

# 50 Landmark Judgments of the Supreme Court of India

A Case-Law Digest for Judiciary Aspirants, Law Students & Legal Professionals



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Case briefs of 50 landmark Supreme Court judgments for judiciary exams, law-school moots and legal-awareness preparation.

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**1****Kesavananda Bharati Sripadagalvaru & Ors. v. State of Kerala & Anr (1973) 4 SCC 225**

The petition challenged the constitutional validity of the 24th, 25th and 29th Constitutional Amendments and Kerala's land reform laws. By a 7:6 majority, the Supreme Court held that Parliament's amending power under Article 368 is wide and extends to Fundamental Rights, but it cannot alter or destroy the basic structure of the Constitution. The Court evolved the Basic Structure Doctrine, affirming constitutional supremacy, judicial review and limited amending power. The judgment established that constitutional amendments violating the Constitution's essential features are liable to be struck down.

**2****D.K. Basu v. State of West Bengal (1997) 1 SCC 416**

The case originated from a public interest litigation highlighting custodial deaths and police torture across India. The Supreme Court held that custodial violence violates the fundamental rights guaranteed under Articles 21 and 22 of the Constitution. To safeguard the dignity and liberty of arrested persons, the Court laid down 11 mandatory guidelines governing arrest and detention, including preparation of an arrest memo, informing relatives, medical examination, and production before a Magistrate. The judgment established that failure to comply with these safeguards attracts legal consequences and compensation for violation of constitutional rights.

**3****Vishaka & Others v. State of Rajasthan & Others (1997) 6 SCC 241**

The petition arose after the gang rape of social worker Bhanwari Devi, exposing the absence of legal safeguards against workplace sexual harassment. The Supreme Court held that sexual harassment violates the fundamental rights to equality, dignity and life under Articles 14, 15, 19(1)(g) and 21. In the absence of statutory law, the Court framed the Vishaka Guidelines, making them binding under Articles 32 and 141 until Parliament enacted legislation. The judgment established that international conventions like CEDAW may be relied upon to protect fundamental rights where domestic law is inadequate.

**4****Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India (1978) 1 SCC 248**

The case arose after the Government impounded Maneka Gandhi's passport under the Passports Act, 1967, without furnishing reasons. The Supreme Court held that any law depriving a person of life or personal liberty under Article 21 must prescribe a procedure that is just, fair and reasonable, and not arbitrary or oppressive. The Court expanded the scope of Article 21, holding that Articles 14, 19 and 21 are interconnected and must be read together. The judgment established the doctrine of substantive due process, significantly strengthening the protection of fundamental rights.

**5****Indra Sawhney & Others v. Union of India & Others (Mandal Commission Case) 1992 Supp (3) SCC 217**

The case challenged the implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendation granting 27% reservation to Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in public employment. A nine-judge Bench upheld the constitutional validity of OBC reservations under Article 16(4) but introduced the 'creamy layer' exclusion to ensure benefits reach the genuinely backward. The Court held that reservations should ordinarily not exceed 50%, prohibited reservation in promotions under Article 16(4), and ruled that backwardness cannot be determined solely by economic criteria. The judgment became the cornerstone of India's reservation jurisprudence.

**6****Selvi & Others v. State of Karnataka & Another (2010) 7 SCC 263**

The case examined the constitutional validity of involuntary administration of narco-analysis, polygraph, and Brain Electrical Activation Profile (BEAP) tests during criminal investigations. The Supreme Court held that

compelling a person to undergo these techniques violates the right against self-incrimination under Article 20(3) and the right to personal liberty under Article 21. Such tests may be conducted only with the individual's informed consent and subject to prescribed safeguards. The judgment established that investigative efficiency cannot override constitutional protections against testimonial compulsion and mental privacy.

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#### **7 S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994) 3 SCC 1**

The case challenged the dismissal of several State Governments under Article 356 on the ground of constitutional breakdown. A nine-judge Bench held that the President's power under Article 356 is not absolute and is subject to judicial review. The Court ruled that a government's majority must ordinarily be tested on the floor of the Legislative Assembly, not determined by the Governor's opinion. It further affirmed that federalism and secularism are basic features of the Constitution. The judgment significantly curtailed the arbitrary imposition of President's Rule.

