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Fast-Track Courts Are Only as Fast as Their Judges

 **INDIAN EXPRESS**

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POLITY**GS2**

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THE LIFT LINE

A court cannot outrun its own vacancies. Rename a courtroom fast-track and you change the signboard, not the speed, unless you also give it judges, forensics and a workable calendar.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Judicial delay is one of the most durable themes in Indian governance, and fast-track courts are the state's recurring answer to it. Every time a heinous crime shocks the public, governments announce new fast-track courts, and every few years the same question returns: why do they slow down? This editorial lets you move past the slogan to the structural reasons for delay, which is exactly the analytical depth GS2 rewards. It connects a constitutional right, an administrative design choice and a resource-allocation failure in a single argument.

GS Paper 2: the theme sits squarely in the structure and functioning of the judiciary, mechanisms for the delivery of justice, and the realisation of fundamental rights. For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: **Fast Track Courts (FTCs)** and **Fast Track Special Courts (FTSCs)**, including those for **POCSO Act** and rape cases, are set up by states with central support and have **no single central governing law**; India carries a **pendency** of nearly **5 crore cases** across all courts, with lakhs pending even in fast-track courts; the constitutional promise of **speedy justice** flows from **Article 21** as read in **Hussainara Khatoon v State of Bihar (1979)**, and **Article 39A** directs the state to secure **equal justice and free legal aid**. For **Mains**, the argument to carry is that speed is a function of the whole justice chain, judges, budgets, forensics and procedure, so a court labelled fast cannot deliver unless every link is strengthened.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The idea of a dedicated court to clear a backlog or to try a category of grave offences quickly is old. The Eleventh Finance Commission funded a large tranche of fast-track courts around the turn of the century. After public outrage over sexual violence, the Centre pushed a scheme of Fast Track Special Courts, many

exclusively for POCSO cases, funded partly through the Nirbhaya Fund and run by the states. On paper the model is attractive: a court with a narrow docket, a mandate to hold day-to-day hearings, and a target to dispose of cases within a fixed window.

The reality has been uneven. Many fast-track courts were created without additional judges, so a sitting judge simply took on the extra label and the extra load. Others lacked dedicated public prosecutors, support staff or forensic backup. Because there is no single central law defining and resourcing these courts, their design varies from state to state, and their pace varies with it. The gap between the promise and the outcome is the subject of this editorial.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The bottleneck is people, not signage

A court's **throughput** is set by judge-time. India's sanctioned judge strength is thin against its population, and vacancies run high. When a fast-track court is carved out without a fresh appointment, the system merely reshuffles the same scarce judge-hours, so total disposal does not rise. Renaming does not add capacity.

Delay lives outside the courtroom too

Even a well-staffed court stalls when the inputs are weak. Investigations arrive incomplete, forensic laboratories are backlogged so DNA and chemical reports take months, witnesses are not produced, and adjournments are granted freely. A fast-track label cannot compensate for a slow investigation or a starved forensic system upstream.

No law, no floor

Because fast-track courts rest on schemes and state notifications rather than a governing statute, there is no guaranteed standard for their staffing, funding or continuation. Funding cycles lapse, and courts wind down or revert to ordinary dockets.

LINK IN THE CHAIN	THE WEAKNESS	CONSEQUENCE FOR SPEED
Judges	High vacancies; low judge-population ratio	Same judge-hours relabelled; no real gain
Investigation	Incomplete or delayed charge sheets	Trials cannot begin or stall midway
Forensics	Backlogged laboratories, few examiners	DNA and chemical reports delay verdicts
Procedure	Liberal adjournments, absent witnesses	Day-to-day hearing mandate breaks down
Legal basis	No central governing law	Uncertain funding, staffing and continuity

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Treat the justice system as a pipeline and find the narrowest section. Total speed is set not by the fastest stage but by the slowest, so pouring resources into the courtroom while forensics and investigation lag simply moves the queue, it does not shorten it. This is systems thinking applied to governance: identify the binding constraint before prescribing a solution. Ask what actually limits disposal, and the answer is rarely the name on the door. It is the vacancy chart, the forensic backlog and the adjournment culture. A reform that targets the visible symbol rather than the binding constraint produces motion without progress. Keep this distinct from questions of exam integrity or policing; the frame here is judicial capacity.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Crime -> investigation (delays) -> forensic report (backlog) -> fast-track court labelled but understaffed -> adjournments + witness gaps -> verdict delayed -> speedy justice under Article 21 denied -> fix: add judges + fund forensics + reform procedure + statutory backing

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Fill judicial vacancies and raise the ratio:** create fast-track courts only with sanctioned additional judges, prosecutors and staff, so capacity genuinely rises instead of being relabelled.
- 2 **Strengthen the forensic and investigation chain:** expand and modernise forensic science laboratories and train investigators, because a trial can move no faster than the evidence reaching it.
- 3 **Reform procedure to curb delay:** enforce limits on adjournments, use day-to-day hearings as designed, and adopt digital case management and e-filing to compress dead time.
- 4 **Give fast-track courts a statutory footing:** enact a clear framework defining their mandate, assured funding and continuity, so they do not lapse with a scheme's budget cycle.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

This connects to the 2022 GS2 question on the challenges to and reform of the judiciary, the 2019 GS2 question on the mandate and functioning of institutions delivering justice, and recurring questions on Article 21 and the right to speedy trial, as well as Article 39A and legal aid.

Practice question: “Fast-track courts without adequate judges, budgets and forensic capacity are fast only on paper.” Critically examine, and suggest systemic reforms to make speedy justice a reality. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: The Indian Express, Department of Justice, Government of India, National Judicial Data Grid

Source: Fast-Track Courts Are Only as Fast as Their Judges — Ujjyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

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