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REVIEW ARTICLE

Beyond Incarceration; Optimising Probation Use in India through Legislative Reform and International Best Practices

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ABSTRACT

The multi-faceted benefits of Probation of offenders make it essential for global criminal justice reform. The Justice Mali math Committee (2003) and the Draft National Policy on Criminal Justice (2007) emphasised sentencing guidelines and increased use of Probation to manage prison populations. Similarly, the Supreme Court's ruling in Inhuman Conditions in Prisons (2016) highlighted Probation as a solution for overcrowding. Amid global recognition of Probation's effectiveness and policy recommendations for its wider use, this study examines the utilisation of Probation of offenders in India, particularly in addressing prison overcrowding and crises like COVID-19. This study analyses the Supreme Court and High Court case law rulings regulating adult probation implementation in India under The Probation of Offenders Act (POA). The findings show a novel two-pronged approach, transcending traditional public safety. The new approach prioritises (1) elevating the Probation of Offenders Act over the penal code to mandate Probation in specific cases and (2) expanding judicial discretion to consider mitigating factors and broaden eligibility. While advocating for greater probation access, the study underscores the need for evidence-based strategies and sentencing guidelines to balance public safety. Further, it proposes legal and practical frameworks to enhance Probation's rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes while mitigating potential risks of recidivism through evidence-based supervision.

Keywords: Probation, Offenders, Rehabilitation, Sentencing, Court

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1. Introduction

Prison overcrowding and human rights concerns necessitate a critical re-evaluation of sentencing practices and comprehensive criminal justice reforms. Originating as a means to assess and reward good behaviour¹⁾ Probation in India involves a conditional suspension of the imposition of sentence on selected offenders on their undertaking to maintain good behaviour for a specified period with or without the supervision of a probation officer²⁾. However, the efficacy of Probation in India, particularly during crises like prison overcrowding and the COVID-19 pandemic, requires rigorous scrutiny. Informed by the global significance of Probation of Offenders, this study aims to directly inform policymaking and legislative reforms by examining the scope of judicial probation sentencing in India, specifically regarding offender rehabilitation and prison overcrowding. We analyse the determinants influencing judicial decisions—probation reports, offence severity, criminal history, and socio-economic factors—and assess the Probation of Offenders Act (POA) in light of UN standards (The Tokyo Rules)³⁾ and thereby addressing a significant lacuna in the existing literature on Probation of offenders in India, specifically focusing on the nuanced and under-explored domain of judicial discretion. Specifically, this research will identify concrete policy recommendations and potential legislative amendments by exploring the feasibility of integrating international evidence-based strategies. The goal is to enhance rehabilitation, reduce recidivism, and ensure fair sentencing, ultimately proposing targeted reforms to optimise Probation and address systemic challenges within the Indian criminal justice system, thereby contributing to tangible policy change and legislative improvements.

2. Literature Review: Global significance of the Probation of offenders

2.1. Historical Relevance

Probation emerged to address the limitations of traditional punishment⁴⁾. According to Bond (1938), one of the most critical pieces of legislation in the human race for guaranteeing defendants' legal representation was the Probation Act of 1907⁵⁾. Its proven effectiveness led to widespread adoption⁶⁾.

2.2. Societal, Psychological, and Economic Benefits of Probation

Probation provides numerous benefits compared to incarceration. Compared to imprisonment, Probation reduces recidivism rates, allowing for the allocation of resources to higher-risk offenders⁷⁾. It also promotes rehabilitation and reintegration through support services, skill development, and access to treatment/education⁸⁾. Culturally tailored programs⁹⁾ and positive relationships¹⁰⁾ further enhance outcomes. Research has shown that specialized psychological treatment is effective in reducing recidivism¹¹⁾. Additionally, Probation helps offenders develop healthier thinking and behaviour patterns through counselling, therapy, and skill-building programs¹²⁾. Probation increases public trust in the justice system¹³⁾ and, with lower recidivism rates, reduces the burden on the system¹⁴⁾. It is also more cost-effective due to lower administration costs¹⁵⁾ and community-based programs¹⁶⁾. Probation further mitigates costs for families and communities and allows offenders to contribute financially through amends and employment¹⁷⁾.

2.3. Probation in India: Global Context and Domestic Issues

Probation needs to be strengthened through local control, judge-set priorities, clear community sentence policy, rehabilitation focus, defendant consent, staff development and supervision, ongoing evaluation, and potentially reversing privatization¹⁸⁾. Probation is a form of social work, but political reasons have caused the separation of the two professions.

This separation harms both as they could benefit from collaboration and shared education. Probation should reclaim its social work identity to serve society better¹⁹⁾. The pandemic demanded adaptable strategies for staff and clients²⁰⁾. Video conferencing requires pre-existing rapport and adaptation of evidence-based practices²¹⁾. Procedural justice principles stressing fairness and the client's voice are vital in in-person and video interactions²²⁾. In India, Current practices prioritize punishment over rehabilitation, leading to inconsistent application and neglecting restorative approaches²³⁾. Legislative reforms and adopting efficient sentencing guidelines from other countries are crucial for achieving fairer and more rehabilitative outcomes. India currently lacks a unified system centred on rehabilitation²⁴⁾.

The Probation of Offenders Act's limitations and unclear roles for stakeholders hinder offender reintegration. Revising the Probation of Offenders Act (1958) is crucial to enhance reintegration and reduce stigma²⁵⁾. The Mali Math Committee report emphasizes the need for strong central legislation with clear guidelines for promoting Probation and parole²⁶⁾. Judges often lack offender background information, leading to inconsistent use of Probation sentencing²⁷⁾. Individualized sentencing and proper use of probation reports are crucial²⁸⁾. Based on the requirement of individualized sentencing under the Eighth Amendment in the U.S.A., Ryan argues that reducing mandatory sentences and expanding probation use could be effective²⁹⁾. Prison overcrowding, high recidivism rates, and ineffective rehabilitation in India necessitate modern correctional methods. Exploration of the global best practices and maximizing Probation is a need of the hour³⁰⁾.

2.4. Critical Insights from Literature Review

Probation reduces recidivism, offers rehabilitation, and reintegrates offenders, all while saving money and protecting communities. Challenges exist: video conferencing demands trust-building, and India's system needs reform. Reforms should focus on individualised sentencing, clear guidelines, increased suitable probation use, revised POA for reintegration, and research effectiveness (particularly for young offenders). These steps can make Probation a pillar of a just justice system.

3. Methods

This study fills a critical gap in the existing literature by analysing judicial discretion in Indian Probation, focusing on sentencing decisions, rehabilitative balance, and societal safety through an integrated methodological framework. It combines doctrinal, socio-legal, and longitudinal analyses to examine the Probation of Offenders Act (POA), aiming to identify legal gaps, map historical trends, and contextualize the impact of socio-economic factors on probation efficacy. This multi-faceted approach informs evidence-based reforms and addresses the need for individualized sentencing.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in a tripartite framework: (1) sentencing theories to analyse judicial discretion; (2) rehabilitation principles (to assess offender reform; and (3) the socio-legal impact of prison overcrowding on probation utilization. These pillars provide an analytical lens through which to examine the evolution of judicial discretion and the effectiveness of Probation through case law analysis.

3.2. Research Design and Data Sources

This review adopts a comprehensive methodological approach, primarily integrating doctrinal and socio-legal analysis. Additionally, a supplementary longitudinal analysis is employed to reinforce the accuracy and reliability of the findings.