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#### **8 Mohd. Ahmed Khan v. Shah Bano Begum & Others (1985) 2 SCC 556**

The case concerned a divorced Muslim woman's claim for maintenance under Section 125 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 after her husband divorced her by talaq. The Supreme Court held that Section 125 CrPC is a secular provision applicable to all citizens irrespective of religion, and a Muslim husband is liable to maintain his divorced wife if she is unable to maintain herself, even beyond the iddat period. The judgment affirmed that personal law cannot override statutory rights to maintenance, reinforcing the constitutional commitment to social justice and gender equality.

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#### **9 Vineet Narain & Others v. Union of India & Another (1998) 1 SCC 226**

The case arose from the Jain Hawala scandal, alleging political interference in corruption investigations by the CBI and other agencies. The Supreme Court held that the rule of law requires investigative agencies to function independently, impartially and free from executive influence. Exercising its powers under Articles 32 and 142, the Court issued binding directions to strengthen the autonomy and accountability of the CBI and the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC). The judgment established that judicial intervention is justified to ensure fair investigation and uphold transparency, institutional integrity and the rule of law.

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#### **10 Olga Tellis & Others v. Bombay Municipal Corporation & Others (1985) 3 SCC 545**

The case challenged the eviction of pavement and slum dwellers from Mumbai, contending that it would deprive them of their livelihood. The Supreme Court held that the right to livelihood is an integral facet of the right to life under Article 21, as no person can live without the means of livelihood. While recognizing that encroachment on public property is unlawful, the Court ruled that eviction must follow a fair, just and reasonable procedure consistent with natural justice. The judgment significantly expanded the scope of Article 21 and procedural fairness.

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#### **11 Bachan Singh v. State of Punjab (1982) 3 SCC 24**

The case challenged the constitutional validity of the death penalty under Section 302 of the Indian Penal Code and Section 354(3) of the Code of Criminal Procedure. A Constitution Bench upheld the validity of capital punishment but held that it should be imposed only in the "rarest of rare" cases, where the alternative of life imprisonment is unquestionably foreclosed. The Court emphasized balancing aggravating and mitigating circumstances before awarding death. The judgment established the "rarest of rare" doctrine, making it the governing principle for imposing capital punishment in India.

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### **National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India & Others (NALSA Case) (2014) 5 SCC 438**

The case sought legal recognition and protection of the rights of transgender persons under the Constitution. The Supreme Court held that gender identity is an integral part of dignity, autonomy and personal liberty under Article 21, and recognized transgender persons as the "third gender." The Court affirmed that every individual has the right to self-identify their gender without mandatory medical procedures. It directed governments to treat transgender persons as socially and educationally backward classes for affirmative action and ensure equal access to education, employment, healthcare and other fundamental rights.

13

### **Minerva Mills Ltd. & Others v. Union of India & Others (1980) 3 SCC 625**

The case challenged the constitutional validity of Sections 4 and 55 of the 42nd Constitutional Amendment, which sought to expand Parliament's amending power and give primacy to Directive Principles over Fundamental Rights. The Supreme Court struck down the impugned provisions, holding that Parliament's limited power to amend the Constitution is itself a part of the Basic Structure. The Court further ruled that Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles are complementary and must remain in harmonious balance. The judgment reaffirmed and strengthened the Basic Structure Doctrine laid down in Kesavananda Bharati.

14

### **Aruna Ramachandra Shanbaug v. Union of India & Others (2011) 4 SCC 454**

The case concerned a plea seeking withdrawal of life support for Aruna Shanbaug, who had remained in a persistent vegetative state for decades following a brutal assault. The Supreme Court rejected the plea on the facts but held that passive euthanasia may be legally permissible in exceptional cases, subject to High Court approval and medical evaluation. The Court distinguished passive euthanasia from active euthanasia, holding the latter to be unlawful. The judgment established the principle that the right to die with dignity under Article 21 may justify withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment under strict judicial safeguards.

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### **Hussainara Khatoun & Others v. Home Secretary, State of Bihar, Patna (1980) 1 SCC 98**

The case exposed the plight of thousands of undertrial prisoners in Bihar who remained incarcerated for periods exceeding the maximum prescribed punishment for their alleged offences. The Supreme Court held that the right to a speedy trial is an essential part of the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21. It further ruled that free legal aid is an indispensable component of a fair, just and reasonable procedure, directing the release of eligible undertrials. The judgment established speedy justice and legal aid as enforceable constitutional guarantees under Articles 21 and 39A.

