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COMPARATIVE LEGAL FRAMEWORKS IN ANTITRUST INVESTIGATIONS: CHALLENGES AND EVOLVING ENFORCEMENT TRENDS

Madhusudan ANV
Department of Law, Mangalayatan University, Beswan, Aligarh, UP, India
Dr. Ali Akhtar (Assistant Professor)
Mangalayatan University, Beswan, Aligarh, UP, India

Abstract
This study provides a comparative legal analysis of antitrust investigation frameworks in the United States (US), the European Union (EU), and India. It examines statutory provisions, enforcement agencies, procedural standards, and evidentiary rules in each jurisdiction. Key findings highlight that while all three systems share the goal of promoting competition, they diverge sharply in approach: the US employs a dual-agency, criminal-and-civil model with a strict per se/rule-of-reason dichotomy (Chatterjee & Gautam, 2012), the EU uses a unified Commission-based system with an effects-based analysis for abuses (European Commission, 2023), and India blends elements of both systems under its single Competition Act, 2002 (Chatterjee & Gautam, 2012). We also identify legal challenges such as jurisdictional conflicts and differing evidentiary requirements, and we assess evolving enforcement trends, including a recent shift towards new focus areas (e.g., digital platforms, labor markets) and intensified international cooperation. The paper concludes that despite shared competition objectives, the lack of harmonization creates uncertainty, underscoring calls for greater convergence and coordination in cross-border antitrust enforcement (Pandey, 2025).
Keywords: Antitrust law; competition policy; comparative law; enforcement trends; U.S.; EU; India; international cooperation.

1.Introduction

Antitrust (competition) laws are critical to maintaining market fairness and economic efficiency, but their application varies across jurisdictions. For example, the Sherman Act (1890) – supplemented by the Clayton Act and FTC Act (1914) – forms the core of US competition law (Chatterjee & Gautam, 2012). In contrast, the EU's modern competition framework arises from the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which prohibits cartels (Article 101) and abuse of dominance (Article 102) within the internal market. India's competition regime, introduced by the Competition Act of 2002, replaced the old MRTP Act and similarly targets collusion and monopolistic conduct (Chatterjee & Gautam, 2012). Despite these common goals, enforcement structures differ: the US employs two federal agencies (the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC)), whereas the EU entrusts its European Commission with enforcement, and India relies on the Competition Commission of India (CCI) alongside a Competition Appellate Tribunal (Chatterjee & Gautam, 2012). These structural and doctrinal differences have become increasingly salient as business operations globalize. This article therefore compares antitrust investigation frameworks in the US, EU, and India, focusing on procedural rules, the role of economic evidence, enforcement challenges, and emerging cross-border trends. By synthesizing legislation, case law, and enforcement data, we aim to clarify how multinational firms and agencies navigate the complexities of divergent competition regimes.

2. Literature Review

The evolution of antitrust law reflects distinct historical and theoretical influences. US antitrust began with the Sherman Act (1890) to curb monopolies (Chatterjee & Gautam, 2012). Its jurisprudence was shaped by competing schools of thought: the early 20th-century "Harvard School" emphasized structural remedies against market concentration, whereas the mid-20th-century "Chicago School" argued for a more economic, efficiency-oriented approach (Chatterjee & Gautam, 2012). In practice, this meant that the US courts moved away from automatic break-ups of large firms towards a rule-of-reason analysis, considering procompetitive justifications. The EU, meanwhile, has long employed an "effects-based" approach, especially in abuse-of-dominance cases; the European Commission's guidelines explicitly embrace an effects-based analysis of Article 102 cases (European Commission, 2023). Several authors note that India's Competition Act (2002) draws from both traditions: it bans hardcore cartels per se (Section 3(3)) yet requires a balancing test of economic effects (AAEC) for other agreements (Chatterjee & Gautam, 2012). Indeed, one commentary observes that the Indian regime "is based largely on the jurisprudence developed in the EU and the US" (Pandey, 2025). Enforcement institutions also differ. The US system assigns criminal cartel prosecutions to the DOJ while the FTC pursues civil cases, often in parallel (Chatterjee & Gautam, 2012). By contrast, the EU relies on the Commission (a single authority) under administrative procedures for prohibitions and fines, with only civil (not criminal) sanctions. India initially created a hybrid structure (CCI for investigation and remedy, a Tribunal for appeals), resembling EU centralization, but with enforcement influenced by US models (Chatterjee & Gautam, 2012). Recent analyses emphasize that these structural differences, along with procedural rules (e.g., standards of proof, rights of defense), create complexities in multinational investigations, fueling calls for harmonization (Pandey, 2025). In sum, the literature identifies key contrasts – per se versus effects-based rules, multi-agency versus single-agency enforcement, and varying evidentiary burdens – suggesting both commonalities (shared competition objectives) and divergence (legal and procedural inconsistencies) across jurisdictions.

