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LANDMARK SUPREME COURT JUDGEMENTS IN INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

The Supreme Court of India, the apex judicial authority acts as both the guardian of the Constitution and a guiding force for our legal and social values. Its role goes far beyond simply settling disputes its decisions often shape the direction in which our society moves. The Court has handed down several landmark judgments that have touched on issues close to every Indian's heart, from protecting civil liberties and ensuring gender equality to safeguarding institutional independence and promoting social justice. These rulings have not only influenced laws and policies but have also left a deep imprint on people's everyday lives. In this blog, we explore some of the most significant Supreme Court verdicts, delving into their reasoning, their impact, and how they shape India's future.

LANDMARK SUPREME COURT JUDGEMENTS IN INDIA

1. *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India*, AIR 2014 SC 1863 (15 April 2014)

- **Bench:** Two judges (Chief Justice K.S. Radhakrishnan and Justice A.K. Sikri)
- **Legal Issue(s):** Whether persons identifying outside the male-female binary (transgender/hijra) could be legally recognized as a “third gender,” and whether ignoring their gender identity violated fundamental rights¹
- **Court's Ruling:** The Court unanimously held that transgender persons have the right to self-identify their gender. It declared that “hijras and eunuchs” may register as “third gender,” and that denying this status violated Articles 14, 15, 19 and 2. The Court directed governments to issue identity documents reflecting

third-gender status and to treat transgender individuals as socially and educationally backward (entitling them to reservations)

- **Impact:** This verdict was India's first legal recognition of non-binary gender, vastly extending constitutional protections to transgender people. It mandated that governments ensure transgender individuals receive social welfare benefits and reserved quotas in education and jobs. The decision is hailed as a milestone for LGBT rights in India.ⁱⁱ
- **Observations:** The judgment was hailed as a historic milestone, yet its promise has not fully reached the ground. A recent report notes that many transgender persons still struggle to access promised benefits and face social stigma, indicating that legal recognition alone has not resolved deep-seated challenges. As many have pointed out, the ruling opened an important door but real change will come only when those rights are truly enforced and when society embraces equality with acceptance and respect.ⁱⁱⁱ

2. *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) v. Union of India, (2017) 10 SCC 1 (24 August 2017)*

- **Bench:** Nine-judge Constitution Bench (Chief Justice J.S. Khehar and eight others).
- **Legal Issue(s):** Whether the Constitution guarantees a right to personal privacy, particularly whether the Aadhaar biometric identity scheme violated fundamental rights.
- **Court's Ruling:** The Court unanimously recognized the right to privacy as a fundamental right under Articles 14, 19 and 21. It held that privacy is an essential component of human dignity and personal liberty. The judgment overruled prior cases denying a general privacy right, establishing that personal autonomy and information are constitutionally protected.
- **Impact:** *Puttaswamy* entrenched privacy at the core of Indian constitutional law. It has far-reaching implications: by explicitly linking privacy to personal identity and autonomy, the verdict "fuelled the fire" for the 2018 decriminalization of homosexuality (*Navtej Singh Johar v. India*)^{iv}. It also set new standards for data protection and state surveillance.

- **Observations:** The Court emphasized that even this broad privacy right is not absolute. It held that restrictions on privacy must be by “procedure established by law” and must satisfy tests of legality, legitimate aim and proportionality^v Commentators note that balancing privacy against security and welfare interests will require careful future adjudication, reflecting the Court’s far-reaching interpretation of personal autonomy

3. *Vishaka & Ors. v. State of Rajasthan & Ors., (1997) 6 SCC 241 (13 August 1997)*

- **Bench:** Three-judge bench (Chief Justice J.S. Verma, Justices Sujata V. Manohar and B.N. Kirpal)
- **Legal Issue(s):** Whether sexual harassment of working women violates fundamental rights (especially Articles 14, 15, 19(1)(g) and 21) and what remedies exist in the absence of specific law^{vi}
- **Court’s Ruling:** The Court held that sexual harassment at the workplace is a violation of women’s fundamental rights to equality and dignity.^{vii} In the absence of any legislation, it framed mandatory “Vishaka Guidelines” under Article 32. These guidelines defined sexual harassment broadly and required employers to create preventive measures (like internal complaints committees), effectively imposing a legal framework against harassment.
- **Impact:** Vishaka was a landmark in protecting women’s rights at work. Its guidelines established the principle that women have a right to a safe workplace and inspired the 2013 **Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act**. The case greatly expanded the scope of Article 14 to cover gender-specific violence.

4. *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala & Anr., (1973) 4 SCC 225 (24 April 1973)*

- **Bench:** Thirteen judges (Chief Justice S.M Sikri and others).
- **Legal Issue(s):** Whether Parliament’s amending power under Article 368 is unlimited, specifically whether it can amend or repeal fundamental rights. The petitioners challenged recent amendments to land reform laws.
- **Court’s Ruling:** In a narrow 7–6 majority, the Court held that while Parliament can amend almost any part of the Constitution, it cannot alter the Constitution’s “basic structure”. Chief Justice Sikri (writing for the majority) identified certain core features such as rule of law, separation of powers,

federalism and secularism as forming this inviolable basic structure. Amendments violating these fundamental features were struck down.^{viii}

- **Impact:** *Kesavananda Bharati* is the source of the **basic structure doctrine**, a cornerstone of Indian constitutional law. It secured the Supreme Court's power to review constitutional amendments for compliance with foundational principles. This doctrine has been repeatedly applied to protect India's democratic framework against excesses of amendment power.

CONCLUSION

These landmark rulings reflect the Supreme Court's role as a guardian of the Constitution's spirit. *NALSA* and *Puttaswamy* expanded the canvas of individual rights, affirming dignity, identity, and privacy. *Vishaka* bridged a legislative gap to safeguard women's workplace safety, while *Kesavananda Bharati* fortified the "basic structure" doctrine, placing constitutional principles beyond the reach of transient political majorities. Together, they show that the Indian Constitution is a living document, capable of growth, responsive to societal needs, and firmly anchored in the ideals of justice, equality, and liberty.

REFERENCES:

ⁱ translaw.clpr.org.in.

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ timesofindia.indiatimes.com.

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^{viii} <https://www.sconline.com/blog/post/2023/04/24/kesavananda-bharati-vs-state-of-kerala/>