16

### **L. Chandra Kumar v. Union of India (1997) 3 SCC 261**

The Supreme Court held that the power of judicial review under Articles 32 and 226 forms part of the Constitution's basic structure. It ruled that decisions of Administrative Tribunals are subject to review by High Courts, while appeals lie before the Supreme Court. The judgment strengthened constitutional supremacy by ensuring that tribunals cannot replace constitutional courts.

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### **Sarla Mudgal v. Union of India (1995) 3 SCC 635**

The Court held that a Hindu husband cannot escape the offence of bigamy by converting to Islam and marrying again without legally dissolving the first marriage. Such a second marriage is void. The judgment emphasized equality before law and highlighted the need for a Uniform Civil Code under Article 44.

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### **M.C. Mehta v. Kamal Nath (1997) 1 SCC 388**

The Supreme Court applied the Public Trust Doctrine, holding that natural resources like rivers and forests are held by the State in trust for the public. It declared that the government cannot transfer such resources for private commercial use if public interest is harmed. The judgment became a landmark in environmental jurisprudence.

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**19 PUCL v. Union of India (1997) 1 SCC 301**

The Court held that telephone tapping seriously affects the right to privacy under Article 21. It upheld the law permitting interception only in exceptional circumstances and laid down detailed procedural safeguards to prevent arbitrary surveillance. The decision significantly strengthened privacy protection and governmental accountability.

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**20 Sheela Barse v. State of Maharashtra (1983) 2 SCC 96**

The Supreme Court issued important directions to protect women prisoners from custodial violence. It directed that female prisoners should be interrogated only in the presence of female police officers and stressed access to legal aid and humane treatment. The judgment reinforced prisoners' fundamental rights under Article 21.

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**21 Golaknath v. State of Punjab (1967) 2 SCR 762**

The Supreme Court ruled that Parliament could not amend Fundamental Rights under Article 368. It held that Fundamental Rights are beyond Parliament's amending power. Although later modified by the 24th Constitutional Amendment and subsequent judgments, the decision played a major role in the evolution of the basic structure doctrine.

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**22 Chairman, Railway Board v. Chandrima Das (2000) 2 SCC 465**

The Supreme Court held the Railways liable to compensate a Bangladeshi woman who was gang-raped by railway employees. It ruled that Article 21 protects every person, including foreigners, and that the State is responsible for violations committed by its employees while performing official duties.

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**23 Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India (1984) 3 SCC 161**

The Court recognized bonded labour as a violation of Articles 21 and 23 and directed governments to identify, release, and rehabilitate bonded labourers. It also expanded the scope of Public Interest Litigation, allowing social activists to approach courts on behalf of disadvantaged sections of society.

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**24 Nandini Satpathy v. P.L. Dani (1978) 2 SCC 424**

The Supreme Court held that no person can be compelled to answer questions that may incriminate them. It expanded the protection against self-incrimination under Article 20(3) and affirmed the right of an accused to consult a lawyer during police questioning, safeguarding fair investigation.

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**25 Lily Thomas v. Union of India (2000) 6 SCC 224**

The Court reaffirmed that conversion to another religion does not automatically dissolve a Hindu marriage. A second marriage without obtaining a legal divorce remains void and amounts to bigamy. The judgment reinforced the principles laid down in Sarla Mudgal and protected the rights of spouses.

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**26 Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration (1978) 4 SCC 494**

The Supreme Court held that prisoners retain their fundamental rights except those lawfully restricted by imprisonment. It condemned torture, solitary confinement, and cruel prison practices, emphasizing that prison administration must respect human dignity and comply with Article 21.

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**27     Union of India v. Association for Democratic Reforms (2002) 5 SCC 294**

The Court directed that election candidates must disclose their criminal cases, educational qualifications, and financial assets. It held that voters have a fundamental right to know this information under Article 19(1)(a), thereby promoting transparency and informed voting.

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**28     Common Cause v. Union of India (2018) 5 SCC 1**

The Supreme Court recognized the right to die with dignity as part of Article 21. It legalized passive euthanasia under strict safeguards and recognized the validity of advance medical directives (living wills), ensuring respect for patient autonomy and dignity.

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**29     S.P. Gupta v. Union of India 1981 Supp SCC 87**

Popularly known as the First Judges Case, the Court held that the executive had primacy in judicial appointments under the constitutional scheme then prevailing. The judgment also broadened the scope of Public Interest Litigation by liberalizing the rule of locus standi for public-spirited individuals.

