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E-FILING OF CASES AS A TOOL FOR JUDICIAL DIGITALIZATION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The foundation of Phases II and III of India's e-Courts Integrated Mission Mode Project is the digitalisation of judicial operations via Electronic Filing (e-Filing). This empirical non-doctrinal study explores the operational effectiveness, structural friction, and human-computer interactions inside Indian court e-Filing platforms, going beyond normative legal analysis and statutory demands. This study offers practical empirical insights into digital court administration based on a systematic empirical survey of active advocate practitioners (N=11) and a thorough qualitative thematic analysis of registry procedures. According to the survey, systemic satisfaction is still stuck in a "average usability trap" (72.7% neutral rating), despite baseline adoption being absolute (100% active usage). Rigid document upload restrictions (45.5%) and frequent server disruptions (90.9% agreement on reason) were noted as major operational friction factors. The foundation of Phases II and III of India's e-Courts Integrated Mission Mode Project is the digitalisation of judicial operations via Electronic Filing (e-Filing). This empirical non-doctrinal study explores the operational effectiveness, structural friction, and human-computer interactions inside Indian court e-Filing platforms, going beyond normative legal analysis and statutory demands. This study offers practical empirical insights into digital court administration based on a systematic empirical survey of active advocate practitioners (N=11) and a thorough qualitative thematic analysis of registry procedures. According to the survey, systemic satisfaction is still stuck in a "average usability trap" (72.7% neutral rating), despite baseline adoption being absolute (100% active usage). Rigid document upload restrictions (45.5%) and frequent server disruptions (90.9% agreement on reason) were noted as major operational friction factors.

Keywords: Judicial Digitalization, E-Filing Systems, Empirical Legal Studies, Indian e-Courts Project, Court Administration, Legal Informatics, Institutional Infrastructure.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian administration of justice faces an unprecedented backlog, with pendency figures exceeding 50 million cases across District Courts, High Courts, and the Supreme Court of India.[1] To address this crisis of docket explosion and administrative delay, the e-Committee of the Supreme Court

[1] National Judicial Data Grid / Ministry of Law & Justice

launched the ambitious e-Courts Integrated Mission Mode Project under the National e-Governance Plan. Designed across three distinct phases, the initiative aims to digitize court management, automate registry operations, and introduce electronic filing (e-filing) as the primary intake mechanism for legal actions.

E-filing was envisioned as a transformational tool capable of democratizing access to justice. By enabling advocates and litigants to submit pleadings, pay court fees, upload evidentiary annexures, and obtain digital case numbers round-the-clock without physical registry attendance, the system promised to compress filing timelines, eliminate physical paper handling, and enhance institutional transparency.

However, while judicial policy discourse frequently treats digital implementation as synonymous with institutional efficiency, empirical legal scholarship cautions against equating technological deployment with user adoption. This study bridges the gap between normative policy intent and operational reality by investigating the frontline experiences of legal advocates navigating Indian court e-filing portals[2].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study rests at the intersection of Socio-Legal Studies, Technology Acceptance Modeling (TAM),[3] and Institutional Infrastructure Analysis. In classic legal theory, procedural access is evaluated primarily through doctrine—analyzing statutory rules of procedure, limitation periods, and court standing. Nondoctrinal empirical scholarship, however, shifts the analytical lens to the material conditions under which procedural rights are exercised.

2.1 The Technology Acceptance Model in Judicial Systems

Davis's Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) posits that user adoption of technology is dictated by two primary variables: Perceived Usefulness (PU)[4] and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU). In the context of judicial administration, legal practitioners represent a specialized end-user cohort. Unlike consumers using commercial applications, advocates operate under strict statutory deadlines, procedural rules, and professional liability. Consequently, technical failure during judicial e-filing does not merely cause inconvenience; it risks the forfeiture of legal remedies through limitation bar or default dismissal.

2.2 International Comparative Perspectives on E-Filing

Global experiences with judicial e-filing reveal distinct evolutionary tracks:

United States (CM/ECF & PACER): The Federal Courts' Case Management/Electronic Case Files system established early mandatory e-filing. While highly reliable, it faced critique for paywalling public records—a flaw India avoided by offering free access via the e-Courts portal.

[2] Supreme Court e-Committee Phase III Vision Document
[3] Davis, 1989
[4] World Bank Group, 2021

United Kingdom (HMCTS Reform)[5]: The HM Courts & Tribunals Service implemented single-cloud digital filing with automated verification, drastically reducing registry turnarounds but requiring significant court staff retraining.

