

Evaluating the Practice and Perception of Plea Bargaining in Maharashtra: An Empirical Study

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Abstract: This empirical study analyses the implementation and perception of plea bargaining within Maharashtra's criminal judicial system, focusing on six districts Thane, Pune, Satara, Sangli, Kolhapur and Ratnagiri. Using a mixed-data approach, primary data were collected from 408 stakeholders including advocates, government prosecutors, judges and participating parties through structured questionnaires. Secondary data were drawn from legislative documents, judicial reports, case laws, committee recommendations and government records since the introduction of plea bargaining in 2006. The findings indicate that the majority of respondents consider the plea bargaining mechanism to be effective, with 37.3% rating it "very well" and 35.5% "somewhat." However, the system remains under-utilized, largely due to low public awareness, limited legal literacy and resistance among defendants to admit guilt. Most respondents strongly supported stricter regulatory guidelines (76.2%), strengthening legal-aid services (78.2%) and the presence of investigating officers during bargaining (73.3%). The study also notes overwhelming support for judicial acceptance of settlement-based compromises (87.3%) and a dedicated authority for plea bargaining matters (89%). The research concludes that while plea bargaining holds promise for reducing pendency and ensuring speedy justice, structural reforms, awareness initiatives and procedural safeguards remain essential for its credible evolution in Maharashtra.

Keywords: Maharashtra, Case Laws, Plea Bargaining, Implementation, Judicial.

INTRODUCTION

The economic well-being of a nation is contingent upon the presence of a robust legal framework and effective maintenance of public order, which are the fundamental responsibilities of the state. The quality of civil society is contingent upon the state's ability to effectively fulfill its fundamental responsibilities. In a pluralistic and democratic society characterized by ethnic minorities and diverse populations, there arises a pressing demand for a criminal justice administration that is adaptable and responsive to changing circumstances. The rapid and dynamic socio-economic and political landscape has resulted in significant

systemic pressures and tensions, posing a substantial threat to the overall stability of the system. In ancient India, the establishment of a judicial system was seen imperative for the maintenance and safeguarding of Dharma. The administration of justice in the country has been facilitated by the involvement of purohitas, and there exists a pervasive tendency towards elitist prejudice in the execution of justice. The medieval period had a parallel occurrence, wherein the invaders, particularly the Mughals, implemented a system of justice aimed at upholding and safeguarding the principles of Islam within the country. Individuals of varying religious affiliations were subjected to disparate treatment. Similarly, the British authorities regarded the legal system as a tool to maintain their colonial dominance in India. The application of laws within the criminal justice administration in India has seen multiple modifications over time. The presence of a feudalistic bent can be discerned in the principles of Dharma, Islamic law, and colonial law. The guiding concept in criminal law has historically revolved around the nature of governance, the underlying purposes of the rules, and the customary practices adhered to by rulers.

In contemporary society, legal systems incorporate procedural mechanisms. The expense of accessing justice has escalated to a level that is unaffordable for individuals with limited financial means. Very time-consuming and difficult for the average person to grasp. Individuals with financial resources and influential positions are more likely to obtain favorable outcomes inside the legal system. The law, whether by design or by randomness, has exhibited a proclivity towards favoring individuals of lower socioeconomic status, who are inherently disadvantaged in their ability to access the judicial system and obtain fair treatment. The presence of elitist prejudice has permeated several aspects of society and exerted its impact on the administration of Criminal Justice. The presence of judicial institutions in the country can be traced back to ancient times. Throughout various historical periods, diverse forms of criminal activities have emerged, necessitating corresponding methods of punishment for these transgressions. This observation highlights the dynamic nature of the purposes of criminal justice administration, which have undergone shifts over time and across different historical periods. Criminal justice refers to a set of procedures and organizational structures employed by national and local governments to uphold social order, prevent and manage criminal behavior, and impose punitive measures on individuals who transgress legal statutes through the imposition of criminal sanctions. The key entities entrusted with these obligations encompass law enforcement organizations (such as police forces and prosecutors), judicial bodies, defense attorneys, and local correctional facilities.

