TECHNICAL REPORT ON THE E-FILING SYSTEM INTRODUCED PURSUANT TO ELECTRONIC FILING RULES FOR COURTS (KERALA), 2021

Table of Contents

1. In	troduction	1
2. Sı	ummary Findings	2
	ecurity	
	Uploading of documents as PDF	
3.2.	OCR enabled PDF	7
4. D	esign	9
4.1.	Inefficient waterfall model	9
4.2.	Separation of case contents from metadata	.10
4.3.	Generic Issues	.11
5 C	onclusion	22

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1. Introduction

The Kerala High Court has rolled out E-Filing system along with the notification of E-Filing Rules, 2021. This report is intended to convey the issues identified, opinions and recommendations of Kerala High Court Advocates Association regarding the E-Filing system. Sound software development practices advise the involvement of "end user" community right from the inception through development, testing and roll out stages of a software system. Advocates, the main intended target users of the E-Filing system, have been kept out of the entire process for reasons unknown. Now the system is live and this report is based on what could be identified and understood from the live interface without access to system documentation or testing data. Poor or nonexistent documentation has also limited the extent to which useful contribution could be made, *de hors* the earnest efforts taken.

The Executive committee of the KHCAA has constituted a Technical Sub-Committee to prepare and file a report on the Technical and operational aspects of E-filing system pursuant to the introduction of the Electronic Filing Rules for Courts (Kerala), 2021 (hereinafter referred to as the 'Rules'). The members of the Technical Sub-Committee are as follows:

- 1. John Mani V Convener
- 2. John Numpeli
- 3. Ashik K Mohamed Ali
- 4. Nimod A R
- 5. Job Abraham
- 6. P. G. Jayashankar

7. Godwin Joseph

8. Rinu S Aswan

The committee, after due research, deliberations and discussions, has prepared a report. The draft of this Report was circulated among the members of the Association. A request was also made to furnish their opinions and suggestions. This committee feels extremely happy to note that all the members who responded to the request have fully endorsed the contents of the Report. The analysis and conclusions, along with suggestions, are given herein.

The E-filing Rules causes hardship to the Lawyer community as well as the Advocate Clerks and it is certain to directly hamper the speedy and effective administration of justice.

2. Summary Findings

- 2.1 The present implementation of the system has not taken into consideration the system efficiency and without adequate testing of the full-fledged operation of the system.
- 2.2 E Filing module being software developed on the basis of "APPLICATION DEVELOPMENT DOCUMENT which contains the entire details of the software, the same has to be scrutinized to assess the safety, integrity and the efficiency of the module. The data sharing policy which is vital to ensure whether the data is shared with third parties or whether there is any monetization policy in respect of the software also needs explanation.
- 2.3 The E Filing system should strive towards simplicity in terms of its functioning. The present E-Filing module only strives towards big data creation which could be used by corporate entities for monetary gain, compromising the privacy of the litigants and advocates.
- 2.4 Initially E-Filing Module was made applicable only for Bail matters. Now due to steep rise in the number of modules incorporated the same have affected the speed and efficiency of the system.

- 2.5 The system implementation is in flagrant violation of the existing procedural laws, including the CPC, Cr. P.C. and the Rules framed there under.
- 2.6 Presently there is no responsibility upon the administrators of the system insofar as data validity, security and integrity is concerned. The lack of an audit Trail regarding data creation, storage and editing leaves open to the possibility of data manipulation being undetectable / untraceable. There is no method to record cyclic redundancy check (CRC) / hash of documents uploaded. This casts a legal liability on advocates in the event of data integrity being lost through data manipulation or otherwise.
- 2.7 The Rules contemplates that the maximum file size for e-filing by users through internet shall not exceed 100MB. Any filing which exceeds this limit is to be done via intranet, through designated counters to be setup by the High Court, which have not been operational at present. The manner of operation of the designated counters is also unclear, leaving the possibility of possible outsourcing and the private entities gaining access.
- 2.8 The designated counters for e-filing which is central in the effective implementation of e-filing to the extent that it permits unimpeded access to justice through technological implementation irrespective of digital divide are unavailable. A complete switch to online e-filing in the absence of designated counters is impractical and unfeasible. Even with designated counters complete switch to online system is not possible without resolving the legal and technical issues involved.
- 2.9 The E-filing system is designed in such a manner that the entire obligation of data entry is on the e-filer. The High Court Registry under whose responsibility this falls has abdicated their role and delegated it to the e-filers. E-filers are called upon to furnish irrelevant information in the modules having no bearing on the case.
- 2.10 It remains the Rules mainly confined to the personal responsibility of the litigant public rather than assigning the statutory duty of maintaining the e-

