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## CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM IN INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO PUNISHMENT THEORY

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### 1. ABSTRACT :

The criminal justice system is the backbone of a civilized society, designed to maintain law and order, ensure justice, and deter criminal behavior. In India, this system operates through a complex interplay of institutions such as the police, judiciary, prosecution, and correctional facilities. Central to this system is the concept of punishment, which serves as both a deterrent and a tool for rehabilitation. This paper explores the theoretical foundations of punishment retributive, deterrent, preventive, reformative, and restorative and critically evaluates their application in the Indian context.

The study also investigates how Indian courts have interpreted and employed these theories through judicial decisions, especially in cases involving capital punishment, juvenile justice, and sentencing discretion. While the Constitution of India ensures fair trial rights and human dignity under Article 21, the practical implementation of punishment theory often raises serious concerns about procedural fairness, custodial violence, overcrowded prisons, and a lack of rehabilitation infrastructure. This research adopts a doctrinal methodology to analyze statutes, judicial precedents, and scholarly opinions. It also offers comparative insights from other jurisdictions and recommends reforms to align India's criminal justice practices with global human rights standards and restorative ideals. The paper concludes by advocating a more balanced, humane, and victim-sensitive approach to punishment within India's criminal justice framework.

### 2. INTRODUCTION

The concept of justice has remained central to human civilization, guiding societies in formulating systems to regulate behavior and resolve conflicts. The criminal justice system, as an organized mechanism for addressing offences against individuals and the state, serves to maintain social order, protect individual rights, and uphold the rule of law. In India, the criminal justice system is rooted in both colonial legacies and indigenous values, evolving through constitutional mandates and statutory enactments such as the Indian Penal Code, 1860, the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, and the Indian Evidence Act, 1872.

One of the core pillars of this system is punishment, which functions as a response to crime. Theories of punishment have long influenced legislative policies and judicial pronouncements, offering diverse perspectives on how wrongdoers should be treated. From the retributive notion of "an eye for an eye" to modern reformative and restorative models that focus on rehabilitation and reconciliation, these theories reflect shifting societal attitudes towards crime and justice.

In the Indian context, punishment is not merely a legal formality but a reflection of the values enshrined in the Constitution particularly the principles of equality, dignity, and liberty under Article 14, 19, and 21. However, in practice, the administration of criminal justice faces numerous challenges. These include the absence of a uniform sentencing policy, arbitrary application of the death penalty, custodial torture, overburdened judicial processes, and a prison system that struggles with overcrowding and inadequate reform mechanisms.

This research paper attempts to critically examine the Indian criminal justice system with a special emphasis on the theory and practice of punishment. It explores the evolution and relevance of various punishment theories in the Indian legal landscape, evaluates their judicial application, and identifies systemic gaps that hinder the delivery of fair and effective justice. It also draws comparisons with global practices to offer constructive insights into how the Indian system can be reformed to better align with the objectives of a humane and accountable legal order.

The paper adopts a doctrinal research methodology, relying on the analysis of legal texts, case law, statutory provisions, and scholarly literature. By focusing on punishment theory, this study not only investigates the effectiveness of punitive measures but also interrogates whether justice both for the victim and the accused is truly being served in the Indian criminal justice system.

### 3. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE IN INDIA

The criminal justice system in India is a product of a long and layered historical evolution that reflects the socio-political and cultural transformations of the subcontinent. From ancient jurisprudence rooted in religious and moral codes to the colonial imposition of codified laws, and finally to the modern constitutional framework, India's criminal justice system has undergone significant changes. Understanding this evolution is crucial to appreciating the current structure, challenges, and underlying philosophies governing punishment in the Indian legal context.

In ancient India, the concept of justice was closely linked to dharma, which represented a set of moral, ethical, and religious duties. Legal systems during the Vedic and post-Vedic periods were predominantly influenced by texts such as the Manusmriti, Yajnavalkya Smriti, and Arthashastra. These texts laid down rules relating to criminal conduct, procedures, and corresponding penalties. The criminal law of that time was largely retributive in nature, with punishments including fines, mutilation, exile, and in some cases, capital punishment. However, the emphasis on repentance, penance (prayaschitta), and the role of the community in dispute resolution introduced elements of reformative and restorative justice.

During the medieval period, especially under the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire, the administration of criminal justice became more centralized and was significantly influenced by Islamic jurisprudence. The principle of deterrence became dominant, with harsh punishments such as public floggings, amputation, and execution being common for serious offences. Qazis (judges) administered justice under Sharia law, but often blended customary practices and royal decrees (farmans) into their decisions. However, justice during this era was often arbitrary, with limited safeguards for the rights of the accused.