European Union (e-CODEX): Designed for cross-border judicial interoperability, emphasizing strict cryptographic standards and automated XML data exchange between national registries.

2.3 The Indian Trajectory: From Paper to Hybrid Friction

Scholarship on Indian legal technology[6] (Datt & Sharma, 2021; Susskind,[7] 2019) highlights a persistent phenomenon: the "hybrid burden". Rather than replacing manual paper workflows with digital pipelines, court registries frequently layer digital mandates on top of existing physical filing requirements, creating duplicate operational costs for litigators.

3. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To evaluate the real-world performance of judicial e-filing, an empirical survey was conducted among active advocate practitioners in India . The study deployed a mixed-methods design, combining structured quantitative metrics with qualitative text fields[8].

The quantitative component comprised 10 closed-ended ordinal and categorical questions capturing respondent demographics, usage frequency, usability ratings (5-point Likert scale), primary system obstacles, perceived delay causes, and priority areas for reform. The qualitative component collected open-text commentary detailing procedural friction, technical failures, and registry interaction experiences.

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: PROFILE & USABILITY METRICS

Analysis of respondent demographics demonstrates that the empirical dataset represents frontline active advocates engaged in regular court practice across District and High Courts[9].

100% ACTIVE E-FILING USERS	63.6% STANDING < 1 YEAR	72.7% RATE USABILITY AS "AVERAGE	90.9% CONFIRM TECH DELAYS

[5] Legal Services Board UK, 2021
[6] Datt & Sharma, 2021
[7] Susskind, 2019
[8] Lipsky, 2010 — Street-Level Bureaucrac
[9] NCAER Report, 2022

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Table 1: Detailed Demographic Profile and System Engagement Breakdown ($N=11$)

Variable description	Category sub-group	Absolute count (n)	Sample share (%)
Standing / practice experience	Junior advocates (less than 1 year)	7	63.6%
	Mid-level advocate (1 to 5 years)	4	36.4%
E-filing usage pattern	Regular users (primary filing mechanism)	6	54.5%
	Occasional user (secondary mechanism)	5	45.5%
General system perception	Average/functional interface	8	72.7%
	Good/ user - friendly interface	3	27.3%
	Poor / unusable interface	0	0.0%

4.1 Analysis of Usability and Interface Comfort

The quantitative data reveals a crucial insight regarding system perception: the portal is not viewed as hostile or unworkable, but rather as a basic, unrefined utility. When asked to evaluate overall system ease on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very Difficult, 5 = Very Easy), 63.6% ($n=7$) chose rating 3 (Moderate/Neutral), while 18.2% ($n=2$) chose rating 4 (Easy) and 18.2% ($n=2$) chose rating 2 (Difficult). Crucially, zero respondents selected rating 1 (Very Difficult) or rating 5 (Very Easy)[10].

This clustering in the middle scale demonstrates an "Average Usability Trap"—the system performs fundamental data submission tasks, but lacks the speed, polish, and error-handling expected of modern digital infrastructure[11].

[10] *See* NAT'L JUDICIAL DATA GRID (NJDG), *Institutional Case Pendency Statistics and Digital Intake Performance Data*, MINISTRY OF L. & JUST. (2024)
[11] *See* Fred D. Davis, *Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use, and User Acceptance of Information Technology*, 13 MIS Q. 319, 319–40 (1989).

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Table 2: 5-Point Likert Distribution — Ease of E-Filing System Operation

Likert score	Qualitative descriptor	Response count (n)	Percentage share (%)
Score 1	Very difficult	0	0.0%
Score 2	Difficult	2	18.2%
Score 3	Moderate/average	7	63.6%
Score 4	Easy	2	18.2%
Score 5	Very Easy	0	0.0%

5. THE "AVERAGE USABILITY TRAP" HYPOTHESIS

A major finding of this empirical research is the concentration of responses in Likert Score 3 (63.6% "Moderate/Average"), combined with 0.0% responses at both extreme ends (Score 1 and Score 5). When combined with general perception data (72.7% rating the system as "Average"), this pattern supports the "Average Usability Trap" Hypothesis[12].

This hypothesis posits that state-operated public software infrastructure achieves baseline functional utility— allowing users to complete mandatory data submissions—but fails to provide the speed, reliability, and modern user experience (UX) standards found in commercial digital platforms. Users do not find the platform unusable, but experience persistent micro-frictions that slow down work and increase administrative effort.

5.1 Cross-Tabulation: Experience Standing vs. System Perceptions

To examine whether professional experience influences technology adaptation, data on practice standing was cross-tabulated against perceived system ease of use.

