

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LEGAL RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS



Open Access, Refereed Journal Multi-Disciplinary
Peer Reviewed

www.ijlra.com

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RIGHT TO EQUALITY IN INDIA: CONSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT AND PRACTICAL REALITIES

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INTRODUCTION

“Equality is not in regarding different things. Similarly, equality is in regarding different things differently”. The word “equality” is derived from a French word “equality” which means sameness of amount or of shape or of status. Equality is a plank of social, economic and political equality which is basically an inbuilt ingredient that our Indian Constitution speaks about. It ensures that all citizens within our country enjoy certain rights in every aspect such as economic, political and social. In our constitution, it is enshrined that each of its citizens will be treated equally, without any discrimination on the basis of gender/sex, religion/caste/race/place of birth. Right to equality is mentioned under articles 14-18 of the Indian constitution.

This right in short states that the state shall not discriminate anyone, all are equal before the law and shall get equal protection of laws in the territory of India. This right to equality is a part of fundamental rights in part 3 of our constitution. The question is that what are the challenges, limitations, applications, and other issues related to the same that comes in the way of achieving this principal of equality? All these questions will be answered in this paper.

The legal issues regarding the topic which will be discussed in this paper are as follows;

1. The in-depth analysis of the right to equality.
2. The challenges to implementation of right to equality
3. Steps taken by the government to enhance the right to equality.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To conduct an in-depth study of the right to equality in the Indian constitution.
2. To identify the challenges in implementation of right to equality.
3. To discuss some government initiatives for enhancing right to equality and their efficiency.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the steps taken by government to implement the right to equality effectively in the country? Are the steps taken relevant?
2. What are the challenges in the implementation of this right.

HYPOTHESIS

A hypothesis can be defined as a clear, testable and falsifiable statements which generally predicts relationship between different variables of the research. Hypothesis plays a very crucial role in research as it is the foundation and research is conducted according to it. Hence my hypothesis of this research is as follows;

1. Expected challenges for right to equality includes discrimination, prejudice, stereotypes, inequalities existing in the society.
2. Another expected outcome may be that though there is a provision for equality in the constitution but there is no much difference in application.
3. The government initiatives have played a significant role in promoting equality but still inequalities and gaps persist.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Alexander's work- 1948¹ - on "equality as a fundamental right in India" He effectively offers an insight into the origin of the concept fundamental rights in which he tracks the American and the French Revolution highlighting how these movements led to the evolution of fundamental rights by challenging the enhanced privileges provided to elite people. However, though Alexander focused on the western examples but he provided a limited context on how this idea was adopted to the Indian context, like a deeper understanding of the exploration of Indian struggle for equality and its unique challenges etc. Alexander examines the limitations of the government of India Act 1935 and the Simon commissions reluctance to include explicit fundamental rights, is a great examination. He also talks about the legislative obstacles faced in India for incorporating equality in the Indian constitution. He also tells Congress Party's vision of equality which moved beyond mere legal equality to include social and economic dimensions as well. However there could be a more detailed examination of the

¹ P. C. Alexander, Equality as a fundamental right in India, 9 THE INDIAN JOURNAL OF POLITICAL SCIENCE [IJPS] 54-58 [1948]

practical and legal challenges faced by the country in the same. Further Alexander also emphasized on the application of the right to equality on the marginalized groups in India and also talks about the judicial enforcement of the right to equality. Though he talked about the same but He did not talk about the challenges in the implementation of this right in the Indian society. Alexander talks about the need for economic equality but does not go deeper into it. The whole article talks about the ethical dimensions of equality but does not talk about the moral responsibilities of the society and the state in ensuring such equality. However, this work by Alexander is a significant work for understanding the role of equality as a fundamental right in India through its comparative and historical analysis.

2. 2020 ² - This paper mainly focuses on the importance of article 14 of the Indian constitution which deals with the right to equality. the right to equality is considered to be a basic feature of the Constitution of India. It states about the significance of the article in safeguarding equality and justice in society. This paper effectively connects with article 14 the broader theoretical concepts of equality. It keeps the Indian Legal Principles in a global context by including some international standards like the universal declaration of human rights (UDHR) which helps us to understand the importance of the same in a global context. The paper could in a better way explain the gap between the theoretical aspects of equality and the practical implementation in India Instead of just explaining the theoretical concepts of equality. This paper also includes landmark cases which enriches the analysis of article 14. This paper effectively communicates us the difference between two concepts which are equality before law and equal protection of law which provides a conceptual clarity. Though landmark cases are discussed well here but a deeper understanding of the cases could provide a clear understanding of how court solve complex issues related to article 14. This paper also tells us about the exceptions to write to equality such as the immunities granted to certain authorities, Provisions that allow for differential treatment etc. However more critical analysis of these exceptions could add an in dept analysis. It while concluding Rightly recognizes the importance of legal aid and equal access to justice. However, it could also suggest some recommendations for the implementation of article 14 and its exceptions. Though this is very informative but it could also add some real-life

² Nikhil Gangappa Mantur, Right to equality: it is a basic feature of our constitution, 10 ACCLAIMS [May 2020]

challenges in the implementation of this right. However, this work serves as a great work for the analysis of right to equality in India.

