



The Indian Journal for Research in Law and Management

Open Access Law Journal – Copyright © 2026

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

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share Alike 4.0 International (CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0) License, which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium provided the original work is properly cited.

The Pila Pahan Verdict and The Battle Against Judicial Delay

-Deeksha Chhipa

Pila Pahan @ Peela Pahan & Ors. v. State of Jharkhand

**2026 INSC 604 | Writ Petition (Crl.) No. 169/2025 | Supreme Court of India | Decided on
29 May 2026**

Bench: Surya Kant, CJI, and Joymalya Bagchi, J.

Introduction

The judgment of the Supreme Court of India in *Pila Pahan @ Peela Pahan & Ors. v. State of Jharkhand & Anr.* addresses a problem that has quietly plagued the Indian judicial system for decades, the delayed pronouncement of reserved judgments by High Courts. What began as a set of individual writ petitions filed by convicts languishing in prison, waiting for their appeals to be decided, eventually grew into a nationwide inquiry that produced binding, court-mandated guidelines under Article 142 of the Constitution. The case is significant not merely for its facts, but for the manner in which the Court used a narrow individual grievance as a springboard to address a systemic institutional failure affecting litigants across the country.

Facts of the Case

The lead petition arose out of the plight of four convicts sentenced by trial courts in Jharkhand. Three of them had been convicted under Section 302 of the Indian Penal Code

and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2012 and 2014, while the fourth had been convicted under Sections 376 and 346 IPC and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2018. Each of these individuals had spent over a decade behind bars, counting the period of pre-trial incarceration, by the time their criminal appeals were finally argued before the Jharkhand High Court. Arguments in their appeals concluded and judgment was reserved sometime between January and June 2022 — yet no judgment followed for years.

Frustrated by this prolonged silence, the petitioners approached the Supreme Court, seeking a direction compelling the High Court to pronounce its reserved judgments. What followed was an unusually elaborate judicial exercise. On the very first hearing in April 2025, the Court directed the Registrar General of the Jharkhand High Court to furnish a report of all matters where judgment had been reserved for more than two months. The report that came back was, in the Court's own words, startling: 56 matters before Division Benches remained undecided despite having been heard between January 2022 and December 2024, and another 11 matters before Single Judges were similarly pending. Curiously, the specific appeals of the petitioners were not even reflected in that report, prompting a further direction for clarification.

As media coverage of the issue grew, including a report noting that the High Court had suddenly decided 75 criminal appeals within a single week after the Supreme Court's intervention the Court recognised that the problem extended well beyond Jharkhand. It accordingly widened the scope of the proceedings, directing every High Court in the country to disclose matters where judgments reserved before 31 January 2025 remained unpronounced. A parallel concern also surfaced: even where judgments had been pronounced in open court, there were often long delays in uploading the reasoned versions onto the High Court websites, leaving litigants without access to the reasoning behind decisions that already affected their liberty or rights.

By the time the four original petitioners were released from custody following the eventual pronouncement of their appeals by the Jharkhand High Court, the Supreme Court chose not to close the matter. It instead kept the proceedings alive because of the far larger structural issue that had been unearthed, tagging numerous similar petitions from across the country to the lead case and appointing an Amicus Curiae to analyse the voluminous data submitted by various High Courts.

The Court's Reasoning

The Court's analysis rested on a straightforward but powerful proposition: the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21 is not confined merely to ensuring a speedy trial. It extends to every subsequent stage of a proceeding, including the pronouncement of the final decision. A litigant who has been fully heard but is left waiting indefinitely for the outcome suffers a violation of the same constitutional guarantee as one denied a timely hearing altogether. The Court was particularly alive to the disproportionate impact of such delay on undertrials and convicts in custody, for whom every additional day without a verdict is a day of continued, and potentially unwarranted, confinement.

The judgment also touched on a subtler institutional concern that a judgment written long after arguments have concluded tends to lose the immediacy and precision that come from proximity to the submissions actually made in court. Beyond the individual litigant, the Court situated the issue within the broader question of public confidence in the judiciary, observing that the regularity with which courts speak after reserving judgment forms part of the foundation of institutional trust.

Rather than treating this as a novel proposition, the Court traced its lineage through earlier precedents, most notably *Anil Rai v. State of Bihar* (2001), where guidelines were first laid down recommending outer limits of two, three, and six months for various stages of administrative escalation when judgments remained unpronounced. The Court also drew upon the more recent decision in *Ratilal Jhaverbhai Parmar v. State of Gujarat* (2024), which had suggested practical alternatives available to judges under pressure of time, including dictating judgments in open court or pronouncing the operative order first while furnishing detailed reasons shortly thereafter.

Acknowledging that no statutory timeline governs judgment pronouncement by High Courts — unlike trial courts, for whom the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Code of Civil Procedure prescribe timeframes the Court held that judicial guidelines under Article 142 were necessary to fill this gap.

The Guidelines Issued

The Court's directions, framed as binding upon all High Courts, can be broadly grouped into three categories. First, procedural timelines: reasoned judgments should ordinarily be pronounced within three months of reservation, with far stricter same-day or next-day timelines for matters touching personal liberty such as bail applications, and a 24-hour window for uploading judgments once pronounced in open court. Second, accountability mechanisms: automated monthly alerts to Chief Justices regarding pending reserved matters, escalation to the Bench concerned if the three-month mark is crossed, and eventual reassignment of the case to a different Bench for a fresh hearing if delay persists beyond an additional two weeks. Third, litigant remedies: any party may apply for early pronouncement once the relevant timeline lapses, with such applications required to be listed within two days.

The Court was careful to add that these directions were not intended as a rebuke of any individual judge, recognising instead the extraordinary caseloads and institutional pressures under which High Court judges function daily.

Significance and Concluding Observations

This decision is a notable addition to the Supreme Court's continuing efforts to operationalise judicial accountability without undermining judicial independence. By converting what had previously been persuasive observations in earlier cases into concrete, monitored, and time-bound obligations, the Court has attempted to close a long-standing structural gap. Its true value lies not in creating a new right, but in giving Article 21's guarantee of personal liberty a practical, enforceable dimension at a stage of litigation the interval between hearing and judgment that had, until now, remained largely unregulated. Whether the guidelines translate into consistent compliance across the country's diverse and overburdened High Courts will depend on the administrative will to implement the monitoring architecture the Court has now put in place.