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ROLE OF LOK ADALAT IN INDIA

Sweksha

Abstract

Lok Adalat has emerged as one of the most significant Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms in India, promoting speedy, affordable, and accessible justice. Established under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, Lok Adalats aim to reduce the burden on courts by encouraging amicable settlement of disputes through conciliation and compromise. This article examines the concept, historical development, and legal framework governing Lok Adalats in India, with particular emphasis on the provisions of the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987. It further discusses the various types of Lok Adalats and their role in resolving disputes relating to family matters, motor accident claims, labour issues, bank recovery, and public utility services. The article also analyses significant judicial pronouncements that have shaped the functioning of Lok Adalats and evaluates the challenges faced by the institution, including limited jurisdiction, lack of public awareness, and infrastructural constraints. Finally, it highlights the need for legal awareness, institutional reforms, and technological integration to strengthen the effectiveness of Lok Adalats. The article concludes that Lok Adalat has become an indispensable component of

India's justice delivery system by ensuring quick, cost-effective, and people-centric dispute resolution while advancing the constitutional objective of equal access to justice.

INTRODUCTION

The Indian judiciary is one of the largest judicial systems in the world. Over the years, Indian courts have been burdened with an enormous number of pending cases, resulting in delays in the delivery of justice. The famous saying “justice delayed is justice denied” reflects the reality faced by many litigants in India. In order to overcome these difficulties and ensure speedy justice to the people, the concept of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) gained importance. Among the various ADR mechanisms, Lok Adalat has emerged as one of the most successful and effective methods of dispute settlement in India.

The term “Lok Adalat” literally means “People’s Court.” It is composed of two words Lok which means people and Adalat which means court. It is a system where disputes are resolved amicably through compromise and conciliation without following lengthy, hefty and complicated court procedures. Lok Adalat aims to provide affordable, speedy, and accessible justice to all sections of society, especially the poor and marginalised sections who may not be able to afford expensive litigation. The system helped in reducing the burden on courts and promoting peaceful settlement of disputes.

MEANING AND CONCEPT OF LOK ADALAT

Lok Adalat is a system of alternative dispute resolution developed in India for resolving the trivial issues in affordable and accessible manner of courts. As we know India has a long history for solving matters through mediation in villages from a long span of time (in village areas). Unlike, regular courts it does not follow the lengthy process of dispute resolving through technical means and go for procedures. Their primary goal is to provide settlement between the parties in simple and friendly manner.

Lok Adalat is based on the principles of equality, fairness, and natural justice. It ensures that justice is not denied merely because of economic or social disadvantages. The award passed by a Lok Adalat is final and binding upon the parties and is treated as a decree of a civil court.¹

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The idea of resolving disputes through conciliation and mediation has existed in India since ancient times. Traditional village Panchayats played a significant role in maintaining peace and harmony by settling disputes locally. However, the modern Lok Adalat movement began as a response to increasing judicial delays and rising litigation expenses.

The first Lok Adalat was organized in Gujarat in 1982. The success of this experiment encouraged other states to adopt similar methods for dispute resolution. Subsequently, the Government of India enacted the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, which gave statutory recognition to Lok Adalats.² The Act came into force in 1995 and provided a structured framework for organizing Lok Adalats across the country.

Today, Lok Adalats are organized at national, state, district, and taluk levels under the supervision of legal services authorities. The system has contributed significantly to the disposal of lakhs of cases every year.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK GOVERNING LOK ADALAT

Lok Adalats in India are governed by the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987. The Act was enacted with the objective of providing free and competent legal services to weaker sections of society and ensuring equal justice for all citizens.³

The important provisions relating to Lok Adalat under the Act are as follows:

- *Section 19*

¹ Legal Service Authorities Act, no.39 of 1987,INDIA CODE(1987)

² NALSA, Lok Adalat, <https://nalsa.gov.in/> (last visited May 9,2026)

³ Legal Service Authorities Act, No 39 of 1987, INDIA CODE (1987)

This section provides for the organization of Lok Adalats by State Legal Services Authorities, District Legal Services Authorities, Supreme Court Legal Services Committee, High Court Legal Services Committees, and Taluk Legal Services Committees.

- *Section 20*

This section deals with the cognizance of cases by Lok Adalats. Cases pending before courts or disputes at the pre-litigation stage may be referred to Lok Adalat if both parties agree for settlement.

- *Section 21*

According to this section, every award of the Lok Adalat shall be deemed to be a decree of a civil court and shall be final and binding on all parties. No appeal lies against such an award.⁴

- *Section 22B*

This section provides for the establishment of Permanent Lok Adalats for disputes relating to public utility services such as transport, postal services, electricity, water supply, and insurance services.

The National Legal Services Authority plays an important role in coordinating and supervising the functioning of Lok Adalats across the country.

TYPES OF LOK ADALAT

- **National Lok Adalat**

National Lok Adalats are organized across the country on a single day. They focus on disposing of a large number of pending and pre-litigation cases through settlement. These Lok Adalats have proved highly successful in reducing judicial backlog.

⁴ Id. § 21

- **Permanent Lok Adalat**

Permanent Lok Adalats were established to deal with disputes relating to public utility services. These bodies not only facilitate conciliation but may also decide disputes on merits if settlement fails, except in matters involving non-compoundable offences.⁵

- **Mobile Lok Adalat**

Mobile Lok Adalats travel from one place to another to provide justice in rural and remote areas. Their purpose is to ensure that justice reaches people who may not have easy access to courts.

