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A Comparative Study of the Rule of Law in India and the England Legal System

Bendre Jyoti Dadasaheb¹, Dr. Pravin Kumar Chuhan²

Research Scholar, Department of Law, Monad University, Hapur, UP, India¹

Professor, Department of Law, Monad University, Hapur, UP, India²

ABSTRACT: The Rule of Law is a foundational principle of constitutionalism and democratic governance, ensuring that all actions of the state are exercised within the limits of law and that no individual or authority is above legal control. This research paper undertakes a comparative study of the Rule of Law as it operates in India and the England legal system, examining its historical evolution, constitutional foundations, and contemporary relevance in administrative governance. Originating as a common law concept in England, the Rule of Law was classically articulated by A. V. Dicey, who emphasized supremacy of law, equality before law, and the predominance of legal spirit. Over time, this concept has undergone significant transformation in both jurisdictions.

In England, the Rule of Law developed through judicial decisions and constitutional conventions within an unwritten constitutional framework, operating alongside the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty. The English legal system relies heavily on common law principles and judicial control to prevent arbitrary administrative action. In contrast, India adopted the Rule of Law as a basic feature of its written Constitution, embedding it explicitly and implicitly through provisions guaranteeing equality, fundamental rights, and judicial review. The Indian judiciary has played an expansive role in interpreting the Rule of Law, extending it to include substantive due process, protection of human rights, and administrative fairness.

This comparative study highlights both similarities and differences in the application of the Rule of Law in the two legal systems. While both systems aim to restrain arbitrary power and ensure accountability of public authorities, their constitutional structures, scope of judicial review, and approaches to administrative discretion differ significantly. The paper emphasizes that despite contextual variations, the Rule of Law remains central to maintaining legality, justice, and good governance. The comparative analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how constitutional and administrative law function to uphold democratic values in India and England.

KEYWORDS: Rule of Law, Indian Constitution, English Legal System, Administrative Law, Judicial Review, Constitutionalism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Rule of Law is a cornerstone of modern constitutional and administrative governance. It signifies the supremacy of law over arbitrary power and ensures that all authorities—legislative, executive, and judicial—act within legally defined limits. As a guiding principle of democratic societies, the Rule of Law protects individual rights, promotes equality before law, and guarantees accountability of public authorities. Its importance becomes particularly evident in administrative law, where state power directly affects citizens' rights and liberties.

The concept of the Rule of Law has its historical roots in the common law tradition of England, where it evolved gradually through judicial decisions and constitutional conventions rather than a single written document. A. V. Dicey's classical formulation of the Rule of Law provided a systematic explanation of this principle, emphasizing the supremacy of law, equality before law, and the predominance of legal spirit. Over time, the English understanding of the Rule of Law has adapted to changing administrative and constitutional realities, particularly with the expansion of executive functions and the growth of welfare governance.

In India, the Rule of Law was adopted as a fundamental principle at the time of independence and was firmly embedded in a written Constitution. Unlike England, India explicitly constitutionalized the Rule of Law through provisions guaranteeing fundamental rights, equality, and judicial review. The Indian judiciary has consistently interpreted the Rule

of Law as a basic feature of the Constitution, expanding its scope to include substantive fairness, reasonableness, and protection against arbitrary state action.

A comparative study of the Rule of Law in India and England is significant because both legal systems share a common historical foundation, yet differ markedly in constitutional structure and administrative practice. England operates under parliamentary sovereignty with an unwritten constitution, while India follows constitutional supremacy under a written framework. These differences have shaped the manner in which the Rule of Law functions and is enforced in each system.

Concept and Evolution of the Rule of Law

The Rule of Law is a fundamental principle that governs the relationship between the state and its citizens by ensuring that all public power is exercised in accordance with law. At its core, the Rule of Law implies that law is supreme and that no individual, authority, or institution is above it. This principle seeks to prevent arbitrariness, protect individual rights, and promote fairness, certainty, and accountability in governance. It forms the ethical and legal foundation of constitutional and administrative law in democratic societies.

