

Justice in the Public Eye: The Role of Social Media in Shaping Judicial Outcomes

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INTRODUCTION

On October 6, 2025, the hallowed halls of the Supreme Court of India witnessed an immoral and unprecedented incident. During routine proceedings, advocate Rakesh Kishore attempted to hurl a shoe at Chief Justice B.R. Gavai, shouting slogans about protecting religious sentiments like (Sanatan ka apman nahi sahenge)¹.

The controversy stemmed from a remark (Sarcasm) the Chief Justice had made regarding a petition about replacing a damaged statue of Hindu deity Vishnu, allegedly suggesting the petitioner "go and ask the deity himself to do something²." Within hours, the incident exploded across social media platforms. Twitter threads dissected the Chief Justice's words, WhatsApp forwards carried inflammatory interpretations, and television news channels amplified the outrage. This incident serves as a stark illustration of a pressing question in contemporary jurisprudence: how is social media reshaping the administration of justice in India?

The intersection of social media and the judiciary represent one of the most complex challenges facing modern democracies. While the digital revolution has democratized information and given voice to millions, it has simultaneously created an environment where judicial decisions are subject to instant public scrutiny, commentary, and often, organized campaigns. This research examines how social media influences judicial outcomes in India, the implications for judicial independence, and the delicate balance courts must maintain between transparency and the sanctity of legal proceedings.

¹ See *Lawyer tries to hurl object at India's chief justice over remark about Hindu god*, NBC NEWS (Oct. 8, 2025) <https://www.nbcnews.com/world/asia/lawyer-throws-shoe-indias-chief-justice-remark-hindu-god-rcna236084>.

² *Id.*

THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Social media has fundamentally altered how Indians engage with their judiciary. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp have transformed every citizen into a potential commentator on judicial matters.

A Supreme Court verdict that once would have been analysed by legal scholars in academic journals now faces immediate dissection by millions of users within minutes of its pronouncement. This democratization of legal discourse presents both opportunities and drawbacks.

The positive aspects are undeniable. Social media has made the judiciary more accessible to ordinary citizens. Complex legal concepts are now explained through infographics, short videos, and digestible threads. Public interest litigation has found new champions in social media activists who can mobilize support for causes that might otherwise languish in obscurity the Supreme Court delivers a progressive judgment on issues like privacy rights, LGBTQ+ rights, or environmental protection, social media amplifies its impact, educating millions about However, this accessibility comes with significant drawbacks. The nuance inherent in legal reasoning often gets lost in the reductive nature of social media communication.

A carefully crafted judgment spanning hundreds of pages becomes reduced to a trending hashtag. Context disappears, replaced by soundbites that serve narratives. Legal principles that require deep understanding are debated by individuals with no legal training, creating echo chambers where misinformation flourishes .

THE UNWANTED PRESSURE OF PUBLIC OPINION

The Chief Justice Gavai incident illustrates a troubling trend: the weaponization of social media to pressure the judiciary. Following the courtroom confrontation, social media platforms were flooded with posts both defending and attacking the Chief Justice. Some users demanded his resignation, while others rallied to support judicial independence. The incident was not merely about the specific remark but became a proxy for larger cultural and political battles being fought in the digital sphere.

This phenomenon raises critical questions about judicial independence. Judges, by the nature of their office, must remain insulated from public pressure to deliver impartial justice based

solely on law and evidence. Yet in December 2024, the Supreme Court itself acknowledged this challenge, observing that judges should avoid social media and refrain from commenting on judgments, noting that judges must "live a hermit's life and work like a horse³." This statement reveals the Court's awareness of how social media can compromise judicial objectivity.

The reality is that judges are human beings who exist in the same society they serve. They cannot completely isolate themselves from the digital noise surrounding high-profile cases. When a case involves sensitive religious, political, or social issues, social media campaigns can create an atmosphere that subtly influences how judges approach their decisions. The fear is not that judges will consciously bend to public pressure, but that the constant barrage of public opinion might unconsciously shape their reasoning or make them overly cautious in addressing controversial matters.

TRIAL BY SOCIAL MEDIA

One of the most disturbing developments is the phenomenon of "trial by social media," where public opinion on social platforms precedes and sometimes supersedes judicial verdicts.

Criminal cases, particularly those involving celebrities or politically charged incidents, become subjects of intense social media speculation. Users declare guilt or innocence based on fragments of information, creating parallel narratives that compete with the actual legal proceedings.

This trend undermines the fundamental principle of "presumption of innocence". When social media has already convicted someone in the court of public opinion, can that individual receive a fair trial? Judges may face implicit pressure to align their decisions with dominant social media narratives to avoid public backlash. Conversely, they might feel compelled to rule against prevailing sentiment to demonstrate their independence, which also represents a form of external influence on judicial decision-making.

The case of several high-profile criminal trials in recent years demonstrates this dynamic. Social media users analysed evidence, cross-examined witnesses in their posts, and

³ *Judges should avoid social media, refrain from commenting on rulings: SC, BUS. STANDARD (Dec. 12, 2024), https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/judges-should-avoid-social-media-refrain-from-commenting-on-rulings-sc-124121201347_1.html.*

delivered their own verdicts. When courts eventually ruled, their decisions were immediately compared to the social media consensus. If the court's decision aligned with popular sentiment, it was praised. If it diverged, judges faced accusations of being "out of touch" or worse, corrupt. This creates an impossible situation where judicial decisions are evaluated not on their legal merit but on their conformity to public opinion.

THE AMPLIFICATION OF MISINFORMATION

Social media's role in spreading misinformation about judicial matters poses another serious challenge. Legal proceedings are complex, and court orders are often lengthy documents with subtle distinctions. However, on social media, these nuances disappear. A bail order is reported as "acquittal." A procedural ruling becomes a judgment on merits. Dissenting opinions are ignored while majority judgments are selectively quoted to support predetermined narratives.