3.2.1. Doctrinal and Socio-Legal Analysis

A systematic legal doctrinal analysis of the POA and relevant case laws after the commencement of POA, 1958 is conducted to identify legal gaps, interpret key provisions, and delineate judicial trends in probation implementation. Socio-legal elements are integrated to contextualize findings, considering socio-economic factors (e.g., poverty, inequality), policy implications, social impact, and external influences (e.g., prison overcrowding). Data sources include legal journals, government reports, and publicly available legal databases.

3.2.2. Longitudinal Descriptive Analysis

A quantitative longitudinal analysis of probation appeals, grants, and refusals from 1958 to 2023 is conducted, utilizing data from SCC Online, with specific search terms focusing on relevant case law. This analysis delineates temporal trends and patterns, including a focused examination of the 2011-2020 period to assess the impact of shifts in judicial interpretation and external factors such as legislative changes.

3.2.3. Comparative Analysis of Legal Provisions and Review of relevant Evidence-based practices

This study also employs a comparative legal analysis of probation legislation in the United States and Australia to identify international best practices. Concurrently, a review of global evidence-based probation literature informs strategies for enhancing the Indian system, facilitating legislative reform.

3.3. Research Questions

RQ1: How does judicial discretion, as informed by sentencing theories and shaped by offence type and severity, influence the application of the POA and its rehabilitative objectives? RQ2: What temporal trends are observable in the judicial use of Probation in India, and how have Supreme Court directives and external factors (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic) influenced these patterns?

3.4. Limitations

This study relies on publicly available legal data and databases. The absence of primary data collection, such as interviews or surveys, limits the scope of analysis and may not fully capture the nuanced experiences of stakeholders. The study is also limited to the available data within the legal databases.

3.5. Discussion

The discussion will synthesize doctrinal, temporal, and socio-legal findings, incorporating comparative analyses and global best practices. It will critically examine the POA's effectiveness, highlighting key challenges related to judicial discretion, rehabilitation, and prison overcrowding, and propose evidence-based reforms to strengthen India's probation system.

3.6. Ethical Considerations and Data Transparency

This study utilises publicly available legal data, ensuring ethical research practices. Data collection is limited to judicial decisions, official reports, and legal journals. Analysis adheres to transparent procedures detailed in the methodology. All sources are meticulously cited.

4. Rehabilitative Justice in India: A Review of Judicial Discretion and the Evolving Scope of the Probation of Offenders Act, 1958

4.1. The Role of the Probation of Offenders Act, 1958, in the Rehabilitation Penal Philosophy

The Probation of Offenders Act, 1958 (POA) marks a progressive shift in criminal law by prioritizing rehabilitation. Its beneficial provisions should be interpreted liberally, not restrictively, to maximize their impact³¹). The Act focuses on social reintegration by diverting young offenders from prison and addressing crime's environmental influences and root causes. It aims to modernize the justice system, which currently suffers from lengthy trials, by implementing a more efficient approach. Prioritizing rehabilitation over punishment for minor offenses³²), the Act seeks to transform offenders into productive members of society³³). Although Probation should be considered for suitable cases, its underutilization by the courts is a significant issue, especially in our slow judicial processes. When a case is finalized, the need for punishment may have lessened due to changing circumstances. Probation becomes a more relevant option for non-serious offences and first-time offenders³⁴).

4.2. Court's Discretionary Release of Convicts on Probation: Key Parameters

Courts hold discretion under sec. 4, POA to release a person found guilty of an offence not punishable with death or life imprisonment on Probation, considering the case's circumstances, the nature of the offence, and the offender's character if deemed expedient³⁵). This decision hinges on factors like offence nature and offender character, with relevant information like probation officer reports guiding the court³⁶).

4.3. The Probation Officers' Report

Probation officer reports are essential for courts to determine probation eligibility. Decisions made without such reports are deemed unlawful³⁷). They are considered mandatory by the Supreme Court, and courts have a responsibility to obtain them³⁸). However, courts can rely on alternative information if reports are unavailable³⁹). While courts should actively gather information for rehabilitation purposes⁴⁰), reports are not mandatory in every instance. Exceptions exist when obtaining a report is deemed a waste of time or when every defendant routinely requests one⁴¹). Ultimately, the burden falls on the offender to present evidence justifying Probation, such as first-time offender status⁴²). The Court's decisions on probation hinge on offence severity, offender age, and circumstances⁴³). Good reason and extenuating circumstances should be considered when granting probation⁴⁴). Denying Probation without justification is improper⁴⁵). Courts have discretion under the Probation of Offenders Act (POA) to grant Probation at various stages, including appellate and revisional⁴⁶).

4.4. The criteria for assessing the circumstances of the offence for Probation decisions

Probation discretion under POA centres on case circumstances, including the nature of the offence and the offender's character. The power of the Court to release certain offenders on Probation of good conduct (Sec.4 POA) applies to all offenders regardless of age except offences punishable with life imprisonment and death. This section intends to reform an offender rather than punish him for his crime⁴⁷). Without explicit guidelines under the Probation of Offenders Act (POA), the following discernible pattern emerges when examining judicial practices regarding probationary release.

4.4.1. Offender Characteristics

Scrutiny of the offence is essential for the judge. This involves understanding whether the crime was premeditated or impulsive, the underlying motive, any personal gain the offender sought, the context (village feud, domestic violence, etc.), and the offender's emotional state at the time. Beyond the offence, the judge should also consider the offender's background, including social and economic status, education and intelligence, and most importantly, their attitude towards society. By examining these factors, the judge can better understand the offender's potential for rehabilitation, ultimately guiding sentencing decisions⁴⁸).

4.4.2. Offense Characteristics

The Court considers aggravating and mitigating circumstances of the offence itself. This includes the nature of the crime, the planning and execution involved, the weapon used (if any), and any accompanying factors (e.g., violence). Based on this comprehensive assessment, the Court decides whether Probation with good behaviour conditions is appropriate or if imprisonment and a fine are necessary⁴⁹).

4.5. Court's Discretion in Releasing Offenders After Admonition

Admonition by a Judge is a reprimand, a censure, or a reproof warning the accused that he is being let off, but in case of repetition, he will be punished severely under the law. When an admonition is administered, there is no question of awarding any further sentence, whether then or at a future date⁵⁰). This applies to specific offences specified in Sec.3 of POA and those punishable by a maximum of two years imprisonment. The offender's character and the circumstances of the case are crucial factors. The admonition is often used for young first-time offenders who acted impulsively, were under the influence, or committed a minor offence⁵¹). Courts acknowledge youthful indiscretions and may grant leniency, even for offences like wrongful restraint or attempted serious crimes⁵²).

Courts have used admonitions for various thefts: stealing a coconut tree for a roof⁵³), a bicycle due to temptation⁵⁴), and petty theft⁵⁵). Admonitions were also used to repay fraudulently obtained loans⁵⁶) and steal cattle due to debt⁵⁷). A lack of criminal history strengthens the case for admonition⁵⁸). Courts have shown leniency in specific offences under POA, even for causing death unintentionally⁵⁹), public intoxication, or disobeying orders duly promulgated by a public servant⁶⁰); admonitions were used due to the lack of premeditation, minor nature of the offence, or lengthy delays in proceedings. Similarly, offenders with no prior criminal history who caused non-serious injuries⁶¹) were released with warnings. Notably, admonition under Section 3 of the POA avoids the stigma of a criminal conviction⁶²). Under Section 3 of the POA, the admonition is excluded for serious, pre-planned crimes or deception⁶³) or creating potential social unrest⁶⁴).

