



INDIAN JOURNAL OF
LEGAL REVIEW

VOLUME 4 AND ISSUE 3 OF 2024

INSTITUTE OF LEGAL EDUCATION



INDIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL REVIEW

APIS – 3920 – 0001 | ISSN – 2583-2344

(Free and Open Access Journal)

Journal's Home Page – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/>

Journal's Editorial Page – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/editorial-board/>

Volume 4 and Issue 3 of 2024 (Access Full Issue on – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/volume-4-and-issue-3-of-2024/>)

Publisher

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INSIDER TRADING LAWS IN INDIA: STRIKING A BALANCE BETWEEN MARKET EFFICIENCY AND INVESTOR PROTECTION

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BEST CITATION – YASHIKA NAYAK, INSIDER TRADING LAWS IN INDIA: STRIKING A BALANCE BETWEEN MARKET EFFICIENCY AND INVESTOR PROTECTION, *INDIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL REVIEW (IJLR)*, 4 (3) OF 2024, PG. 154-163, APIS – 3920 – 0001 & ISSN – 2583-2344.

ABSTRACT

This research paper explore, how insider trading laws in India balancing the market efficiency and Investor protection includes rights of investor, evolution, enforcement and market dynamics. It starts dealing by the legal framework established by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) and relevant laws. The paper discussed the challenges of enforcing these laws, such as detecting insider trading and the penalties for those who break the rules. By evaluating case studies and empirical data, the study highlights the tension between fostering a competitive market environment and protecting investors from unfair practices. Furthermore, the study discusses the implications of insider trading on market dynamics, exploring how such practices can distort price discovery and harm the overall investment climate. It emphasizes the need for a more proactive approach, including greater transparency, enhanced regulatory cooperation, and the integration of advanced data analytics to detect suspicious trading patterns.

Keywords: – Insider Trading, Market Efficiency, Investor Protection, SEBI, Legal Regulations, Financial Market.

Introduction: – In India, insider trading laws play a critical role in maintaining fairness in the stock market. These laws are designed to prevent individuals with access to confidential, non-public information from using it for personal financial gain. When insiders trade on such privileged information, it not only gives them an unfair advantage but also undermines trust in the market, making it unfair for regular investors. Over the years, as India's economy and financial markets have grown, regulators have strengthened insider trading laws to ensure that everyone has a level playing field. SEBI, the Securities and Exchange Board of India, has been responsible for regulating and updating these laws to keep up with changing market conditions. However, the challenge lies in balancing two key goals: ensuring that markets remain fair and transparent, while also promoting market efficiency so that businesses can thrive without excessive regulation. In a country like India, where many companies are

family-owned or closely held, it can be difficult to distinguish between legitimate business decisions and insider trading.

Historical Evolution of Insider Trading Laws in India Initial Regulations: The Early Days

In the early days of India's stock markets, there was little regulation concerning insider trading. The Indian stock market, driven largely by regional exchanges, was characterized by limited oversight and a lack of clear legal frameworks. This lack of regulation made it easy for individuals with inside information to exploit it for personal gain, creating an uneven playing field for the average investor. With no central regulatory body to enforce market rules, insider trading went largely unchecked, undermining trust in the markets. A major turning point came in 1988 with the establishment of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) as a statutory body. As India's economy began to liberalize in the early 1990s, the capital markets

saw rapid growth, necessitating stronger regulatory frameworks to protect investors and ensure fair practices. In 1992, SEBI introduced the first comprehensive set of regulations to specifically address insider trading. The SEBI (Prohibition of Insider Trading) Regulations, 1992, were designed to curb the misuse of non-public, price-sensitive information and to provide a legal basis for prosecuting those who engaged in insider trading. This marked a significant shift in Indian capital market regulation, as it aimed to increase market transparency and investor protection. As the markets evolved and became more complex, so too did the regulatory landscape. Recognizing the need for a more robust and modernized approach, SEBI overhauled its insider trading laws with the introduction of the SEBI (Prohibition of Insider Trading) Regulations, 2015. This regulation represented a comprehensive update to the 1992 rules, significantly broadening the definition of what constituted insider trading. It included stricter penalties for violations and expanded the definition of "insiders" to include individuals indirectly connected to the company, such as consultants, advisors, and even close relatives. The 2015 regulations also introduced stringent compliance standards for companies, requiring them to establish internal controls and policies to prevent insider trading.