filing cases on the Officials. The basic setup to accommodate the several file movements at a time and the file absorption are lacking in the present efiling set up based on the present Rules. This will create chaos during peak hours and will ultimately result in losing the statutory rights of the litigant public in filing cases even on the last day of limitation for no fault of him.

- 2.11 There were multiple instances reported wherein due to technical glitches in the payment system, multiple payments were forced to be made causing monetary loss, time and mental agony and causing prejudice to the litigants insofar as their right to life and liberty is concerned. There is no mechanism for refund of excess / multiple payments and as such, this being critical to the function of the e-filing, it is not feasible / practical for the e-filing system to go live without addressing this crucial aspect. In civil appeals and other matters, where huge amount has to be paid as court fees, no mechanism is made to redress the grievance and to protect the issues arising out of limitation even though the mishap occurs due to no fault on the part of the advocates.
- 2.12 There are demonstrated instances of the failure of the system in respect of its primary functions in the very first module that has been implemented itself, and to adopt a full-fledged implementation without addressing the already existing defects would cause catastrophic consequences to the users of the system.
- 2.13 A basic feature of any software system is the availability of an e-grievance redressal mechanism which is absent in the system. In a real time e-filing system dealing with time sensitive matters, the absence of a grievance redressal system is completely unacceptable and *ipso facto* makes the system unworkable.
- 2.14 Chances of Fraud/Forgery will go undetected in the E-filing system as there is no measure to ensure the genuineness of documents filed. The present E-filing system does not provide for data authentication in the manner contemplated under law and is without any checks and balances to prevent

- unauthorized access including tampering with the contents of the uploaded documents. It is trite to state that the system does not contemplate any protection against Fraud / Forgery within the E filing system.
- 2.15 The E-filing system's processes from start to completion are cumbersome and illogical. The difficulty in this regard has already been experienced by Advocates when the same was adopted in filing of Bail Applications in 2020.
- 2.16 The E-filing system unnecessarily cast an onerous financial burden on practicing Advocates by way of additional expenses on specialized high end technological infrastructure such as duplex scanner, subscription to costly software solutions, etc, This exorbitant cost, especially in the time of pandemic, results in a digital divide and increases the cost of litigants to the justice delivery system. Auto – Duplex scanning is very expensive, since the price of a basic scanner having auto duplex scanning which permits OCR capabilities is around ₹38-40k. Most of the other scanners are above ₹50k. On the other hand, normal scanners with or without PDF would consume much time for scanning both sides of the page. The alternative would be to permit filing with one side printing. With the adoption of this system, lawyers are required to choose a PDF editing software, such as adobe, nitro PDF, etc. The paid versions of these types of software are very expensive (with Adobe costing around ₹1,200/- per month, with an annual commitment; i.e. Close to Rs. 15,000 annually).
- 2.17 The litigant public and the Advocates are expected to make only statutory payment in filing a case. By the introduction of e-filing any litigant who approaches the court is forced to obtain a digital signature upon payment which also increases the litigation cost to be expended by a litigant.
- 2.18 Though there are 160 categories of cases which can be filed through the E-filing system, there is absolutely no information as to how the system can be used. The presumption that users of the system would be competent to operate the modules without information regarding the same will result in

systemic failure and errors during the operationalization of the system.

