

Constitutional Contradictions in India: A Critical Study of Doctrinal Tensions, Social Realities, And The Need for A Dynamic Interpretation

Nidhi Lobhiwant Meshram¹, Prof. Dr. Shipra Singam²

¹PhD Scholar, Law Department

²HoD, Law Department

Abstract

The Constitution of India serves as a transformative framework aimed at securing political freedom and promoting social justice within a diverse society. Its designers intentionally embedded structural contradictions such as balancing equality with affirmative action, secularism with religious personal laws, and a federal system supported by central authority to maintain governance flexibility. These contradictions have become more pronounced with changing political, social, and technological landscapes. Key factors such as judicial interpretation, technological advances, declining public trust in representative institutions, and debates over constitutional morality have altered the dynamics of constitutional democracy. Particularly in the digital era, conflicts surrounding rights versus regulation, privacy against surveillance, and citizen sovereignty in relation to corporate influence have surfaced. This analysis argues that these constitutional contradictions exemplify a living constitution rather than indicating systemic flaws. However, if not addressed, they could undermine democratic legitimacy and social justice. The study emphasizes that the constitution's effectiveness relies not solely on institutional reform but also on fostering an informed and engaged citizenry.

Keywords: Constitution of India, Constitutional Contradictions, Judicial Interpretation, democracy, federalism, secularism, constitutional morality, digital governance, fundamental rights, social justice

INTRODUCTION

The Constitution of India, adopted on November 26, 1949, is a foundational document that aims to establish political independence and foster social transformation. It serves as a social contract reflecting the people's aspirations for justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. However, the Constitution grapples with inherent contradictions arising from India's vast diversity religious, linguistic, cultural, economic, and social resulting in tensions within its constitutional framework.

These contradictions are intentional, as the framers recognized that a rigid constitution would be inadequate for a pluralistic society like India. Therefore, the Constitution promises equality while permitting affirmative action, upholds secularism yet allows religious personal laws, establishes federalism but grants the Union overriding powers, guarantees fundamental rights while allowing for their

limitation, and supports popular sovereignty while endowing significant authority to unelected bodies, particularly the judiciary.

The concept of "constitutional contradictions" highlights the internal tensions between principles that can conflict with one another, such as equality versus reservation policies or freedom of religion versus gender justice. These issues are exacerbated by shifting social dynamics, advancements in technology, and evolving moral standards, which the framers could not foresee.

Contemporary constitutional discussions reveal increasing friction among the three branches of government: legislature, executive, and judiciary. While the Constitution aims for a separation of powers, it also necessitates checks and balances that can lead to overlaps. The Supreme Court's interpretation, deemed binding under Article 141, has transformed judicial interpretation into a significant source of normative power, inciting debates on judicial activism and the legitimacy of unelected judges in shaping public policy. As public trust in the legislature and executive wanes, the judiciary's stature rises, highlighting concerns over its accountability and transparency.

Digital transformation poses additional challenges, affecting the nature of rights and governance as social media and public discourse evolve. Constitutional guarantees of free speech and privacy now operate in a landscape dominated by private tech companies, complicating the realization of constitutional ideals amid rapid societal changes.

Central to the Constitution is the phrase "We, the People of India," which emphasizes that sovereignty lies with the citizens. Yet this promise contrasts with realities of limited civic engagement, misinformation, and passive democratic participation, where citizens invoke rights without fulfilling corresponding duties. This disparity raises important issues regarding constitutional morality within institutions and society at large.

The study posits that these constitutional contradictions reflect a living legal order rather than failures. However, unresolved contradictions risk undermining democratic legitimacy and social justice. Through a doctrinal and analytical methodology, the paper explores these major constitutional tensions: equality, secularism, federalism, institutional balance, morality, technology, and citizenship within India's socio-political context. It argues that genuine constitutional progress requires both societal transformation and active citizen participation, asserting that the Constitution's vitality relies on the collective commitment of the populace.

EQUALITY AND RESERVATION: THE CONSTITUTIONAL PARADOX

The Indian Constitution presents a profound contradiction between the principles of equality and the policy of reservation, creating a complex legal and social landscape. Central to this discourse is Article 14, establishing equality before the law and equal protection, juxtaposed with Articles 15 and 16, which allow the state to enact affirmative action propositions. The coexistence of these principles has spurred ongoing debates in Indian constitutional law.