3. 2018³ – this paper starts by stating the evolution of the idea of equality through philosophical and historical school. It contrasts the idea of equality given by the early Greek school including Aristotle and Plato and another given by the Stoics, that made equality a complex idea which is blend of Philosophy and practicality. These two schools of thought played an important role in knowing how the idea of equality have evolved. The inclusion of Greek Philosophers gave a convincing historical perspective by including a wide range of thinkers and eras. But in this there is a lack of how these historical perspectives directly influenced the modern legal system. This paper also mentions the different interpretations and definitions of equality which helped us to understand the multifaceted nature of equality which ranged from legal to social dimensions That helped us to understand the complexity of the concept. This also includes contemporary as well as historical definitions. It would have been more helpful if there would have been similarities and differences between these definitions. This paper also specifies the conditions which are necessary for achieving equality like not providing special privileges to people, Giving opportunities for personal development etc. These conditions are applicable to historical as well as modern context which is great aspect. However, A bit practical Aspect of the same could be added for a better understanding. It also tells us about the different categorization of equality including economic, political, social, natural and legal equality Which are well explained through practical implications. However, this does not include how sometimes these different kinds of equality can overlap in practice. It also tells the provision of right to equality in Indian Constitution and its detailed analysis and challenges. However, this lacks some case studies. This paper talks about the gap between the constitutional guarantees and real-life implementation by discussing about the challenges towards the implementation of right to equality.

RIGHT TO EQUALITY

Article 14; RIGHT TO EQUALITY

This article states that “the state shall not deny to any person equality before law or equal protection of law in the territory of India”. This right is given to the citizens, aliens who are the

³ Dr. B. R. Mourya, The history of the right to equality: an analytical study, 5 AD VALOREM- JOURNAL OF LAW [2018]

citizens of other countries and also to legal persons.

The principle of equality before law states that “each and every person is equally subjected to the law of the land and no person is above the law”. It is of the British origin. On the other hand, another principle of equal protection of laws is taken from the American Constitution. Equal protection of laws means that each and every person should be subject to same law in same circumstance with same liabilities and privileges. Or in other words, Likes should be treated alike without any discrimination. One difference between equality before law and equal protection of law is that the former is a minus and the latter is a plus. Both these concepts achieve equality in legal status, opportunity and justice.

Another principal embodied in this article is the rule of law. This principle was evolved by A.V. Dicey, according to him “rule of law has three elements, absence of arbitrary powers or supremacy of law, equality before law and the primacy of the rights of individuals”. A point which is essential to note is that the supreme court has held that rule of law is a part of the basic structure of our constitution. Another important point to note is that the rule of law in India consist of only the two components.

Now there are also some exceptions to the rule of equality before law;

1. Under article 361 the president and the governor get certain immunities like no process of arrest or imprisonment shall be instituted against neither of them when they are at office, no criminal proceedings shall be continued or instituted against either of them when they are in term of office etc.
2. According to article 105 no person of the parliament or legislative assembly is liable in any proceeding regarding any words spoken or any vote given in the parliament or legislative assembly.
3. Foreign sovereigns or rulers, diplomats and ambassadors are immune from civil and criminal proceedings.

LANDMARK JUDGEMENTS

1. NATIONAL LEGAL SERVICE AUTHORITY V. UNION OF INDIA 2014 –

It was seen that the transgender people were subject to extreme discrimination in various aspects of their life, the national legal service authority filed a case to achieve gender equality and to end the discrimination. It was held that the article 14 of the

constitution that talks about the right to equality, is gender neutral and says “all persons” so this right would also extend to transgender persons.

2. E.P. ROYAPPA V. STATE OF TAMIL NADU 1974

This case expanded the scope of article 14 by introducing a test named the authority test. Justice Bhagwati ruled that the guarantee of equality under this article includes the guarantee against state’s arbitrariness.

3. AIR INDIA V. NARGESH MEERZA 1978

In this case the arbitrary rules of the Air India company were challenged. These include the retirement of the female flight attendant on reaching 35 years of age, upon her marriage or upon her first pregnancy. The court stated that these rules are only for the female and not for the male which is against article 14 and so these rules were struck down.

4. INDIAN YOUNG LAWYERS ASSOCIATION V. STATE OF KERALA 20056

With a 4:1 majority judgement the supreme court held the restriction upon the women from age group of 10-50 years, for not to enter into the temple to be unconstitutional and against article 14 as being against right to equality. Further it also passed directions for the safety of women entering into the temple.