- 2.19 The exhibits produced are to be scanned independently and uploaded separately which is time-consuming. There is no provision for uploading a case as a single document. To avoid delay and confusion the number of steps to be undertaken for e-filing could have been reduced to single point upload of files which is simple for end users.
- 2.20 The main reason why email filing, as done during lockdown period in 2020, was not accepted was that in many cases physical files are not yet submitted by the advocates before registry. Such a situation could be avoided if there is provision for issuing code numbers by KHCAA to advocates to be entered at the time of e-filing. KHCAA being the representative organization of the bar could ensure that its members comply with statutory requirements in filing cases. Therefore a requirement of a mandatory nature has to be insisted that all matters should be filed only through an Advocate who is accredited to file matters before High Court. It is practiced in several High Courts. If this requirement is incorporated in the module, the efficiency and effectiveness of the system would enhance exponentially.

To summarize, the E-filing system in its present form is cumbersome, lacks a user friendly interface, requires excessive amounts of irrelevant information input, lacks adequate system safeguards, does not include a grievance redressal or error detection and correction system. It also lacks a refund option with regard to errors in payments, and does not contain product documentation needless to say, in contravention of all the procedural laws. All of the above makes the system unworkable in the present form, replacing physical filing.

However, an attempt was made to test the system with a hypothetical case filing to understand the system's operational aspects. The findings are categorized into the following sections.

- Security
- Design

Specific issues

3. Security

For the sole purpose of understanding the operational aspects of the system presently put in place by the High Court, study was undertaken on each module, with the following assumptions, without prejudice to the concerns raised by the Bar, mentioned *supra*.

- i. System is secure to use and follows the guidelines issued by "Guidelines For Indian Government Websites" as issued by the Central Government.
- ii. All data stored is in encrypted form.
- iii. All data is backed up regularly and the data of sensitive nature is handled as per the guidelines issued by Central Government in terms of data storage.
- iv. All issues regarding data privacy has been addressed and sensitive information like minor and victim information is not visible to anyone other than to those authorized to view them.
- v. Information held in the system is not passed on to any other third parties or data analytics firms.

3.1. Uploading of documents as PDF

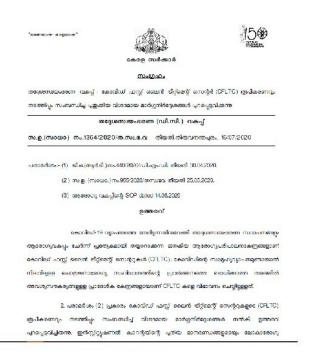
Section 5 of the Rules states the steps for uploading files into the system. The Rules specifies various criteria for creating pdfs. Presently it is not possible to identify at which stage the edit happened as there is an absence of an audit trail facility. The system does not provide for cyclic redundancy check (CRC) / hash to authenticate whether uploaded documents have been altered / tampered with.

3.2. OCR enabled PDF

Another requirement of the Rules is to make the uploaded PDF document OCR enabled. The present system is designed in such a manner that the entire obligation

of data entry is on the e-filer, with the HC registry having absolutely no burden on them. Most of the word processing documents have the function of converting documents to PDF'. Scanning software also automatically converts documents to PDF. OCR enabling PDF's is an advanced feature and requires users to purchase capable software like Acrobat Pro etc. The need for OCR enabling a scanned document is for the benefit of registry side of the High Court. It is not a legal requirement or one beneficial to litigants or advocates. That being so, the present stipulation that while uploading the document into the system, there should be OCR enablement by the Advocate does not make any sense. This is perfectly doable by the registry and any license required need only be purchased at one place that is by High Court and saves valuable time and money for advocates and litigants while filing cases.

The below screenshots are that of an original document and a copy obtained after exporting the same, utilizing OCR.





This demonstrates the futility of the requirement mandated under the Rules, pertaining to OCR. The aspect relating to preparing OCR enabled documents is

solely the need / requirement of the High Court Registry and shifting the burden to the members of the Bar is unsolicited, arbitrary, and inexcusable.