- **State, District, and Taluk Lok Adalat**

These Lok Adalats are organized at different administrative levels for settlement of local disputes and pending cases. They play a vital role in grassroots dispute resolution.

Role of Lok Adalat in India

- *Speedy Justice*

One of the most important roles of Lok Adalat is the delivery of speedy justice. Ordinary court proceedings often take several years before final disposal. Lok Adalat resolves disputes quickly through compromise and mutual understanding. This helps litigants save both time and energy.

- *Reduction of Judicial Burden*

Indian courts are overburdened with millions of pending cases. Lok Adalats assist in reducing this burden by settling a large number of disputes outside regular courts. By disposing of cases efficiently, Lok Adalats contribute to the smooth functioning of the judiciary.

- *Inexpensive Justice*

⁵ Id. § 22B

Litigation in regular courts is often expensive because of lawyer fees, court fees, and procedural expenses. Lok Adalats provide justice at minimal or no cost. Court fees already paid are also refunded when disputes are settled through Lok Adalat.⁷ This makes justice more accessible to economically weaker sections of society.

- *Promotion of Amicable Settlement*

Unlike traditional courts where disputes are decided through adversarial proceedings, Lok Adalat encourages compromise and conciliation. The process helps maintain friendly relations between parties and prevents hostility.

- *Access to Justice for the Poor*

Lok Adalat strengthens the constitutional principle of equal justice by ensuring that poor and marginalized people are not deprived of legal remedies. Free legal aid and simple procedures make the justice system more inclusive.

- *Informal and Flexible Procedure*

Lok Adalats are not bound by strict procedural laws or technical rules of evidence. The informal atmosphere allows parties to present their grievances freely and reach settlements conveniently.

- *Rural Justice and Social Harmony*

In rural areas, Lok Adalat has played an important role in resolving disputes peacefully. Since many villagers are hesitant to approach formal courts due to financial and social reasons, Lok Adalat provides an effective alternative. It promotes social harmony and community participation in dispute resolution.

- *Settlement of Various Disputes*

Lok Adalats deal with a variety of disputes including:

- Motor accident claims

- Family and matrimonial disputes
- Labour disputes
- Bank recovery matters
- Land disputes
- Consumer disputes
- Electricity and water bill disputes
- Compoundable criminal offences

This wide jurisdiction increases their importance in the Indian legal system.

Landmark Judgments

- **State of Punjab v. Jalour Singh**

In *State of Punjab v. Jalour Singh*, the Supreme Court of India held that Lok Adalat acts as a conciliatory authority and can pass awards only on the basis of compromise or settlement between parties.⁶ The Court clarified that Lok Adalat cannot decide disputes on merits like a regular court.

- **Afcons Infrastructure Ltd. v. Cherian Varkey Construction Co.**

In this case, the Supreme Court emphasized the significance of ADR mechanisms, including Lok Adalat, in reducing judicial backlog and promoting speedy justice.⁷ The Court encouraged wider use of alternative dispute resolution methods in civil disputes.

Challenges Faced by Lok Adalat

Despite its success, Lok Adalat faces several challenges.

- **Lack of Awareness**

⁶ STATE OF PUNJAB V. JALOUR SINGH, (2008) 2 SCC 660

⁷ ALFCONS INFRASTRUCTURE LTD. V. CHERIAN VARKEY CONSTRUCTION CO.,(2010) 8 SCC 24

Many people, especially in rural areas, are still unaware of the benefits and functioning of Lok Adalat. Lack of legal awareness limits its effectiveness.

- **Pressure for Settlement**

In some cases, parties may feel pressured to accept settlements even if they are not fully satisfied. This may affect the fairness of the process.

- **Limited Jurisdiction**

Lok Adalat cannot deal with non-compoundable criminal offences or highly complex disputes requiring detailed adjudication.

- **Infrastructure Issues**

Several Lok Adalats, particularly in rural areas, suffer from inadequate infrastructure and lack of trained personnel.

- **No Appeal**

The award of Lok Adalat is final and binding. While this ensures speedy resolution, it may create difficulties if a party later feels dissatisfied with the settlement.

Suggestions and Reforms

In order to strengthen the Lok Adalat system, certain reforms are necessary.

First, greater awareness programs should be conducted to educate people about the advantages of Lok Adalat. Legal literacy camps and awareness drives can help increase public participation.

Second, the government should improve infrastructure and provide adequate training to conciliators and legal aid workers. Proper training will improve the quality of settlements.

Third, digital Lok Adalats should be promoted through online platforms. Virtual hearings can help people from remote areas participate more conveniently.

Finally, stronger coordination between courts and legal services authorities can further improve the efficiency of Lok Adalats and ensure wider access to justice.

Conclusion

Lok Adalat has emerged as one of the most effective mechanisms for delivering speedy, inexpensive, and accessible justice in India. It reflects the constitutional vision of social justice and equal access to legal remedies. By promoting amicable settlement and reducing the burden on courts, Lok Adalat has strengthened the Indian justice delivery system.

Although certain challenges such as lack of awareness and infrastructural limitations still exist, the overall contribution of Lok Adalat to the Indian legal system is remarkable. With proper reforms, awareness, and technological advancement, Lok Adalat can play an even greater role in ensuring justice for all sections of society. It remains an important pillar in the movement towards affordable and efficient justice in India.

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