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LANDMARK SUPREME COURT JUDGEMENTS IN INDIA

-Jayashree Raman

ABSTRACT

The Supreme Court of India plays a vital role in protecting the Constitution and upholding the principles of justice, liberty, equality, and democracy. Its landmark judgements have significantly influenced the development of Indian law and the interpretation of constitutional provisions. These judgements address important issues relating to Fundamental Rights, gender equality, personal liberty, social justice, and the rule of law. Decisions such as Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala, Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India, and Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India have shaped the constitutional framework of the country. This blog explores some of the most significant Supreme Court judgements in India, their legal principles, and their impact on Indian society. Ultimately, these landmark decisions demonstrate the judiciary's responsibility in preserving constitutional values and strengthening the foundations of Indian democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Supreme Court, also known as the apex court or the court of final appeal, is the highest court in the hierarchy of courts. It usually functions as an appellate court, hearing appeals from various lower or district courts and matters which have gone too serious. The Supreme Court of India, established on 28th January 1950 in New Delhi, is the highest judicial authority. It has over 37 judges plus the Chief Justice and holds the power to invalidate judgments across the country. Its decisions are binding nationwide, marking it as one of the most powerful supreme courts globally.

There are various landmark judgements given by the Supreme Court of India.

- Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala (1973)

This being one of the most famous of all, a judgement which established the Basic Structure Doctrine, which limits the power of Parliament to amend the Constitution. In ¹[Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala \(1973\)](#), a historic 13 judge bench heard the case for over 68 days. The Supreme Court gave a verdict that “while the Parliament has broad powers to amend the Constitution under Article 368, it cannot alter or destroy its basic structure”. By basic structure it means, the key features like: Supremacy of the Constitution, Secularism and Democracy, Separation of powers, Judicial Review and Rule of Law. Since then, this doctrine has been used to invalidate various constitutional amendments and safeguard against any alteration of the character of the Indian Constitution.

- [Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India \(1978\)](#)

A judgement that fundamentally expanded the scope of personal liberty under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. In ²[Maneka Gandhi v Union of India \(1978\)](#), the government without providing any valid reasons, ordered Manika Gandhi to surrender her passport, calling to be ‘interest of general public’. She filed a writ petition under Article 42 of the Constitution, arguing that this action led to a violation of her fundamental rights; Article 14(Right to Equality); Article 19(Freedom of Speech) and Article 21(Personal Liberty). The Supreme Court ruled that the right to go abroad is a part of “personal liberty” under Article 21. The Court also continued saying that the procedure set by the law cannot be oppressive, it must be fair and reasonable, keeping into consideration principle of natural justice.

- [Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan \(1997\)](#)

A judgement that established legal protections against sexual harassment in the workplace. There not being any provisions for sexual harassment at workplace led to massive public outrage, seeking women’s rights at workplace across the country. This made the Supreme Court intervene and it gave out the “Vishaka guidelines”, which directed to the prevention and redressal of sexual harassment and workplace. In ³[Vishaka v State of Rajasthan \(1997\)](#), guidelines were made to define an employer’s bad conduct, their duties and establishing complaint committees. This guideline served for over 16 years, until it was replaced by

¹ Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala, (1973) 4 SCC 225

² Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India, AIR 1978 SC 597

³ Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan, (1997) 6 SCC 241

Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act , 2013.

- Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India (2018)

Here, the Supreme Court of India, decriminalized consensual same-sex relations by quoting down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), Section 377 remains in force for non-consensual sexual acts, sexual acts involving minors, etc. In ⁴[Navtej Singh Johar v Union of India \(2018\)](#), the bench held that the colonial era's provisions violated, Articles 14 (Right to Equality), 15 (Prohibition of Discrimination), 19 (Freedom of Expression), and 21 (Right to Life and Personal Liberty). The judges further quoted that societal disapproval or moral of the majority cannot override individual constitutional rights, dignity, and personal liberty. A five-judge bench made an historic ruling, reshaping our Indian Constitutional Law and giving fundamental rights to the LGBTQ+ community.

- Mohd. Ahmed Khan v. Shah Bano Begum (1985)

A Supreme Court judgement that upheld the right of a divorced Muslim women to seek financial maintenance from her husband. In the ⁵[Shah Bano case \(1985\)](#), a five-judge bench ruled in favour of Shah Bano, stating that "Section 125 of the CrPC is a secular provision overriding personal laws". The Court said that a divorced woman unable to support herself is entitled to maintenance post the idaat period under the Muslim Personal Law. The Rajiv Gandhi government coming under pressure passed the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986. The Supreme Court later simplified the statute, saying that husbands must provide a reasonable one-time maintenance during iddat for future livelihood, and Section 125 CrPC remains accessible to divorced Muslim women.

CONCLUSION

These landmark judgments have significantly shaped India's constitutional landscape by reinforcing fundamental rights, establishing new legal protections, and ensuring the Constitution's integrity. They continue to guide the nation's legal and social progress. These judgements opened a new direction in our constitutional thinking and added various

⁴ Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India, (2018) 10 SCC 1

⁵ Mohd. Ahmed Khan v. Shah Bano Begum, (1985) 2 SCC 556

dimensions through which we can establish our constitutional principles and uphold our Indian Constitution.

As rightly said,

“.....⁶ When histories of nations are written and critiqued, there are judicial decisions at the forefront of liberty. Yet others have to be consigned to the archives, reflective of what was, but should never have been.” - D.Y Chandrachud J ([The Hindu](#))

⁶ This profound observation by Justice D.Y. Chandrachud appears in paragraph 121 of the landmark 9-judge bench decision in [Justice K.S. Puttaswamy \(Retd.\) Vs. Union of India](#), (2017) 10 SCC 1.