4.6. Limitations on the Incarceration of Offenders

The POA prioritizes non-prison sentences for young offenders. The Court must consider releasing them with a warning (admonition) or Probation unless there is a good reason for imprisonment. Before deciding, the Court must consider a report on the offender's background and other relevant information (Section 6 of the POA). The Act prioritizes protecting young offenders (under 21) from the negative influence of hardened criminals in prison. Sec. 6 of the POA emphasizes this goal, mandating that courts consider alternatives to imprisonment unless necessary⁶⁵). The ordinary rule under section 6 appears to grant the benefit. Denying the benefit is an exception to the rule of granting the benefit. Section 6 of the POA

benefits must usually be granted. Only in rare and exceptional circumstances can the benefit be denied⁶⁶). When applying Sec.6, courts look beyond the severity of the offence and consider factors that suggest an offender's potential for rehabilitation. These factors include impulsive or first-time offences⁶⁷), the influence of media portrayals on criminal behaviour⁶⁸), and unusual circumstances surrounding the crime.

Probationary release is not restricted to minor offences. Courts consider the broader context for rehabilitation, including the relationship between offender and victim⁶⁹) and the offender's age and criminal history⁷⁰). The POA reflects a progressive approach to criminal justice. The Supreme Court has extended its benefits to offenders under the Prevention of Food Adulteration Act and some offences under the Prevention of Corruption Act⁷¹). This underscores the focus on rehabilitation and the reduction of unnecessary incarceration for young offenders.

There was disagreement among various benches of the Supreme Court as to whether the exact date for the application of Section 6 of POA is the date of commission of the offence or the date on which the trial court had to deal with the offence for the imposition of the punishment. The Supreme Court finalized its position in *Sudesh Kumar v. State of Uttarakhand* that Section 6 of the Act would apply to the accused who is under 21 years of age on the date of imposition of punishment by the trial court and not on the date of commission of the offence. The provisions of Section 6 of the Act would apply to him in full force⁷²), upholding the decision of the higher bench (four judges) of the Supreme Court in *Ramji Misser v. State of Bihar*⁷³). The Probation of Offenders Act offers leniency, but exceptions exist. Probation cannot be granted to a perpetrator who abducted a teenage girl and forced her into sexual submission with criminal intention⁷⁴). Courts can deny Probation for offences with mandatory minimum sentences, like possessing large quantities of alcohol without a permit⁷⁵). Similarly, Probation is not guaranteed under Section 33 of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act⁷⁶). Probation also does not apply during pre-trial stages⁷⁷) or for offences under the Defence of India Act⁷⁸).

4.7. Utilizing Discretion in Probation: General Guidelines for Offenders Over the age of 21 years

The Probation of Offenders Act allows release for good conduct based on the offence's nature and the offender's character. However, court rulings show that the offence type significantly impacts eligibility. Probation becomes less likely for those who commit more serious crimes.

4.7.1. Probation and Sex Offenders

Probation is generally unavailable for sexual offences due to their severe nature⁷⁹). Courts have denied Probation for heinous acts like kidnapping and forced sexual submission⁸⁰). Granting Probation for sex offences, it is argued, could embolden perpetrators and hinder their apprehension⁸¹). This strict approach extends to attempted rape and sexual assault⁸²). Sexual harassment is a violation of a woman's privacy and dignity, demanding a strong response⁸³). Rehabilitation becomes secondary for offences against vulnerable children, given society's need for protection⁸⁴).

4.7.2. Offences Affecting Public Morals

The courts deny Probation for selling obscene materials due to its corrupting influence, especially on youth⁸⁵). Similarly, Probation is denied for exposing young people to pornography⁸⁶). This protects public morals and discourages harmful behaviour⁸⁷).

4.7.3. Probation and Socio-economic Offences

The courts take a stricter approach to Probation for socio-economic offences, prioritizing public safety and deterrence. Probation was revoked for adulterating food colouring and endangering consumers, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds⁸⁸). Social protection outweighs leniency in such cases. Similarly, Probation is rarely granted for white-collar crimes due to concerns about deterrence⁸⁹). Probationary measures are seen as insufficient to discourage economic crimes. Further, it applies to offences of violating the Essential Commodities Act⁹⁰), hoarding large quantities of liquor⁹¹), and unauthorized gas cylinder possession⁹²). Additionally, Probation is generally denied for serious offences like opium and gold smuggling⁹³). These offences are viewed as heinous due to their commercial motives and difficulty in detection, warranting harsher punishments⁹⁴). This stricter approach reflects the potential harm caused by socio-economic offences and the need to protect vulnerable populations⁹⁵).

4.7.4. Offenses Eroding Public Trust

Indian courts deny Probation for offences involving forged documents and cheating. This protects educational opportunities by preventing undeserving students from using fake mark sheets⁹⁶). Similarly, Probation is denied for acquiring jobs through forged documents⁹⁷). Probation is also unavailable for misusing public funds⁹⁸) and practising law without qualifications⁹⁹). Such actions erode public trust in institutions and professions. Further, Probation is denied for concealing past convictions and defrauding the court¹⁰⁰), premeditated crimes¹⁰¹), and crimes affecting medical professionals' morals¹⁰²).

4.7.5. Probation and death by rash and negligent Act

The courts are reluctant to grant Probation for causing death by rash and negligent acts¹⁰³). This applies particularly to professional drivers, who are more responsible for safety¹⁰⁴). Probation was also denied when a person's negligence while operating an elevator resulted in a fatality¹⁰⁵). Recently, the Himachal Pradesh High Court also held that it is not permissible to grant the benefit of the Probation of Offenders Act for an offence involving rash and negligent driving¹⁰⁶).

4.7.6. Probation and offences with minimum sentences

The general approach followed by courts is that the Probation of Offenders Act (1958) generally does not apply to offences with mandatory minimum sentences. This ensures the intended punishment is imposed¹⁰⁷). Applying Probation would undermine the purpose of the minimum sentence. However, exceptions exist. If the law allows judicial discretion, Probation might be considered¹⁰⁸). Here, specific reasons justifying a lesser or no prison sentence are required. Further complexities arise with post-1958 legislation. Some argue that the Act does not apply to mandatory minimum sentences prescribed in such special laws, especially those with a "non-obstante" clause overriding other laws¹⁰⁹).

5. Exceptional Considerations: Mitigating factors have been prioritized in appeals before constitutional courts over time

When considering appeals for Probation, courts sometimes weigh mitigating factors favourably. Similarly, the Act's benefits should be applied based on the specific circumstances of each case¹¹⁰). Favourable factors include the absence of premeditation for minor injuries¹¹¹) and unique circumstances like accidental and unintentional presence at the crime

scene¹¹²). Probation can even apply to serious offences involving mitigating factors like small quantities (gold smuggling)¹¹³).

