

# **Session -1 Understanding Judicial Hierarchy in India: How to Interpret Decisions from Different Courts**

India has a well-defined judicial hierarchy that serves as the backbone of its legal system. Understanding the roles, jurisdiction, and authority of various courts is essential for interpreting their decisions correctly.

## **1. Structure of the Judiciary in India**

India's judiciary operates in a hierarchical structure to ensure justice at multiple levels. Each tier has specific roles and jurisdictions:

### **1.1 Supreme Court of India (SC)**

#### **Role and Authority:**

The Supreme Court is the apex court in India, serving as the final interpreter of the Constitution. It plays a pivotal role in upholding the rule of law, safeguarding the Constitution, and ensuring justice. Its decisions are binding on all courts across India, as stipulated under **Article 141 of the Constitution**. This makes it the highest judicial authority and a key pillar in maintaining the balance of power in the country.

#### **Jurisdiction of the Supreme Court:**

The Supreme Court exercises a wide-ranging jurisdiction under various articles of the Constitution, which include **Original Jurisdiction, Appellate Jurisdiction, Advisory Jurisdiction, and Writ Jurisdiction**.

#### **1. Original Jurisdiction (Article 131):**

The Supreme Court has the authority to hear disputes directly between:

- **The Union and one or more States.**
- **Two or more States.**

These cases typically involve constitutional or legal disputes of national importance. Examples include disputes over water-sharing agreements, boundary disputes, or taxation issues.

#### **Illustrative Example:**

- The **Cauvery River Water Dispute** between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka was adjudicated by the Supreme Court under its original jurisdiction.

## **2. Appellate Jurisdiction (Articles 132, 133, 134):**

The Supreme Court acts as the highest appellate court, allowing appeals against judgments passed by High Courts or tribunals. Appeals can be made in the following cases:

- **Civil matters:** Disputes related to property, contracts, or personal rights.
- **Criminal matters:** Cases involving serious offenses like murder or violation of constitutional rights.
- **Constitutional matters:** Cases concerning the interpretation of the Constitution.

#### **Illustrative Example:**

- **Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala (1973):** This landmark case, heard under appellate jurisdiction, defined the **Basic Structure Doctrine**, limiting the Parliament's power to amend the Constitution.

## **3. Advisory Jurisdiction (Article 143):**

The President of India can seek the opinion of the Supreme Court on matters of public importance or constitutional interpretation. While the Court's advisory opinion is not binding, it holds significant weight.

#### **Illustrative Examples:**

- **Ayodhya Land Dispute (1994):** The Supreme Court provided its advisory opinion on whether a Hindu temple pre-existed the Babri Masjid on the disputed site.
- **Sabarimala Temple Case:** The President sought the Court's opinion on issues of gender equality in religious practices.

#### **4. Writ Jurisdiction (Article 32):**

The Supreme Court has the power to issue writs for the enforcement of Fundamental Rights guaranteed under the Constitution. It acts as the protector and guarantor of these rights, enabling citizens to approach the Court directly in case of violations.

#### **Illustrative Example:**

- **MC Mehta v. Union of India (1987):** The Supreme Court issued directives for environmental protection, highlighting its role in enforcing Fundamental Rights, particularly the Right to Life (Article 21).

### **1.2 High Courts (HCs)**

**Role and Position:** High Courts serve as the highest judicial authority within a state or a group of states. They are integral to ensuring justice at the state level and play a critical role in the judicial system. As the highest court in a state or union territory, they have the authority to supervise subordinate courts under their jurisdiction, ensuring that all judicial processes adhere to the rule of law.

**Jurisdiction:** The jurisdiction of High Courts is extensive, and they function under different categories:

1. **Original Jurisdiction:** The High Courts possess original jurisdiction, particularly in matters related to the enforcement of Fundamental Rights or other legal rights as provided under Article 226 of the Indian Constitution. These petitions generally involve issues that impact the public interest or challenge state action that affects constitutional rights.
  - **Example:** The **Allahabad High Court** has quashed illegal detentions under the National Security Act in several cases. Such cases are taken up directly by the High Court without needing to go through subordinate courts.
2. **Appellate Jurisdiction:** High Courts also have appellate jurisdiction, meaning they can hear appeals from subordinate courts, including district courts, Sessions Courts, and tribunals. This jurisdiction is exercised when a party wishes to challenge a decision made by a lower court, ensuring that justice is properly delivered.