Article 15; RIGHT AGAINST DISCRMINATION

It is stated in the article that “the state shall not discriminate any citizen only on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth or anyone. This is with respect to discrimination prohibited by the state, only. the second proviso to Article 15(2), providing that “no citizen shall, be Subject of any disability, condition or restriction regarding access to”. This rule is applied to private person and state.

The rule of non-discrimination also has certain exceptions which are;

1. The state is empowered to make special provisions for the empowerment of the women and children. Like reservations are done in parliament for women and children have right to education.
2. The state can make special provisions for the betterment of socially and economically backward classes schedule tribe and scheduled caste. Like reservations in educational institutions, scholarships for fee etc.
3. The state can make special provisions for the advancement of the economically weaker section of society

Landmark cases

1. STATE OF MADRAS V. CHAMPAKAM DORAIRAJAN

His case was an important milestone as it announced the reservation policy in clause 4 of this article. This case established the principle of reasonable classification, that is to say active participation and reservation in substance of advancement of socially and educationally backward classes but not solely on casteism or communalism.

2. RAJENDRA V. STATE OF MADRAS 1968

It was held that if a caste as a whole is economically and socially backward then the reservation for the same under article 15[4] will not be unconstitutional.

Article 16; EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY IN CASE OF PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT

This article states that the state shall give every citizen equal opportunity in cases of public appointment and employment. That there shall be no discrimination among citizens only on the grounds of religion, race, castes or sex and that all can now hold a public employment post, office etc. Similarly, this also has provision for the backward classes that is, the state may make any provisions in favour of the schedule-caste and scheduled-tribes who are not adequately represented in public services, so that adequate representation should be there. The provisions for reservation in this article also extends to the economically weaker section of society. The point to note here is that this article does not guarantee the right to employment to the citizens instead it guarantees the right to equal opportunity in case there are vacancies available in public employment. this also applies to promotions and terminations in case of state employment. this article applies only to those people who are either working in a post in public employment or have applied for the same.

The parliament enacted in 1995 the 77th constitutional amendment act which added clause 16[4A] and allowed the parliament to make provisions for the reservation of promotion post for SC and ST which in turn was totally opposite to the decision given in the landmark judgement of INDRA SAWHNEY V. UNION OF INDIA. Later 16[4B] was added by the 81st constitutional amendment act 2000.

LANDMARK JUDGEMENT

1. BALAJI V. STATE OF NYSORE 1963

In this case the court held that caste cannot be sole criteria for determining the backwardness of a community instead this can include their poverty, place of residence

etc.

2. INDRA SAWHNEY V. UNION OF INDIA 1993

It is a landmark judgement related to this article. In this case the supreme court met with the challenge of carry forward reservations. It has its roots in the second backward classes committee headed by B.P. Mandal, in its report it recommended 27% reservation for the OBC and 22.5% for the SC and ST. but the government acted on the same a decade later and reserved vacancies of 27% for the educationally and socially backward classes which is to be filled by direct recruitment. Indra Sawhney challenged this extension of reservation on the basis that it violates the right of equality of opportunity in the constitution, he also argued that the caste was not a reliable indicator of backwardness in reservations.

The supreme court upheld that the caste was an accepted as an indicator of backwardness in cases of reservations thus the extension of reservations for OBC in central government services was implemented in 1992 reserving 27% seats for them. Though this was accepted by the supreme court but was denied by some states. The case was reopened in 1999 and the reservation was extended to SC and ST. another important point this case highlighted was that the reservations in this article does not apply to promotions. Later this ruling was overruled by passing the 77th constitutional amendment act 1995.

CHALLENGES TO RIGHT TO EQUALITY

1. ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

The disparities in economic spheres is a major challenge in achieving equality in India. There is a huge difference between rich and poor. As the poor are not able to access the education, healthcare, so they are unable to be equal with other people.

2. SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Some groups are often excluded from the society like the Dalits, Adivasis etc. who hence are unable to access the equal opportunities hence leading to lack of equality.

3. CASTE SYSTEM

The caste system prevailing in the society causes a hierarchical difference between different Varnas like the Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishyas and Shudras, that leads to them getting unequal opportunities in the society, being discriminated on the basis of caste that causes inequality and acts as a huge challenge.

4. GENDER INEQUALITY

The males and the females in our society are discriminated and are treated unequally in our society. This difference between male and female causes a huge obstacle in achieving equality as they are not given equal opportunity whether in social, economic or political spheres. Even the head of the family is often a male member so how can equality be achieved.

5. CURRUPTION AND INEFFICIENCY

Often corruption in the government or the bodies implementing laws lead to the inefficient implementation of the laws related to caste discrimination and leads to injustice.