These entities are responsible for overseeing the processes of apprehension, formal accusation, legal resolution, and imposition of penalties upon individuals who have been deemed culpable. The establishment of criminal justice administration has been deemed necessary by the state in order to uphold and enforce the societal norms and standards of human behavior, which are crucial for safeguarding both people and the community. The criminal justice system encompasses a collection of governmental institutions and procedures designed to regulate criminal behavior and administer sanctions upon those who have transgressed legal statutes. The United States does not possess a singular criminal justice system, but rather comprises numerous distinct systems that share similarities. The operational procedures of the criminal justice system in different regions are contingent upon the governing jurisdiction, which may include municipal, county, state, federal, tribal, or military authorities. Various jurisdictions exhibit variations in their legal systems, governmental bodies, and approaches to administering criminal justice proceedings. Plea bargaining is a significant idea throughout various criminal justice systems.

Plea bargaining is a concept that has existed from ancient times, tracing its origins back to the earliest periods of human history. In the Indian context, the notion under consideration is very nascent, now in its early stages of development. However, it has already been implemented and adopted in several other countries. Plea bargaining is a process that exhibits greater stringency compared to the provision outlined in the Criminal Procedure Code, however it is less strict than the court's need to compound cases. When a legal case is initiated against an individual in a court of law, the accused has the option to appear before the court and make a statement acknowledging their culpability. This phenomenon carries broader ramifications across various scenarios and contexts. "The court has the discretion to grant the defendant the opportunity to enter a plea, perhaps resulting in a reduced term or the framing of a charge for a less severe offense than the one originally committed. Alternatively, the court may permit the defendant to resolve the matter by the payment of a fee. The outcome is contingent upon the specific details and contextual factors of each individual case, as well as the prior history and background of the defendant.

One process used before trials is plea bargaining. In the realm of legal discourse, the term 'plea' refers to a concise response provided by an individual in the context of a criminal proceeding, serving as a direct reply to an assertion or accusation made against them. The term "bargain" refers to the act of exchanging an item for something else. It is a procedure when an agreement or bargain is made between the prosecution and the accused of a crime (via counsel) with the

trial judge actively involved. The idea that a judge can only determine a sentence during an open court session is subverted by a plea deal. Plea-bargaining is a term that refers to a variety of situations. It is occasionally used to characterize conversations between the prosecution and the attorneys representing the accuser regarding the charges that will be brought against the accused and any indications that the accused is willing to enter a guilty plea to specific counts. This practice may be referred to as prosecutorial plea bargaining. The earlier word also encompasses discussions in which the presiding judge of the trial actively engages. In this particular arrangement, the attorney representing the accused and the prosecution convene with the judge in a secret chamber to deliberate on the anticipated punishment for the accused. The attorney representing the accused utilizes this information as an indication of their intention to file a plea of guilt. The phenomenon under consideration can be characterized as judicial plea-bargaining.

In criminal trials, plea bargaining is a well-established practice that is consistently used in all 50 states of the United States. Plea bargaining is the process by which a prosecutor persuades an accused criminal to admit to his guilt and give up his right to a trial in exchange for a less sentence than would be applied if the accused were found guilty after a trial. Either directly, by lowering the charges, or indirectly, with the court's cooperation, by recommending a lesser sentence that the judge will carry out, the prosecutor extends mercy. The prosecutor is freed from having to establish the accused's guilt, and the court is spared from having to make that determination in exchange for obtaining this mercy for the accused. Based only on the accused's confession, the court finds him guilty without making any independent decisions. Therefore, plea bargaining is a non-trial process used to find guilty and sentence defendants who are charged with serious crimes. Plea bargaining is a procedure for handling ordinary cases more quickly in which the person accused of committing a crime or crimes agrees to enter a guilty plea to one or more of the charges in exchange for a less sentence without going to trial. Occasionally, it can be in exchange for a state's consent to drop additional costs. For instance, a defendant might be charged with sodomy, rape, and burglary. In exchange for the state dropping the sodomy charge, the defendant may consent to the burglary and rape counts. From the accuser's perspective, this means that he forfeits a conviction and a lighter punishment in exchange for a drawn-out, costly, and traumatic trial process where he might be found guilty. Thus, it entails an active bargaining process in which the accused proposes to exchange some charge concessions or a reduced penalty for a guilty plea, thereby waiving his right to a trial. The parties to an agreement in a case brought based on a police report are the