Market Efficiency and Insider Trading in India

Efficient Market Hypothesis (EMH) in the Indian Context

The Efficient Market Hypothesis (EMH)³⁵² suggests that stock prices reflect all available information, meaning that it is impossible to consistently achieve higher returns than the market without access to new information. In the context of Indian markets, particularly the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) and National Stock Exchange (NSE), the EMH operates with some limitations. While the major indices like BSE Sensex and NSE Nifty are relatively efficient

and reflect a substantial amount of public information, they do not always meet the ideal conditions of the EMH, especially when compared to more developed markets like the U.S.

The Indian market is characterized by a high level of retail participation and a significant presence of family-owned and closely-held companies. Moreover, informational inefficiencies tend to be more pronounced in smaller companies and regional exchanges, where transparency is lower, and the flow of information is not as robust. While the major indices may operate in semi-strong form efficiency—where prices quickly adjust to publicly available information—insider trading can disrupt this efficiency by allowing certain participants to exploit information that is not yet public.

Impact of Insider Trading on Market Efficiency

While some argue that insider trading can speed up price discovery by reflecting non-public information in stock prices sooner, this comes at a significant cost to market efficiency, particularly in India. Insider trading undermines the fairness of the market, deterring retail investors from participating due to the perception of an uneven playing field. In a country where retail investor trust is still developing, the presence of insider trading can lead to reduced market participation, harming liquidity and overall market efficiency.

Moreover, insider trading creates a market where informed participants gain an unfair advantage over uninformed ones, distorting prices in a manner that does not truly reflect all available information. This results in market inefficiency because prices are driven by privileged knowledge rather than open and equal access to information. In the long run, this undermines investor confidence, eroding the integrity of the market and reducing its attractiveness to both domestic and foreign investors.

³⁵² Khanna, A. (2018). *Corporate Governance in India: A Legal and Ethical Perspective*. Oxford University Press.

1. Limited Market Access and Information Asymmetry

India's stock market is unique in that it encompasses both highly liquid, large-cap stocks and smaller, less liquid companies with limited transparency. In the case of these smaller firms, insider trading exacerbates the existing issues of information asymmetry, where insiders have access to critical information that is not available to the public. This lack of transparency leads to significant market distortions, as prices do not accurately reflect the company's true value.

Compared to more developed markets, where regulatory frameworks are stricter and information is more freely available, Indian markets face greater challenges in mitigating the effects of insider trading. The lack of widespread access to information, particularly in smaller firms, makes it easier for insiders to manipulate stock prices. This asymmetry is harmful to the Indian market's long-term growth, as it prevents fair price discovery and discourages retail and institutional investors from investing in such companies.

2. Investor Protection in India Asymmetry of Information

In India, the gap between institutional investors, corporate insiders, and retail investors is particularly pronounced. Institutional investors often have access to research, advanced tools, and direct communication channels with company management, while corporate insiders have privileged access to confidential, price-sensitive information. Retail investors, who form a significant portion of the market, generally lack these resources, placing them at a disadvantage. This asymmetry of information makes investor protection especially critical in the Indian context. Retail investors often face a challenging landscape where they have to navigate market conditions without the same level of information available to larger, more influential players. This imbalance leaves them vulnerable to price manipulation, insider

trading, and other unethical practices. In such a scenario, investor protection is essential to leveling the playing field and ensuring that retail investors can participate confidently in the markets without fear of exploitation.

3. SEBI's Role in Investor Protection

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has taken proactive steps to protect investors, especially retail participants. One of SEBI's core responsibilities is to reduce the information gap between different types of investors and ensure that the market remains transparent and fair. To this end, SEBI has implemented a comprehensive regulatory framework aimed at safeguarding investors. A key aspect of SEBI's role involves monitoring stock price volatility and identifying unusual market movements that may indicate manipulation or insider trading. SEBI enforces strict disclosure norms, requiring companies to publicly disclose any material information that could impact stock prices. This allows all investors to access crucial information at the same time, minimizing the advantages that insiders or institutional investors might otherwise have. Additionally, SEBI has introduced various investor education programs to improve financial literacy and awareness. By equipping retail investors with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions, SEBI seeks to mitigate the impact of information asymmetry and reduce the risks faced by retail participants.