Constitutional courts, ordinarily meticulous in granting Probation to offenders over 21, emphasizing public safety and other pertinent factors, have historically adhered to established norms and exercised a restrained approach. However, recent trends suggest a departure from this stance, especially since 2016. Recently, courts have placed greater weight on mitigating factors when making sentencing decisions. This has increased leniency, with judges more likely to grant Probation to offenders over 21. In February 2016, considering prison overcrowding and human rights violations, the Supreme Court directed the Undertrial Review Committee to investigate the implementation of the Probation of Offenders Act, 1958, specifically focusing on first-time offenders to provide them with an opportunity for restoration and rehabilitation in society¹¹⁴). Later, The Supreme Court established that the Probation of Offenders Act (1958) supersedes earlier enactments. This means that the possibility of Probation under this Act applies even in cases where other laws might prescribe mandatory minimum sentences. The Court has shown a willingness to grant Probation despite mandatory minimums for serious offences like robbery or dacoity with attempted violence, considering factors like good conduct in prison and victim forgiveness¹¹⁵). This principle was further supported in *Tarak Nath Keshari v. State of WB*, where Probation was allowed despite a minimum sentence under the Essential Commodities Act (1955) because POA was a later law¹¹⁶).

Building on the above precedent, the Rajasthan High Court similarly granted Probation in *Rajesh Kumar v. State of Rajasthan*¹¹⁷), and the other High Courts are expanding probation access (Probation of Offenders Act, 1958). Examples include Probation for sexual assault considering victim-offender relationships¹¹⁸) and remorseful mothers in tragic cases of culpable homicide not amounting to murder¹¹⁹). Additionally, courts emphasize mandatory consideration of probation¹²⁰) and protect the fundamental right to profession during probation¹²¹). This trend suggests a shift towards a more nuanced and rehabilitative approach to criminal justice in India.

Furthermore, the high courts granted Probation, considering several factors favouring the appellants. These factors include expressions of remorse coupled with decades of a clean record in cases of death resulting from rash and negligent acts¹²²), absence of any criminal history in cases of forgery¹²³), no criminal activity between the parties for long years following the incident, absence of criminal antecedents and significant time elapsed since the offenses of adultery and dowry death¹²⁴), the advanced age of the appellant at 70 years with no recent criminal record¹²⁵), absence of criminal antecedents and peaceful behaviour since release on bail in 1993 for the offense of attempted murder¹²⁶), a substantial period of time having passed (17 years) without any criminal activity under the Essential Commodities Act¹²⁷), satisfactory conduct during imprisonment for attempted robbery and dacoity when armed with a deadly weapon, with the remaining one year of imprisonment converted to Probation for maintaining peace and good behaviour¹²⁸), good behaviour post-release on bail, lack of any prior criminal history, responsibility for dependent aged parents, an unemployed wife, and a minor child, as well as partial restitution of nearly half the misappropriated funds with a commitment to repay the remainder in the case of criminal misappropriation of loan repayments (EMI), committed by the executive of the finance company¹²⁹).

6. Temporal patterns of probation appeals, probation grants and refusals after the commencement of the Probation of offenders Act, 1958.

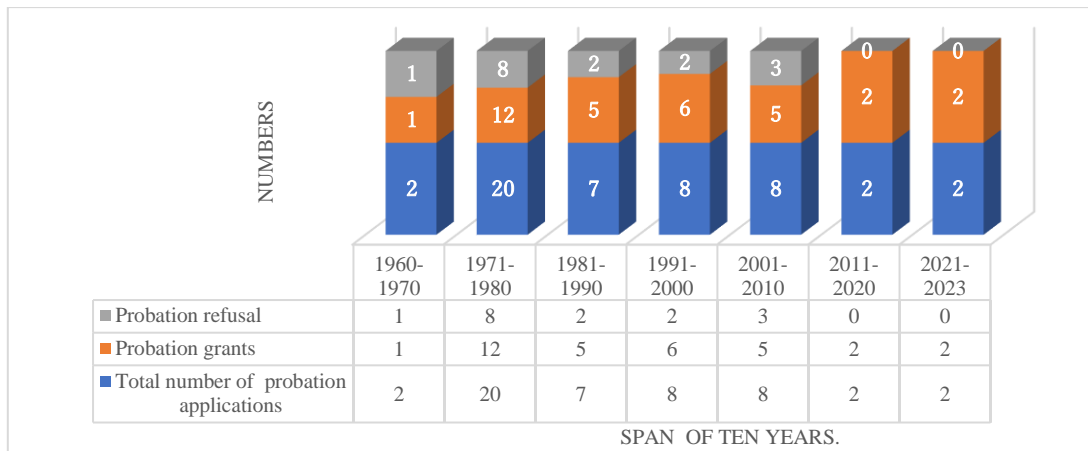


Figure 1. Quantitative Analysis of Probation Requests, Grants, and Refusals for Offenders Under 21 years of age Before Constitutional Courts Post-POA, 1958, during each consecutive span of 10 years

Figure 1 illustrates a surge in probation requests in appeals by under-21 offenders during the 1970s. Notably, a stark contrast is evident in the 21st century, where all such appeals were granted between 2011-2023.

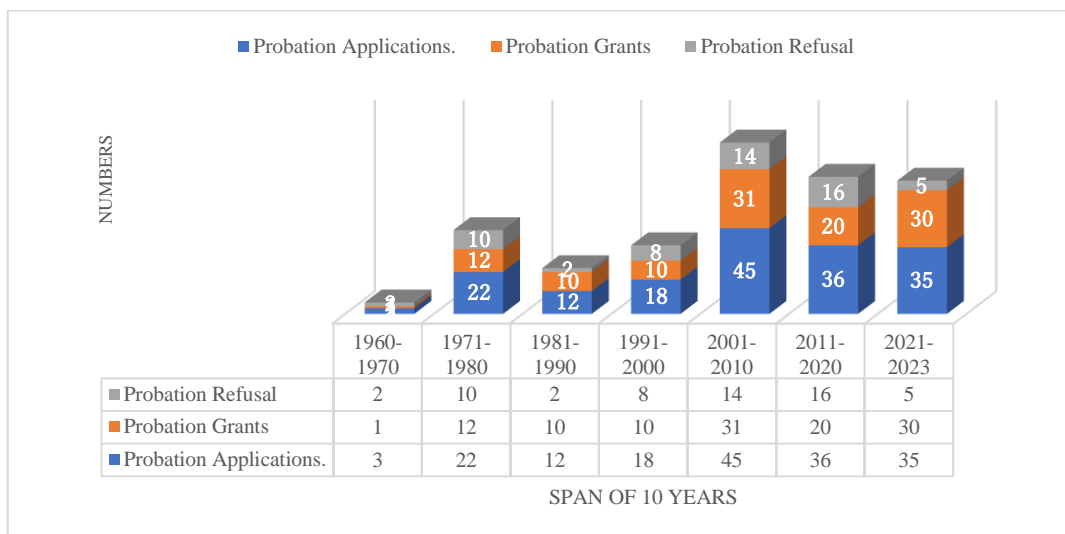


Figure 2. Quantitative Analysis of Probation Requests, Grants, and Refusals for Offenders above 21years of age Before Constitutional Courts Post-POA,1958, during each consecutive span of 10 years

Figure 2 shows rare probation appeals of offenders above 21 years early in the Probation of Offenders Act (1958), rising significantly in the 1970s. Appeals peaked at 4.5/year (2001-2010), dipped slightly (2011-2020), but surged to 12/year since 2021. Adult probation grants reached the second-highest in the Act's history within three years from 2021