victim, the prosecutor, the investigating officer, and the accused. In order to resolve the criminal case where the accused enters a guilty plea for the offence for which a trial is still pending, they must all agree. In all other situations, the victim and the accused are the parties to the agreement. They have to consent to a settlement of the criminal case where the accused enters a guilty plea for the offence for which there is still a trial. A case settlement must be reached with the Court's approval and oversight.

Plea bargaining is a type of adversarial legal practice that is important to the criminal justice system. In India, the criminal justice system is administered on the adversarial common law system that was brought over from British colonial rulers. The current adversarial system depends on the ability of solicitors to persuasively argue their clients' viewpoints in front of an impartial court in an effort to discover the truth of the matter. In her capacity as an impartial arbiter, the judge tries to ascertain whether the prosecution has successfully established the guilt of the accused party beyond a reasonable doubt, while also affording the accused person the presumption of innocence. The judge never takes the effort to find out the truth because he is too worried about upholding his impartiality. The adversarial system forces the judge to perform a passive role since it places no positive obligation on him to find the truth. Finding the truth is the trial judge's job in the inquisitorial systems that were in place in the European continental countries, including the Soviet Union. The investigating prosecutor is given the investigation by the judicial police officer, who assists the judge. After reviewing the findings, the prosecutor may request that the judge assume oversight of the case's investigation. The investigative process takes the least amount of time because it is conducted under the judge's direction. After then, the case is sent to the trial judge for decision-making.”

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The decision to limit the geographical scope of the research was motivated by the necessity to ensure accuracy and thoroughness of the study's findings. Target area of the proposed research was the *Maharashtra judiciary*. For attaining objectives, 6 districts have been selected namely Thane, Pune, Satara, Sangli, Kolhapur and Ratnagiri districts of Maharashtra.

Sample

The notion of plea bargaining is relatively fresh, and only a limited number of stakeholders, such as court officers and advocates, has knowledge about it. However, the general public lacks legal literacy and remains mostly unfamiliar with this research subject. The sample due

to constrains of time and resources included *advocates, government prosecutors and judges* who are working and practicing in the court of Chief Judicial Magistrate and Judicial Magistrate First Class *and the parties* who are participated in process.

Data

For the current investigation, both primary and secondary data has been used.

Data Collection

❖ Primary

In this research study, data was collected through surveys using self-developed questionnaires, following the empirical research procedures outlined in the progress reports. The questionnaire was designed for advocates, government prosecutors, judges, and other legal professionals practicing in the courts of the Chief Judicial Magistrate and Judicial Magistrate First Class. The survey focused on the districts of Thane, Pune, Satara, Sangli, Kolhapur, and Ratnagiri in Maharashtra to evaluate the current state and effectiveness of plea bargaining. Before distributing the questionnaire, the purpose of the research was clearly explained to all respondents, and their informed consent was obtained. It is important to clarify that the term ‘defendant’ was intentionally used in the questionnaire instead of ‘accused’ because many participants were reluctant to complete the forms when the term ‘accused’ was used. This modification was made to improve response rates and ensure participant comfort while maintaining clarity.

❖ Secondary

A comprehensive collection of legal resources was gathered for research, including the Law Commission Reports, Parliamentary Standing Committee Report, Malimath Committee Report on Criminal Justice System Reform, Supreme Court and High Court case laws, Cr.P.C., B.N.S.S. and other related Acts, Constitution of India, as well as relevant books, research papers, and articles. To focus particularly on Maharashtra, the secondary data has been also collected from sources, including the Bombay High Court, the Maharashtra Legal Services Authority, other courts, the Maharashtra Prison Department, the District Legal Services Authority, and numerous government publications. Plea bargaining went into effect in July of 2006. Therefore, the researcher mainly examined secondary data for the time frame spanning from July 2006 to present.