Historically, the concept of the Rule of Law developed gradually within the common law tradition. Its roots can be traced to early constitutional developments such as the Magna Carta of 1215, which limited the absolute power of the monarchy and asserted that the ruler was subject to law. Over time, this idea evolved through judicial decisions and constitutional practices, reinforcing the belief that government authority must be constrained by legal norms.

The classical exposition of the Rule of Law was provided by A. V. Dicey in the late nineteenth century. Dicey identified three core principles: the supremacy of law, which excludes arbitrary power; equality before law, which requires that all persons, regardless of status, are subject to the same law administered by ordinary courts; and the predominance of legal spirit, meaning that constitutional principles are the result of judicial decisions rather than formal declarations. Dicey's theory significantly influenced constitutional thinking in common law countries, including India.

However, Dicey's formulation has been subject to criticism for its rigidity and limitations. Critics argue that his theory underestimated the role of administrative authorities and ignored the realities of modern welfare states, where executive discretion is essential for effective governance. Additionally, the strict application of equality before law has been questioned in societies that require affirmative action and differential treatment to achieve substantive equality.

In response to these criticisms, the concept of the Rule of Law has evolved from a formal and procedural notion to a broader and more substantive one. Contemporary interpretations emphasize not only legality but also justice, reasonableness, and protection of fundamental rights. The modern Rule of Law includes principles such as due process, proportionality, transparency, and access to justice. This evolution reflects the changing role of the state and the increasing importance of human rights in constitutional governance.

Thus, the Rule of Law is no longer confined to the absence of arbitrary power but has become a dynamic and expanding principle. Its evolution demonstrates its adaptability to different constitutional systems and social conditions, making it a vital concept for comparative analysis in both Indian and English legal contexts.

Rule of Law in the English Legal System

The Rule of Law has traditionally occupied a central position in the English legal system and has developed primarily through common law principles, judicial decisions, and constitutional conventions rather than through a written constitutional document. In England, the Rule of Law functions alongside the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty, which grants Parliament the supreme law-making authority. Despite this, the Rule of Law acts as a crucial limitation on the exercise of executive and administrative power by ensuring legality, fairness, and accountability.

The classical understanding of the Rule of Law in England is closely associated with the writings of A. V. Dicey. According to Dicey, the English legal system exemplified the Rule of Law through the supremacy of law over arbitrary power, equality before ordinary courts, and the protection of individual rights through judicial decisions. These principles ensured that public authorities could act only within the scope of powers granted by law and that individuals had effective legal remedies against unlawful administrative action.

Judicial control has been a key mechanism for enforcing the Rule of Law in England. Courts have exercised the power of judicial review to examine the legality of administrative actions and to ensure that public authorities do not exceed or abuse their powers. Through doctrines such as ultra vires, reasonableness, and procedural fairness, English courts have

restrained executive arbitrariness and protected individual rights. The principles of natural justice, particularly the right to a fair hearing and the rule against bias, have been integral to this process.

The development of administrative law in England, especially in the twentieth century, expanded the scope of the Rule of Law. The growth of the welfare state and administrative agencies necessitated a balance between efficient governance and legal accountability. In response, courts evolved flexible standards of review to supervise administrative discretion without undermining administrative efficiency.

In recent times, the incorporation of human rights principles has further strengthened the Rule of Law in the English legal system. Although Parliament remains sovereign, judicial interpretation and statutory safeguards have enhanced the protection of fundamental rights and reinforced the principle that government action must conform to legal and moral standards. Thus, the Rule of Law in England continues to function as a dynamic and evolving principle that safeguards legality, liberty, and constitutional balance.

Rule of Law in India

The Rule of Law occupies a central and foundational position in the Indian constitutional and administrative framework. Unlike England, India adopted the Rule of Law within a written Constitution, making it an explicit and enforceable principle of governance. From the very beginning, the framers of the Constitution envisioned a system in which all organs of the state would function within constitutional limits and be accountable to the law. As a result, the Rule of Law has been recognized as a basic feature of the Indian Constitution.