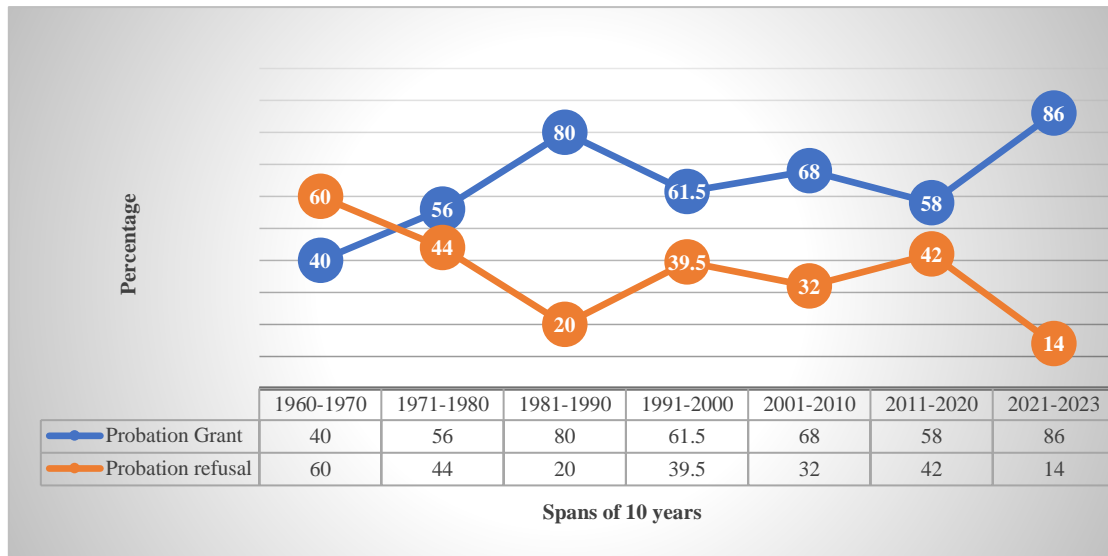


Figure 3. The percentage variations of Probation grants and probation refusals for both offenders above and below 21 years.

The Figure 3 diagram integrates percentage variations in probation grants and refusals for offenders above and below 21 years. Initially, a prevalent trend of refusal characterizes the first decade of the Probation of Offenders Act 1956. However, from 1971-1980, there was a shift as probation grants surpassed refusals, resulting in the second-highest gap. Subsequent decades exhibit consecutive fluctuations, reaching the maximum gap (within three years) during 2021-2023, with probation grants at 86%. Identifying these consistent patterns can aid in predicting future trends in the Probation of offenders through deeper analyses.

Researchers observed a substantial decrease in probation grants from 2011 to 2020 following the enactment of the Probation of Offenders Act 1958. A subsequent in-depth longitudinal analysis focusing on this specific period generated the following diagram, Figure.4

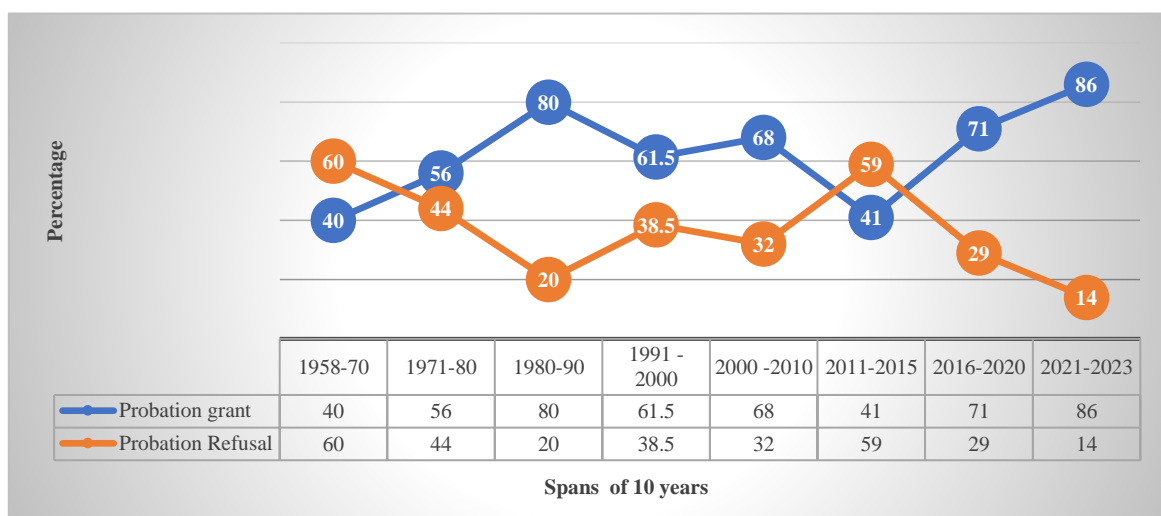


Figure 4. Notable Probation Grant and Percentage variations post POA, 1958

As per the Figure4, probation grants consistently increased from 40% in 1958-1970 to 80% in 1980-90. In the subsequent decades, there were alternating declines and rises, maintaining levels above 60% compared to probation refusals until 2010. However, from 2011-2015, there was a significant 28% decline, causing probation grants to drop below refusals at 41%. Notably, probation grants have rapidly increased over the next five years, reaching 71% and further escalating to 86% during 2021-2023.

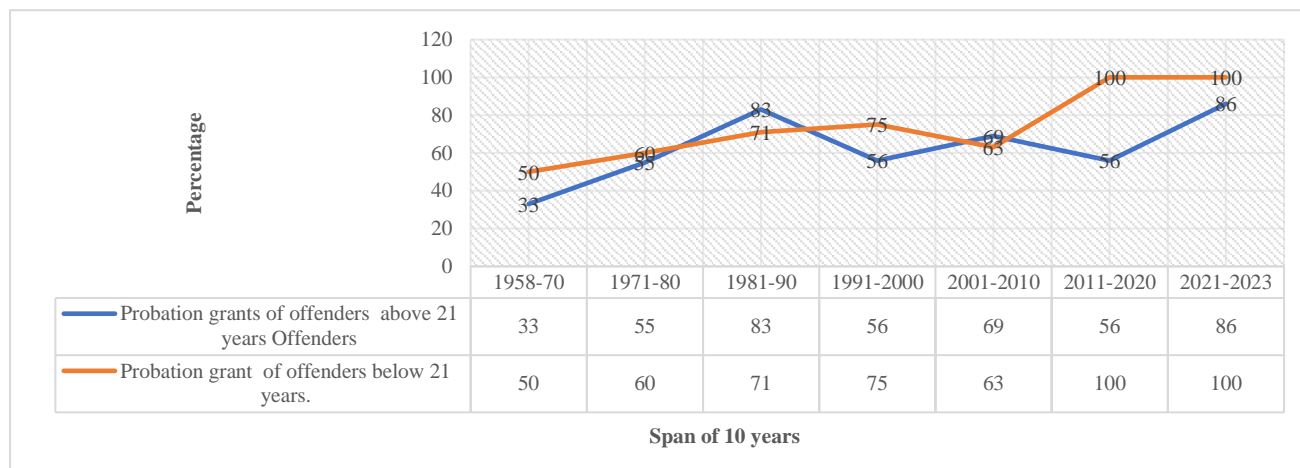


Figure 5. Percentage variations in probation grants out of total requests between offenders above 21 years and below 21 in each consecutive span of 10 years post-POA, 1958.

As per Figure 5, Probation grant patterns following the 1958 Act demonstrate a notable shift. After minimal initial usage, juvenile probation grants significantly increased, achieving 100% from 2011-2020, while adult grants, though showing recent growth to 86% (2021-2023), have historically remained lower.