4. Design

4.1. Inefficient waterfall model

The current design follows a waterfall model of stage wise filing of a case. There are 14 to 20 stages or steps to complete a filing depending upon the case type. This is an inefficient design. A person filing a case can go from one step to another only one after other. No step can be skipped and go directly to any stage even when the stages in between are optional. In the case of a correction at an earlier step also, the person filing has to go all the way back to that step and then once again go forward step by step. The design is like traveling in a train where one has to stop at every station before going to next and in case of a correction required at a previous station then he has to go back there and then go through each station again before reaching final destination. The process is time consuming and inefficient.



Suggested Model – Save and Submit

Instead of a waterfall model, the forms can be made a single page or paginated. Users should be able to fill any page, then save it and comeback and do other pages.



The user should be able to save the case at any stage and submit it once complete. The current functionality of draft cases option suffers from the same issue as of filing a new case that is there is no flexibility to edit or add specific sections. Ideally payment should come after submission of the case.

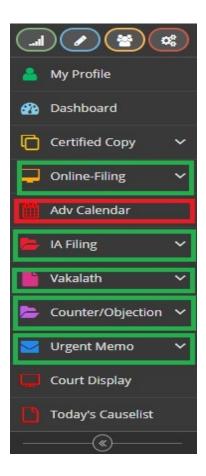
4.2. Separation of case contents from metadata

Statutory requirements specify contents of the case to be filed. For example High Court Rules specify how a writ petition should be filed, ie Statement of Facts, Grounds, Prayer etc. Civil Procedure Code specifies how first and second appeals should be filed. Only grounds and prayer are required in some cases and in some cases substantial question of law is required. The current system, in addition to the legally required content as mentioned above, also requires the user to fill in lot of data which is purely Meta data (like Aadhaar card, act, sub section etc). Seeking these data itself as a stage consumes valuable time of the members of the Bar, which does not further any benefit or justice to the clients. Metadata information is for the benefit of High Court for administrative purposes and for statistics and not mandated as per any statutory prescriptions. The person filing the case should not be burdened or forced to provide this data totally unnecessary for the filing of the case

Out of about 160 odd types of cases enlisted presently in the system, an analysis was made in relation to specific case types, as described below. A thorough testing of each of the case types would reveal individual case type filing faults. Issues found for the ones tested are pointed out below.

4.3. Generic Issues

Issue 1 - irregular grouping of Menu items

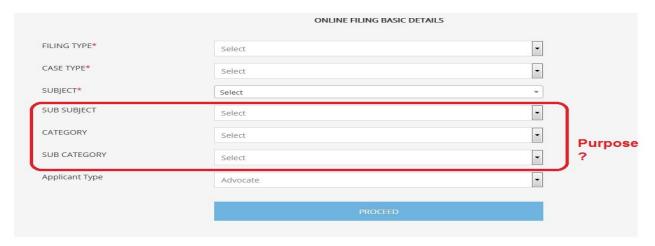


The menu is neither designed alphabetically nor semantically. Current structure forces user to do a manual search to figure out what goes where. The lack of logical ordering of the grouping is writ large and evidences the absence of stake holder consultation.

New Case Filing

Issue 2 – Unexplained sub subject and categorization

No information is available regarding what these additional fields are for. It is neither beneficial to the litigants nor to the advocates. These data entry requirements are solely to serve the ease of HC registry, and delegating to the same to the members of the Bar is inexcusable, and is notjustifiable.

