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RIGHTS AND DUTIES OF CITIZENS: THE BALANCE EVERY DEMOCRACY NEEDS

~Nupur Mehra

Law is not merely a source of entitlements; it is equally a framework of obligations that balances individual liberty with the collective good. The importance of law extends far beyond just maintaining peace in society. It serves as the foundation for true equality. To provide access to every citizen of the country, legal rights and duties are being established by the state. Rights are often celebrated as a hallmark of democracy, but they cannot stay in vacuum. Every right enjoyed by one individual creates a corresponding obligation for another making duties the silent yet indispensable foundation of a functioning legal system. Without this balance, rights risk becoming instruments of conflict rather than tools of justice.

This blog explores the relationship between legal rights and legal duties, examining why neither can exist meaningfully without the other and the balance between both.

Freedom without responsibility: Can rights exist in Isolation?

We have heard from many people that "this is my right." Whether posting on social media, spreading opinion without checking the exact facts, using freedom of speech as a weapon while speaking about any matter whether in a debate or by public opinion, etc. So, these types of rights are becoming part of our daily life. But how often do we hear someone say, "this is my duty"? Hardly, right? No one easily gets ready to take responsibility. But "where there is a right, there is a duty too." This can be understood by the leading case, *State of Rajasthan v. Union of India*, (1977) 3 SCC 592, where the Supreme Court of India observed that in a stricter sense, legal rights are correlative of legal duties and are defined as interests which the law protects by imposing corresponding duties on others.". In another case, *AIIMS Students' Union v. All India Institute of Medical Sciences*, (2002) 1 SCC 428, the Supreme Court observed that Fundamental Rights and Fundamental Duties are complementary to each other. The Court

emphasized that while Fundamental Duties are generally non-justiciable, they are valuable constitutional obligations that guide the interpretation of rights and promote responsible citizenship.

The legal architecture of Rights and Duties-

Rights are not just a privilege for people; they are the foundation of a democratic society. For these rights to get its legal importance, several freedom fighters and people have fought. The constitution is built like a two-pillar structure. One pillar guarantees protections such as equality before the law, freedom of expression, protection from exploitation, and access to justice. The other pillar, often less discussed, sets out what citizens owe to the community and the nation. In India, this architecture is visible in the Constitution itself: Part III guarantees Fundamental Rights, while Part IV-A lists Fundamental Duties. Together, they form a framework where entitlement and obligation are meant to move in tandem, not in isolation. Laws, police powers, judicial review, and administrative regulation all operate within this framework, translating abstract constitutional promises into everyday enforceable protections—such as anti-discrimination laws, or workplace safety codes, that hold both citizens and institutions accountable.

Constitutional Morality Beyond Fundamental Rights-

Beyond the rights explicitly written into law lies a broader idea, that a constitution carries a certain moral spirit which should guide public conduct even where no specific rule exists. This spirit asks citizens and institutions alike to act in ways that respect diversity, protect the vulnerable, and strengthen democratic values, even in situations the original lawmakers never anticipated. For example, when new technologies raise questions about data privacy or online harassment, courts and lawmakers often look beyond the literal text of existing statutes to this underlying constitutional spirit to fill the gaps. It is this same spirit that expects citizens to act responsibly, not because a specific rule demands it in every instance, but because the values underlying the legal system demand it.

Duties: The Silent Foundation of Every Right-

It is easy to overlook how deeply duties support the very rights people enjoy. The right to a clean environment depends on citizens not littering, not polluting water bodies, and not damaging public land. The right to safety on the roads depends on drivers respecting traffic

rules. The right to peaceful public spaces depends on citizens not creating public nuisance. Duties rarely announce to themselves the way rights do. There is no dramatic courtroom battle over the duty to develop scientific temper or preserve public property, yet without this quiet compliance, rights would collapse under the weight of misuse. Duties function like the foundation of a building- invisible, unglamorous, but essential to everything standing above them.

Why Duties Rarely Receive the Same Attention-

Despite their importance, duties remain the less-discussed half of the citizenship equation. Part of the reason is structural, fundamental duties in India, for instance, are not directly enforceable in courts the way fundamental rights are. There is no mechanism to sue a citizen simply for failing to develop a "scientific temper" or for not cherishing the ideals of the freedom of struggle. Rights, on the other hand, come with remedies. A citizen whose right is violated can approach a court and seek redress. This asymmetry naturally shifts public attention, and legal discourse toward rights, while duties are relegated to school textbooks and occasional public messaging campaigns.

Restoring the Balance Between Liberty and Responsibility-

Restoring this balance does not require diminishing rights. It requires strengthening the culture around duties. This can happen through civic education that treats duties as part of active citizenship rather than passive moral advice, through community-level accountability where local bodies and citizen groups monitor environmental and public conduct, and through public institutions modeling responsible behavior themselves.

Why This Balance Matters Today-

The urgency of this balance is sharper than ever in a hyper-connected world. A single post can go viral within minutes; a protest can be organized within hours, and misinformation can spread faster than any correction. Climate change, data privacy, and communal harmony are no longer abstract constitutional ideals; they are daily tests of whether citizens can exercise their freedoms while honoring their obligations to each other and to the planet. The balance between liberty and responsibility is not a historical relic; it is a live, ongoing negotiation shaped by every citizen's daily choice.

Conclusion-

Rights and duties are not competing forces but complementary halves of the same civic identity. A right exercised in isolation, without regard for responsibility, erodes the very freedom it claims to protect. As societies continue to evolve amid new technologies and new challenges, the real measure of a mature democracy will not be how loudly its citizens can demand their rights, but how consistently they choose to honor the duties that make those rights sustainable for everyone.