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Expanding Horizons of Fundamental Rights in India: A Judicial Journey through Transformative Constitutionalism

Dr. Rang Nath Singh ¹, Dr. Santosh Kumar ^{2*}

¹ Principal, Satyendra Chandra Guria Law College, Kashipur, US Nagar, Uttarakhand, India

² Advocate, High Court of Judicature at Allahabad, India

* Corresponding Author: Dr. Santosh Kumar

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Abstract

The Constitution of India is often hailed as a living and organic document, one that evolves with the changing needs and aspirations of society. At its heart lies Part III, which enshrines the Fundamental Rights—an essential component that protects individuals from arbitrary state action and affirms their intrinsic dignity, equality, and liberty. These rights not only form the bedrock of Indian democracy but also serve as a moral compass for governance and law-making. The Constitution, thus, acts as both a shield against state excesses and a framework for individual empowerment in a pluralistic society. Over the decades, the Supreme Court of India and High Courts have assumed the role of custodians of these rights, breathing life into the text through progressive and purposive interpretation. This dynamic process has significantly broadened the meaning and application of rights, ensuring their continued relevance in the face of technological advances, economic inequalities, social exclusion, and political challenges. From interpreting the “right to life” under Article 21 as encompassing the right to live with dignity to recognizing emerging rights such as digital privacy and environmental protection, the judiciary has consistently reaffirmed the Constitution’s transformative potential.

This paper seeks to explore the constitutional journey of Fundamental Rights in India through the theoretical lens of transformative constitutionalism, which views the Constitution as a tool for meaningful social change and the advancement of human dignity. It delves into the philosophical underpinnings of rights jurisprudence and critically examines landmark judicial pronouncements that have redefined the contours of these rights in contemporary India. By tracing this evolution, the paper not only highlights the judiciary’s proactive role but also reflects on the institutional, political, and societal factors that influence the realization of constitutional promises. In doing so, the study aims to underscore the continuing relevance of Fundamental Rights in modern India and the importance of an engaged and responsive constitutional culture. The paper ultimately emphasizes that while courts have been instrumental in expanding the horizons of individual freedoms, the true potential of these rights can only be realized through synergistic action by all branches of the state, active civil society participation, and widespread public awareness.

Keywords: Fundamental Rights, Indian Constitution, Judicial Interpretation, Transformative Constitutionalism, Social Justice

1. Introduction

The Constitution of India, which came into force on January 26, 1950, is widely revered as a visionary and transformative document that laid the foundation for the world's largest democracy. Among its most significant features is the comprehensive enumeration of Fundamental Rights under Part III, which draws inspiration from the American Bill of Rights and international human rights instruments.

These rights were designed not merely as guarantees against state arbitrariness but as essential safeguards to ensure the liberty, equality, dignity, and personal freedoms of all individuals, regardless of caste, creed, religion, gender, or socio-economic background.

While the text of the Constitution provides a foundational framework, it is the role of the Indian judiciary—particularly the Supreme Court—that has given real meaning and substance to these rights. Over the decades, the Court has engaged in a dynamic and purposive interpretation of the Constitution, expanding the scope and content of Fundamental Rights in response to changing societal needs and emerging global human rights norms. This evolutionary process, often referred to as transformative constitutionalism, envisions the Constitution not as a static legal instrument but as a living document capable of adapting to contemporary challenges and fostering a just social order. Through its landmark rulings, the judiciary has elevated the Constitution into a potent tool for advancing socio-economic justice, protecting the marginalized, and deepening democratic values. This paper seeks to examine the evolution and expansion of Fundamental Rights in India, emphasizing the critical role of judicial activism and constitutional interpretation in transforming the rights discourse. It explores how the Indian Constitution, through its interpretative journey, has evolved from a set of formal rights into a vehicle for substantive justice and societal transformation.

2. Fundamental Rights: Foundation of the Constitution

The Fundamental Rights enshrined in the Indian Constitution were significantly influenced by international and comparative legal frameworks, notably the American Bill of Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 1948. The framers of the Constitution recognized the importance of ensuring a set of inalienable rights for all individuals to establish a just, democratic, and egalitarian society. Accordingly, Articles 12 to 35 in Part III of the Constitution provide a comprehensive charter of Fundamental Rights that aim to protect individual liberty, promote equality, and secure human dignity.

These rights are categorized into six broad groups:

Right to Equality (Articles 14–18): This guarantees equality before the law, equal protection of laws, prohibition of discrimination, and equal access to public employment and the abolition of untouchability and titles. It lays the cornerstone of the constitutional promise of fairness and non-discrimination.

Right to Freedom (Articles 19–22): These provisions ensure freedom of speech and expression, assembly, association, movement, residence, and profession. They also protect individuals from arbitrary arrest and guarantee personal liberty through due process.