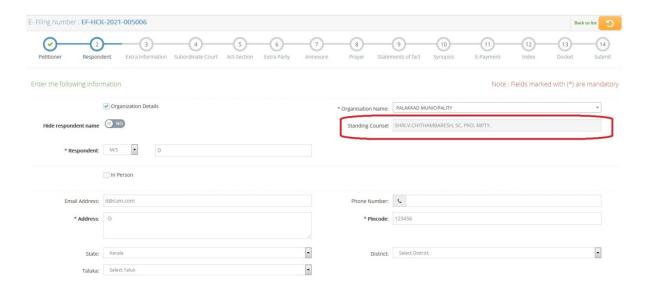


Issue 3 - Subject selection

Once the case type is selected, the drop down for subject should only show relevant subjects to the case type. For example when criminal, bail application is selected, showing all subjects is redundant and makes life of user difficult.

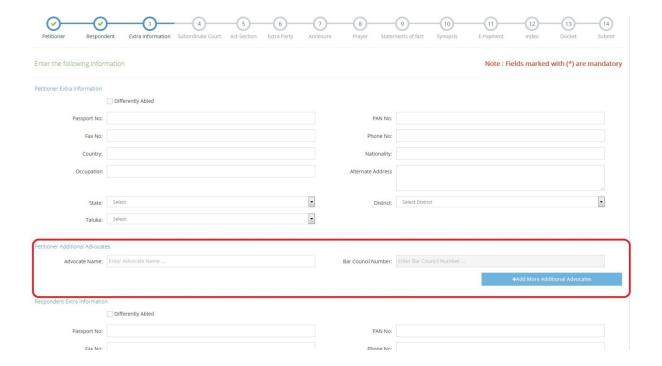
Issue 4 - Respondent Organization

Standing counsel information is outdated and non-editable.



The system, on the other hand, does not contain the functionality to select when there are more than one standing counsel for an institution.

Issue 5 - Extra Information

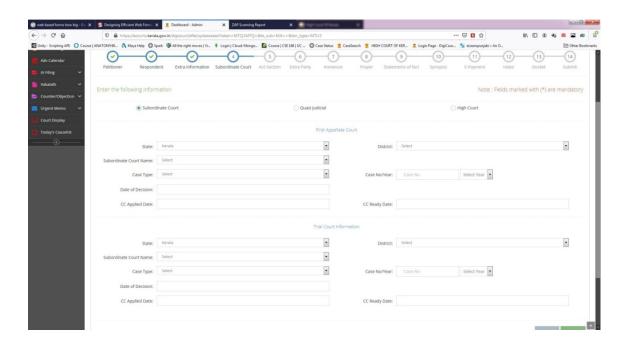


- 1 There is no purpose in seeking input of extraneous information, other than for the sole purpose of casting undue burden on the lawyers. No explanation or information is made available to make a decision as to why this information is relevant for the purposes of filing a case.
- 2 The present system contemplates addition of advocates as part of the 'extra information'. This aspect is completely illogical and absurd, since the details regarding the service of notice must go hand in hand with the petitioner's details.
- 3 The information about the additional advocates generally remains the same for most of the advocates. The information should be auto populated by the system, instead of the need to add additional advocates every time a case is filed. The failure entails wastage of time and effort on the part of the members of the Bar.

Issue 6 - Subordinate court information

Not relevant for all filings especially writ petitions. No need for that stage in case types which do not have that information.

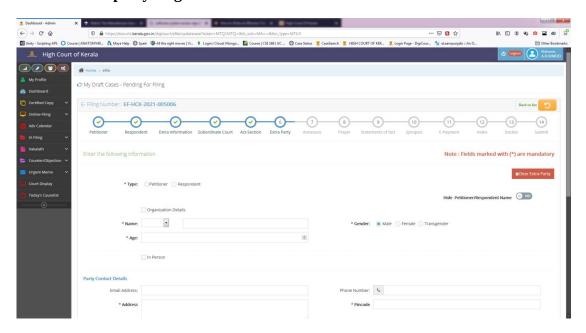
Despite the fact that such information is irrelevant for a large number / category of cases, the advocate is forced to proceed to this page, without an option to skip it, thus resulting in waste of time and resources, and increasing the burden of providing extraneous information.