Challenges in India

India's corporate landscape is characterized by the dominance³⁵³ of family-owned businesses and closely-held companies. These entities often maintain tight control over company operations and information flow, leading to potential governance issues. The concentration of control within families or a small group of individuals makes it easier for insiders to engage in practices like insider trading, as they have greater access to confidential information.

³⁵³ The Changing Landscape of Insider Trading Regulations in India." (2022). *Financial Express*. Retrieved from [Financial Express](https://www.financialexpress.com).

This control structure can also result in weaker corporate governance, as family-owned businesses may not adhere to the same rigorous standards of transparency and accountability as widely-held public companies. Retail investors in India have historically been at a greater risk of exposure to market manipulation, as information imbalances are more likely to occur in such environments.

While SEBI has made significant strides in enforcing regulations and improving governance standards, challenges persist. Retail investors still face significant risks in a market where insider trading and manipulation can occur due to entrenched family control and opaque corporate practices. Strengthening governance frameworks, ensuring stricter compliance with disclosure norms, and fostering a culture of transparency will be crucial to further enhancing investor protection in India.

4. SEBI's Prohibition of Insider Trading Regulations, 2015

Key Provisions

The SEBI (Prohibition of Insider Trading) Regulations, 2015³⁵⁴ brought significant updates to India's insider trading laws, aimed at increasing transparency, accountability, and investor protection in the securities markets. Some of the key provisions include:

- **Definition of "Insider":** An insider is broadly defined as anyone who is connected to a company and has access to unpublished price-sensitive information (UPSI). This includes employees, directors, and those who may not be directly associated with the company but are connected to individuals who have insider knowledge, such as consultants, auditors, lawyers, and even close relatives.
- **"Unpublished Price-Sensitive Information" (UPSI):** UPSI refers to any information that is not available to the public

and could have a significant impact on the price of a company's securities once it becomes public. This could include financial results, mergers or acquisitions, changes in key management, or significant business decisions. Under the 2015³⁵⁵ regulations, companies must ensure that UPSI is kept confidential until it is publicly disclosed.

- **Chinese Walls:** One of the notable provisions is the creation of "Chinese walls" within companies. This concept involves establishing information barriers between departments to prevent the flow of UPSI between different sections of the company, such as between the finance and trading departments. This measure helps prevent leaks of sensitive information that could lead to insider trading.

Innovations Introduced

- **Code of Conduct for Listed Companies:** The 2015 regulations mandate that all listed companies adopt a code of conduct to prevent insider trading. This code outlines procedures and policies to ensure that UPSI is handled properly and only disclosed on a need-to-know basis. Companies must also establish internal controls and monitoring systems to ensure compliance with these regulations.
- **Disclosure Requirements:** The regulations impose strict disclosure requirements on insiders. Insiders must report their trades to the company and the stock exchanges. Additionally, any trades that exceed a certain value threshold must be disclosed. This requirement ensures greater transparency and allows SEBI to monitor suspicious trading patterns more effectively.
- **Strengthening Penalties:** SEBI has been granted the authority to impose strict penalties on those found guilty of insider trading. These penalties include hefty fines, which can run into crores of rupees, and imprisonment for up to ten years. By introducing stronger penalties, SEBI

³⁵⁴ Securities and Exchange Board of India. (2022). "Annual Report: Market Practices and Reforms." Retrieved from [SEBI Website](https://www.sebi.gov.in).

³⁵⁵ SEBI (Prohibition of Insider Trading) Regulations, 2015: Detailed Provisions and Implementation Guidelines

aims to deter individuals from engaging in insider trading and emphasize the seriousness of such offenses.