In India, the Rule of Law is reflected in several constitutional provisions, most notably in the guarantee of equality before law and equal protection of laws under Article 14. This provision embodies the principle that the state cannot act arbitrarily and must treat individuals fairly and reasonably. Articles 19 and 21 further strengthen the Rule of Law by protecting fundamental freedoms and the right to life and personal liberty, subject only to procedure established by law. Together, these provisions ensure that individual rights are protected against unjust and unreasonable state action.

The Indian judiciary has played a decisive role in expanding and reinforcing the Rule of Law. Through judicial interpretation, courts have ensured that legislative and executive actions conform to constitutional norms. The power of judicial review enables courts to strike down laws and administrative actions that violate fundamental rights or exceed constitutional authority. Over time, the judiciary has broadened the scope of the Rule of Law to include substantive fairness, reasonableness, and non-arbitrariness in administrative decision-making.

Public Interest Litigation has further strengthened the Rule of Law in India by making justice accessible to marginalized and disadvantaged groups. By relaxing procedural requirements, courts have enabled citizens to challenge administrative arbitrariness and misuse of power. This development has transformed the Rule of Law from a formal legal principle into an instrument of social justice.

At the same time, the Indian approach to the Rule of Law recognizes the need for administrative discretion in a welfare state. However, such discretion is subject to judicial control to prevent abuse of power. Thus, the Rule of Law in India operates as a balance between effective governance and protection of individual rights, ensuring that all state action remains within the bounds of constitutional legality and democratic values.

Comparative Analysis of the Rule of Law in India and the English Legal System

A comparative analysis of the Rule of Law in India and the English legal system reveals both significant similarities and important differences arising from their distinct constitutional structures and historical experiences. While both systems share a common common-law heritage and a commitment to limiting arbitrary power, the manner in which the Rule of Law is conceptualized and enforced differs substantially.

One of the key similarities between the two systems lies in the fundamental objective of the Rule of Law, which is to ensure legality, equality, and accountability of public authorities. In both India and England, the Rule of Law requires that governmental power be exercised in accordance with law and that individuals have access to judicial remedies against unlawful administrative action. Judicial review plays a crucial role in both systems as a mechanism for controlling administrative discretion and preventing abuse of power.

However, a major difference arises from the constitutional framework of the two countries. England operates under an unwritten constitution based on parliamentary sovereignty, where Parliament is the supreme law-making authority. In

this system, the Rule of Law functions primarily through judicial interpretation, common law principles, and statutory safeguards. In contrast, India follows a written Constitution based on constitutional supremacy. The Rule of Law in India is not merely a political ideal but a constitutional mandate enforceable through fundamental rights and judicial review. Another important distinction relates to the scope of judicial review. In England, courts traditionally exercise judicial review over administrative actions but do not possess the power to invalidate Acts of Parliament. The principle of parliamentary sovereignty limits judicial intervention in legislative matters. In India, however, courts have wide powers of judicial review and can strike down legislation that violates constitutional provisions or fundamental rights. This broader scope significantly strengthens the Rule of Law in the Indian context.

The approach to equality also differs between the two systems. Dicey's concept of equality before law influenced both jurisdictions, but India has adopted a more substantive interpretation. The Indian Constitution permits reasonable classification and affirmative action to achieve social justice, whereas the English system historically emphasized formal equality before ordinary courts.

Despite these differences, both legal systems continue to evolve in response to modern governance challenges. The comparative study highlights that while the Rule of Law adapts to different constitutional contexts, its core purpose of preventing arbitrariness and protecting liberty remains constant in both India and England.

Rule of Law and Administrative Law

The relationship between the Rule of Law and administrative law is both close and interdependent, as administrative law provides the practical mechanisms through which the Rule of Law is enforced in day-to-day governance. In modern states, the expansion of governmental functions has led to the growth of administrative authorities vested with wide discretionary powers. The Rule of Law ensures that such powers are exercised within legal limits and are subject to judicial scrutiny to prevent arbitrariness, abuse, and injustice.