Data Analysis

The mean and percentage approaches were applied to statistical data analysis. The data that has been computed and examined was displayed as graphs in addition to other table formats. The raw data was analyzed using appropriate statistical tool including Microsoft Excel to draw effective conclusions.

RESULTS

Table 1: In your opinion, how effective is the plea bargaining procedure implemented in Maharashtra?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not at all	9	2.2	2.2	2.2
	Not well	22	5.4	5.4	7.6
	Somewhat	145	35.5	35.5	43.1
	Very well	152	37.3	37.3	80.4
	Well	80	19.6	19.6	100.0
	Total	408	100.0	100.0	

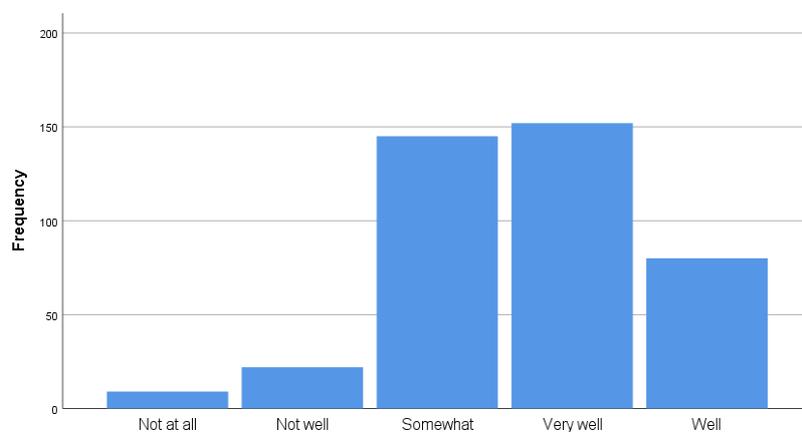


Figure 1: 1 In your opinion, how effective is the plea bargaining procedure implemented in Maharashtra?

In the given table and figures (Table and Figure), the data illustrates respondents' opinions on the effectiveness of plea bargaining implementation in Maharashtra. Among 408 respondents, 37.3% rated it as 'Very well,' 19.6% as 'Well,' and 35.5% as 'Somewhat.' A smaller percentage, 5.4%, responded with 'Not well,' and 2.2% chose 'Not at all.' The majority of respondents perceive the plea bargaining procedure in Maharashtra as effective to a considerable extent, though a significant portion still sees room for improvement in its implementation and outcomes.

- **Popularity and Frequency of Practice**

Table 2: Do you think that plea bargaining should be more or less common in Maharashtra's criminal judicial system? If yes then why?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		1	.2	.2	.2
	Accused are more inclined to plead not guilty and demand trial	1	.2	.2	.5
	Can't say	75	18.4	18.4	18.9
	Lack of awareness about this provision leads to less common practice of plea bargaining process in our courts	1	.2	.2	19.1
	Less common	239	58.6	58.6	77.7
	More common	89	21.8	21.8	99.5

No one opt for plea bargaining	1	.2	.2	99.8
There are other provisions by which accused and victim get early result	1	.2	.2	100.0
Total	408	100.0	100.0	