A significant transformation came with the British colonial rule, which introduced a structured, codified, and centralized system of criminal justice. The British perceived Indian customary law as vague and inconsistent and thus undertook the task of systematizing it. The most important development in this regard was the enactment of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), 1860, drafted by Lord Macaulay. The IPC provided a comprehensive classification of offences and punishments based on British utilitarian principles. It laid the foundation for a uniform criminal code applicable across British India. This was followed by the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), 1898 and the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, which collectively formed the procedural backbone of the criminal justice system.

While these colonial laws were modern in form, they retained the British imperial interest in maintaining order and control. The system was accusatorial in form but hierarchical and rigid in practice, often functioning more as a tool of governance than justice. It lacked a rehabilitative approach and was largely punitive and deterrent in nature. Moreover, the colonial justice system excluded the participation of the masses, was linguistically alienating, and often discriminated against Indians.

Post-independence, the Constitution of India (1950) provided a new philosophical and legal direction to the criminal justice system. The framers of the Constitution envisioned a system that would uphold justice, liberty, equality, and dignity. The criminal laws were retained with amendments, but now operated under the supervision of constitutional guarantees such as the right to life and personal liberty (Article 21), protection against arbitrary arrest (Article 22), and equality before the law (Article 14). This marked a shift from a colonial, control-oriented system to one that aspired to be welfare-oriented and rights-based.

Despite these constitutional advancements, the criminal justice system continues to bear the imprint of its colonial origins. The IPC, CrPC, and Evidence Act remain largely unchanged in substance, though they have been periodically amended. Over time, the Indian judiciary has played a pivotal role in interpreting these laws in the light of fundamental rights. Landmark decisions such as *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India* (1978), *Bachan Singh v. State of Punjab* (1980), and *Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration* (1978) have significantly expanded the scope of due process and humane treatment within the criminal justice framework.

In recent years, several Law Commission reports and expert committee recommendations have called for comprehensive reforms in the criminal justice system, emphasizing the need for a victim-centric and restorative approach. These include the Malimath Committee Report (2003), which highlighted the importance of balancing the rights of the accused with the needs of victims, and the Draft Indian Penal Code (2020) proposed by the Bureau of Police Research and Development, which aims to modernize definitions, offences, and punishments.

Thus, the historical development of criminal justice in India reveals a gradual transition from a morally-guided, community-based system to a state-controlled, codified framework, and now towards a rights-based, participatory legal order. However, the coexistence of ancient values, colonial legacies, and constitutional ideals also creates tensions within the system, especially when it comes to the philosophy and execution of punishment. The next section will examine the institutional structure of the current criminal justice system in India and the role each component plays in administering justice.

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#### 4. STRUCTURE OF THE INDIAN CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

The criminal justice system in India is a vast and interconnected mechanism designed to detect crime, prosecute offenders, adjudicate disputes, and enforce penalties while ensuring constitutional protections for both victims and accused persons. Its primary objective is to uphold the rule of law and maintain public order by administering justice in a fair and impartial manner. The system operates through five key components: the police, prosecution, judiciary, defence, and correctional institutions. Each of these elements plays a crucial role in the functioning of the system and contributes to its overall effectiveness in delivering justice.

##### **Police: The First Responders**

The police form the frontline of the criminal justice process. Their responsibilities include the prevention and detection of crime, maintenance of public order, investigation of offences, and collection of evidence. Under the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (CrPC), the police have the power to register First Information Reports (FIRs), make arrests, interrogate suspects, and file charge sheets. While the police are empowered to ensure swift action, their powers are subject to constitutional safeguards to prevent misuse. For instance, in *D.K. Basu v. State of West Bengal* (1997), the Supreme Court laid down guidelines to protect individuals from custodial torture and arbitrary detention.

However, the police system in India has often been criticized for being overburdened, understaffed, and susceptible to political influence. There is a pressing need for police reforms, particularly in areas of training, accountability, and community policing, to make them more people-centric and efficient in upholding justice.

### ***Prosecution: Ensuring Legal Accountability***

The prosecution is responsible for presenting the case against the accused on behalf of the state. It is a crucial link between the investigation carried out by the police and the trial conducted by the judiciary. Public prosecutors, appointed under Section 24 of the CrPC, have the duty to conduct the prosecution with fairness and impartiality. They must ensure that justice is served not merely by securing convictions, but by upholding the principles of due process and rule of law.

In practice, however, the prosecutorial system in India faces challenges such as lack of independence from the executive, inadequate training, and limited resources. Often, public prosecutors are unable to devote adequate attention to cases, especially in overburdened courts, which hampers the quality of trials.