Right against Exploitation (Articles 23–24): These prohibit human trafficking, forced labour, and child labour, reflecting the Constitution's commitment to human dignity and labour rights.

Right to Freedom of Religion (Articles 25–28): These articles protect the right to freely profess, practice, and propagate religion, and ensure the secular nature of the Indian state by barring religious instruction in state-funded institutions.

Cultural and Educational Rights (Articles 29–30): These safeguard the rights of minorities to preserve their language, script, and culture, and to establish and administer

educational institutions of their choice.

Right to Constitutional Remedies (Article 32): Often referred to as the “heart and soul of the Constitution” by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, this article empowers individuals to directly approach the Supreme Court for the enforcement of Fundamental Rights through writs such as habeas corpus, mandamus, prohibition, quo warranto, and certiorari.

However, these rights are not absolute in nature. The Constitution permits the State to impose reasonable restrictions on the exercise of these rights in the interest of sovereignty, public order, decency, morality, security of the state, and other legitimate aims. This inherently creates a delicate balance between individual freedoms and collective societal interests, a balance that is maintained through judicial interpretation and constitutional adjudication. The judiciary, particularly the Supreme Court of India, plays a pivotal role in determining the scope and limitations of these rights. Through doctrines such as proportionality, due process, and the basic structure doctrine, the courts have consistently acted as guardians of the Constitution, ensuring that the Fundamental Rights evolve with changing societal needs and contemporary challenges. This judicial oversight has been crucial in transforming the Fundamental Rights from mere textual guarantees into living rights that are central to India's democratic and constitutional ethos.

3. Transformative Constitutionalism: Concept and Relevance

Transformative constitutionalism refers to the understanding and application of constitutional law as a dynamic and progressive instrument for initiating deep and substantive social transformation. Unlike a rigid or merely procedural view of the Constitution, transformative constitutionalism treats it as a living document—one that evolves over time and adapts to contemporary socio-political realities. It aims not only to regulate power but to dismantle deeply entrenched systems of oppression and inequality, thereby reshaping societal values in line with constitutional ideals such as justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity.

At its core, transformative constitutionalism envisions the Constitution as a catalyst for correcting historical injustices, social hierarchies, and economic disparities. It places the dignity of the individual and the empowerment of the marginalized at the heart of constitutional governance. This approach aligns with the aspirational nature of the Indian Constitution, particularly as reflected in the Preamble, Fundamental Rights (Part III), and Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV).

In the Indian context, transformative constitutionalism has found powerful expression through judicial interpretation. The Indian judiciary, particularly the Supreme Court, has played a key role in expanding the scope of Fundamental Rights to address socio-economic inequalities and promote inclusive justice. This has been evident in several landmark judgments where the Court has reinterpreted constitutional provisions in a progressive light. For example, in *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* (1973), the Court introduced the Basic Structure Doctrine, laying the foundation for a constitutional morality that limits arbitrary legislative power. Similarly, in *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India* (1978), the Court redefined personal liberty under Article 21, interpreting it to include procedural fairness and due process of law.

Further, in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (2018), the

Court struck down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, thereby recognizing the constitutional rights of the LGBTQ+ community and reaffirming the Constitution's transformative potential to accommodate changing social values. In *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) v. Union of India* (2017), the recognition of the right to privacy as a Fundamental Right again underscored the evolving nature of constitutional interpretation in response to contemporary digital and technological realities.

Transformative constitutionalism in India also means a proactive judiciary, which goes beyond mere dispute resolution and becomes an agent of social justice. Through public interest litigation (PIL) and judicial activism, the courts have addressed issues like bonded labour, environmental degradation, rights of prisoners, education, health, gender equality, and minority rights—often giving voice to the voiceless.

Thus, transformative constitutionalism in India signifies an ongoing project of nation-building. It reimagines the Constitution not as a static rulebook but as a living charter of rights and duties that actively shapes and reshapes society toward achieving substantive democracy and inclusive governance. It is a reminder that constitutional interpretation is not merely about legality, but about envisioning and achieving a more just and equitable society.

4. Judicial Interpretation and Expanding Rights

The Indian judiciary has played an indispensable role in the expansion and dynamic interpretation of Fundamental Rights, gradually transforming them from textual guarantees to powerful tools for achieving social justice and individual liberty. Through landmark judgments, the Supreme Court of India has not only broadened the scope of these rights but also adapted them to the needs of a modern, democratic society. Some of the most significant cases in this constitutional journey include:

A.K. Gopalan v. State of Madras (1950): This was one of the earliest cases on the interpretation of Article 21 (Protection of life and personal liberty). The Supreme Court, in a rather restrictive manner, held that "procedure established by law" meant any procedure enacted by the legislature, even if it was arbitrary or unjust. The Court refused to read Fundamental Rights as interconnected, treating each article in isolation. This decision reflected a formalistic and literal approach to constitutional interpretation.

Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India (1978): This case marked a turning point in the interpretation of Article 21. The Court overruled the narrow view in *A.K. Gopalan* and held that the "procedure established by law" must be "just, fair and reasonable," thus infusing Article 21 with the principles of natural justice. Furthermore, it established that Fundamental Rights are not watertight compartments, but are interrelated and must be read in a harmonious and expansive manner. This judgment ushered in an era of judicial activism and transformative constitutionalism.

Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala (1973): Perhaps the most celebrated constitutional judgment in India, this case introduced the Basic Structure Doctrine, which asserted that while Parliament has wide powers to amend the Constitution under Article 368, it cannot alter or destroy the 'basic structure' of the Constitution, which includes Fundamental Rights, the rule of law, the principle of separation of powers, and judicial review. This judgment established an essential

safeguard against authoritarianism and protected the inalienability of Fundamental Rights.

Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) v. Union of India (2017): In this landmark case, a nine-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court unanimously held that the Right to Privacy is an intrinsic part of the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21. This decision overturned earlier rulings and set a constitutional foundation for protecting citizens in the digital age, especially in the context of surveillance, data protection, and informational autonomy. It further expanded the substantive dimension of liberty in India.

Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India (2018): This judgment decriminalized consensual homosexual relations by reading down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. The Supreme Court emphasized that the right to sexual orientation, privacy, and dignity are fundamental to individual identity and fall within the scope of Articles 14, 15, 19, and 21. The Court's approach was informed by the values of human dignity, equality, and inclusion, affirming that the Constitution is a living document capable of evolving with societal change.

These progressive rulings reflect the judiciary's commitment to interpreting the Constitution in light of contemporary realities, and to ensuring that Fundamental Rights remain vibrant, inclusive, and protective of individual autonomy and human dignity. Through these judgments, the Indian courts have reaffirmed the transformative power of the Constitution and their role as guardians of democratic values and civil liberties.

5. Emerging Dimensions of Fundamental Rights

Over the years, the Indian judiciary has significantly broadened the scope of Article 21 of the Constitution, which originally stated: "No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law." While the wording appears simple, the judiciary has adopted a purposive and expansive interpretation, infusing the article with a wide range of substantive rights necessary for living a life with dignity. This approach exemplifies the essence of transformative constitutionalism, wherein courts interpret the Constitution not merely based on textual limits, but on its spirit, purpose, and evolving societal needs.

Some of the most notable rights judicially read into Article 21 include:

Right to a Clean and Healthy Environment: The Supreme Court has held in cases such as *Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar* (1991) and *M.C. Mehta v. Union of India* (various cases) that the right to life includes the right to live in a pollution-free environment. Environmental degradation, if unchecked, violates the right to life and health, making environmental protection a constitutional imperative. Article 21 has thus been interpreted as encompassing ecological and environmental concerns.

Right to Livelihood: In *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation* (1985), the Court recognized that the right to livelihood is an integral part of the right to life. The judgment emphasized that the deprivation of livelihood would not only take away a person's means of survival but would also strip them of dignity. Therefore, eviction of pavement dwellers without providing alternate accommodation was held to violate Article 21.

Right to Education: Initially read into Article 21 by judicial interpretation in cases like *Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka* (1992) and *Unni Krishnan v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (1993),

the right to education was later given explicit constitutional backing through the 86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002, which inserted Article 21A—guaranteeing free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of 6 and 14 as a Fundamental Right.

Right to Privacy in the Digital Age: As reaffirmed in the Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) v. Union of India (2017) judgment, the right to privacy is a fundamental right under Article 21. This decision was crucial in a rapidly digitizing world, where personal data, surveillance, and informational autonomy have become central concerns. The judgment extended the umbrella of liberty to include digital rights, data protection, bodily autonomy, and decisional freedom in personal matters.

Right to Die with Dignity (Passive Euthanasia): In Common Cause v. Union of India (2018), the Supreme Court held that the right to live with dignity also includes the right to die with dignity, thereby permitting passive euthanasia under strict guidelines. This ruling acknowledged an individual's autonomy over the end of life decisions and further humanized the interpretation of Article 21.

These judicial innovations underscore how Article 21 has become the heart of the Indian Constitution, representing not just the right to exist, but to live with dignity, choice, and equality. The shift from a narrow, textual reading to a purposive, value-oriented interpretation reflects the judiciary's commitment to upholding the transformative vision of the Constitution. This dynamic interpretation ensures that Fundamental Rights remain responsive to emerging societal challenges and continue to protect human dignity in a meaningful and evolving manner.