Analysis indicates that junior advocates (<1 year standing) report higher adaptability to interface quirks, yet express greater frustration with technical delays due to tight filing deadlines. Mid-level practitioners (1–5 years standing) show higher tolerance for procedural delays but express strong critique regarding redundant paper filing mandates enforced by court registries.

6. DEEP DIVE: SYSTEMIC BOTTLENECKS & TECHNICAL FRICTION

While broad usability ratings indicate baseline functional acceptability, probing specific technical touchpoints uncovers severe systemic bottlenecks that hamper legal practice. Table 3 presents the breakdown of primary operational difficulties encountered by practitioners[13].

Table 3: Primary Technical & Operational Difficulties Encountered in E-Filin

Operational obstacle category	Primary choice (n)	Percentage share (%)	Impact severity level
Document upload	5	45.5%	Critical operational

[12] SUPREME COURT OF INDIA E-COMMITTEE, *Phase III Vision Document for the e-Courts Integrated Mission Mode Project* 12–15 (2023).
[13] HM COURTS & TRIBUNALS SERV., *HMCTS Reform Programme Projects Explanatory Document* 8–12 (2021).

limitation (size caps & compression)			barrier
Technical & server infrastructure outages	2	18.2%	High systemic impact
Complex workflow & lack of technical guidance	2	18.2%	Moderate administrative
Court fee payment gateway drops & failure	1	9.1%	High financial risk
Security , privacy & OTP authentication errors	1	9.1%	Moderate technical friction

7. The Document Upload Crisis and File Size Thresholds

As demonstrated in Table 3, 45.5% of respondents identified document uploading as their single greatest operational hurdle[14]. Current judicial e-filing guidelines enforce strict file size caps—frequently restricting individual PDF uploads to 5 Megabytes (5MB) per file or capping entire petitions at 20MB.

In trial and appellate litigation, pleadings routinely include extensive annexures, lower court judgment records, certified deeds, witness depositions, and documentary evidence running into hundreds of pages. To comply with 5MB upload restrictions, advocate offices must perform extreme PDF compression or split single legal filings into dozens of fragmented sub-files[15].

7.1 Infrastructure Reliability and Limitation Period Risks

Server instability during peak filing hours represents a major operational vulnerability. The survey measured practitioner agreement on whether technical glitches directly contribute to filing delays[16].

Table 4: Practitioner Agreement on Technical Glitches as Drivers of Filing Delay

Response scale option	Respondent count (n)	Percentage share (%)	Consensus metric
Strongly agree	4	36.4%	
Agree	6	54.5%	90.9% combined consensus

[14] Gautam Datt & Rahul Sharma, *Digital Transformation of the Indian Judiciary: Evaluating the Impact of the e-Courts Project*, 18 J. L. TECH. & PUB. POL'Y 145, 152–58 (2021).
[15] RICHARD SUSSKIND, ONLINE COURTS AND THE FUTURE OF JUSTICE 45–52 (2019).
[16] DORY REILING, TECHNOLOGY FOR JUSTICE: HOW INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY CAN SUPPORT JUDICIAL REFORM 89–104 (2010)

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8. **IMPACT ON PROFESSIONAL EFFICIENCY & ACCESS TO JUSTICE**

A primary goal of judicial digitalization is compressing case processing timelines and reducing physical court travel expenses[17]. The empirical data presents a nuanced picture of whether e-filing has realized these objectives in practice[18].

Table 5: Practitioner Sentiment on Time Savings vs. Court Visit Reductions

Sentiment indicator	Saves professional time (%)	Reduces physical visits (%)
Strongly agree	0.0%	18.2%
Agree	18.2%	27.3%
Neutral / undecided	45.5%	36.4%
disagree	27.3%	9.1%
Strongly disagree	9.1%	9.1%

8.1 Time Savings Evaluation

As detailed in Table 6, practitioner opinion on time savings is divided: 36.4% disagree or strongly disagree that e-filing saves time, 45.5% remain neutral, and only 18.2% agree. This negative sentiment reflects the additional non-legal labor required to reformat PDF documents, resolve portal errors, and perform duplicate physical filings.

8.2 Physical Court Attendance Reductions

Regarding whether e-filing reduces physical court visits, empirical sentiment is more positive: 45.5% of respondents agree or strongly agree that physical visits have declined, while 36.4% remain neutral, and 18.2% disagree[19].

Where registries strictly enforce digital-only workflows without demanding physical paper backups, advocates experience tangible reductions in physical travel[20]. However, in courts where registry staff insist on receiving physical files, the need for physical visits remains unchanged.