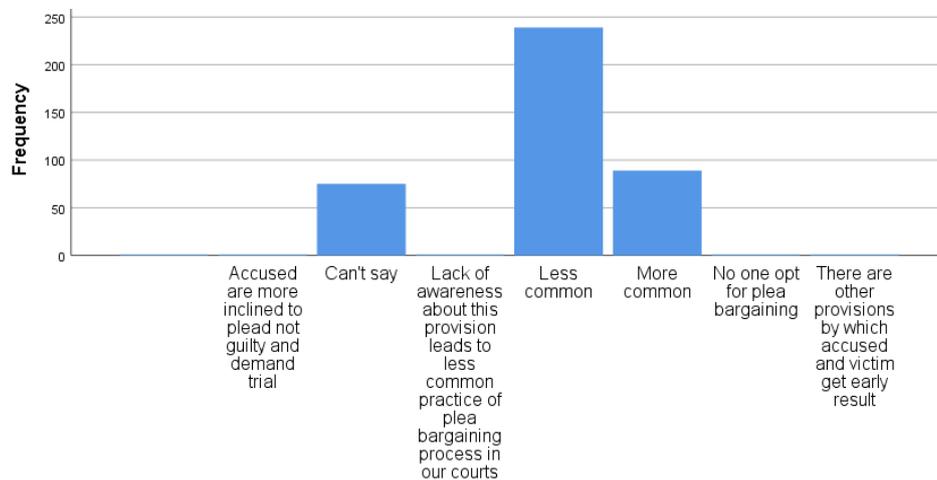


Figure 2: 2 Do you think that plea bargaining should be more or less common in Maharashtra's criminal judicial system? If yes then why?

- **Need for Stronger Regulations**

Table 3: Do you think that plea bargaining in Maharashtra needs more stringent regulations or guidelines?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Can't say	9	2.2	2.2	2.2
	May be	43	10.5	10.5	12.7

No	45	11.0	11.0	23.8
Yes	311	76.2	76.2	100.0
Total	408	100.0	100.0	

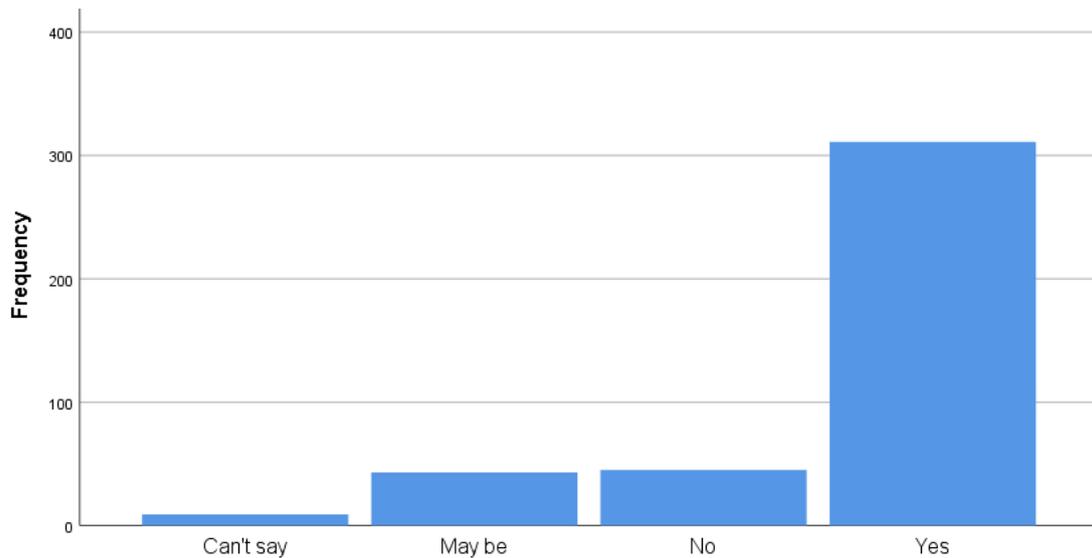


Figure 3: 3 Do you think that plea bargaining in Maharashtra needs more stringent regulations or guidelines?

In the given table and figures (Table and Figure), the data shows respondents' views on whether plea bargaining in Maharashtra requires more stringent regulations or guidelines. Among 408 respondents, a substantial 76.2% responded 'Yes,' 11.0% said 'No,' 10.5% chose 'May be,' and 2.2% selected 'Can't say.' The overwhelming majority believe that plea bargaining in Maharashtra needs stricter guidelines to ensure procedural fairness, transparency, and consistency in its application.