6. PENDING CASES

There are thousands of cases pending in the court of law. And many of them relates to right to equality and which leads to delay in justice and thus is a challenge to equality.

7. PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION

The prejudice prevalent in our society often causes inequality. There exists discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, race, disability which increases the gap between individuals which acts as a challenge to equality.

STEPS TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT TO IMPLEMENT RIGHT TO EQUALITY

1. Reservation policy – This policy provides affirmative action for uplifting the historically disadvantaged section of the society by providing them reservations in government jobs, educational institutions and so forth. The current quota of the central government includes 7.5% reservation for the scheduled tribes (STs), 15% for the scheduled castes, (SCs) 27% for the other backward castes or classes (OBCs) and 10% for the economically weaker sections of the society (EWS).⁴ Though this policy is useful for the development of these sections as it gives representation and fair opportunities but on the other hand this policy leads to conflict and disharmony in the society hence it should be limited.
2. Employment generation schemes – The government has launched several employment generation schemes like the “Aatmanirbhar Bharat”, Rojgar Yojana” “PM Rojgar

⁴ *Reservation System in India, Caste Wise and Category Wise*, <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/reservation-in-india/> (last visited Oct. 21, 2025).

Protsahan Yojana”, “MGNMREGA”, “Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan” etc.⁵ to generate employment and remove poverty and thus it is a major step to remove inequalities from the Indian society. Though these are great initiatives, they lack implement in an effective ways as it is seen that poverty percentage has not improved considerably.

3. Reservation policy in local bodies – To enhance equality in Indian society and give equal opportunities to everyone, the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment act mandated the reservation for the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women in local bodies. the reservation for the SCs and STs is provided on the basis of their population. Moreover, 1/3rd seats are reserved for women.⁶ Though this is a great step to increase representation of weaker sections of society but in practice it is not effective as men control the women in power. Moreover, representation should be provided to weaker sections of society not only in local bodies but they should be provided with adequate representation in the Parliament as well.
4. Initiatives against discrimination – Many initiatives have been taken to abolish discriminatory practices by the government of India. One of which was the implementation of “Untouchability (offences) Act, 1955”, which criminalized the practice of untouchability. This act was amended by the Parliament in 1976 to clearly reflect its purpose and the name of the act was also amended to “Civil Rights Act”. Another initiative was “SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) act, 1989 which led to the establishment of special courts to deal with the cases of atrocities committed against the members of SC and ST community.⁷ Although these initiatives are very comprehensive but they are unsuccessful in achieving their targets as many incidences of discrimination and atrocities are seen against these communities in Indian society especially in Rural areas.
5. Initiatives to promote gender equality – The initiatives to promote gender equality includes the “Code on wages 2019” that promotes equal wages, timely payment and non-discrimination on the basis of gender and also covers transgender individuals, “Code on Social Security, 2019” which provides maternity leave, creche facilities etc.

⁵ *Employment Generation Schemes/ Programmes of Government of India | Directorate General of Employment (DGE) | GoI |India*, https://dge.gov.in/dge/schemes_programmes (last visited Oct. 21, 2025).

⁶ *73rd Amendment of Panchayati Raj in India | Election Commission for UTs | India*, <https://secforuts.mha.gov.in/73rd-amendment-of-panchayati-raj-in-india/> (last visited Oct. 21, 2025).

⁷ saumya, *Initiatives And Protocols Launched By The Government To Provide Equality To People Suffering From Social Discrimination | JudicateMe*, (Nov. 6, 2021), <https://judicateme.com/initiatives-and-protocols-launched-by-the-government-to-provide-equality-to-people-suffering-from-social-discrimination/>.

Other initiatives include “Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (save daughters and educate daughters)”, “Mission Shakti” and many more.

CONCLUSION

The right to equality plays a significant role in a democracy like India. Right to equality in India is embodied under article fourteen to eighteen of our constitution. It ensures that India becomes a just, equitable and a country where every person lives a dignified life and gets equal opportunities in every sphere of our lives. Right to equality not only means that equal opportunity should be given but also states that there should be absence of inequality. It allows for reasonable classification and protective discrimination to ensure the development of the socially and economically weaker sections of the society. The provision of right to equality suffers from many challenges like discrimination, inequality, legal challenges, corruption etc. To mitigate these challenges the government has introduced certain initiatives for instance the reservation policy for the SC, ST, OBC, EWS, the code on wages, the social security code, The untouchability [Offences] act etc. these government initiatives have played a significant role in decreasing the inequalities and promoting equality among the diversities. Though this right is guaranteed but in reality, this right is not so effective as people are still discriminated in many parts of the world, it will not be so effective unless the mentality and the thinking of the people change. Still despite of many challenges this right plays a significant role.

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