

SOCIOLOGICAL JURISPRUDENCE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: THE ROLE OF PUBLIC INTEREST LITIGATIONS (PILS) IN SHAPING INDIAN DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

The concept of sociological jurisprudence reflects an understanding of law as a living, social institution designed to serve the needs of people and society. Rooted in the works of Roscoe Pound and other sociological jurists, it emphasizes the role of law as an instrument of social engineering and justice rather than a mere mechanical application of rules. In India, this theoretical perspective finds its most vibrant expression through Public Interest Litigations (PILs), which have evolved as a mechanism for promoting social justice and participatory democracy. By relaxing the traditional *locus standi* and embracing a proactive judicial role, PILs have redefined the contours of access to justice and accountability in governance. This paper examines the theoretical foundations of sociological jurisprudence, explores the emergence and evolution of PILs in India, and evaluates their impact on Indian democracy, social policy, and institutional balance. It further compares Indian sociological jurisprudence with American Realism, analyses criticisms and risks associated with judicial activism, and proposes safeguards and recommendations for maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of PILs as tools of social transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Law and society share a dynamic, interdependent relationship. Sociological jurisprudence views law not as a static command but as a living instrument aimed at fulfilling social needs and aspirations. The Indian legal system, grounded in the ideals of the Constitution, has progressively evolved toward this sociological orientation, particularly through judicial innovations like Public Interest Litigations (PILs).

PILs have become a defining feature of Indian democracy, bridging the gap between law and social reality. Originating in the post-Emergency period, they emerged as an instrument for addressing structural injustices, protecting human rights, and holding the State accountable. They reflect the essence of sociological jurisprudence by translating the theoretical notion of “law in action” into tangible outcomes for the marginalized.

This paper aims to examine the evolution, methodology, and social impact of PILs in India through the lens of sociological jurisprudence. It assesses their contribution to democratic deepening, identifies institutional challenges, and offers comparative and forward-looking insights.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a **doctrinal and analytical research methodology**. Primary sources include constitutional provisions, Supreme Court judgments, and statutes related to public interest litigation. Secondary sources comprise academic writings, law review articles, and commentaries on sociological jurisprudence and judicial activism.

A **socio-legal approach** is used to assess the practical impact of PILs on society and governance. Comparative insights are drawn from **American Legal Realism**, providing a framework for understanding how Indian courts have adapted similar ideas to local socio-political contexts. The methodology integrates qualitative analysis of landmark cases and policy outcomes to evaluate PILs as instruments of social change and democratic accountability.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIOLOGICAL JURISPRUDENCE

The foundations of sociological jurisprudence lie in the rejection of formalism and the recognition of law’s social purpose. **Roscoe Pound**, its most prominent advocate, described law as a tool of **social engineering**, aiming to balance competing interests in society—individual, public, and social. He urged that judges consider the practical effects of legal rules rather than adhering to rigid precedents.

Similarly, **Eugen Ehrlich’s** concept of the “living law” emphasized that real law emerges from social interactions, customs, and institutions, not merely from statutes or judicial decrees. **Leon Duguit’s** theory of social solidarity reinforced the idea that law must reflect mutual obligations within a community.

In India, this school found resonance through judicial creativity in interpreting the Constitution as a living document. Post-independence jurists and judges like Justice P.N. Bhagwati and Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer exemplified this

sociological approach by using law as a means to ensure social justice and upliftment of marginalized populations. The PIL became the most visible embodiment of Pound's theory in practice—law as an active agent of social reform.

4. SOCIAL JUSTICE IN INDIAN CONSTITUTIONALISM

The Indian Constitution enshrines social justice as one of its foundational ideals, reflected in the **Preamble**, **Fundamental Rights**, and **Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSPs)**. The Constitution's commitment to justice—social, economic, and political—positions the judiciary as a guardian of egalitarian values.

Through **Articles 14, 19, 21, 38, 39, and 46**, the State and the courts are tasked with ensuring substantive equality and human dignity. The doctrine of **transformative constitutionalism** guides Indian jurisprudence, emphasizing that the Constitution is not a static charter but an evolving instrument for societal transformation.

PILs have become a key mechanism for realizing these objectives, allowing courts to reinterpret rights expansively and enforce social obligations of the State, particularly in fields like environment, education, labor, and human rights.

5. EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC INTEREST LITIGATIONS IN INDIA

PILs in India emerged in the late 1970s as a response to systemic denial of justice to the poor and voiceless. Inspired by judicial activism, the Supreme Court adopted a **liberal interpretation of locus standi**—allowing any public-spirited individual to file petitions on behalf of those unable to approach the courts themselves.

Justice P.N. Bhagwati in *S.P. Gupta v. Union of India* (AIR 1982 SC 149) formally articulated this shift, holding that access to justice is a fundamental right and that procedural technicalities must not defeat substantive justice.

