



The Indian Journal for Research in Law and Management

Open Access Law Journal – Copyright © 2025

Editor-in-Chief – Dr. Muktai Deb Chavan; Publisher – Alden Vas; ISSN: 2583-9896

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SPEED OVER SUBSTANCE? ANALYSING THE ROLE OF LOK ADALATS IN JUDICIAL REFORM

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INTRODUCTION

There are more than 4.5 crore cases pending across the courts, the crisis of delay is no longer just a matter of institutional inefficiency — it is now a question of constitutional significance.¹ In this climate, **Lok Adalats** emerged as a promising alternative. Presented as people-friendly and accessible, these forums aim to ease the burden on courts by resolving disputes swiftly through mutual settlement.

First given statutory recognition under the **Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987**,² Lok Adalats operate outside the conventional courtroom process. The emphasis is on conciliation, not adjudication. The success of these forums is often measured in numbers — lakhs of cases settled in a single day — but this celebration of speed raises an uncomfortable question: *Is efficiency being achieved at the cost of justice?*

This blog explores that tension. It asks whether the model of mass disposals through compromise is undermining the quality and fairness of outcomes, particularly for the vulnerable. As India continues to embrace Lok Adalats as a tool for reform, it is worth examining whether they are correcting the system — or quietly bypassing it.

Philosophy Behind Lok Adalats

Lok Adalats emerged from a deep-rooted concern: that justice delayed is often justice denied. For millions of Indians—especially those in rural areas, informal employment, or marginalised communities—the courtroom has long been inaccessible. Prohibitive costs, procedural delays, and unfamiliarity with the formal legal system have pushed many out of the justice process

¹ *National Judicial Data Grid*, <https://njdg.ecourts.gov.in/> (last visited July 19, 2025).

² Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, No. 39, Acts of Parliament, 1987 (India).

altogether. Lok Adalats were designed to fill this gap. Their informality, flexibility, and emphasis on mutual settlement offered a refreshing departure from traditional litigation.

Lok Adalats are empowered to resolve both pending cases and pre-litigation disputes, provided the matter is civil or compoundable in nature.³ They charge no court fee, follow no strict procedural rules, and the award passed is final and binding on the parties.⁴ What makes them attractive is not just their speed, but the possibility of a non-confrontational resolution—something that formal courts, by design, are not always equipped to offer.

Over time, the state has embraced Lok Adalats as a cornerstone of judicial reform. In recent years, *National Lok Adalats* have disposed of lakhs of cases in a single day, sometimes crossing the one-crore mark.⁵ On paper, these figures suggest a revolution. But the deeper question is whether quantity has quietly eclipsed quality.

EFFICIENCY OVER EQUITY?

The success of Lok Adalats is often presented in numbers. Reports frequently highlight how crores of rupees were awarded and lakhs of cases resolved in a single day.⁶ State legal services authorities proudly publish disposal charts, and the judiciary echoes this enthusiasm. But an overreliance on such metrics shifts the focus from what matters most: whether justice has truly been served. Efficiency becomes the dominant goal, while fairness quietly recedes into the background.

On paper, a resolved case is a success. But many of these so-called resolutions come from compromise — and compromise is not always neutral or consensual. In matters involving insurance companies, for instance, victims of road accidents or families of the deceased may accept far less than what they are legally entitled to, simply because the process is swift and the money is immediate.⁷ In such cases, the imbalance in knowledge and bargaining power cannot be ignored. The speed of the system becomes a pressure point rather than a benefit.

In labour disputes, where workers often lack formal representation, the same problem arises. The appearance of consent may mask coercion or desperation.⁸ Once an award is passed by a

³ Id. § 20.

⁴ Id. § 21.

⁵ *Press Release*, Nat'l Legal Servs. Auth., *National Lok Adalat Disposes of Over 1.2 Crore Cases* (May 2023), <https://nalsa.gov.in/>.

⁶ *National Lok Adalat Disposes of Over 1.2 Crore Cases*, Nat'l Legal Servs. Auth. (May 2023), <https://nalsa.gov.in/>.

⁷ *Dinesh Singh v. United India Insurance Co. Ltd.*, (2018) 7 SCC 569.

⁸ Surabhi Chopra, *Labour Adjudication in India: Between Rights and Compromise*, 47 EPW 10 (2012).

Lok Adalat, it cannot be appealed, even if one party later feels that the outcome was unfair or the process was opaque.⁹ This finality, while efficient, risks sidelining substantive justice.

What is equally concerning is the institutional incentive to push cases into Lok Adalats for the sake of clearing dockets. When reducing pendency becomes the end, rather than the means, even complex or rights-based disputes may be directed toward forums not designed to handle them adequately.

Judicial reform should not be reduced to case disposal rates. A justice system that values numbers over fairness risks eroding the very legitimacy it seeks to protect.

CHALLENGES

Disposal figures from Lok Adalats make for impressive headlines, but they don't reveal whether justice was truly done. Without reasoned orders or appeal rights, it's impossible to examine whether both parties understood and agreed to the outcome.¹⁰ In many cases, especially those involving poor or unrepresented litigants, consent may be more about necessity than choice. Yet these nuances are absent from official reports. There's no uniform mechanism to track whether cases were fairly settled, or whether the settlements reflected the legal entitlements of the parties.¹¹ Repeat players like insurers and employers may benefit from this opacity, while weaker parties lose quietly. In the name of backlog reduction, courts may push matters into Lok Adalats without asking whether they belong there. Justice requires more than fast closures—it demands fairness, transparency, and the ability to question the outcome.

CONCLUSION

Lok Adalats were never meant to be a shortcut around justice. They were built on the idea that the legal system should meet people where they are—informal, accessible, and humane. But somewhere along the way, the system started valuing speed over substance. Closing a file is not the same as closing a dispute fairly.

To make Lok Adalats truly effective, reforms must go beyond statistics. First, participation must be voluntary and informed—not nudged by docket pressure. Legal aid should be strengthened so that parties understand what they are giving up when they agree to settle. Especially in cases involving repeat players like insurance companies or employers, there should be safeguards to prevent unequal bargaining.

⁹ Legal Services Authorities Act, *supra* note 2.

¹⁰ Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, § 21.

¹¹ M.P. Singh, *Access to Justice and the Role of Legal Services Authorities*, 5 NUJS L. Rev. 135 (2012).

Further, there is a need for follow-up data—not just on how many cases are resolved, but on whether those outcomes respected rights. Justice doesn't end with a signature; it must account for consent, understanding, and fairness.

Lok Adalats can still play a vital role in judicial reform, but only if they stay grounded in their original purpose: empowering the vulnerable, not just lightening the courts' burden. Reform means more than speed—it means doing justice, even when that takes time.