9. MACRO ASSESSMENT OF JUDICIAL DIGITALIZATION

Despite day-to-day operational frustrations, overarching practitioner sentiment regarding the broader initiative of judicial digitalization remains receptive and forward-looking[21]. Figure 2 and Table 7 detail respondent assessments of whether e-filing has improved judicial efficiency overall.

Table 6: Overall Practitioner Assessment — Has E-Filing Improved Judicial Efficiency?

[17] WORLD BANK GROUP, DOING BUSINESS 2020: ENFORCING CONTRACTS AND JUDICIAL AUTOMATION IN DEVELOPING ECONOMIES 62–67 (2021).
[18] LEGAL SERVS. BD. UK, EVALUATION OF DIGITAL COURT REFORMS AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS 14–22 (2021).
[19] Code Civ. Proc. § 148A (1908) (India); *see also* The Limitation Act, 1963, § 5 (India) (governing condonation of delay caused by administrative or technical impediments).
[20] *See* Information Technology Act, 2000, § 5 (India) (granting legal recognition to electronic signatures for authentication of court filings).
[21] *See* SUPREME COURT OF INDIA, *e-Filing 3.0 User Manual: Standard Operating Procedure for Advocates and Litigants-in-Person* 14–18 (2022).

Assesment category	Response count (n)	Percentage share (%)	Strategic socio- legal insight
Strongly agree Agree	1 3	9.1% 27.3%	36.4% positive sentient : early adopters experiencing workflow gains

This finding offers a clear signal for judicial policy makers: advocate practitioners are willing partners in digital transformation. Resolving underlying technical glitches and administrative duplication will unlock widespread practitioner endorsement and operational efficiency gains.

10. PRACTITIONER REFORM PRIORITIES & STRATEGIC ROADMAP

To identify targeted institutional remedies, respondents ranked primary reform priorities required to optimize e-filing performance[22]. Table 7 outlines these priorities alongside recommended policy implementation pathways.

Table 7: Practitioner Reform Priorities for System Enhancement (N=11)[23]

System reform priority	Preference (%)	Institutional implementation pathway
Faster document verfication	36.4%	Establish SLA- backed 24-hour verification timelines for registry srutinizers
Simplified filing procedure	36.4%	Streamline web form,introduce smart field pre-filing and guided UI wizards
Better server & portal performance	27.3%	Migrate to scalable cloud architecture and increase file size caps to 50MB
Advocate training & help desks	0.0%	Core functionality upgrades prioritized over external user training
Cybersecurity & encryption	0.0%	Baseline security assumed,usability fixes demanded immediately

[22] *See* M.P. Jain, *Indian Constitutional Law* 1420–25 (8th ed. 2018) (discussing Article 21 rights to speedy trial and procedural access).
[23] *See* Anita Kushwaha v. Pushap Sudan, (2016) 8 SCC 509, 532 (India) (holding that access to justice is a fundamental right guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution of India).

10.1 Analysis of Reform Preferences

The data reveals a clear demand for core backend and workflow improvements over secondary support measures: 100% of practitioner reform votes focused on core system functional upgrades[24] (36.4% Faster Verification, 36.4% Simplified Procedure, 27.3% Better Server Performance), with zero votes assigned to external training or cybersecurity

11. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS & IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP

Based on empirical findings and qualitative analysis, this study proposes a three-pillar policy roadmap to transition Indian judicial e-filing into an efficient digital ecosystem.

11.1 Pillar I: Infrastructure Expansion & Technical Standardization

Technical bottlenecks are the primary driver of practitioner frustration. Addressing these friction points requires targeted infrastructure upgrades:

- Dynamic Cloud File Allocation & 50MB Size Caps: Upgrade portal storage backends to support

single-file uploads up to 50MB, utilizing server-side compression and automatic background OCR processing to reduce client-side file preparation burdens.

- High-Availability Server Architecture: Implement load-balanced cloud server infrastructure designed to handle peak filing hours (3:00 PM – 5:00 PM and 11:00 PM – 12:00 AM) without performance degradation or system timeouts[25].
- Automated Payment Gateway Reconciliation: Integrate real-time payment webhooks with state treasuries, featuring automatic retry loops and instant transaction verification to eliminate unrefunded dropped fee payments.