### ***Judiciary: The Guardian of Justice***

The judiciary plays a central role in the criminal justice system as an impartial arbiter that determines guilt and prescribes punishment. India follows a hierarchical structure of courts, with the Supreme Court at the apex, followed by High Courts in each state, and subordinate courts at the district and taluka levels. Criminal cases are tried by Sessions Courts and Magistrate Courts, depending on the seriousness of the offence.

The judiciary also performs the vital function of interpreting laws, ensuring that individual rights are not infringed during investigation and trial. Constitutional courts have expanded the meaning of Article 21, guaranteeing fair trial, legal aid, and speedy justice. However, the judiciary itself faces several systemic hurdles—most notably judicial delays, pendency of cases, and a shortage of judges. These issues undermine the timely delivery of justice and sometimes result in long periods of pre-trial detention for undertrial prisoners.

### ***Defence and Legal Aid: The Rights of the Accused***

The Indian Constitution and legal system recognize the presumption of innocence and the right to a fair defence. Article 22(1) of the Constitution ensures that an arrested person has the right to consult and be defended by a legal practitioner of their choice. Additionally, under Section 304 of the CrPC, the court is bound to provide free legal aid to indigent accused persons.

The Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 established institutions such as the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) to provide access to justice for all. Despite these provisions, access to competent legal representation remains limited, particularly for marginalized communities. Many defence counsels lack adequate training, and there is a general disparity in the quality of representation between the state and the accused, affecting the fairness of the trial process.

### ***Correctional Institutions: The Role of Prisons***

Correctional institutions such as jails, borstal homes, open prisons, and reformatories form the final stage of the criminal justice process. Their primary function is the custodial supervision and rehabilitation of convicted offenders. India's prison system is governed by the Prisons Act, 1894 and respective state prison manuals.

While in theory, the aim is reformation, in reality, the prison system suffers from acute overcrowding, understaffing, poor infrastructure, and lack of rehabilitation programs. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data consistently shows that a majority of the prison population consists of undertrial prisoners, reflecting systemic delays and failures in pre-trial processes. Landmark judgments like *Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration* (1978) emphasized prisoners' rights to dignity and humane treatment, but implementation remains inconsistent.

### ***Interconnected Challenges and Systemic Gaps***

The criminal justice system in India operates as a multi-tiered mechanism, but its efficiency is often compromised due to lack of coordination, infrastructural inadequacies, and outdated laws. Key issues include the absence of a uniform sentencing policy, limited use of technology, political interference, and insufficient budgetary allocation for reforms. These challenges affect the delivery of justice, and by extension, the implementation of punishment theories, especially those focused on reform and rehabilitation.

To address these concerns, various committees—including the Malimath Committee (2003) and the Madhava Menon Committee (2007)—have recommended comprehensive reforms, such as strengthening investigative agencies, ensuring prosecutorial independence, fast-tracking trials, and improving prison conditions. However, implementation has been slow and piecemeal.

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## **5. THEORIES OF PUNISHMENT**

Punishment is a fundamental element of the criminal justice system and reflects a society's collective response to criminal behavior. In legal jurisprudence, the concept of punishment is not merely about inflicting pain or suffering but is deeply tied to the objectives of justice, social order, moral retribution, and deterrence. Over time, various theories of punishment have emerged, each offering a different justification for penalizing offenders. These theories influence how laws are framed, how courts interpret sentencing, and how correctional institutions function. In the Indian context, these theories continue to shape legislative frameworks and judicial reasoning.

### **1. Retributive Theory**

The retributive theory is one of the oldest and most intuitive forms of punishment. It is based on the moral principle of "an eye for an eye", emphasizing that wrongdoers deserve to suffer in proportion to the harm they have caused. The theory sees punishment as a form of moral vengeance, where justice is achieved by ensuring that the offender is repaid for their crime.

In the Indian legal system, traces of retributive justice can be found in provisions prescribing capital punishment, life imprisonment, or rigorous imprisonment for heinous offences such as murder, terrorism, and rape. The Supreme Court in *Bachan Singh v. State of Punjab* (1980) upheld the constitutional validity of the death penalty, but only in the "rarest of rare" cases, implicitly acknowledging a limited space for retribution in a civilised legal system.

However, retributive justice has its limitations. It does not aim at reforming the offender or addressing the root causes of crime. Moreover, in a diverse and developing country like India, relying solely on retribution can risk undermining the rehabilitative goals of justice.

## 2. Deterrent Theory

The deterrent theory views punishment as a tool to prevent crime by instilling fear in the minds of potential offenders. It operates on the premise that the fear of consequences will discourage individuals from committing criminal acts. Deterrence can be of two types:

- General deterrence aims to discourage the public at large.
- Specific deterrence targets repeat offenders by preventing them from committing further crimes.