7. Analysis of the findings, Potential challenges and concerns

India's Probation of Offenders Act (POA) emphasizes rehabilitation for minor offences. Probation is generally unavailable for serious crimes, repeat offenders, or offences impacting public safety or trust. The courts can grant Probation even without the probation officer's report. The examination of recent cases from 2016, specifically from 2021, indicates a surge in granting probation appeals before The Supreme Court and The High Courts. Superseding mandatory minimum sentences, the courts emphasize the POA's mandatory nature. Factors considered include crime severity, offender's background, and remorse. High Courts increasingly consider Probation for older offenders and serious offences, weighing mitigating factors like clean records and behaviour. The POA prioritizes rehabilitating young offenders by limiting imprisonment for those under 21. Since the Act's inception, the Constitutional courts have favoured granting Probation for this age group. This has led to a positive trend in probation utilization by trial courts and fewer appeals from offenders below 21(from the 1970s). The further fall in appeals of young offenders from 2000 is due to the Juvenile Justice Act (2000), which applies to juvenile offenders up to 18.

On the other hand, applications from older offenders peaked in the 2000s but faced a stricter approach until 2015. The recent rise to 84% in probation grants by constitutional courts relates to the 2016 Supreme Court directive¹³⁰⁾ and public

health emergency measures due to COVID-19 to address prison overcrowding. Courts' discretion has almost reached the stage of granting Probation, similar to that of both age groups.

If constitutional court rulings consistently disregard the established restricted criteria and norms for granting Probation to offenders above 21 due to prison overcrowding and public health emergencies, it could lead to trial courts awarding Probation more widely. Consequently, this study identifies urgent challenges, including an overburdened probation system, increased recidivism, limited resources, inadequate rehabilitation services, community safety concerns, and data management issues. To address these issues, the criminal justice system must prioritize solutions such as clear guidelines, standardized risk assessments and mandatory probation officer reports, improved data management and transparency, research and evaluation, and training for judges and probation personnel on the Probation of Offenders Act to ensure consistent application.

8. Beyond Incarceration: Exploring Alternative Sentencing through US and Australian Probation Models

8.1. U.S.A.

The US probation system has various components¹³¹). This analysis examines sentencing in Florida, Massachusetts, and California. Florida statutes provide Probation, community control, and pre-trial intervention for most offences. Probation involves community supervision. Community control entails monitored custody. These options are available for pre- and post-judgment felonies¹³²). Massachusetts uses probation orders with general and specific conditions¹³³). Sentencing recommendations guide decisions. Pre-trial diversion offers an alternative to trial¹³⁴). Probation options include pre-trial Probation¹³⁵), Continuance Without a Finding, Straight Probation, conditional sentence¹³⁶), split sentence¹³⁷) and intermediate sanctions. California emphasizes public safety in probation decisions. Probation involves suspending sentence execution. It's unavailable for violent felonies or repeat offenders. The Community-Based Punishment Act (1994) provides alternatives to incarceration. California emphasizes Probation's role in public safety¹³⁸).

8.2. Australia

Australia's probation system varies by jurisdiction¹³⁹). This analysis examines sentencing in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), Northern Territory (NT), and Queensland (QLD). ACT Crimes (Sentencing) Act 2005) considers offence details and offender characteristics¹⁴⁰). Options include Good Behaviour Orders, Drug and Alcohol Treatment Orders, Intensive Correction Orders, suspended sentences, and Deferred Sentence Orders (ACT, 2005). NT Sentencing Act 1995 prioritises rehabilitation and flexibility (Sentencing Act, 1995). Accordingly, Dismissal, discharge, and bond orders serve a threefold purpose: to rehabilitate offenders, address minor offences without resorting to harsh penalties, and provide alternatives in situations where a conviction or strict punishment would not be appropriate. In essence, these measures acknowledge that specific circumstances may warrant leniency. Release options include unconditional Dismissal, community work orders, community custody orders, and mental health orders. Suspended sentences, home detention, and mental health treatment orders are also available¹⁴¹). QLD Penalties and Sentencing Act 1992 provides Probation for six months to 3 years. Factors considered include offender characteristics and offence details. Various sentencing options are available. Offenders can be released without conviction or with summary conviction on entering recognizance without any sentence to which the offender is liable. Upon conviction, options¹⁴²) include Probation, community service, combined orders, suspended sentences, or drug/alcohol treatment.

This analysis explores the potential for reforming India's Probation of Offenders Act (POA) by drawing on comparative insights from US and Australian probation models, focusing on critical areas: diversifying sentencing options to enhance individualised rehabilitation (Florida, Massachusetts, ACT, NT, Queensland), balancing public safety with judicious discretion through risk assessment and structured guidelines (California, Massachusetts, Florida, ACT, NT), implementing evidence-based practices and robust monitoring systems, and addressing prison overcrowding by expanding probation eligibility and supervision. Key lessons for India include contextual adaptation, strengthening probation officer capacity, investing in community-based programs, implementing pre-trial diversion, prioritising evidence-based reforms, and developing clear statutory guidelines to ensure a more effective, rehabilitative, and just probation system.

9. Successful International Practices: A Literature Review

9.1. Effective Rehabilitation programs for probationers

Effective programs target low-income offenders, providing job training and connecting them to employers. They also emphasize supervisor training for improved offender management¹⁴³. Gender-specific programs are crucial, with guidance and support for women seeking meaningful work¹⁴⁴. Combining community initiatives with social reintegration programs shows promise for successful reintegration¹⁴⁵. Probation officers play a vital role in addressing suicide attempts¹⁴⁶, reforming families, and promoting positive home environments¹⁴⁷. Rehabilitation programs can benefit juveniles, improving social and economic conditions even for serious offenses¹⁴⁸. Soft approaches, with tailored interventions and frequent interactions, reduce recidivism among violent extremist offenders¹⁴⁹.

Adequate supervision fosters a sense of self-belief in redemption and supportive relationships, with interventions tailored to individual learning styles and motivations. Risk assessment and response by probation officers impact perceptions of desistance from criminal activity¹⁵⁰. Community supervision organizations implementing the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model effectively reduce recidivism and help offenders overcome labels hindering rehabilitation¹⁵¹. RNR principles are not infallible but depend on age and effective implementation¹⁵². Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision (STICS) facilitates skill development and is effective in the successful large-scale implementation of RNR principles¹⁵³. Electronic monitoring and risk assessment tools enhance offender management and probation service efficiency. Remote contact methods like phone calls and GPS technology show promise in reducing recidivism for sex offenders compared to prison¹⁵⁴.

Community-based treatment programs vary in effectiveness for different age groups and may require ongoing monitoring and supervisor training¹⁵⁵. Cognitive-behavioural therapy is versatile and reduces recidivism for various offender types (drug, domestic violence, sex offenders)¹⁵⁶. Probation officer training rooted in specific perspectives (e.g., General Personality and Cognitive Social Learning) can improve interactions and slightly reduce recidivism¹⁵⁷.

9.2. The Factors Favouring Successful Reintegration and Desistance from Crime

Research highlights that successful reintegration and desistance from crime depend on various factors. Modern probation approaches emphasize compassion, prioritizing trust and empathy in the relationships between probation officers and offenders¹⁵⁸. Recognizing an offender's remorse as a sign of the potential for positive change is another key element, fostering "reintegrative shaming"¹⁵⁹. Ethical humility, where leaders and practitioners cultivate honesty, respect, and openness to new ideas, is crucial within Probation services¹⁶⁰. An approach prioritizing individual needs over generic risk

assessments is more effective for successful re-entry¹⁶¹). Solution-focused probation supervision, where offenders feel understood and supported, is also important. Establishing stable routines for offenders can help reduce anxiety and promote positive lifestyle changes¹⁶²). Dismantling barriers through understanding past records and focusing on opportunities, relationships, and social support all contribute to desistance from crime¹⁶³). Motivation on the part of the offender, combined with family support and religious involvement, is crucial for program success and reducing recidivism rates¹⁶⁴).