The concept of equality within the Constitution diverges from traditional liberal interpretations,

advocating not for uniformity but for differential treatment under reasonable classification¹. The founding framers, notably Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, recognized India's caste system and entrenched inequalities, viewing reservation not as an exception to equality but rather as an essential means to achieve substantive equality.²

Reports concerning constitutional provisions outline that Articles 15(4) and 16(4) enable special provisions for disadvantaged demographics, while subsequent amendments broadened reservations to educational institutions and economically weaker sections. These evolutions highlight the tension between non-discrimination and redistributive justice and raise critical questions about the implications of such reservations, particularly regarding their potential transformation into political patronage mechanisms.

Judicial interpretation has been pivotal in negotiating the issues surrounding equality and reservation. The Supreme Court's decisions, particularly the landmark case of *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, marked a decisive shift towards substantive equality, imposing limits on affirmative action while simultaneously fostering new contradictions³. Ongoing judicial scrutiny calls for quantifiable data on backwardness and representation, and recent rulings have complicated the equality-reservation paradigm further, particularly through allowing economic criteria beyond traditional caste-based considerations.

Despite constitutional assurances, representation gaps persist in gender contexts, underscoring that women remain underrepresented in various powerful roles within society. Additionally, the intersectionality of discrimination especially among Dalit and minority women highlights the inadequacy of current legal frameworks in addressing layered complexities of inequality.

Public discourse often casts reservation policies as detrimental to merit, which conflicts with a nuanced understanding of merit as influenced by social factors. This tension transcends legal doctrine, permeating societal consciousness and emphasizing the need for a more comprehensive recognition of substantive equality.

Ultimately, the constitution's struggle between equality and reservation is a reflection of deeper ideological tensions within Indian democracy, combining liberalism with communal justice principles. This dynamic requires continuous engagement, as rigid approaches can threaten the equilibrium of progressive social policies. An effective affirmative action strategy must be informed by data, account for intersectionality, and remain aligned with the broader goals of constitutional equity.

SECULARISM, PERSONAL LAWS AND UNIFORM CIVIL CODE: A CONSTITUTIONAL DILEMMA

Secularism stands as a core value within the Indian Constitution, but its application in a society characterized by diverse religions has led to ongoing contradictions. Unlike the Western model advocating a strict church-state separation, Indian secularism promotes equal respect for all faiths while allowing state intervention for social reforms that align with constitutional principles. This unique approach has

¹ *State of West Bengal v. Anwar Ali Sarkar*, AIR 1952 SC 75

² *Constituent Assembly Debates, Vol. VII, 1948–49 (Speech of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar)*.

³ *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, 1992 Supp (3) SCC 217.

instigated conflicts, particularly regarding personal laws, gender justice, and the Implementation of a Uniform Civil Code (UCC).