In August 2025, when the Supreme Court directed the Union government to draft comprehensive guidelines for regulating social media content, it cited concerns about the misuse of free speech and the spread of misinformation.

The Court recognized that the unchecked proliferation of false information on digital platforms threatens not just individual rights but the integrity of institutions, including the judiciary itself.

The incident involving Chief Justice Gavai exemplifies this problem. The actual exchange in court was likely concerned with nuanced legal questions regarding the scope of judicial intervention in religious matters. However, once the issue was reframed on social media as a narrative of alleged disrespect toward religious sentiments, the complexity of the constitutional discourse was lost. As a result, critical considerations such as the constitutional distinction between secular and religious domains, the limits of judicial authority, and the principles governing state neutrality in matters of faith disappeared in the viral spread of public outrage.

JUDICIAL TRANSPARENCY VERSUS TRIAL INTEGRITY

The tension between transparency and trial integrity has intensified in the social media age. Courts have traditionally operated with a degree of opacity, not out of elitism but to protect the integrity of proceedings. Deliberations are private, draft judgments are confidential, and the reasoning behind decisions is revealed only in final orders. This system exists to ensure that judges can think freely, debate openly, and reach decisions based solely on legal considerations.

Social media challenges this model by demanding instant transparency. Users want live updates, real-time commentary, and immediate explanations (Just Like Cricket Match). Some argue that livestreaming court proceedings would enhance accountability. While this has merit for certain matters, it also risks turning trials into performances where lawyers and judges are constantly aware of their public audience.

Would a judge question a witness as rigorously knowing that every word will be dissected on Twitter? Would lawyers modify their strategies based on social media feedback? The Supreme Court has made efforts to balance these concerns. It livestreams certain important constitutional cases, recognizing the public interest in transparency. However, it maintains restrictions on other matters, particularly those involving sensitive personal information or national security. This selective approach acknowledges both the benefits of transparency and the dangers of excessive publicity.

THE PATH FORWARD: REGULATION AND EDUCATION

Addressing the impact of social media on judicial outcomes requires a multifaceted approach.

1. There must be greater legal literacy among social media users. When citizens understand basic legal principles, they can engage more meaningfully with judicial decisions rather than reacting purely emotionally. Educational campaigns, Awareness Programmes, perhaps led by bar associations and law schools, could help bridge this gap. I also think we as law students can also help by connecting with people specially teenagers (Youths) because India is a nation where a large population consists of youth (18-40) who mostly spend their time on social media.
2. Social media platforms must take responsibility for the content they host regarding ongoing legal proceedings. While freedom of expression is sacrosanct, it cannot be absolute when it threatens the right to fair trial. Platforms should develop mechanisms to track misinformation about court cases and provide links to official court documents. They should also consider restrictions on comments about ongoing trials, like sub judice rules that govern traditional media.
3. The legal framework governing contempt of court needs updating for the digital age. The Contempt of Courts Act, 1971, was drafted in a pre-internet era. Contempt of Courts Act, 1971, was drafted in a pre-internet era. social media campaigns that attempt to prejudice

judicial proceedings or intimidate judges. However, this must be done carefully to avoid curtailing legitimate criticism of judicial decisions⁴, which is essential in a democracy.

4. Judges themselves need training in digital literacy. While they should avoid engaging directly on social media, they must understand how these platforms work and how public opinion is shaped online. This awareness will help them contextualize the external pressures they face and develop strategies to maintain their independence.

PROTECTING JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE

The incident involving Chief Justice Gavai is not merely about one judge or one remark. It represents a critical juncture in Indian democracy. If judges can be physically threatened for their statements in court, and if social media can be weaponized to create hostile environments around controversial cases, judicial independence itself is at risk.

The judiciary must be defended not through blind support of every decision but through institutional safeguards. This includes protecting judges from physical violence, prosecuting those who threaten judicial officers, and creating a culture that respects the separation of powers. Social media users have every right to criticize judgments they disagree with, but criticism must be distinguished from intimidation.

At the same time, the judiciary must remain humble and accessible. Judges are not infallible, and their decisions must be open to scrutiny and debate. The solution is not to insulate courts entirely from public discourse but to ensure that discourse remains informed, respectful, and focused on legal merits rather than personal attacks.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between social media and the judiciary will continue to evolve. Technology will advance, platforms will change, but the fundamental tension between public engagement and judicial independence will remain. The Chief Justice Gavai incident serves as a reminder of the judicial independence will remain. The Chief Justice Gavai incident serves as a reminder of India, what was threatened was not just one person's dignity but the very principle that justice India, moving forward, we must recognize that social media is neither inherently good nor bad

⁴ *Supreme Court's Social Media Regulation Order: Free Speech and Accountability, VAJIRA MANDRAVI (Sept. 2, 2025),*
<https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/social-media-regulation-order/>.

for the judicial system. It is a tool that can enhance transparency and public engagement or undermine fair trials and judicial independence. The choice depends on how we use it. Citizens must engage responsibly, understanding that their posts and shares have real consequences. Courts must adapt to the digital age while protecting the core values that make justice possible. And society must recommit to the principle that in a democracy, courts are places where reason prevails over rage, where evidence matters more than emotion, and where justice is determined by law, not by the loudest voice in the digital crowd.

The test of our democracy lies not in silencing social media but in ensuring that even in the age of instant communication and viral outrage, the scales of justice remain balanced, and the blindfold of Lady Justice remains firmly in place. Only then can we truly say that justice is not just seen to be done but done right just seen to be done.