Indian criminal laws reflect a strong deterrent orientation. Stringent punishments for crimes such as rape (Section 376 IPC), terrorism (UAPA Act), drug offences (NDPS Act), and corruption aim to create a chilling effect. For example, the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, introduced harsher penalties for sexual offences after the Nirbhaya case to strengthen deterrence.

However, critics argue that deterrent punishments often fail when not supported by effective policing and swift justice. The fear of punishment is diluted when conviction rates are low and trials are delayed. Hence, while deterrence remains an important objective, it must be part of a broader justice framework.

## 3. Preventive Theory

The preventive theory aims at incapacitating the offender so they are unable to commit further crimes. This is usually achieved through imprisonment, life sentences, or even death penalties in extreme cases. The theory is grounded in the protection of society from dangerous individuals.

In India, preventive detention laws such as the National Security Act (NSA) and the Public Safety Acts of various states reflect the preventive approach. These laws allow for the detention of individuals without trial for limited periods if their actions are deemed prejudicial to public order.

The preventive theory, though necessary in some cases involving terrorism or organized crime, raises concerns regarding misuse and violations of civil liberties. The Indian Constitution allows preventive detention under Article 22, but with procedural safeguards to prevent its arbitrary application.

## 4. Reformatory Theory

The reformatory theory is rooted in the belief that crime is often the result of social, economic, or psychological factors, and that offenders can be reformed and reintegrated into society as law-abiding citizens. The focus is not on retribution or deterrence, but on rehabilitation, moral development, and correction of the criminal mindset.

India's constitutional ethos, especially under Article 21 (Right to Life and Personal Liberty), supports a humanistic approach to punishment. Reformatory justice is evident in juvenile justice laws, open prisons, parole and probation systems, and vocational programs in jails. The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, emphasizes rehabilitation over punishment, aligning with the reformatory ideal.

The judiciary has also played a crucial role in promoting reformatory justice. In *Mohd. Giasuddin v. State of A.P.* (1977), the Supreme Court noted that sentencing should reflect a concern for the offender's capacity for reform, not merely the crime. Similarly, in *State of Gujarat v. Hon'ble High Court of Gujarat* (1998), the Court recommended that jails should function as correctional homes, not punitive institutions.

However, the practical implementation of reformatory measures in India is uneven due to overcrowded prisons, inadequate rehabilitation programs, and social stigma faced by ex-convicts.

## 5. Restorative Theory

The restorative theory is an emerging approach that focuses on restoring the harm caused by criminal conduct. It seeks to involve the victim, offender, and community in a dialogue to heal the wounds of crime. The aim is to bring about reconciliation and accountability rather than punishment for its own sake.

While not fully integrated into India's mainstream criminal justice system, restorative practices are increasingly gaining attention, especially in juvenile justice, family disputes, community policing, and Lok Adalats. Mediation and conciliation in compoundable offences under the CrPC are also reflective of this model.

The Justice Malimath Committee (2003) strongly recommended the adoption of restorative justice practices in India, particularly for victims who are often sidelined in traditional criminal trials. However, a comprehensive legislative framework for restorative justice is still lacking.

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## 6. CHALLENGES IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM RELATED TO PUNISHMENT

### 1. Delayed Justice and Pendency of Cases

One of the most persistent issues in India's criminal justice system is judicial delay. According to recent data from the National Judicial Data Grid (NJDG), over 4 crore cases are pending across various courts in India, with a significant portion being criminal in nature. Delays in trials mean that many accused individuals, including those charged with minor offences, spend years as undertrial prisoners without being proven guilty.

The delay not only defeats the purpose of punishment but also leads to psychological trauma, economic hardship, and social stigma for the accused and their families. The famous aphorism—"Justice delayed is justice denied"—aptly captures the failure of a system that punishes through delay, rather than through lawful conviction.

## 2. Arbitrary and Inconsistent Sentencing

Another critical challenge is the lack of a uniform sentencing policy. Indian courts have wide discretion under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and other laws to decide the nature and quantum of punishment. While this allows judges to consider the specifics of each case, it often results in inconsistency and unpredictability.

For instance, two individuals convicted of the same offence might receive vastly different sentences, depending on the subjective perceptions of judges regarding aggravating or mitigating factors. This inconsistency leads to perceived injustice and weakens public confidence in the legal system.

The Malimath Committee Report (2003) recommended the establishment of a Sentencing Guidelines Commission to develop structured guidelines for sentencing, similar to models in the U.S. and U.K., but the recommendation has not been implemented.

