

Fast-track courts: Justice on the clock

Several States, including Odisha, Kerala, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Telangana, had no functional fast-track courts in 2023

DATA POINT

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Fast-track courts in India were established to address the phenomenal judicial backlog (Chart 1) and ensure the timely delivery of justice. These courts were designed to deal with heinous crimes, including sexual offences and crimes against women and children. However, the effectiveness of fast-track courts has been plagued by several factors, such as resource limitations, inefficient investigations, and insufficient staff at the judiciary. The demand for these courts occasionally resurfaces when incidents like the tragic rape and murder of a doctor at Kolkata's R.G. Kar Medical College happen, though the inherent limitations of the judicial system remain largely overlooked.

Chart 2 indicates that between 2018 and 2020, India saw a significant rise in the number of fast-track courts. In 2018, 699 courts were operational, growing to 907 by 2020. This increase was largely a response to public outcry over delays in high-profile cases such as Nirbhaya gang rape, which ignited a nationwide demand for quicker justice. However, this progress has slowed since 2020, with the number of functional courts dropping to 832 in 2023. This decline reflects the challenges States face in maintaining these courts due to financial and administrative constraints. While the Union government provides support, the responsibility of running fast-track courts rests with the States, many of which struggle to allocate the necessary resources.

While States such as Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu have maintained a high number of operational courts, others have far fewer or, in some cases, none. For instance, in 2023, several States, including Odisha, Kerala, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya

Pradesh, and Telangana, either had no functional fast-track courts or were struggling to establish them. These disparities are a reflection of local resource limitations, varying levels of prioritisation, and differing administrative capabilities.

Chart 3 shows the number of functional fast-track courts over time across select major States. States with fewer financial capabilities struggle to keep fast-track courts functioning optimally.

Even in States where these courts are operational, they are often overburdened by the sheer volume and variety of cases, resulting in delays. The jurisdiction of fast-track courts is disproportionately wide compared to their capacity, further delaying justice.

Another challenge, many States have not expanded the scope of fast-track courts beyond sexual offences, limiting their ability to address other categories of high-pendency cases.

By broadening their jurisdiction, these courts could alleviate some of the burdens on the regular judiciary and better fulfil their intended purpose of delivering faster justice across a wider range of cases.

The future of fast-track courts has huge potential to ensure speedy justice. But, for these courts to live up to their promise, the States must prioritise their operation and ensure they have the necessary resources to function efficiently. The States must improve their sophisticated investigation, providing cutting-edge forensic services.

One possible solution lies in leveraging technology. Digital case management systems, e-filing, and video conferencing could help reduce procedural delays, allowing fast-track courts to work more effectively.

The road to justice is long, but with the right support, fast-track courts can help ensure that justice is delivered efficiently, providing victims the closure they deserve without unnecessary delays.



Need for speed

The charts are sourced from Lok Sabha questions and answers

Chart 1: The chart shows the total criminal cases pending in High Courts (right axis) and District Courts (left axis)

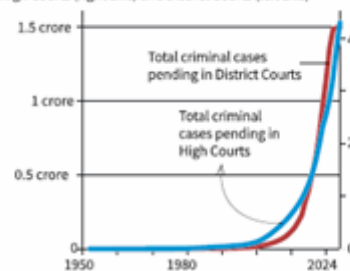


Chart 2: The chart shows the number of fast-track courts established between 2018 to 2023

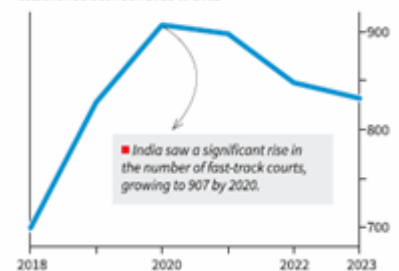
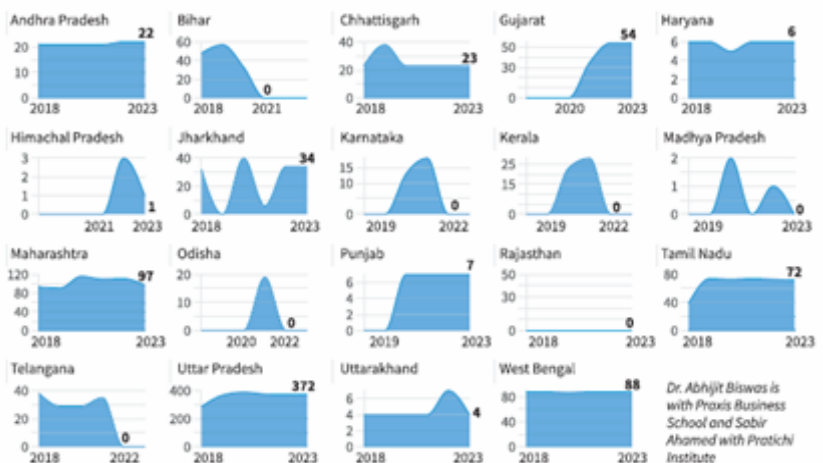


Chart 3: The chart shows the number of functional fast-track courts over time across select major States



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