1. Although the term "secular" was explicitly included in the Constitution's Preamble by the Forty-Second Amendment, the concept has been inherent since the Constitution's creation. Articles 25 to 28 provide for freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practice, and propagate religion, while Article 44 urges the State to pursue a UCC for all citizens⁴. This structure portrays a constitutional paradox, allowing enforceable rights to religious freedom but placing the call for a UCC beyond judicial enforcement. Thus, the Constitution simultaneously ensures religious autonomy and aims for legal uniformity, complicating the relationship between communal norms and individual rights.
2. Family-related personal laws, which govern marriage and inheritance, are among the most debated sectors of Indian constitutional law. Rooted in religious customs, these laws often reflect patriarchal values and significantly vary across communities, leading to conflicts with constitutional equality guarantees under Articles 14, 15, and 2⁵. The Supreme Court's ruling in the *Mohd. Ahmed Khan v. Shah Bano Begum* (1985) case demonstrated the fragility of women's legal rights within the context of religious personal law. Subsequent political reactions influenced the enactment of the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986, highlighting how legal contradictions often yield to political compromises instead of principled judicial practices. Additionally, the *Shayara Bano v. Union of India* (2017) ruling, which abolished the practice of instant triple talaq, illustrated a significant assertion of constitutional supremacy, although critics argue it risks inconsistency and potential majoritarian bias⁶.
3. Constitutional morality has emerged as a key judicial principle in addressing conflicts between religious liberties and individual rights. In the *Sabarimala* case, the *Indian Young Lawyers Association v. State of Kerala*, the Supreme Court leveraged this concept to allow women's entry into the temple, emphasizing equality over established religious customs. While the ruling was hailed by civil rights advocates, it faced substantial social backlash, demonstrating the challenges of implementing judicial authority as a catalyst for social change. This situation prompts a crucial inquiry regarding whether courts should drive social reform or allow such changes to develop organically within communities. The Constitution remains ambiguous on this matter, perpetuating the friction between transformative constitutionalism and the respect for cultural diversity.
4. The UCC remains a highly debated aspiration within the Indian Constitution. Advocates assert that a UCC would enhance national unity, gender equity, and legal clarity, while opponents argue it jeopardizes religious autonomy and cultural identity, especially for minority groups. Although Article 44 is part of the Directive Principles, indicating a gradual implementation approach, political discussions often depict the UCC as an immediate necessity. Judicial references in cases like *Sarla Mudgal v. Union of India* and *Jose Paulo Coutinho v. Maria Luiza Valentina Pereira* support the UCC's desirability but stop short of

⁴ INDIA CONST. preamble.; arts. 25–28, 44; *The Constitution (Forty-Second Amendment) Act, 1976*.

⁵ INDIA CONST. arts. 14, 15 & 21.

⁶ *Shayara Bano v. Union of India*, (2017) 9 SCC 1.

compelling its enactment, reflecting an awareness of the governance dilemma between democratic legitimacy and judicial impingement.⁷

5. Emerging academic discourse cautions that an aggressive push for uniformity may inadvertently consolidate majoritarian dominance masked as equality. Should a UCC prioritize the personal law structures of the predominant community, it risks undermining genuine secularism rather than reinforcing it. Thus, the challenge lies not in choosing between secularism and pluralism, but in harmonizing them within a rights-based framework.

6. The inherent contradictions between secularism and personal laws manifest as a fundamental aspect of India's constitutional architecture. This reflects the framers' struggle to reconcile unity with diversity, reform with acceptance, and individual rights with collective traditions. Though constitutional morality provides a normative guide, its acceptance is contingent upon societal support and democratic interaction. Rather than perceiving the existing contradiction as a constitutional flaw, it could be viewed as a platform for dialogue and progressive change. A collaborative approach to reform, particularly concerning personal laws, may yield more fruitful outcomes than unilateral action by judicial or legislative bodies. The persistent tension between secularism and personal laws illustrates the evolving and dialogical nature of the Constitution.

SEPARATION OF POWERS, JUDICIAL AUTHORITY, AND ARTICLE 141: INSTITUTIONAL CONTRADICTIONS

The doctrine of separation of powers is fundamental to constitutional governance, designed to prevent authority concentration and protect liberty through checks and balances. The Indian Constitution does not implement strict separation; instead, it allows functional overlaps between the legislature, executive, and judiciary, leading to both cooperation and inherent contradictions affecting judicial authority, democratic legitimacy, and judicial precedent enforcement under Article 141.

1. Unlike the U.S. Constitution, the Indian Constitution does not explicitly establish separation of powers but rather allocates functions among three branches while allowing some encroachments for effective governance. Articles 74 and 75 allocate executive power to the Council of Ministers responsible to the legislature, while Articles 121 and 211 curb legislative discussions regarding judicial conduct. Conversely, Articles 32 and 226 empower the judiciary to review actions taken by the executive and legislature. This design indicates a choice for accountability and flexibility over strict separation, generating ambiguities regarding institutional authority limits, particularly where judicial review intersects with policymaking.

2. Judicial review has become crucial in constitutional governance, with the judiciary interpreting fundamental rights expansively and embracing the basic structure doctrine. While this activism protects individual and minority rights, it also raises concerns about undermining parliamentary sovereignty⁸. The basic structure doctrine, highlighted in *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* (1973), empowers the

⁷ *Sarla Mudgal v. Union of India*, (1995) 3 SCC 635; *Jose Paulo Coutinho v. Maria Luiza Valentina Pereira*, (2019) 9 SCC 325.