- **Example:** If a party wants to challenge a criminal verdict passed by a **Sessions Court**, the appeal can be filed in the respective High Court. This helps to ensure that there is a further review of the case by a higher authority, preventing miscarriages of justice.
- 3. **Supervisory Jurisdiction:** High Courts supervise the functioning of all subordinate courts within their territorial jurisdiction. This supervisory role ensures that lower courts act in accordance with the law, and that justice is not delayed or denied. The High Court's power under Article 227 of the Constitution allows it to intervene in cases of judicial overreach or improper conduct by subordinate courts.
  - **Example:** The **Madras High Court** has historically decided significant cases related to industrial policies, particularly those that affect the state of Tamil Nadu, ensuring that the actions of lower courts are aligned with legal principles.

### **1.3 Subordinate Courts**

#### **Subordinate Courts in India**

Subordinate courts operate under the supervision of High Courts and are responsible for handling most civil and criminal matters at the district level and below. They function as the primary judicial bodies for resolving disputes that do not reach the level of the High Courts or Supreme Court. The structure of subordinate courts consists of District and Sessions Courts, as well as Magistrates' Courts and Civil Judges' Courts.

#### **A. District and Sessions Courts**

**Role:** District and Sessions Courts are the highest courts within a district for handling both civil and criminal cases. These courts play a significant role in adjudicating serious disputes and offenses at the district level. They have jurisdiction over both civil and criminal matters and are essential in ensuring justice is delivered at the grassroots level.

1. **Civil Cases:** District Courts handle significant civil disputes, including property disputes, matrimonial issues, and breaches of contract. These cases are generally more complex and involve larger stakes.
  - **Example:** A land ownership dispute, where two parties are in conflict over the rightful owner of a piece of land, would typically be filed in the District Court.

The court would examine evidence, testimonies, and legal precedents before issuing a verdict.

2. **Criminal Cases:** Sessions Courts, which are part of the District Courts, are responsible for trying more severe criminal offenses such as murder, rape, and robbery. These courts deal with high-profile and grave criminal cases that require a thorough examination and adjudication.
  - **Example:** The **Nirbhaya Case** (2012), involving the brutal gang rape and murder of a young woman, was initially tried in a Sessions Court in Delhi. This case attracted nationwide attention and required a detailed investigation and judgment.

**3.Appellate Jurisdiction:** District Courts also have appellate jurisdiction, meaning they hear appeals from subordinate courts such as Magistrates' Courts or Civil Judges' Courts. If a party is dissatisfied with a verdict in a lower court, they can approach the District Court for a higher review of the case.

- **Example:** If a party loses a property case in a Magistrate's Court and feels that the judgment is unjust, they can appeal the decision in the District Court, which will review the case afresh.

## **B. Magistrates' Courts and Civil Judges' Courts**

**Role:** Magistrates' Courts and Civil Judges' Courts form the lower tier of the judiciary. They handle less severe criminal and civil matters and are considered the first level of the court system. These courts are typically where cases begin and are resolved quickly.

1. **Magistrates' Courts:** Magistrates' Courts are primarily responsible for handling minor criminal cases. These include offenses like petty theft, traffic violations, and minor assaults. The goal of these courts is to resolve less serious offenses that do not involve significant harm or penalty.
  - **Example:** A petty theft case, where an individual is caught stealing a small item, would be tried in a Magistrate's Court. Depending on the severity, the case might be dealt with through a fine or a short prison sentence.

2. **Civil Judges' Courts:** Civil Judges' Courts deal with minor civil disputes, including small claims or simple property disputes. These cases are generally of a lower value and can be resolved without the need for extensive proceedings.
  - **Example:** A monetary dispute between two individuals over a loan repayment or a property boundary issue would be handled by a Civil Judges' Court. These courts provide quick resolutions to everyday legal issues between individuals.

**Hierarchy:** Magistrates' Courts are classified into different levels based on the seriousness of the offenses they handle:

- **Judicial Magistrates (First and Second Class):** These magistrates handle slightly more serious cases, such as non-bailable offenses.
- **Metropolitan Magistrates:** In urban areas, these magistrates oversee cases in cities with large populations.
- **Executive Magistrates:** These magistrates handle administrative and preventive matters, such as maintaining law and order.

### **Examples to Illustrate the Structure in Action**

1. **Civil Dispute:**
  - A dispute over land ownership is initially filed in the District Court.
  - If one party is dissatisfied with the judgment, they may appeal to the High Court.
  - If the issue remains unresolved, the case may eventually reach the Supreme Court for a final decision.
2. **Criminal Case:**
  - A theft case is initially filed in a Magistrate's Court.
  - If the accused wishes to appeal, the case can be moved to a Sessions Court for a re-examination of the evidence and facts.
  - If the party is still dissatisfied with the verdict, the case can be appealed to the High Court, and further, to the Supreme Court for final resolution.
3. **Constitutional Matter:**
  - If a state passes a law that restricts freedom of speech, a writ petition challenging the law can be filed in the High Court under Article 226 of the Constitution.