11.2 Pillar II: Procedural Rationalization & Administrative Oversight

Technology alone cannot resolve judicial inefficiency if legacy bureaucratic practices remain unchanged. Procedural reforms must accompany technological upgrades:

- Strict Ban on Duplicate Physical Filings: Issue binding practice directions across all High Courts and District Courts prohibiting registries from demanding physical paper backup files for matters successfully efiled with digital signatures.
- Service Level Agreements (SLAs) for Scrutiny: Mandate a strict 24-hour deadline for registry verification of e-filed cases, supported by automated dashboard alerts for supervisory judges to track pending verification backlogs[26].
- Standardized Defect Taxonomy & Inline Annotations: Replace generic registry objection tags with a standardized drop-down defect taxonomy and direct PDF annotation tools, allowing advocates to easily identify and correct filing errors.

[24] E-COMMITTEE, *supra* note 2, at 45 (outlining proposed Cloud Computing and SaaS migration pathways).
[25] *See* BAR COUNCIL OF INDIA, *Rules of Professional Standards and Advocate Disciplinary Rules*, r. 12 (1975) (addressing advocate liability for filing defaults).
[26] M.P. Jain & Anita Kushwaha v. Pushap Sudan

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11.3 Pillar III: User-Centric Design & Integrated Platform Architecture

To lower operational complexity, judicial portals should adopt modern interface design standards:

- Guided Multi-Step Filing Wizards: Redesign portal filing forms into step-by-step guided wizards featuring real-time data validation to prevent data entry errors prior to submission.
- Unified Advocate Access Portal (Single Sign-On): Consolidate disparate regional e-filing portals into a unified national access portal linked to Bar Council of India (BCI) practitioner databases[27].

12. COMPARATIVE EMPIRICAL FRAMEWORK: PRE- AND POST-REFORM PATHWAYS

To demonstrate the practical impact of the proposed policy recommendations, Table 8 compares current operational friction points against projected outcomes following targeted reforms.

Table 8: Comparative Analysis of Current E-Filing Workflows vs. Reformed Digital Pathways

Workflow dimension	Current operational reality (status quo)	Reform target state (post - policy action)
Document uploads	5MB hard cap, cilent-side PDF compression,risk of illegible text	50MB file limits,dynamic server -side compression &auto-OCR.
Physical duplication	Duplicate physical paper filing mandatory in many registers.	100% paperless workflow, binding ban on redundant paper submission.
Payment processing	Dropped payment transactions require manual treasury refund claims.	Integrated multi-bank webhooks with instant reconciliation & auto-retry.
Registry verification	Unpredictable turnaround (1-5days), generic defact notice	24-hours SLA guarantee,standardized defect taxonomy & inline PDF feedback
System availability	Frequent server timeouts during peak filing hours (3-5pm)	Auto- scaling cloud infrastructure with 99.9% uptime SLA

12.1 Evaluating System Progression Through Technological Acceptance Metrics

Applying the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) framework to the post-reform target state indicates that resolving baseline operational friction directly enhances Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)[28].

[27] Limitation Act, 1963 & BCI Professional Rules
[28] Datt & Sharma, 2021 & Susskind, 2019

As PEOU improves, practitioner compliance shifts from forced administrative adherence to active professional preference, driving broader digital transformation across the legal sector.

13. CONCLUSION & INSTITUTIONAL SYNTHESIS

Electronic filing systems represent a critical pillar of India's vision for a modernized, accessible, and transparent judicial system. This non-doctrinal empirical research study demonstrates that legal practitioners have fully embraced digital court platforms as an integral component of routine litigation practice (100% active usage across the respondent cohort). However, user experience remains constrained within an "average usability trap"

(72.7% neutral rating), burdened by persistent technical bottlenecks and redundant paper filing mandates[29].

The empirical investigation identifies three primary operational vulnerabilities requiring immediate policy attention:

1. Inflexible Document Storage Infrastructure: Capping file uploads at 5MB creates substantial nonbillable overhead for advocate offices, forcing unnecessary document splitting and file quality degradation[30].

2. The Hybrid Paper-Digital Paradox: Mandatory demands for physical paper backups alongside

electronic submissions eliminate time savings and double operational costs for litigating parties.

3.Financial and Scrutiny Delays: Payment gateway timeouts without real-time reconciliation, combined with slow, opaque registry defect notifications, undermine confidence in digital court workflows[31].

Importantly, empirical findings reveal zero ideological resistance from the legal bar toward judicial digitalization. Advocate practitioners view digital transformation as a necessary step forward for court administration. By implementing targeted cloud infrastructure upgrades, enforcing strict scrutiny SLAs, eliminating duplicate paper requirements, and adopting user-centric portal designs, the Indian judiciary can realize the full potential of Phase III of the e-Courts project—building a modern, paperless, and efficient system of justice.

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