In both India and the English legal system, administrative law serves as an instrument to operationalize the Rule of Law by regulating the actions of executive authorities. It establishes principles that guide administrative decision-making, such as legality, reasonableness, proportionality, and procedural fairness. These principles ensure that administrative actions conform not only to statutory requirements but also to broader standards of justice and fairness.

Judicial review is the most significant tool through which the Rule of Law is enforced in administrative matters. Courts examine whether administrative authorities have acted within the scope of their powers, followed due process, and respected principles of natural justice. In England, doctrines such as *ultra vires*, *Wednesbury unreasonableness*, and procedural impropriety have developed to control administrative discretion. These doctrines ensure that public authorities do not exceed the powers granted to them by Parliament and that their decisions are rational and fair.

In India, judicial review of administrative action has evolved into a robust and expansive mechanism. Indian courts have consistently held that arbitrariness is antithetical to the Rule of Law. Administrative discretion, though necessary for effective governance, must be exercised reasonably and in accordance with constitutional values. The judiciary has emphasized that discretionary power cannot be unfettered and must be guided by clear standards to prevent misuse.

The principles of natural justice form a common foundation in both systems and are central to administrative law. The right to a fair hearing and the rule against bias reinforce the Rule of Law by ensuring transparency and accountability in administrative decision-making. These principles protect individuals from unjust administrative actions and strengthen public confidence in governance.

Thus, administrative law acts as the bridge between abstract constitutional ideals and practical governance. By subjecting executive action to legal control, it gives concrete meaning to the Rule of Law and ensures that power is exercised responsibly, lawfully, and in the public interest.

Challenges to the Rule of Law

Despite its central importance in constitutional and administrative governance, the effective realization of the Rule of Law faces several challenges in both India and the English legal system. These challenges arise from the increasing complexity of governance, expansion of administrative discretion, and the tension between efficiency and legality. While the institutional frameworks in both systems aim to uphold the Rule of Law, practical limitations often weaken its full implementation.

One of the major challenges to the Rule of Law is administrative arbitrariness. Modern governments are required to perform a wide range of functions related to welfare, regulation, and public service delivery. This expansion has resulted in the delegation of extensive discretionary powers to administrative authorities. Although discretion is necessary for effective governance, its misuse or excessive exercise can undermine legality and fairness. When decisions are taken without clear guidelines, transparency, or accountability, they threaten the very foundation of the Rule of Law.

Delay in the administration of justice is another significant challenge. Access to justice is an essential component of the Rule of Law, but judicial delays weaken public confidence in legal institutions. In India, the backlog of cases and procedural complexities often result in prolonged litigation, making legal remedies ineffective for many citizens. In England, although the judicial system is relatively efficient, resource constraints and procedural reforms have raised concerns regarding access to justice, particularly for disadvantaged groups.

The increasing use of delegated legislation and executive rule-making also poses challenges to the Rule of Law. While delegated legislation is essential for administrative efficiency, excessive reliance on executive-made laws may dilute legislative oversight and democratic accountability. If such powers are exercised without adequate safeguards, they may lead to arbitrary governance and weaken the supremacy of law.

Another challenge lies in balancing national security and public interest with individual rights. Governments often invoke emergency powers, public order regulations, or security laws to address extraordinary situations. While such measures may be necessary, their misuse or prolonged application can erode civil liberties and undermine the Rule of Law. Ensuring proportionality and judicial oversight in such cases remains a persistent concern.

Lastly, political influence and erosion of institutional independence pose serious threats to the Rule of Law. The independence of the judiciary and administrative institutions is essential for maintaining legality and accountability. Any attempt to undermine institutional autonomy or disregard judicial decisions weakens constitutional governance.

Thus, the challenges to the Rule of Law highlight the gap between constitutional ideals and practical realities. Addressing these challenges requires strengthening institutions, ensuring accountability, improving access to justice, and reaffirming commitment to legality and democratic values.

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II. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative examination of the Rule of Law in India and the English legal system brings out several important findings that highlight both continuity and divergence in constitutional and administrative governance. One of the key findings is that despite differences in constitutional structure, the Rule of Law functions as a foundational principle in both systems, aimed at preventing arbitrary exercise of power and ensuring accountability of public authorities. In both jurisdictions, the Rule of Law serves as a safeguard for individual liberty and a mechanism to maintain the balance between authority and freedom.