- Improvement in Legal Aid Services**

Table 4: Do you think that legal aid services in Maharashtra need to be improved so that defendants in plea bargaining cases are properly represented?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Can't say	5	1.2	1.2	1.2
	May be	33	8.1	8.1	9.3
	No	51	12.5	12.5	21.8
	Yes	319	78.2	78.2	100.0
	Total	408	100.0	100.0	

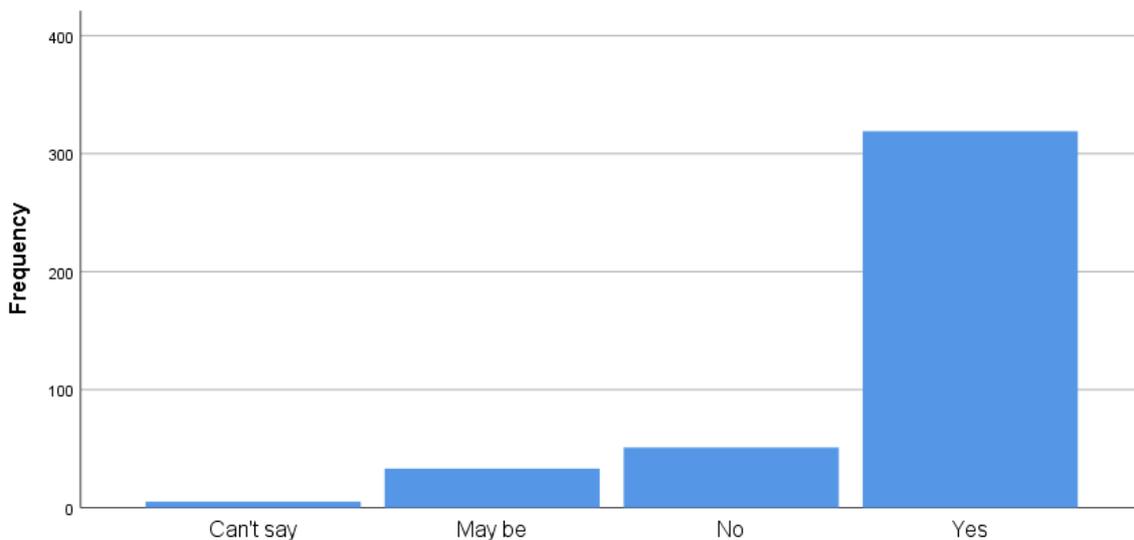


Figure 4: 4 Do you think that legal aid services in Maharashtra need to be improved so that defendants in plea bargaining cases are properly represented?

In the given table and figures (Table and Figure), the data illustrates respondents' opinions on whether legal aid services in Maharashtra need improvement to ensure proper representation of defendants in plea bargaining cases. Out of 408 respondents, 78.2% answered 'Yes,' 12.5% said 'No,' 8.1% selected 'May be,' and 1.2% chose 'Can't say.' The majority of participants

believe that enhancing legal aid services is essential for safeguarding the rights of defendants in plea bargaining cases, emphasizing the need for accessible and competent legal support.

- **Role of Investigating Officer in Bargaining**

Table 5: Do you think that an Investigating Officer should be present during the bargaining process?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Can't say	6	1.5	1.5	1.5
	May be	33	8.1	8.1	9.6
	No	70	17.2	17.2	26.7
	Yes	299	73.3	73.3	100.0
	Total	408	100.0	100.0	