Client-centred communication is another crucial factor. Probation officer training should emphasize avoiding labels based solely on past behaviour while explaining decisions and actively listening to clients¹⁶⁵). Similarly, applying procedural justice principles promotes trust-building interactions during Probation supervision¹⁶⁶), even when video conferencing is used¹⁶⁷). Probation works best when there is a strong team effort. Collaboration between probation officers, courts, law enforcement, mental health providers, and the client himself leads to better outcomes for everyone. This can mean fewer emergency room visits, less police involvement, and a more successful path for the probationer. By investing in targeted interventions for mental health needs and addressing the root causes of criminal behaviour, Probation can help people succeed¹⁶⁸).

Additional positive influences include addressing client-identified problems to foster better relationships with Probation officers¹⁶⁹). With sufficient institutional backing and investment in the broader social environment, probation staff can cultivate professionalism based on "thick" relationships. These relationships transcend superficial interactions and emphasize trust, empathy, and mutual respect. By fostering such connections, probation services can regain legitimacy and improve effectiveness¹⁷⁰). There is evidence that gardening programs can positively impact mental and physical health, skill development, and social interaction for women in community corrections¹⁷¹). Political courage is needed to prioritize Probation's role in promoting social justice and emphasize its duty to care for individuals under supervision. Despite being unfashionable, Probation and social work services must embody societal responsibility towards those with criminal records, reflecting the values of a compassionate society¹⁷²).

10. Discussion

This study elucidates the complex interplay between judicial discretion, sentencing theories, and exogenous pressures within India's Probation of Offenders Act (POA) 1958 framework.

Judicial Discretion and the POA's Application (RQ1), while rooted in rehabilitative principles, are significantly modulated by judicial discretion, influenced by sentencing theories, offence severity, and type. Courts navigate a delicate balance between rehabilitation and public safety¹⁷³), particularly in socio-economic¹⁷⁴) and public trust offences¹⁷⁵), with deterrence playing a notable role. Offense severity demonstrably limits Probation, especially in cases of heinous crimes and those that erode public trust. The general approach excludes sexual offences¹⁷⁶) and those involving mandatory minimum sentences from the purview of Probation of offenders¹⁷⁷). Recent trends indicate an increasing consideration of mitigating factors¹⁷⁸), reflecting a move towards individualized justice. The POA's broad discretionary scope, guided by offender character and probation reports, allows for nuanced application. The admonition is employed for minor offences, and incarceration is restricted for young offenders. Evolving judicial interpretations by Constitutional Courts have expanded the POA's scope, with recent jurisprudence emphasizing leniency and mandatory consideration of mitigating factors¹⁷⁹) 120. Ultimately, judicial discretion reconciles rehabilitative goals with public safety imperatives, revealing an evolving, nuanced approach to Indian criminal justice.

Temporal Trends in Probation Practices (RQ2) post-POA reveals a phased evolution. Initially (1958-1970), Constitutional Courts exhibited limited probation utilization, with refusals exceeding grants. Subsequently (1970s-1990s), a marked increase in probation requests, particularly for juvenile offenders, coincided with a rise in granted applications. The period 2000-2010 demonstrated volatility, with a significant decline in grant rates (2011-2015) followed by a recovery, while juvenile grants reached a consistent 100%. A recent surge (2021-2023) indicates a dramatic escalation in adult probation appeals and grants, culminating in a peak of 86%. These temporal patterns suggest an evolving, broader discretionary space for trial courts to implement offender probation.

Impact of External Factors, Particularly the COVID-19 Pandemic, necessitated an urgent re-evaluation of probation principles. Supreme Court directives aimed at mitigating prison overcrowding led to the release of numerous inmates¹⁸⁰, highlighting the need for adaptable legal frameworks in public health emergencies. Ineffective COVID-19 prison releases, punitive isolation, and violent protest suppression, coupled with overcrowding and inadequate healthcare, endangered both inmate and public health¹⁸¹. This event underscores the judiciary's capacity to re-calibrate probation policies in response to external pressures, potentially influencing long-term attitudes towards non-custodial sentencing. The pandemic highlighted the need for legal reforms to address future public health emergencies, and the influence of these events on judicial attitudes toward Probation needs further study.

Despite the POA's rehabilitative intent, its practical implementation faces significant challenges. Vague standards, inconsistencies, and potential biases compromise judicial discretion. The lack of empirical substantiation for rehabilitation effectiveness, standardized risk assessment tools, and an outdated focus on static offender backgrounds necessitate reform. The inequitable burden on offenders to justify Probation, the neglect of victim involvement, and limitations in admonition practices reveal systemic flaws. Judicial practice regarding probation denial across specific offences and the constraints of mandatory minimum sentences necessitate legislative amendments, judicial guidance, and a shift towards individualized evidence-driven justice. Automatic denial based on offence gravity, particularly in sexual offences, is flawed, necessitating individualized risk assessments¹⁸² and therapeutic interventions¹⁸³. Mandatory minimum sentences, amplified by "non-obstante" clauses, restrict the POA, prioritizing deterrence over rehabilitation. Legislative amendments, judicial guidance, and a shift towards individualized, evidence-driven justice are imperative.

Comparative analysis of the USA and Australia reveals divergent approaches to alternative sentencing. India's national POA contrasts with the decentralised, state-level guidelines in the US and Australia. Kerala's 2022 NCRB-reported crime density of 12 per sq. km, compared to the Indian national average below 2, demonstrates the necessity of such a decentralised approach. The US¹⁸⁴ and Australia¹⁸⁵ emphasize evidence-based practices, offering specialised probation programs and empowering judges with individualised sentencing options. This approach may lead to fairer outcomes and reduced disparities while mitigating prison overcrowding.

In contrast, India's system faces program variety and sentencing option limitations. Furthermore, handling disqualifications post-probation differs significantly, with the US and Australia employing more streamlined pre-trial or non-conviction orders. India's challenges regarding "disqualification" post-probation highlight the need for streamlined processes and reduced stigma, as seen in pre-trial and non-conviction probation orders in the US and Australia.

Effective Probation, as evidenced by international best practices, necessitates a holistic, data-driven approach. Key components include specialized programs tailored to offender needs, well-trained probation officers¹⁸⁶ utilizing risk assessments¹⁸⁷ and desistance skills, and robust inter-agency collaboration with social services¹⁸⁸. Probationer-centred

communication¹⁸⁹), fostering trust, and building social support networks are paramount for successful reintegration¹⁹⁰. Moreover, addressing the root causes of crime and advocating for systemic reforms are integral to long-term success. However, resource limitations and external factors, such as pandemics, pose significant challenges, requiring ongoing evaluation and adaptation of probation strategies.

Future research should address inconsistencies in probation applications stemming from discretionary practices despite a trend towards leniency and rehabilitation. The future research should (1) quantify the impact of external factors (COVID-19, media) on judicial decisions; (2) analyse socio-economic disparities in probation access and outcomes; (3) assess public perception and acceptance across offender profiles; (4) evaluate the long-term efficacy of monitoring and rehabilitation strategies; (5) examine the influence of judicial discretion and emerging technologies; and (6) investigate public perception and the root causes of crime to inform holistic rehabilitation models.