⁸ *Minerva Mills Ltd. v. Union of India*, (1980) 3 SCC 625.

judiciary to nullify constitutional amendments that threaten the constitution's essential framework, positioning judges above elected representatives and creating worries about democratic deficit and judicial overreach.⁹

3. Article 141 mandates that the Supreme Court's rulings bind all other courts, ensuring uniform legal interpretation. However, this has led to institutional friction as judicial interpretations increasingly extend into policy-making realms. The judiciary has issued binding directives on varied issues such as environmental protection and electoral transparency, which blur lines between judicial adjudication and governance, often justified by claims of executive inertia.

4. Tensions between the legislature and judiciary characterize Indian constitutional practice, with amendments aimed at overturning judicial rulings demonstrating a continuous struggle for supremacy. Recent debates around judicial appointments, particularly critiques of the collegium system, expose further contradictions, as though the judiciary argues for independence, concerns regarding transparency and accountability persist due to a lack of a constitutionally defined appointment process.¹⁰

5. The judiciary typically enjoys high public trust, perceived as less corrupt and more principled than other branches. This moral authority supports its activism but is being tested by recent controversies involving judicial delays, selective activism, and inconsistency. 'Legal morality' has gained traction in discussions about required ethical standards for judges; while courts champion constitutional morality to guide societal conduct, similar adherence to transparency by the judiciary is questioned.

6. The Indian constitutional system operates through institutional dialogues despite existing tensions, where legislative responses to judicial decisions and executive adherence to court directives help maintain constitutional equilibrium. However, vague boundary definitions raise risks of constitutional fatigue, potential legislative backlash to excessive judicial intervention, and unchecked executive power threatening civil liberties. Striking a balance that respects institutional roles without compromising constitutional values remains challenging.

7. The contradictions in India's separation of powers framework reflect the Constitution's effort to balance governance efficacy with rights protection. While Article 141 is vital for legal consistency, its application must observe the limits of judicial authority and uphold democratic accountability. Hence, a focus on constitutional dialogue, ethical conduct, and respect for boundaries among institutions is crucial to maintain legitimacy across all three branches. The current tension between judicial authority and democratic governance is a significant constitutional contradiction in India.

TECHNOLOGY, SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONSTITUTIONAL LAG: NEW AGE CONTRADICTIONS

The rapid advancement of digital technology and social media platforms has introduced profound constitutional contradictions not anticipated by the framers of the Indian Constitution. Central

⁹ *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala*, (1973) 4 SCC 225.

¹⁰ *Supreme Court Advocates-on-Record Ass'n v. Union of India*, (2016) 5 SCC 1 (NJAC case).

constitutional values Freedom of speech, privacy, dignity, and due process remain significant, yet their implementation in a digital context has become increasingly complex, leading to what is termed "constitutional lag." This lag poses significant challenges to governance, rights protection, and democratic participation.

1. Article 19(1)(a) protects freedom of speech and expression, subject to reasonable restrictions, traditionally exercised through print media and public forums. The rise of social media has transformed speech into instantaneous and worldwide discourse, intensifying contradictions between free expression and regulation. While social media enables dissent and democratic participation, it also becomes a platform for misinformation and hate speech. State efforts to regulate this content raise concerns over censorship and executive overreach, challenging the essence of free speech amid the necessity for regulation.¹¹
2. The digital age has seen significant power consolidation among private corporations, whose content moderation and governance policies significantly influence public discourse. These corporations, often unelected and unaccountable to constitutional standards, wield quasi-public power without adhering to corresponding rights obligations, illustrating a constitutional contradiction between democratic ideals and corporate influence over speech.
3. The Supreme Court's recognition of the right to privacy as a fundamental right has been challenged by the increasing scope of digital surveillance and data collection¹². The interplay between state surveillance and private data harvesting raises critical questions about consent and accountability, revealing tensions in the state's dual role as protector of rights and as a consumer of surveillance technologies.¹³
4. From Secondary to Primary Source: Technological advancements have led to a shift in evidentiary standards, with digital evidence now often regarded as primary in legal proceedings. This evolution exposes conflicts between traditional safeguards and modern investigative practices, necessitating adaptations in the interpretation of constitutional commitments to fair trial and due process amid emerging digital vulnerabilities.
5. The judiciary faces challenges in adjudicating cases involving online speech, harassment, and reputation. Judicial interventions aim to uphold dignity and order but risk imposing paternalistic standards on personal expression¹⁴. The limited judicial capacity to address rapidly evolving technologies highlights tensions between constitutional authority and enforcement in digital contexts.
6. The failure to address digital governance within the constitutional framework emphasizes the necessity for adaptive interpretation and innovation. While constitutional amendments are challenging, balancing judicial creativity with legislative action is vital to address new challenges without risking institutional overreach or exacerbating constitutional delays.