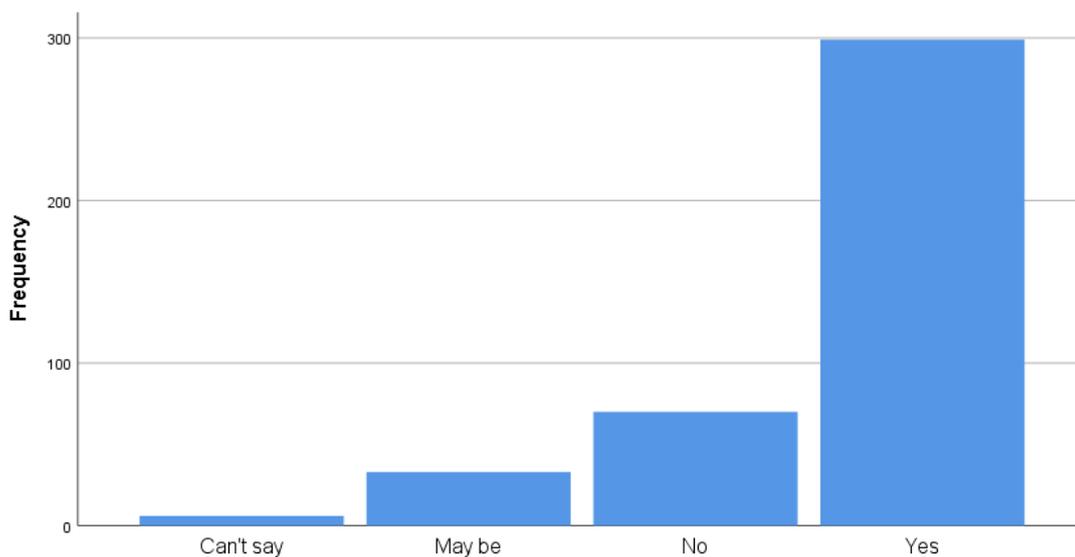


Figure 5: 5 Do you think that an Investigating Officer should be present during the bargaining process?

In the given table and figures (Table and Figure), the data presents respondents' views on whether an Investigating Officer should be present during the plea bargaining process. Out of

408 respondents, 73.3% answered 'Yes,' 17.2% said 'No,' 8.1% selected 'May be,' and 1.5% chose 'Can't say.' A significant majority supports the involvement of Investigating Officers during the bargaining process, indicating a belief that their presence would ensure factual accuracy and procedural integrity.

- Court Acceptance of Settlements**

Table 6: Do you think that it is appropriate for the court to accept the settlement terms, which include a compromise on both monetary restitution and prison time, as being satisfactory to all parties?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Can't say	4	1.0	1.0	1.0
	May be	22	5.4	5.4	6.4
	No	26	6.4	6.4	12.7
	Yes	356	87.3	87.3	100.0
	Total	408	100.0	100.0	

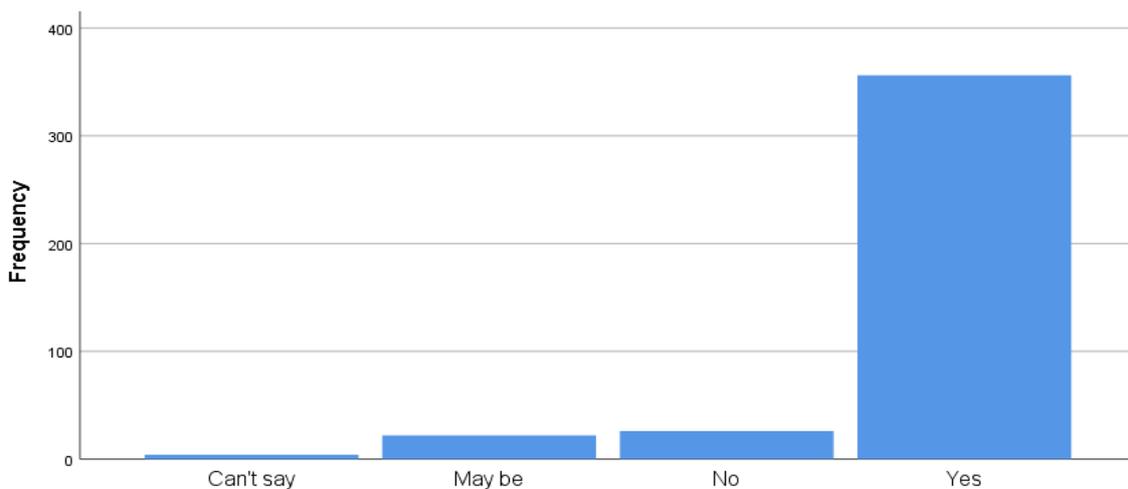


Figure 6: 6 Do you think that it is appropriate for the court to accept the settlement terms, which include a compromise on both monetary restitution and prison time, as being satisfactory to all parties?

In the given table and figures (Table and Figure), the data shows respondents' opinions on whether it is appropriate for courts to accept settlement terms that involve compromises on both monetary restitution and prison time, ensuring satisfaction for all parties involved. Out of 408 respondents, 87.3% answered 'Yes,' 6.4% said 'No,' 5.4% selected 'May be,' and 1.0% chose 'Can't say.' The overwhelming majority believe that courts should have the authority to accept such settlements, reflecting strong support for judicial discretion in recognizing mutually agreeable plea bargains.