11. Conclusion

This study has comprehensively analysed the Indian Probation of Offenders Act (POA) 1958, integrating doctrinal, socio-legal, and longitudinal methodologies to assess its efficacy in addressing prison overcrowding and promoting offender rehabilitation. The findings reveal a complex interplay between judicial discretion, sentencing theories, and external pressures, notably the COVID-19 pandemic. While rooted in rehabilitative principles, judicial discretion significantly shapes the POA, influenced by offence severity, type, and evolving sentencing theories. Temporal trends indicate a gradual expansion of discretionary space for trial courts, reflecting a nuanced approach to non-custodial sentencing. However, systemic challenges hinder the POA's practical implementation, including vague standards, inconsistencies, and a lack of empirical evidence. Comparative analysis with the USA and Australia highlights the limitations of India's centralized system, particularly in terms of specialized programs and evidence-based practices. International best practices underscore the need for a holistic, data-driven approach, emphasizing well-trained probation officers, inter-agency collaboration, and client-centred communication. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a critical catalyst, demonstrating the judiciary's capacity to adapt to external pressures and the necessity for robust legal frameworks in public health emergencies. However, the pandemic also exposed the vulnerabilities of the Indian correctional system and the urgent need for systemic reforms.

To optimize India's probation system for enhanced societal outcomes, a comprehensive strategy is required, encompassing **(1) Procedural Rigor:** Legislative amendments to clarify ambiguous provisions, standardize risk assessment (RNR model), and align with international best practices, coupled with judicial guidelines to minimize discretionary disparities and ensure consistent application. **(2) Rehabilitation Efficacy:** Increased investment in evidence-based programs addressing criminogenic needs, enhanced training for personnel, and robust inter-agency collaboration for holistic offender reintegration. **(3) Resource Optimization:** State-specific, data-driven resource allocation, prioritizing risk-based interventions and mitigating prison overcrowding, supplemented by technology integration (electronic monitoring, data analytics) for continuous improvement. **(4) Ethical and Victim-Centric Approach:** Prioritizing ethical practices, adequate resources for probation officers, and integration of victim rights to ensure a balanced, socially just framework. This paradigm shifts towards individualized, evidence-driven justice, underpinned by continuous program evaluation, will strengthen India's probation system, reduce recidivism, and align with global penological trends. Based on the data analysed and the challenges identified, this study proposes a policy framework for India that contextualizes

international best practices while integrating insights from the Justice Malimath Committee ¹⁹¹⁾ and the Draft National Policy on Criminal Justice¹⁹²⁾

. The framework addresses critical concerns raised by the Supreme Court regarding prison overcrowding and public health emergencies by advocating expanded Probation, particularly for first-time offenders. This approach, whether through amendments to the Probation of Offenders Act or as a standalone sentencing statute, aims to reduce incarceration, enhance rehabilitation, and align with human rights principles, fostering a more balanced and effective criminal justice system.

Policy Recommendations

A. Practical Proposals for Systemic Reform: Contextualizing International Best Practices for India.

1 Enhanced Probation Expansion by Strategic Implementation and Evaluation: To effectively expand probation programs while addressing budgetary and capacity limitations, a comprehensive strategy is required, encompassing a phased implementation prioritising pilot programs in high-need areas with rigorous cost-benefit analysis and diversified funding; targeted capacity enhancement through evidence-based training, mentorship, and certification for probation officers; technological integration to streamline operations, enhance data analysis, and improve supervision; robust community-based collaboration to mobilise resources and support reintegration; and performance-driven accountability mechanisms, including clear metrics, regular evaluations, and transparent reporting to ensure program effectiveness and public trust. **2 Guided Judicial Discretion:** To implement the potential benefits of expanded judicial flexibility, as seen in Australian models, India must adopt a "guided discretion" framework, characterised by India-specific sentencing guidelines reflecting the nation's diverse socio-economic realities, including caste, poverty, and regional disparities. This framework necessitates mandatory, rigorous judicial training focused on evidence-based sentencing and cultural sensitivity, alongside a phased implementation through pilot programs to assess the impact before the nationwide rollout. Crucially, addressing the excessive judicial caseload is essential to ensure that increased discretionary powers do not lead to procedural delays and to allow judges adequate time to apply the newly implemented guidelines effectively. **3 Culturally Validated Risk Assessments:** A culturally validated approach, such as the LSI-R, is paramount to effectively implementing standardised risk assessments in India, integrating dynamic and static factors in risk assessment with an unbiased, fair and ethically feasible criminological prognosis utilising the assistance of AI. This requires rigorous linguistic and cultural adaptation for India's diverse populations, integrating India-specific socio-economic factors like marginalisation and resource access, and establishing a national criminal database for calibration and validation. Furthermore, comprehensive training for probation officers is essential to guarantee accurate application. Including community input, particularly local knowledge, will enhance the assessment's contextual relevance. Complementing this, developing tailored community-based programs is crucial for effective rehabilitation. **4. Tailored Community-Based Programs:** Effective implementation of community-based rehabilitation programs in India necessitates a tailored approach that addresses the specific needs of diverse local communities. This involves localised program development, strategic partnerships with NGOs and community leaders to ensure effective implementation and community buy-in, and establishing sustainable funding models through public-private partnerships and dedicated state funding. These programs should integrate restorative justice principles, such as community service and victim-offender mediation, to promote accountability and facilitate reintegration. **5. Targeted Pre-**

Trial Diversion: To effectively implement pre-trial diversion programs and conviction-free orders in India, a targeted approach is essential, prioritising non-violent, first-time offenders with clear and consistently applied eligibility criteria. These programs must incorporate restorative justice components, such as victim-offender mediation and community service, to foster accountability and rehabilitation. Community involvement in designing and implementing these programs will enhance their effectiveness and ensure they are culturally sensitive, leading to better outcomes and reduced recidivism.

6. Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Effective reform of India's probation system necessitates robust interdisciplinary collaboration, fostering a synergy between legal expertise, social scientific insights, and community leadership. This collaborative approach will ensure that proposed reforms are not only legally sound but also grounded in empirical evidence and responsive to the complex socio-cultural realities of diverse Indian communities, leading to more holistic and sustainable outcomes.

B. Probation Sentencing Guidelines.

Probation, a critical alternative to incarceration, necessitates structured guidelines to ensure fairness, consistency, and efficacy. This framework emphasizes **(1) Guiding Principles:** Fairness, rehabilitation, public safety, individualization, and restorative justice must underpin all sentencing decisions. **(2) Sentencing Options:** A spectrum of pre-trial (diversion, probation) and post-conviction orders (dismissal, good behaviour bonds), alongside administrative Probation, specialized programs (drug/sex offender), combination orders, split sentences, and community corrections (electronic monitoring, restorative justice), should be available. **(3) Sentencing Criteria:** Offender character (age, health, history), offence nature (severity, victim impact), and mitigating circumstances (remorse, cooperation, socio-economic background, rehabilitation potential) must be rigorously assessed. **(4) Implementation and Monitoring:** Effective supervision, access to support services (counselling, vocational training), and strict enforcement of conditions are crucial. **(5) Continuous Improvement:** Data-driven, state-specific evaluations, adaptive guideline revisions, and stakeholder collaboration are essential for optimization. **(6) Mandatory Training:** Judges and probation officers require comprehensive training on global best practices, comparative systems, offender treatment, and rehabilitation programs tailored to the Indian context to ensure evidence-based implementation and enhance probation effectiveness.

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