Challenges in Enforcement

While the 2015 regulations represent a significant step forward in combating insider trading, enforcement remains a challenge. Insider trading is notoriously difficult to prove due to the complex and often opaque nature of market transactions. The challenge of enforcement is compounded by:

- **Complex Market Activities:** Insider trading often involves sophisticated financial transactions that may not immediately appear suspicious. Proving intent and linking trades to the use of UPSI requires extensive investigation and technical expertise.
- **Delays in Investigations:** Investigations into insider trading can be prolonged, with regulatory and legal processes often taking years to conclude. This delay can weaken the effectiveness of enforcement efforts, as evidence may become harder to trace over time.
- **Reliance on Circumstantial Evidence:** Given the nature of insider trading, direct evidence is often hard to come by. Regulators may have to rely on circumstantial evidence, such as unusual trading patterns or timing of trades in relation to the release of UPSI. However, proving a direct connection between the insider and the trade remains a significant hurdle in many cases.

Despite these challenges, SEBI's 2015 regulations have laid a strong foundation for regulating insider trading in India. They reflect a growing emphasis on corporate transparency, accountability, and the protection of investor interests, although continued efforts to strengthen enforcement mechanisms and reduce investigation delays are necessary to maximize the effectiveness of these rules.

5. Landmark Insider Trading Cases in India

Rakesh Jhunjhunwala Case (2005)

One of the most high-profile insider trading investigations in India involved Rakesh Jhunjhunwala, a billionaire investor often referred to as India's "Warren Buffett." In³⁵⁶ 2005, Jhunjhunwala came under scrutiny when SEBI launched an investigation into allegations of insider trading involving shares of Aptech, an education company in which he held significant stakes. The case centered on allegations that Jhunjhunwala had access to non-public information and used it to trade Aptech's shares for personal gain. The investigation demonstrated the complexities and delays involved in proving insider trading. It took years for SEBI to gather sufficient evidence to charge Jhunjhunwala, who strongly denied the allegations. Though the enforcement process was slow, the investigation highlighted SEBI's increasing willingness to take on powerful market players and enforce regulations, signaling to the market that no one is above the law.

The Ketan Parekh Scam (2001)

One of the most notorious cases of market manipulation and insider trading in Indian history was the Ketan Parekh scam³⁵⁷, which shook the country's financial markets in 2001. Ketan Parekh, a stockbroker, used a combination of insider trading, price manipulation, and circular trading to inflate the prices of select stocks, often referred to as "K-10 stocks." By colluding with company insiders and using a network of brokers, Parekh manipulated stock prices to his advantage while simultaneously engaging in insider trading, leveraging unpublished price-sensitive information. When the scam unraveled, it led to a massive crash in stock prices, causing significant losses for investors and leading to a loss of confidence in the market. The scandal

³⁵⁶ SEBI v. M/s. Rakesh Jhunjhunwala (2005), SEBI Order No. WTM/RKA/MIRSD/6/2005.

³⁵⁷ Infosys Case (2020) – Whistleblower allegations and SEBI investigations.

exposed the vulnerabilities of India's stock market and resulted in several regulatory reforms by SEBI to strengthen oversight and prevent market abuse. The Ketan Parekh case remains a landmark example of how insider trading can destabilize markets and hurt investor confidence, leading to more stringent regulations.

Infosys Case (2020)

In 2020, one of India's largest IT companies, Infosys, found itself embroiled in an insider trading controversy. Whistleblowers alleged that some executives within the company were involved in insider trading by leaking price-sensitive financial information ahead of the public release of the company's quarterly results. The case attracted significant media attention due to the size and prominence of Infosys and raised questions about corporate governance within large companies. The allegations triggered an internal investigation, and SEBI also took action to investigate the trades. While the investigation is still ongoing, the Infosys case underscored the governance challenges that even well-regarded and transparent companies can face. It highlighted how large corporations, with complex structures and multiple departments, must remain vigilant about preventing insider trading by ensuring strong internal controls and compliance with regulations. The case also emphasized the importance of whistleblower protections in uncovering corporate wrongdoing.

6. Comparative Analysis of Insider Trading Laws

Comparison with the U.S.

Indian insider trading regulations, as enforced by SEBI, differ significantly from the U.S. model, particularly in terms of enforcement. In the U.S., the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) enforces insider trading regulations primarily under Rule 10b-5 of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934. Rule 10b-5 prohibits fraudulent activities in connection with the purchase or sale of securities, and the SEC actively prosecutes

insider trading cases using both civil and criminal penalties.