Issue 7 - Act Section stage

This stage, as in the above case, is not relevant for the advocate. It is only to serve the grouping etc. at the administrative level and comes within the definition of metadata.

Issue 8 - Extra party stage



Similar to adding additional advocates, this should be added along with relevant pages and not as an extra stage. Facility to add additional petitioners and additional respondents should be in those stages. Current design is too cumbersome and non-intuitive.

Issue 9 - Incorrect phrasing



Should be "Statement of Facts" not "Statements of fact"

Issue 10 - Other stages - ordering



The stages are ordered without any rational basis and, demonstrate a complete lack of practical application.

The payment, being the final step before submission, should logically come as the last stage.

Issue 11 - No stage to add grounds.

It is not clear where to add "Grounds". Is it part of "Statement of facts" or is it part of prayer. In cases where grounds for relief are mandatory (for examples WPCs, as set out in Form No. 10 of the High Court Rules), the absence of such a stage is in direct conflict with the existing Rules, resulting in the system being unable to comply on its functionalities with the existing Rules.

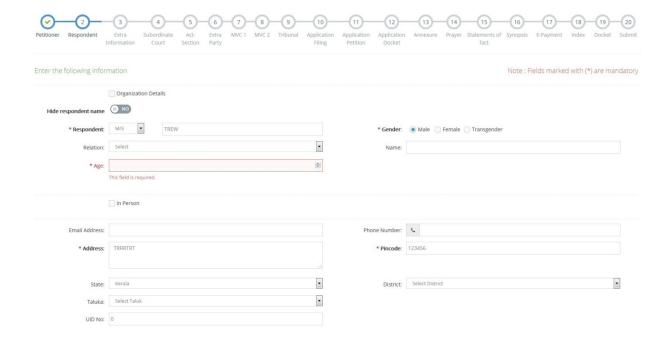
Issue 12– E-Payment

What is the relevance of Certified copy in payment section



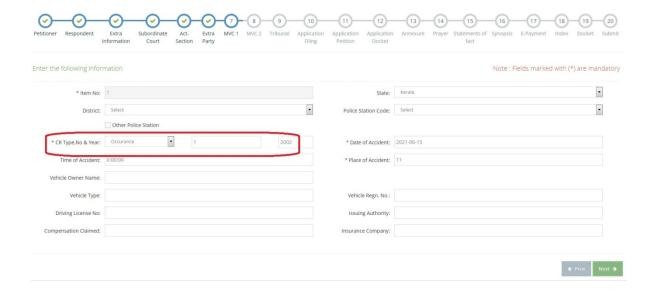
Issue 13 – Respondent's Age Mandatory

When it comes to statutory appeals, the parties are obliged to follow the cause title in the impugned judgment/award. The respondent details in such a case cannot be amended by the e filer, but should be auto-populated by the system.



Issue – 14 – MVC1 Cr No Mandatory

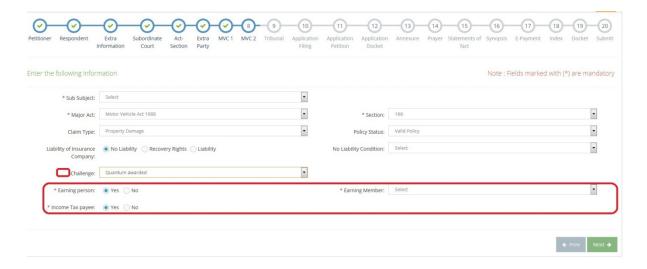
Crime no. should not be made mandatory. In many cases, no crimes are registered, and consequently, the details will be nonexistent. This being a mandatory field, it results in gross miscarriage of justice, since the matter cannot befiled.



Issue – 15 – MVC2 Mandatory Fields

Fields "Earning person", "Earning Member", "Income tax payee" should not be mandatory. They have no relevance/say in case of an appeal from property damage.