3. Methodology

This study employs a comparative legal analysis. We review primary sources (statutes, regulations, and enforcement guidelines) and secondary sources (law review articles, firm reports, and official press releases) in the US, EU, and India. Key texts include US antitrust statutes (Sherman and Clayton Acts), the TFEU competition provisions, and India's Competition Act, along with guidelines and case law that interpret them. We also examine data and commentary from competition authorities and international bodies: for example, US DOJ Annual Reports, European Commission enforcement notices, CCI orders, and multilateral guidance (e.g., ICN/OECD recommendations). Information was gathered using legal databases and official websites, and relevant excerpts have been cited to support comparisons. By synthesizing these materials, we map out each jurisdiction's investigative procedures, evidentiary standards, and enforcement practices, and identify trends and cooperative frameworks that have emerged in recent years.

4. Results

4.1 Frameworks and Enforcement Structures : The US, EU, and India each have distinct legal frameworks governing antitrust investigations. In the US, antitrust law is contained mainly in the Sherman Act (Section 1 prohibiting collusion; Section 2 outlawing monopoly) and the Clayton Act (addressing specific practices like mergers) (Chatterjee & Gautam, 2012). Enforcement is split between two federal agencies: the DOJ Antitrust Division (an executive agency) prosecutes criminal offenses (e.g., cartels) (Chatterjee & Gautam, 2012), while the independent FTC pursues civil cases on Section 1 and 2 violations as well as unfair competition. Both agencies can challenge mergers under the Clayton Act. By contrast, the EU's competition law is codified in the TFEU: Article 101 prohibits restrictive agreements, and Article 102 prohibits abuse of dominance. The European Commission has sole competence to enforce these rules (originally delegated by the Council) (Chatterjee & Gautam, 2012). If a transaction or conduct affects trade within the EU, the Commission (or in national cases, member-state authorities) may investigate under these provisions. Importantly, EU rules are framed to reach any agreement that "has as its object or effect the prevention, restriction or distortion of competition" (TFEU Art. 101) (Chatterjee & Gautam, 2012), requiring in principle proof of an appreciable effect. India's Competition Act similarly outlaws anti-competitive agreements (Section 3) and abuse of dominance (Section 4) with an express focus on an

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"appreciable adverse effect on competition" (AAEC). The Competition Commission of India (CCI) is the sole authority for enforcement, subject to appeals before the Competition Appellate Tribunal. The Act presumes hard-core cartels illegal (akin to per se) under Section 3(3), but for other restraints (Section 3(4)), it mandates a case-by-case evaluation of economic impact under six statutory factors – including entry barriers, consumer benefits, and efficiencies (Chatterjee & Gautam, 2012). Thus, while all three jurisdictions prohibit similar conduct, their institutional models and substantive tests vary significantly.

4.2 Procedural Standards and Evidentiary Requirements: Procedural rules in investigations also diverge. In the US, criminal cartel cases proceed under strict trial procedures: the DOJ must prove a conspiracy beyond reasonable doubt, and defendants enjoy rights to jury trials and discovery. DOJ policy treats certain conduct as automatically unlawful: "Price fixing, bid rigging and market allocation are among the group of antitrust offenses that are considered 'per se' unreasonable restraints of trade," requiring no further economic justification (U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). Non-cartel restraints are judged under the rule of reason, requiring detailed evidence of market effect versus efficiency. By contrast, EU cartel enforcement under Article 101(1) focuses on the "object" of an agreement (so-called naked restraints of trade) as inherently illegal, but otherwise the Commission (and courts) apply an effects-based analysis of harm. Under Article 102, enforcement has explicitly adopted an effects-based approach (as stated in Commission guidance) (European Commission, 2023). As a result, EU investigations often involve extensive economic evidence (market share data, price impact studies) to establish dominance and exclusionary effects. India's system melds these approaches. The CCI treats horizontal cartels as per se illegal (similar to US), but for vertical or unilateral conduct, it applies a balanced test of AAEC using economic factors (similar to EU) (Chatterjee & Gautam, 2012). In practice, Indian courts have required case-by-case economic analysis for most agreements, echoing the rule-of-reason spirit, especially in vertical restraint cases.