Early PILs such as *Hussainara Khatoon v. State of Bihar* (AIR 1979 SC 1360) brought attention to the plight of undertrial prisoners, leading to prison reforms. Subsequently, *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation* (1985) recognized the right to livelihood as part of the right to life under **Article 21**. Environmental jurisprudence flourished with *M.C. Mehta v. Union of India* series, where the Court invoked sustainable development principles.

Thus, PILs marked a paradigm shift from **adversarial to collaborative justice**, aligning the legal system with sociological jurisprudence's core—law as a facilitator of social welfare.

6. PILS AS INSTRUMENTS OF SOCIOLOGICAL JURISPRUDENCE

The PIL mechanism redefined the role of the judiciary from a passive arbiter to an active catalyst of social change. It embodies Pound's ideal of “balancing interests” by harmonizing individual rights with collective welfare.

Through PILs, courts have expanded the horizons of **Article 21**, encompassing the rights to education, health, environment, livelihood, privacy, and human dignity. Cases like *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan* (AIR 1997 SC 3011) led to the creation of guidelines against sexual harassment, later codified into law through the 2013 Act.

In environmental and labor jurisprudence, PILs have influenced administrative accountability and public policy formulation. They have enhanced **transparency, participatory governance**, and **constitutional morality**, fulfilling the sociological aim of bridging law and society.

7. SOCIAL IMPACT AND POLICY OUTCOMES

PILs have profoundly influenced India's social and policy landscape. They have:

1. **Democratized Access to Justice:** Enabling marginalized groups, NGOs, and activists to seek judicial remedies.
2. **Strengthened Human Rights Protection:** From prisoners' rights to gender equality.
3. **Shaped Public Policy:** Influencing legislation on pollution control, workplace safety, child labor, and women's rights.
4. **Enhanced Administrative Accountability:** By compelling governments to act on issues like environmental degradation and corruption.

For instance, the *M.C. Mehta* environmental cases resulted in the establishment of pollution control norms, while *Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India* (AIR 1984 SC 802) prompted labor reforms. These demonstrate how sociological jurisprudence operates as a living force in Indian democracy.

8. CRITICISMS AND INSTITUTIONAL RISKS

Despite its contributions, the PIL movement faces significant criticisms:

1. **Judicial Overreach:** Critics argue that courts often step into legislative or executive domains, undermining the separation of powers.
2. **Frivolous and Political PILs:** Some petitions serve personal or political agendas rather than genuine public interest.
3. **Institutional Strain:** The increasing volume of PILs contributes to judicial backlog.
4. **Lack of Implementation:** Courts issue wide-ranging directives without ensuring enforcement, diluting efficacy.

Scholars like Upendra Baxi and S.P. Sathe have noted that unrestrained judicial activism may erode institutional legitimacy if it bypasses democratic accountability.

9. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: AMERICAN REALISM AND INDIAN ADAPTATION

The Indian sociological jurisprudence movement draws intellectual parallels with **American Legal Realism**, which emerged as a critique of formalism in the early 20th century. Realists like **Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.**, **Karl Llewellyn**, and **Jerome Frank** emphasized that law is what judges do in practice, not what statutes prescribe. They advocated studying law empirically in its social context.

India's judicial approach extends this realist perspective but adds a **normative and constitutional dimension**. While American Realists focused on descriptive analysis of judicial behavior, Indian sociological jurisprudence incorporates **moral and transformative objectives**—using law as a tool for social justice.

Thus, the Indian judiciary blends realism with **constitutional idealism**, making PILs a distinct innovation that reflects the local socio-political ethos while drawing from global jurisprudential currents.

10. THE WAY FORWARD: SAFEGUARDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To preserve the integrity and efficacy of PILs, certain safeguards are essential:

1. **Screening Mechanism:** Courts should adopt stricter scrutiny at the admission stage to filter frivolous petitions.
2. **Code of Conduct for Petitioners:** Introducing guidelines to prevent misuse by political or vested interests.
3. **Follow-up Mechanisms:** Establish monitoring committees to ensure compliance with judicial orders.
4. **Judicial Training:** Continuous capacity building in socio-legal reasoning for judges handling complex social issues.
5. **Public Legal Education:** Empower citizens through legal awareness to promote responsible litigation.
6. **Collaboration with Institutions:** Courts should coordinate with legislatures, executive agencies, and civil society for sustainable policy implementation.

These measures would strengthen PILs as credible tools for realizing sociological jurisprudence in practice while respecting institutional boundaries.

11. CONCLUSION

Sociological jurisprudence envisions law as a means to achieve social harmony and justice. In India, this philosophy found concrete expression in the evolution of Public Interest Litigations, which transformed the judiciary into an instrument of democratic accountability and social reform.

While PILs have advanced environmental protection, gender justice, labor rights, and governmental transparency, they also face challenges of overreach and misuse. Balancing activism with restraint remains essential for maintaining judicial credibility and institutional equilibrium.

Ultimately, the success of PILs and sociological jurisprudence lies in their ability to **translate constitutional ideals into social realities**, ensuring that democracy remains not merely procedural but substantively just.

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