The challenge box is purely for the purpose of administrative convenience, and is not necessary or required for the purposes of filing of the case. The MV Act does not stipulate any grounds on which appeal can be filed. In the absence of a statutory requirement, the advocates cannot be compelled to select one of the many options, that too provided by the High Court, without any statutory basis. Challenge can be on multiple grounds, and a classification on that ground is purely for the purpose of statistics, administrative convenience, and the advocate should not be burdened with furnishing the said details.



Issue – 16 – Tribunal mandatory fields

Income pleaded and income reckoned should not be mandatory. It has no relevance in filing an appeal. None of this information has any relevance on the filing of the case, and in case, all of this information is available from the pleadings. Requiring the advocates to separately enter the data in bits and pieces is crude, onerous and completely unnecessary, resulting in waste of time and resources. This screen alone is sufficient to demonstrate the role of an advocate is downgraded to that of a glorified data entry operator.

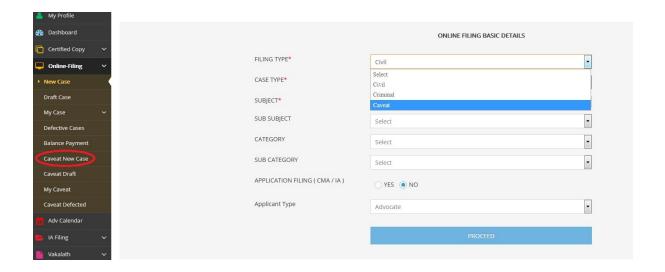


LAA – Land acquisition appeal

The same issues as raised in MACA would prima facie apply in this instance also. All of the objections raised above, mutatis mutandis would apply to LAA as well. For the sake of illustration, some such stages are highlighted hereunder.



Issue 17 - Caveat filing from two places



Should be consolidated under Cases.

Issue 18 - Illogical ordering of stages



Payment should not come before completing filing details.

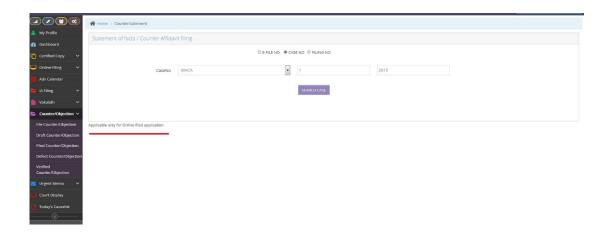
Issue 19 – Vakalath uploading

Annexure stage contains facility to upload the vakalath. There are no annexure or exhibits for Caveat. Nomenclature is wrong.



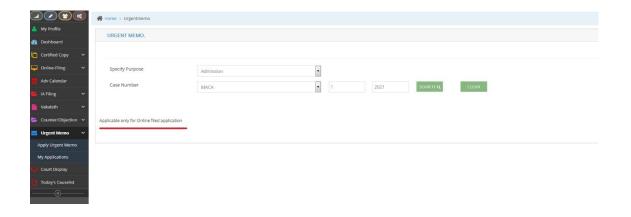
Issue 20 – Counter Objection

Counter or objection can be filed only for cases filed through e-filing. The High Court had disabled the options, consequent to which it was not possible for further analysis and study.



Issue 21 – Urgent Memo

Urgent memo also can only be filed for cases e-filed. No testing could be done due to the restriction, as mentioned supra.



5. Conclusion

Success of any system depends not just on its purpose; the system has to be first and foremost usable. If the system is not easy to use, instead of making a manual process efficient, it just manifests itself as an inefficient electronic solution. Translation of a manual process into electronic one is not always straight forward. Some process can be translated one to one while others need change and in some cases an entire manual process can be done away with as it may not be relevant in the digital scenario. Law and legal field is an expert domain. Many a practice may not make any sense applying common sense but the same would have a legal or historic background. The exclusion of advocates and the Kerala High Court Advocates' Association right from the inception of E-Filing project manifests itself in the e filing system, as exhibited here above. The inputs and knowledge from the Bar as users of the future system and also stakeholders is invaluable. The judiciary and the bar are ultimately part of one and the same machinery

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