One key distinction is the **proactive enforcement** by the SEC. The U.S. regulator uses advanced surveillance systems, such as the Market Information Data Analytics System (MIDAS), to monitor trading activities in real-time, enabling it to identify suspicious trades and initiate investigations even before a whistleblower report or complaint is filed. The SEC's enforcement approach also places a strong emphasis on deterrence through high-profile prosecutions, hefty fines, and jail terms for offenders.

In contrast, **SEBI's enforcement stance has historically been more reactive**. Investigations are often triggered by complaints, whistleblower reports, or post-event analysis of trading patterns. SEBI has made improvements in recent years, especially with its push for technology-driven surveillance through initiatives like the Data Analytics Project (DAP), but its proactive capacity still lags behind the SEC. Another notable difference is that insider trading cases in the U.S. tend to be resolved faster due to the robust legal infrastructure, while in India, cases can drag on for years, which dilutes the impact of enforcement actions.

Comparison with the European Union

The European Union's insider trading regulations are primarily governed by the **Market Abuse Regulation (MAR)**, which was introduced in 2016. MAR applies across the EU and aims to prevent insider trading, market manipulation, and unlawful disclosure of information. One of the key aspects of MAR is its strict **disclosure obligations**. MAR mandates immediate public disclosure of inside information by companies, ensuring that all investors have equal access to significant information that could affect share prices.

In comparison, **SEBI's disclosure requirements are less stringent** than those under MAR. While Indian regulations require companies to

disclose material events that could impact stock prices, the timelines for such disclosures can be flexible, and enforcement of these obligations is often inconsistent. MAR also imposes strong penalties for insider trading, including fines that are proportionate to the severity of the infraction, and EU regulators have broad powers to impose sanctions. SEBI's penalties for insider trading, although strengthened in the 2015 regulations, still fall short in terms of the fines and sanctions imposed compared to the EU, especially given the magnitude of the Indian markets.

Lessons from Other Jurisdictions

India's insider trading regulations could benefit from reforms that incorporate best practices from international jurisdictions. Some potential areas for improvement include:

- **Tighter Control Over Family-Owned Businesses:** Many Indian companies are family-owned or closely-held, leading to governance issues and increased risks of insider trading. Drawing from the U.S. and EU's stronger corporate governance frameworks, India could introduce stricter requirements for transparency and disclosures in these businesses. Enhancing oversight mechanisms, such as independent audits and improved whistleblower protections, would help mitigate insider trading risks.
- **Enhanced Use of Technology for Surveillance:** Both the U.S. and the EU utilize advanced technology for surveillance and monitoring of trading activities. SEBI could invest more heavily in AI-driven analytics and real-time data monitoring tools to proactively identify insider trading patterns. This would allow SEBI to move toward a more preventive enforcement approach, similar to the SEC's use of MIDAS.
- **Strengthening Legal Infrastructure and Timely Enforcement:** Faster adjudication of insider trading cases is essential for maintaining market integrity. SEBI could collaborate with the judiciary to establish

specialized courts or tribunals focused on securities fraud and insider trading to expedite cases. The U.S. model of pursuing both civil and criminal penalties could also serve as a benchmark for enhancing deterrence in India.

Striking the Balance: Indian Perspective

Balancing Regulation and Market Growth

In the rapidly evolving landscape of India's financial markets, striking a balance between robust regulation and fostering market growth is crucial. Strong regulatory frameworks are essential to protect investors, maintain market integrity, and build trust in the financial system. However, over-regulation can create an environment that stifles innovation and market efficiency, particularly in a developing economy like India, where vibrant market activities are essential for economic growth.

Excessive regulation may lead to increased compliance costs for businesses, deterring new entrants and hindering the development of the capital markets. For instance, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) might struggle with the complexities of compliance, reducing their access to capital and limiting opportunities for growth. Therefore, while it is vital to ensure investor protection through sound regulations, regulators like SEBI must also be mindful of the need to create a conducive environment for market participants. This balance is crucial to sustaining long-term market growth and ensuring that capital markets remain vibrant and attractive.