## 3. Overcrowded and Underfunded Prisons

India's prisons are overcrowded, understaffed, and underfunded, seriously hampering the reformative aims of punishment. As per the NCRB Prison Statistics Report, Indian prisons operate at over 120% of their capacity, with some states exceeding 150%. More than 75% of inmates are undertrial prisoners, many of whom are behind bars simply because they cannot afford bail.

The conditions in many prisons are inhumane, lacking basic hygiene, healthcare, mental health services, or opportunities for vocational training. Despite being labeled as "correctional homes," many prisons still function in a punitive rather than reformative manner. The Supreme Court, in several judgments including *Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration*, has emphasized the rights of prisoners, but practical implementation remains poor.

## 4. Inadequate Legal Aid and Defence Representation

Although Article 39A of the Constitution and the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 provide for free legal aid, access to quality legal representation remains a major challenge for the economically disadvantaged. Many legal aid lawyers are underpaid, undertrained, and overburdened, resulting in poor defence for accused individuals, especially in rural and semi-urban areas.

As a consequence, many innocent persons either suffer wrongful convictions or are coerced into plea bargaining, simply because they lack the resources to mount a proper defence. This is a serious deviation from the principles of natural justice and due process.

## 5. Political and Policing Bias

Law enforcement agencies, particularly the police, often function under political influence or systemic bias. This can lead to selective targeting, fabrication of evidence, or custodial torture, especially against minorities, Dalits, Adivasis, and dissenters. While custodial violence is constitutionally impermissible, incidents continue to rise.

The police also sometimes arrest individuals under stringent laws like UAPA or sedition for acts that may not warrant such harsh treatment. These laws have low conviction rates, but the punishment lies in the prolonged pre-trial detention, which undermines reformative or restorative justice ideals.

## 6. Lack of Victim-Centric Approaches

India's criminal justice system remains largely accused-centric, with the victim often relegated to a secondary role. There is minimal focus on victim compensation, rehabilitation, or restorative dialogue between the offender and the victim.

Though schemes like the Victim Compensation Scheme under Section 357A of the CrPC exist, their implementation is patchy, and awareness among victims is limited. The absence of restorative justice mechanisms limits the system's ability to heal both the victim and society.

## 7. Limited Use of Alternative Punishments

The Indian system still largely depends on incarceration as the primary form of punishment, even for non-violent and petty crimes. Alternative methods like community service, probation, electronic monitoring, or restorative conferencing are either underutilized or legally underdeveloped.

Despite the availability of probation under the Probation of Offenders Act, 1958, courts often overlook these options. A more progressive penal policy would encourage non-custodial sentences for appropriate cases to reduce prison burden and enhance reintegration.

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## 7. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

### Conclusion

The criminal justice system in India, deeply rooted in both colonial legacy and constitutional vision, plays a pivotal role in maintaining societal order, protecting rights, and delivering justice. Punishment, as a core function of this system, is designed not only to penalize wrongdoers but also to deter crime, reform the offender, and serve justice to victims and society at large. However, as this research has shown, there exists a considerable gap between the theoretical ideals of punishment and the practical realities within the Indian context.

Historically, Indian jurisprudence has oscillated between retributive justice and reformative ideals, drawing from ancient Dharmashastra principles, British colonial penal codes, and post-independence constitutional values. The present-day system reflects a blend of these influences but continues to lean heavily toward punitive incarceration, even in cases where reformative or restorative measures may be more appropriate.

Through the examination of various theories of punishment—retributive, deterrent, preventive, reformative, and restorative—it is clear that no single approach suffices in isolation. A just and humane criminal justice system must strike a balance between punishment and rehabilitation, protection and compassion, deterrence and opportunity for reform.

Despite constitutional safeguards and a detailed legal framework, the practical challenges remain deeply entrenched. From delays in trials and inconsistent sentencing to custodial violence, overcrowded prisons, and lack of victim support, the current system often fails to meet the demands of speedy, fair, and effective justice. Moreover, the underutilization of alternative punishments, insufficient legal aid, and biases in enforcement reflect systemic flaws that require urgent redressal.

In essence, the Indian criminal justice system's approach to punishment is at a crossroads. It must transition from an archaic, custodial-heavy model to one that is inclusive, efficient, and humane, rooted in data-driven policies and grounded constitutional morality.

### ***Suggestions for Reform***

- Establish a Uniform Sentencing Policy
- Promote Alternative and Non-Custodial Sentences
- Strengthen Legal Aid Services
- Speedy Trial Mechanism and Judicial Reforms
- Humanize the Prison System
- Victim-Centric Reforms
- Police Reforms and Accountability

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