- **Need for a Distinct Judicial Authority**

Table 7: Do you think that it would be advisable to establish a distinct judicial authority responsible for resolving 'plea bargaining' petitions in order to mitigate potential bias against the accused?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Can't say	5	1.2	1.2	1.2
	May be	20	4.9	4.9	6.1
	No	20	4.9	4.9	11.0
	Yes	363	89.0	89.0	100.0
	Total	408	100.0	100.0	

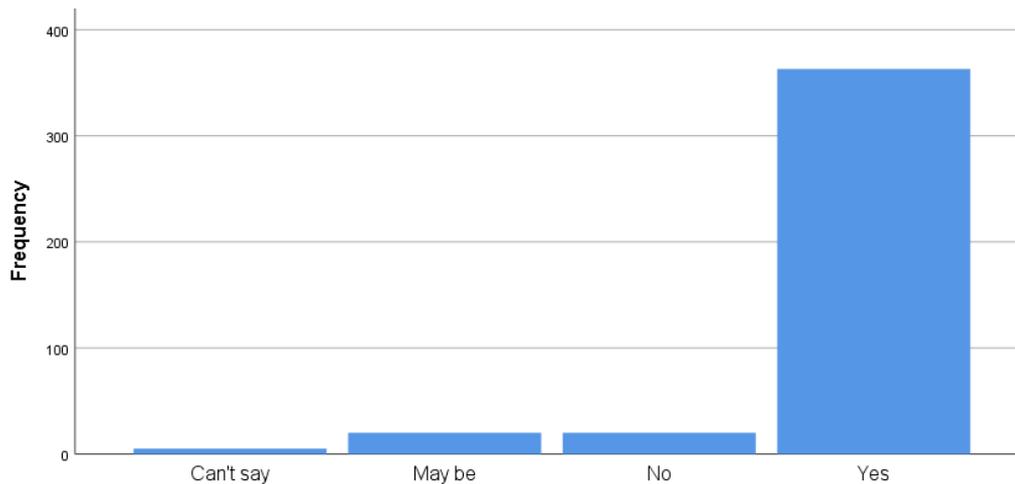


Figure 7: 7 Do you think that it would be advisable to establish a distinct judicial authority responsible for resolving 'plea bargaining' petitions in order to mitigate potential bias against the accused?

In the given table and figures (Table and Figure), the data illustrates respondents' opinions on whether establishing a distinct judicial authority to handle plea bargaining petitions would help reduce potential bias against the accused. Out of 408 respondents, 89.0% answered 'Yes,' 4.9% said 'No,' 4.9% selected 'May be,' and 1.2% chose 'Can't say.' An overwhelming majority supports the establishment of a dedicated judicial body for plea bargaining cases, suggesting a perceived need for specialized oversight to ensure impartiality and protect the rights of the accused.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that plea bargaining in Maharashtra has achieved a moderate degree of functionality, but its potential remains largely unrealized. Most judicial stakeholders acknowledge that the mechanism can contribute significantly to reducing case-backlogs, facilitating early disposal and securing mutually beneficial outcomes for victims and defendants. Yet, the process continues to suffer from a lack of widespread awareness, inconsistent implementation and reluctance on the part of defendants to admit guilt. Respondents emphasised the urgent need for a stronger regulatory framework to ensure transparency, fairness and standardised procedures across districts. Equally critical is the improvement of legal aid services to protect the rights of defendants who enter the bargaining process without adequate legal understanding. The findings further support involving investigating officers and empowering courts to approve negotiated settlements involving

restitution and reduced sentences. Most importantly, an overwhelming demand for a specialised judicial authority highlights the perceived necessity for unbiased handling of plea bargaining petitions. Overall, the research reinforces that plea bargaining can become an effective instrument of criminal justice reform in Maharashtra only when policy support, legal awareness, supervision mechanisms and safeguards are expanded in a systematic manner.

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