- The High Court will decide the matter, and if there is still dissatisfaction, the case can be appealed to the Supreme Court under Article 32 for a final ruling.

## 1.4 Specialized Courts

### Specialized Courts in India

India has established specialized courts and tribunals to handle specific types of cases more efficiently. These courts focus on particular areas of law, ensuring that the adjudication process is streamlined and tailored to the complexities of certain legal matters. Below are some of the key specialized courts in India:

#### 1. Family Courts

**Role:** Family Courts are designed to handle matrimonial disputes and issues related to family law. These courts primarily deal with cases involving divorce, alimony, child custody, maintenance, and other related matters. The goal is to provide a quicker and more compassionate resolution to sensitive family disputes, as opposed to the traditional civil courts.

#### Example:

- In a case where a couple is seeking a divorce, the matter would be heard in the Family Court. If there are issues related to the custody of children, the Family Court would also handle the determination of who the children should live with and the maintenance that one parent might owe to the other.
  - **Specific Case Example:** If a woman files for divorce and seeks custody of her child, the Family Court would examine the circumstances and decide on custody arrangements based on the best interests of the child.

#### 2. Consumer Forums

**Role:** Consumer Forums, also known as Consumer Courts, are set up to address grievances related to consumer rights. These forums provide a platform for consumers to seek redressal for issues such as defective goods, poor services, unfair trade practices, or exploitation by

businesses. The Consumer Protection Act, 2019, provides the legal framework for these forums.

**Example:**

- A consumer purchases a washing machine from a retailer, but it turns out to be defective and doesn't function properly. Despite multiple attempts to get it repaired or replaced, the retailer does not respond. The consumer can file a complaint with the **Consumer Forum** seeking compensation or a replacement for the defective product.
  - **Specific Case Example:** If a company sells a product with a misleading warranty and refuses to honor it, a consumer can file a case in the Consumer Forum to demand a replacement, refund, or compensation for the inconvenience caused.

### **3. Labour Courts**

**Role:** Labour Courts are specialized tribunals that deal with disputes between employers and employees related to employment and labor laws. These courts primarily focus on issues like wrongful termination, unfair treatment, disputes regarding wages, working conditions, and other labor-related matters. They ensure the enforcement of labor rights and work towards the welfare of workers.

**Example:**

- An employee is terminated from their job without a valid reason and without being given a proper notice period as per their employment contract. The employee can approach the **Labour Court** to challenge the termination, seek compensation, and demand reinstatement or proper severance pay.
  - **Specific Case Example:** A worker at a manufacturing unit is not paid overtime for hours worked beyond the standard shift. The worker can file a case in the Labour Court to claim their due payment for overtime work.

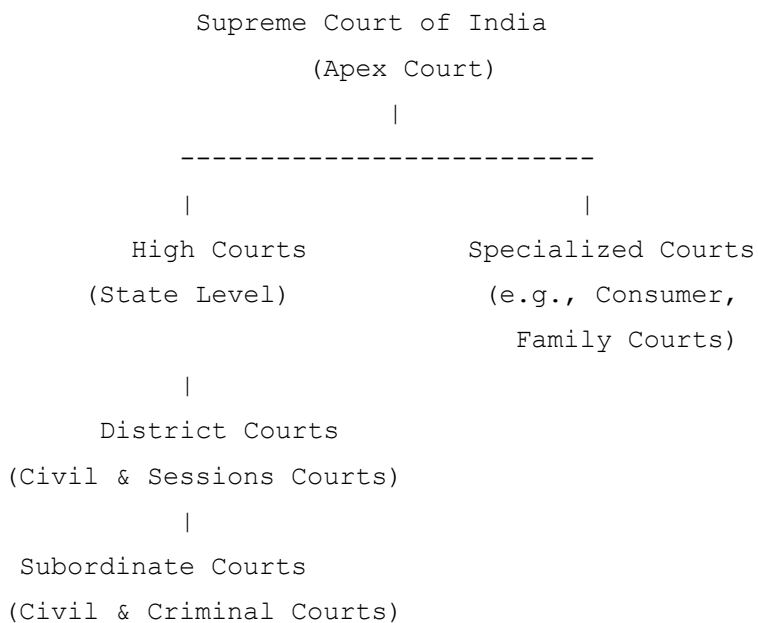
Here is a **tabular representation** and **flowchart** for understanding the judicial hierarchy in India:

### **Tabular Form: Judicial Hierarchy in India**



Level	Court Name	Jurisdiction	Examples of Cases
<b>1. Apex Level</b>	Supreme Court	Original, Appellate, and Advisory	Disputes between states; appeals from High Courts
<b>2. State Level</b>	High Courts	Original, Appellate, and Supervisory	Writ petitions; appeals from District Courts
<b>3. District Level</b>	District & Sessions Courts	Civil and Criminal Jurisdiction	Land disputes; serious crimes like murder
<b>4. Subordinate Level</b>	Civil & Criminal Courts	Civil (e.g., property disputes), Criminal (e.g., theft, assault)	Tenant-landlord disputes; petty theft cases
<b>Specialized Courts</b>	Consumer, Family, Labour Courts, Tribunals	Specific domains	Consumer grievances, matrimonial disputes

### Flowchart Form: Judicial Hierarchy in India



# **1. Interpreting Decisions from Different Courts**

In India, the judicial system operates on a hierarchical structure, with each level of court having specific roles, responsibilities, and binding authority. The decisions made by higher courts have a binding nature on lower courts, while those made by lower courts may only serve as persuasive or factual references in future cases. Understanding how court decisions are interpreted across various levels—Supreme Court (SC), High Courts (HCs), and subordinate courts—helps in understanding the development of legal principles and the application of judicial precedents.

## **1. Supreme Court Decisions**

**Binding Nature:** Under Article 141 of the Indian Constitution, the decisions of the Supreme Court are binding on all courts in India. The Supreme Court’s pronouncements serve as the final interpretation of the law, and its judgments hold the highest authority in the country.

### **Example:**

- **Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala (1973)** is a landmark Supreme Court case where the Court established the “basic structure doctrine” of the Indian Constitution. According to this doctrine, the Parliament cannot amend the Constitution in a way that alters its fundamental structure. This principle is binding on all courts across India and has been frequently cited in constitutional matters involving amendments.

## **2. High Court Decisions**

**Binding Nature:** Decisions made by High Courts are binding on the subordinate courts within their jurisdiction. For example, if a High Court pronounces a judgment on a particular matter, lower courts within that state or union territory must follow that ruling.

However, **High Court decisions are not binding on other High Courts** unless they are cited by the Supreme Court or a uniform law is established by the Supreme Court. High Court judgments may have persuasive value for other High Courts, especially in similar cases, but they are not mandatory for courts outside that jurisdiction to follow.

### **Example:**

- **Naz Foundation v. Government of NCT of Delhi (2009):** The Delhi High Court decriminalized homosexuality by striking down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. This decision had persuasive value across India, and many other High Courts referred to it. However, it was not binding until the **Supreme Court's** final judgment in **Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India (2018)**, which upheld the decriminalization of same-sex relations across the country.

### **3. Subordinate Court Decisions**

**Binding Nature:** Subordinate court decisions, which are made at the District, Sessions, and Magistrate levels, are not binding on other courts. These rulings apply only to the parties involved in the case at hand. However, **subordinate court decisions may have factual significance** and can influence similar cases, particularly when the facts and circumstances align closely with those of past cases.

#### **Example:**

- If a District Court rules on a property dispute between two parties, its decision is not binding on other districts or courts. However, the factual analysis and reasoning used in the ruling may be referenced in future cases with similar facts, helping other courts interpret similar issues.

### **4. Application of Special Leave Petitions (SLPs)**

**Article 136** of the Indian Constitution allows the Supreme Court to hear appeals from any court or tribunal through Special Leave Petitions (SLPs). The Court has the discretion to grant leave to appeal if it believes the matter involves a significant legal question or if a lower court's decision needs to be reviewed.

#### **Example:**

- If two High Courts issue conflicting rulings on a similar legal issue, the Supreme Court can resolve the conflict by granting an SLP and issuing a binding ruling.

## **2.Principle of Judicial Precedent**

Indian courts follow the doctrine of *stare decisis*, which means "*to stand by what has been decided.*" This principle is critical to maintaining consistency and ensuring that similar cases are treated similarly over time. The hierarchy of courts determines the binding nature of judicial decisions:

## 2. Vertical Precedent:

- Lower courts are bound by the decisions of higher courts within their jurisdiction. This ensures uniformity in judicial decisions and reduces the potential for contradictory rulings.
- **Example:** If the Supreme Court rules on the interpretation of a law, all courts below it, including High Courts, District Courts, and Magistrates' Courts, must follow that ruling.

## 3. Horizontal Precedent:

- Courts at the same level are not bound by each other's decisions, but they may refer to each other's rulings for guidance. This helps courts at the same level develop a consistent approach to interpreting laws without strictly adhering to each other's past judgments.
- **Example:** If two District Courts in different states deliver conflicting judgments on the same legal issue, each court may look at other District Courts' decisions for guidance but is not obligated to follow them.