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**30     Novartis AG v. Union of India (2013) 6 SCC 1**

The Supreme Court rejected Novartis's patent application for the cancer drug Glivec, holding that it failed to satisfy Section 3(d) of the Patents Act. The judgment prevented evergreening of pharmaceutical patents and balanced innovation with affordable access to essential medicines.

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**31     Samatha v. State of Andhra Pradesh (1997) 8 SCC 191**

The Supreme Court ruled that tribal lands in Scheduled Areas cannot be leased to private companies for commercial mining. The Court broke new ground by declaring the State is a "person" bound by anti-alienation laws under the Fifth Schedule. It held that mining in these zones is restricted to public sector undertakings or tribal cooperatives, mandating that 20% of net profits must fund local tribal welfare.

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**32     People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) v. Union of India (2003) 4 SCC 1**

The Supreme Court ruled that voters have a fundamental right to know the background of candidates contesting elections. The Court upheld voter information access under Article 19(1)(a) (freedom of speech and expression), declaring that democracy is compromised without informed choices. It struck down a parliamentary amendment that sought to shield candidates from mandatory disclosures regarding their criminal records, assets, liabilities, and educational qualifications.

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**33     Rameshwar Prasad v. Union of India (2006) 2 SCC 1**

The Supreme Court ruled that the Governor's recommendation to dissolve the Bihar Legislative Assembly before its first meeting was unconstitutional, arbitrary, and mala fide. The 5-judge Constitution Bench held that the Governor cannot dissolve an assembly merely to prevent a political coalition from claiming majority to form a government. It established that political floor-testing must happen inside the House, preventing the executive from weaponizing Article 356 to stall democratic processes.

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**34     Mary Roy v. State of Kerala AIR 1986 SC 1011**

The Supreme Court delivered a landmark judgment establishing gender equality in inheritance rights for Syrian Christian women in Kerala. The Court ruled that the discriminatory Travancore Christian Succession Act, 1916, which limited a daughter's inheritance to one-fourth of a son's share or a small fixed dowry, stood repealed by the Indian Succession Act, 1925. By striking down this archaic customary law, the Court ensured that Christian daughters enjoy equal inheritance rights as their brothers.

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### **35 Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra v. State of U.P. 1985 AIR 652**

The Supreme Court ordered the closure of illegal limestone quarries in the Mussoorie-Dehradun range. This historic judgment was the first in India to recognize the Right to a Healthy Environment as part of the Right to Life under Article 21, establishing that ecological preservation takes precedence over industrial economic growth and introducing the concept of sustainable development into Indian environmental law.

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### **36 Swami Shraddhananda v. State of Maharashtra (2007) 8 SCC 435**

The Supreme Court created a new sentencing category: life imprisonment without the possibility of remission. The Court held that when a case does not strictly fall into the "rarest of rare" category for a death sentence, yet ordinary life imprisonment (which often allows release after 14 years) is inadequate, judges can substitute capital punishment with imprisonment for the remainder of the convict's natural life. This bridged the gap between death and standard life sentences.

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### **37 Society for Unaided Private Schools of Rajasthan v. Union of India (2012) 6 SCC 1**

The Supreme Court validated the Right to Education Act's mandatory 25% quota for disadvantaged children in private unaided non-minority schools, ruling it a valid public interest under Article 21A. The ruling, however, exempted unaided minority schools to protect their autonomy under Article 30(1), establishing a balance between inclusive education and minority rights.

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### **38 Harish Uppal v. Union of India (2003) 2 SCC 45**

The Supreme Court ruled that lawyers have no right to strike or boycott courts. The Constitution Bench held that legal strikes paralyze the justice delivery system and violate litigants' fundamental right to a speedy trial. It declared that advocates are officers of the court with a primary duty to their clients. The judgment established that striking lawyers face disciplinary action for professional misconduct, safeguarding judicial functioning from arbitrary internal protests.

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### **39 Shatrughan Chauhan v. Union of India (2014) 3 SCC 1**

The Supreme Court ruled that an inordinate delay in deciding mercy petitions is a mitigating factor to commute a death sentence to life imprisonment. The Court held that prolonged delay causes immense mental torture, violating the Right to Life under Article 21. It established that executing a prisoner after excessive delay is unconstitutional, and declared that a minimum 14-day gap must exist between rejecting a mercy petition and the scheduled execution.

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### **40 A.K. Gopalan v. State of Madras AIR 1950 SC 27**

The Supreme Court of India adopted a strict, literal interpretation of the Constitution, ruling that the "procedure established by law" under Article 21 means any validly enacted statutory law, regardless of whether it is fair or just. Rejecting the American concept of "due process of law," the Court held that preventive detention laws could not be struck down on moral or reasonable grounds, vastly limiting individual liberty against legislative actions.