6. Challenges and Criticisms

While the Indian judiciary has played a transformative role in expanding the scope of Fundamental Rights, the path of constitutional evolution is not without its challenges and criticisms. The progressive jurisprudence shaped by the courts has brought about significant societal reforms, but several structural and conceptual concerns continue to persist.

Judicial Overreach vs. Judicial Activism: A key issue in contemporary constitutional discourse is the fine line between judicial activism and judicial overreach. While activism is praised when courts step in to protect rights and promote justice, especially in the face of legislative or executive inaction, overreach is criticized when the judiciary encroaches upon the domain of policymaking. The expansion of Fundamental Rights often invites debate on whether courts are acting as constitutional guardians or exceeding their mandate by assuming legislative functions.

Implementation Gaps in Rights Jurisprudence: Although the judiciary has read several progressive rights into the Constitution, the actual implementation of these rights on the ground remains inadequate. For instance, despite the recognition of the right to education and the right to a clean environment, systemic issues such as poor infrastructure, bureaucratic apathy, and lack of political will hinder effective enforcement. This gap between rights recognition and realization continues to be a significant hurdle in the fulfilment of constitutional promises.

Balancing National Security and Individual Rights: In a global context of rising terrorism, digital surveillance, and cyber threats, states often invoke national security to justify restrictions on individual rights. The Indian judiciary is

frequently called upon to strike a balance between ensuring public order and protecting civil liberties. Cases involving internet shutdowns, preventive detention laws, and sedition charges highlight the tension between state interests and personal freedoms. The challenge lies in ensuring that security concerns do not become a pretext for stifling dissent or curtailing fundamental freedoms.

Need for Uniform Application across States: The enforcement of fundamental rights often varies significantly across different states due to socio-economic disparities, political influences, and administrative inefficiencies. For instance, the implementation of Article 21A (Right to Education) or Article 14 (Right to Equality) differs widely depending on regional governance and local policies. This lack of uniformity undermines the egalitarian vision of the Constitution and affects marginalized communities disproportionately.

Furthermore, critics argue that judicial expansion of rights by unelected judges may potentially dilute the democratic mandate, as such actions bypass the legislature, which is directly accountable to the people. However, proponents of judicial activism counter this by emphasizing the importance of constitutional morality—the principle that the judiciary must uphold the core values of justice, equality, and liberty even when majoritarian impulses threaten them. In landmark judgments like Navtej Singh Johar and Sabarimala, the courts have intervened to ensure that constitutional principles prevail over social prejudice and political convenience.

In conclusion, while the judiciary's role in interpreting and expanding Fundamental Rights is commendable, the sustainability of transformative constitutionalism depends on institutional checks and balances, inter-institutional cooperation, and robust implementation mechanisms. Bridging the gap between constitutional ideals and socio-political realities remains the key challenge in realizing the true spirit of Fundamental Rights in India.

7. Conclusion

The journey of Fundamental Rights in India has been a dynamic and evolving one, shaped by the interplay of constitutional mandates and judicial vision. From their inception, these rights were envisioned not merely as legal guarantees, but as instruments to uplift individuals and empower them to participate meaningfully in a democratic society. Over time, this vision has been invigorated through the lens of transformative constitutionalism, which perceives the Constitution as a living document—capable of adapting to the aspirations of a progressive, pluralistic, and inclusive society. Through landmark judgments, the judiciary has consistently upheld and expanded the meaning of rights to meet the challenges of the times. Whether it is the recognition of the right to privacy in a digital era, the right to education, or the decriminalization of consensual sexual conduct, courts have not hesitated to invoke constitutional morality and universal human dignity to reinterpret the constitutional text in a purposive manner. This interpretative activism has made the Constitution a dynamic force for social transformation, bridging historical inequities and enabling the assertion of rights by the most vulnerable.

However, the task of realizing the full potential of Fundamental Rights does not rest solely with the judiciary. Judicial pronouncements, no matter how progressive, require active implementation by the executive and supportive legislation from the legislature. The translation of rights from

courtrooms into the lived realities of citizens hinges upon political will, administrative efficiency, and policy coherence. Moreover, civil society organizations play a crucial role in mobilizing public opinion, monitoring state accountability, and advocating for rights-based frameworks, especially for marginalized groups. Additionally¹, public awareness and legal literacy are indispensable for making rights meaningful. A constitutionally empowered citizenry that is aware of its entitlements is more likely to demand enforcement and participate constructively in democratic processes. Educational initiatives, public campaigns, and access to legal aid can significantly contribute to strengthening the culture of rights in India.

In essence, while the judiciary has played a pioneering role in breathing life into Fundamental Rights, the path to true constitutional realization requires a collaborative effort—an enduring commitment from all arms of the state, support from civil society, and an engaged, informed public. Only then can the promises of justice, liberty, equality, and dignity, enshrined in the Constitution, be fully actualized for every citizen of India.

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