¹¹ *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India*, (2015) 5 SCC 1.

¹² *K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India*, (2017) 10 SCC 1.

¹³ *Justice B.N. Srikrishna Committee Report on Data Protection* (2018).

¹⁴ *Subramanian Swamy v. Union of India*, (2016) 7 SCC 221 (criminal defamation).

7. The interplay between constitutional values and technological change presents significant contemporary challenges. Social media can enhance democratic participation while simultaneously distorting it. Digital evidence can facilitate truth-seeking yet complicates due process. Furthermore, corporate authority can broaden expressive freedoms but undermine accountability. These contradictions necessitate a rethinking of constitutional governance focused on transparency, proportionality, and participatory regulation to ensure the Constitution remains relevant in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

The Indian Constitution stands out as a progressive legal document, embodying a tension between various ideals, including equality and reservation, secularism and personal laws, and judicial authority versus democratic legitimacy. This study highlights that such contradictions are integral to its structure and are not mere flaws but essential features of its constitutional design.

1. The Constitution attempts to reconcile clashing values in a diverse society marked by historical injustices and inequality. It combines liberal principles, like Fundamental Rights which safeguard individual freedoms, with transformative aspirations found in Directive Principles aimed at social change. This balance creates inevitable tensions, showcasing its adaptive nature. The paper posits that these contradictions serve as mechanisms for ongoing societal dialogue and adaptation, contrary to a rigid, overly consistent constitutional framework that could become obsolete.

2. Guardian, Not Governor: The judiciary has a crucial role in managing these constitutional contradictions, often intervening where legislative or executive actions fall short. While courts uphold democratic values and protect marginalized communities, their legitimacy is contingent upon transparency and ethical behavior. Excessive judicial involvement can undermine democracy, indicating the need for the judiciary to act as a guardian of constitutional principles rather than an overreaching governor, necessitating stronger accountability and ethical standards.

3. The digital era exacerbates existing constitutional contradictions, significantly affecting free speech, privacy rights, and civic participation. Courts and legislators struggle to adapt to these rapid technological shifts, indicating that constitutional responsibility goes beyond institutional frameworks. With social media influencing public discourse, citizens have a role in either upholding or undermining constitutional values. Thus, a more engaged citizenry is essential, as responsibility for maintaining democracy lies with the populace rather than solely with governments or institutions.

4. True constitutionalism demands active public involvement that transcends mere electoral participation. Enhancing civic education and promoting constitutional literacy are vital for aligning constitutional ideals with societal realities. The study acknowledges persistent societal contradictions such as gender inequality and religious intolerance that legal reforms alone cannot rectify. To fulfill constitutional promises, there must be a focus on social transformation, youth involvement, and inclusive representation, ensuring that the Constitution's principles resonate across various societal sectors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Adopt a Principled Approach to Constitutional Contradictions: Institutions should embrace contradictions and resolve them through dialogue instead of confrontation.
2. Strengthen Judicial Ethics and Accountability: Ensure transparency in appointment processes, provide reasoned judgments, and practice ethical self-regulation to maintain judicial legitimacy.
3. Promote Inclusive and Consultative Legal Reform: Legal reforms, especially in personal laws and digital governance, should be participatory and mindful of pluralism.
4. Develop a Rights-Based Digital Constitutional Framework: There is an urgent need for clear legislation on data protection, platform accountability, and digital evidence.
5. Enhance Civic and Constitutional Education: Empower citizens with knowledge of constitutional values to support democratic resilience.

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