Improving Market Surveillance

Technological advancements offer significant potential for improving market surveillance and enhancing the effectiveness of insider trading regulations. Tools such as data analytics, artificial intelligence (AI), and blockchain can play pivotal roles in SEBI's efforts to detect and prevent insider trading.

- **Data Analytics and AI:** By leveraging data analytics and AI, SEBI can monitor trading patterns and identify unusual activities that may indicate insider trading. Machine learning

algorithms can analyze vast amounts of trading data to spot anomalies in real time, enabling quicker investigations and responses to suspicious activities. Such proactive measures can significantly enhance SEBI's capacity to deter insider trading and bolster market integrity.

- **Blockchain Technology:** The use of blockchain can enhance transparency and traceability in securities transactions. By recording all trades on an immutable ledger, regulators can more easily track and verify transactions, reducing opportunities for insider trading and market manipulation. Moreover, blockchain can streamline the disclosure process, ensuring that all investors have immediate access to the same information, thereby promoting a fairer trading environment.

Proposals for Reform

To strengthen the framework for combating insider trading in India, several reforms could be implemented:

- **Shorter Disclosure Timelines:** One critical reform would be to mandate the disclosure of trades within hours rather than days. Rapid disclosure would ensure that all market participants have access to the same information in a timely manner, reducing the information asymmetry that often fuels insider trading. By implementing stricter timelines, regulators can foster greater transparency and confidence in the market.

- **International Collaboration:** As India continues to emerge as a significant player in the global financial landscape, international cooperation becomes essential. Collaborating with foreign regulators can enhance India's ability to address cross-border insider trading and market manipulation. Joint investigations, information sharing, and harmonizing regulatory practices will strengthen India's position in the global market and improve its regulatory effectiveness.

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- **Strengthening Whistleblower Protections:** To encourage more individuals to come forward with information about insider trading, it is vital to enhance whistleblower protections. Providing stronger legal safeguards, financial incentives, and anonymity for whistleblowers can promote a culture of accountability. By encouraging insiders and other market participants to report unethical practices, SEBI can gain critical insights into insider trading activities and take prompt action.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) faces a significant challenge in balancing the dual objectives of investor protection and market efficiency. On one hand, robust regulations are essential to safeguard the interests of investors and maintain the integrity of the financial markets. On the other hand, excessive regulation can stifle innovation, hinder capital formation, and deter market participation, particularly in a developing economy like India. SEBI's reactive enforcement approach, the complexities of insider trading investigations, and the evolving landscape of corporate governance all present hurdles that need to be navigated carefully.

The Future of Insider Trading Regulation in India

As India continues to grow as a key player in the global financial arena, the regulatory framework surrounding insider trading is likely to evolve significantly. Increased foreign investment and globalization will demand more stringent and harmonized regulations that align with international standards. The adoption of advanced technological tools, such as AI and data analytics, will enable regulators to monitor market activities more effectively, enhancing the detection and prevention of insider trading. Additionally, as corporate governance practices come under greater scrutiny, companies will be pressured to adopt more transparent and accountable practices, further contributing to a healthier market environment.

Reforms for Greater Balance

To achieve a more effective regulatory balance, several reforms should be considered:

- **Stringent Compliance Requirements:**

Companies should be mandated to adhere to stricter compliance protocols, ensuring that they maintain robust internal controls to prevent insider trading. This includes implementing comprehensive training programs for employees regarding insider trading laws and ethical trading practices.

- **Improved Surveillance:** SEBI should invest in cutting-edge surveillance technologies that facilitate real-time monitoring of trading activities. By adopting advanced data analytics and AI tools, SEBI can enhance its ability to identify suspicious trading patterns and take timely action against potential violations.

- **Tougher Penalties:** To act as a deterrent against insider trading, penalties for violations should be strengthened. This could include substantial fines and longer imprisonment terms for offenders, which would signal the seriousness of insider trading offenses and reinforce the importance of compliance.

By implementing these reforms, India can create a regulatory environment that not only protects investors but also encourages market dynamism and growth. The path forward requires careful consideration and a commitment to fostering a fair and transparent financial market, ultimately contributing to the overall economic progress of the country. Through proactive regulation, technological integration, and an emphasis on corporate governance, India can establish a robust framework for combating insider trading, ensuring that its markets remain both vibrant and trustworthy.

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