A significant finding of this study is that the constitutional framework plays a decisive role in shaping the scope and effectiveness of the Rule of Law. In England, the Rule of Law has evolved through common law traditions and judicial interpretation within the context of parliamentary sovereignty. Courts exercise strong control over administrative action but remain constrained in reviewing primary legislation enacted by Parliament. In contrast, India's written Constitution and the doctrine of constitutional supremacy provide a broader and more explicit foundation for the Rule of Law. The power of judicial review enables Indian courts to invalidate not only administrative actions but also legislative measures that violate constitutional provisions.

The discussion further reveals that judicial activism has significantly expanded the scope of the Rule of Law in India. Through creative interpretation of fundamental rights, particularly Articles 14 and 21, Indian courts have transformed the Rule of Law into an instrument of substantive justice. Concepts such as non-arbitrariness, reasonableness, and fairness have been firmly embedded in administrative decision-making. In England, although courts traditionally adopted a restrained approach, recent developments in administrative law and human rights jurisprudence indicate a gradual shift towards a more rights-oriented understanding of the Rule of Law.

Another important finding relates to the treatment of equality. While Dicey's notion of formal equality influenced both systems, India has consciously adopted a substantive approach to equality to address social and economic inequalities. This marks a departure from the classical English model and reflects the social justice orientation of the Indian Constitution. The discussion shows that this adaptation strengthens the Rule of Law by aligning it with social realities rather than weakening it.

The study also finds that modern governance poses similar challenges to the Rule of Law in both systems, particularly in relation to administrative discretion, delegated legislation, and national security concerns. These challenges underscore the need for continuous judicial vigilance and institutional accountability. Overall, the discussion suggests that while the application of the Rule of Law varies across jurisdictions, its core objective of limiting power and protecting rights remains central to both India and the English legal system.

III. CONCLUSION

The comparative study of the Rule of Law in India and the English legal system clearly demonstrates that the Rule of Law remains a fundamental and indispensable principle of constitutional and administrative governance in both jurisdictions. Despite differences in constitutional structure, historical evolution, and legal practices, both systems share a common commitment to limiting arbitrary power, ensuring equality before law, and protecting individual rights. The Rule of Law functions as the backbone of democratic governance by maintaining the supremacy of law over all forms of authority.

In the English legal system, the Rule of Law developed organically through common law traditions, judicial decisions, and constitutional conventions. Operating within the framework of parliamentary sovereignty, it emphasizes legality, procedural fairness, and judicial control over administrative action. Although courts in England cannot invalidate primary legislation, their strong supervisory role over executive and administrative authorities has ensured that public power is exercised within legal boundaries. Over time, the incorporation of human rights principles has further strengthened the Rule of Law by enhancing the protection of individual liberties.

In India, the Rule of Law occupies an even more explicit and robust position due to the presence of a written Constitution based on constitutional supremacy. It is firmly embedded in fundamental rights and has been recognized by the judiciary as a basic feature of the Constitution. Through judicial review, Indian courts exercise wide powers to control both legislative and executive actions, ensuring that all state activity conforms to constitutional norms. The Indian approach reflects an expanded and substantive understanding of the Rule of Law, incorporating principles of fairness, non-arbitrariness, social justice, and human dignity. The comparative analysis highlights that while England follows a more traditional and restrained model shaped by parliamentary sovereignty, India has adopted a more expansive and activist approach influenced by its socio-economic realities and constitutional goals. Both models, however, illustrate that the Rule of Law is not a static concept but a dynamic and evolving principle that adapts to changing governance needs.

In conclusion, the Rule of Law continues to serve as a vital safeguard against misuse of power in both India and the English legal system. Strengthening institutions, ensuring judicial independence, and maintaining accountability are essential for preserving its effectiveness. The comparative perspective reinforces the universal importance of the Rule of Law in sustaining constitutionalism, administrative fairness, and democratic values.

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