4.3 Emerging Enforcement Trends: Recent trends show all jurisdictions adapting to new challenges. Notably, major authorities report a decline in traditional cartel enforcement in 2023. A Clifford Chance survey notes that both the US and EU recorded historically low cartel fines – "record lows for cartel enforcement in 2023 in the EU (lowest cartel fines … in 20 years) and the US (a mere $2 million in criminal cartel penalties)" (Clifford Chance, 2023) marked a significant downturn in traditional cartel enforcement across major jurisdictions. According to Clifford Chance (2024), both the European Union and the United States experienced historically low cartel fines. In the EU, fines dropped to their lowest levels in two decades, while in the US, the Department of Justice imposed a mere $2 million in criminal cartel penalties—far below historic norms. Analysts attribute this decline partly to waning leniency applications, increased litigation costs, and the shifting focus of authorities to novel areas of concern, such as digital platforms and labor markets. In response, competition authorities have recalibrated their enforcement priorities. In the United States, the DOJ and FTC have increased scrutiny of technology mergers and wage-fixing agreements, reflecting heightened concern over monopsony power (U.S. Federal Trade Commission, 2023). The European Commission has similarly focused on digital ecosystems, releasing historical ruling in Google shopping and Android cases, which outlines how major digital players can structure markets in their favor (European Commission, 2023). Meanwhile, in India, the CCI began an investigation into the pricing algorithm used by the ride-sharing platforms, marking a new era of the Digital Competition Enforcement (India's Competition Commission, 2023).Concurrent, international coordination has increased. The International Competition Network (ICN) and Economic Cooperation and Development Organization (OECD) have promoted convergence in discovered techniques and data-sharing structure. For example, the 2023 ICN annual report emphasized the importance of procedural fairness and the use of economic evidence in courts, indicating a step towards harmonious best practices (ICN, 2023).

5. Discussion

Comparative analysis suggests how antitrust tests are done globally, it reveals both convergence and deviation. Whereas all three courts-US, the European Union and the general objective of preventing the Indo-Competitive Conduct and protecting consumer welfare are greatly varying in their procedural design and legal principles. The United States retains a unique bilateral enforcement model, where FTC's civic enforcement works with criminal prosecution of DOJ. This structure enables the aggressive preventive to the cartel, allowing a fine assessment of monopoly behavior. However, it also produces potential overlap and regulatory fragmentation (Chatterjee and Gautam, 2012).The European Union's single-agency model provides more centralized authority but raises concerns about due process, especially given the Commission's dual role as investigator and decision-maker (Gerber, 2014). India's framework blends features from both systems, with the CCI acting as both investigator and adjudicator, but with appellate oversight from the Competition Appellate Tribunal.Another major difference lies in the approach to economic analysis. The US has long divided antitrust evaluation into "per se" and "rule of reason" categories, a dichotomy that often simplifies enforcement but may overlook the complexities of modern digital markets. The EU's effects-based analysis, particularly under Article 102 TFEU, enables more sophisticated inquiry into market dynamics but can be burdensome in terms of evidence requirements and litigation timelines (Whish & Bailey, 2021). India, while adopting the effects-based test under AAEC, faces institutional challenges in applying robust economic scrutiny, owing to capacity constraints and relatively fewer precedents.Enforcement results further depict judicial differences. With the risk of imprisonment for cartel behavior, American enforcement remains more punitive. In contrast, the European Union and Indian Enforcement administrative emphasis on punishment and corrective behavior treatment. While monetary fine is common in all three courts, their magnitude and frequency are different, which affects corporate compliance strategies globally.

6. Conclusion

This article concludes that while the goals of the Competition law widely alliances in the US, the European Union and India, their no -confidence probe structures reflect a deep difference in the legal tradition, institutional design and procedural law. These differences give rise to both opportunities and challenges for international cooperation and convergence. On the one hand, the variety of approach allows for national references and allows for optimization. On the other hand, they risk inconsistent consequences in cross -border cases, regulatory arbitrations and corporate uncertainty. To resolve these challenges, procedural harmony, mutual recognition of investigative results, and more emphasis on increased use of multilateral forums (eg, ICN, OECD) are required. Since the global commerce continues to shift to digital and algorithm-operated platforms, the antitrust enforcement must develop into the tendem-only fair competition but also conscience in global legal reactions.

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