#### 41 **Madhav Rao v. Union of India (1971) 1 SCC 85**

The Supreme Court struck down a Presidential Order that arbitrarily abolished the privy purses and titles of former princely rulers. The Court held that the executive could not bypass Parliament to nullify explicit constitutional guarantees. It ruled that privy purses constituted protected property rights, and their executive termination violated fundamental rights. Although a major victory for the rule of law, Parliament swiftly bypassed it via the 26th Constitutional Amendment.

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#### 42 **Indira Nehru Gandhi v. Raj Narain 1975 AIR 1590**

The Supreme Court of India delivered a historic ruling that solidified the "Basic Structure" doctrine and declared that free and fair elections are an unalterable part of the Constitution. Striking down the 39th Amendment (Article 329A), which attempted to insulate the Prime Minister's election from judicial scrutiny, the Court affirmed that the rule of law and judicial review cannot be dismantled by a parliamentary majority. This decision effectively checked absolute executive overreach during the Emergency era.

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#### 43 **State of Maharashtra v. Indian Hotel & Restaurants Association (2013) 8 SCC 519**

The Supreme Court upheld the right of women bar dancers to earn a livelihood, striking down the state's selective ban on dance bars. The Court ruled that prohibiting dance performances in ordinary establishments while permitting them in elite hotels violated the right to equality under Article 14 and the right to practice any profession under Article 19(1)(g). It emphasized that the state should regulate safety rather than enforce complete prohibition.

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#### 44 **Unnikrishnan v. State of Andhra Pradesh (1993) 1 SCC 645**

The Supreme Court declared the Right to Education a Fundamental Right under Article 21, revolutionizing Indian law. The Constitution Bench interpreted the Right to Life to encompass free, compulsory primary schooling for children up to 14 years old. It categorically banned exploitative "capitation fees" in private colleges and regulated their admissions to check commercialization. This historic ruling served as the direct catalyst for the 86th Constitutional Amendment (Article 21A) and the Right to Education (RTE) Act.

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#### 45 **Narmada Bachao Andolan v. Union of India (2000) 10 SCC 664**

The Supreme Court allowed construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam to proceed, balancing development against environmental concerns. Applying the principle of sustainable development, the Court ruled that the right to water and electricity for millions outweighed localized ecological disruptions. It held that infrastructure projects do not inherently violate Article 21, provided the government executes mandatory, phased rehabilitation for displaced tribal communities alongside construction, setting a major precedent for national infrastructure jurisprudence.

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#### 46 **Sri Bodhisattwa Gautam v. Miss Subhra Chakraborty (1996) 1 SCC 490**

The Supreme Court ruled that rape is a grave violation of a woman's Right to Life and Dignity under Article 21. Recognizing the severe trauma inflicted, the Court held that judiciary has inherent powers to award interim compensation to victims during a pending criminal trial. It ordered the accused to pay immediate monthly maintenance, establishing a landmark precedent for victim welfare and early financial relief in sexual assault cases.

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#### 47 **Ediga Anamma v. State of Andhra Pradesh (1974) 4 SCC 443**

The Supreme Court shifted capital sentencing norms, establishing life imprisonment as the rule and the death penalty as the exception. Justice Krishna Iyer ruled that courts must balance a crime's brutality against a criminal's mitigating factors. Due to her youth, gender, status as a mother, and death-row delay, the court commuted her sentence. This landmark case directly laid the foundational framework for India's modern "rarest of rare" doctrine.

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**48     Abhay Singh v. State of Uttar Pradesh (2013) 15 SCC 465**

Supreme Court judgment that restricted the use of red beacon lights and sirens on vehicles, ruling they create an undemocratic, privileged class in violation of Article 14. Aimed at curbing India's "VIP culture," the ruling restricted beacons to specific high-ranking constitutional dignitaries, setting the stage for the government's total ban on red beacons in 2017.

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**49     Bijoe Emmanuel v. State of Kerala (1987)**

Protected students who refused to sing the national anthem for religious reasons, showing that freedom of conscience is core to Indian pluralism.

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**50     T. K. Rangarajan v. Government of Tamil Nadu (2003)**

The Supreme Court ruled that government employees do not possess a fundamental or absolute right to strike, noting the disruption caused to public administration.

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