World Human Rights Research Council
Research Paper on Human rights law and ground realities in india
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International Convention for Human Rights 2026
25 October 2026 | NDMC Convention Centre, New Delhi (IN)

HUMAN RIGHTS LAW AND GROUND REALITIES IN INDIA: A CONSTITUTIONAL, EMPIRICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS

ABSTRACT, INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

Abstract

- The protection of human rights in India reveals a persistent gap between constitutional guarantees and their practical implementation. The Indian Constitution recognizes fundamental rights relating to equality, liberty, dignity and access to justice. The Supreme Court has substantially expanded these guarantees through progressive constitutional interpretation, particularly under Article 21. Nevertheless, institutional limitations, socioeconomic inequalities, prolonged undertrial detention, prison overcrowding, judicial pendency and deficiencies in legal representation continue to restrict their effective enjoyment.
- This study examines the relationship between human rights law and ground realities in India through constitutional, doctrinal, socio-legal and secondary empirical analysis. It evaluates international human rights obligations, constitutional jurisprudence, criminal justice administration, judicial delays, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and the legal aid system.
- The central argument is that the principal challenge to human rights protection in India is not the absence of legal recognition but the uneven enforcement of existing rights. Meaningful constitutional protection requires effective institutions, accessible remedies, transparent accountability and evidence-based reforms.
- Keywords: Human Rights, Indian Constitution, Article 21, Criminal Justice, Undertrial Prisoners, Judicial Pendency, NHRC, Legal Aid, Access to Justice, Constitutional Accountability.

1. Introduction

- Human rights protection is a defining feature of constitutional democracy. However, the formal recognition of rights does not necessarily guarantee their effective realization. This distinction is particularly significant in countries

experiencing socioeconomic inequalities, administrative constraints and institutional delays.

- India possesses an extensive constitutional framework protecting fundamental rights through judicial review, enforceable remedies and independent courts. The Supreme Court has developed a progressive interpretation of personal liberty and human dignity, extending constitutional protection to fair procedure, speedy trial, legal assistance, privacy and humane treatment in custody.
- Despite these developments, many individuals encounter substantial barriers when attempting to enforce their rights. Poverty, procedural complexity, prolonged litigation, inadequate legal representation and limited institutional accountability often weaken the practical effectiveness of constitutional guarantees.
- The distinction between legal entitlement and actual access to justice is especially visible in criminal proceedings, where individuals may remain detained for substantial periods without conviction.

1.1 Research Problem

The principal research problem concerns the continuing divergence between constitutional commitments and lived experiences of human rights protection in India.

Although rights are recognized through constitutional provisions, legislation and judicial decisions, their enforcement remains uneven because of institutional and socioeconomic constraints.

1.2 Research Objectives

The study seeks to examine the constitutional and international foundations of human rights, evaluate Article 21 jurisprudence, assess criminal justice and judicial administration, examine the NHRC and legal aid institutions, and propose practical reforms.

1.3 Research Methodology

The research adopts a doctrinal and socio-legal methodology supported by secondary institutional data. It examines constitutional provisions, statutes, international instruments, judicial precedents and published reports from the NCRB, NJDG, NHRC and NALSA.

The research does not involve original fieldwork. Its empirical conclusions are therefore limited to descriptive analysis of available institutional evidence.

2. International Human Rights Framework

- International human rights law provides a normative framework for protecting human dignity, equality, liberty and fundamental freedoms.
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, established an internationally recognized statement of basic rights. Subsequent treaties, particularly the

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), developed binding obligations for participating states.

- India has ratified several major international human rights conventions, including the ICCPR, ICESCR, ICERD, CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- These instruments establish standards concerning personal liberty, fair trial, humane treatment of detainees, equality, education, health and protection against discrimination.

2.1 Constitutional Relationship Between International and Domestic Law

India generally follows a dualist approach to international treaty obligations requiring domestic legislative implementation.

Article 51(c) directs the State to foster respect for international law and treaty obligations. Although this provision is part of the Directive Principles of State Policy, it reflects India's constitutional commitment to international legal cooperation.

Article 253 empowers Parliament to enact legislation implementing international treaties and conventions.

Consequently, international treaty obligations do not automatically become directly enforceable domestic rights merely through ratification. However, courts may use international principles when interpreting constitutional provisions, provided they are consistent with domestic law.

2.2 Judicial Application of International Human Rights Standards

The Supreme Court's decision in Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan, (1997) 6 SCC 241, illustrates the influence of international human rights law on constitutional interpretation.

In the absence of specific domestic legislation addressing workplace sexual harassment, the Court relied upon constitutional equality provisions and principles contained in CEDAW to formulate protective guidelines.

The judgment established the interpretive importance of international conventions consistent with constitutional rights.

The subsequent Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, demonstrated how judicial intervention may contribute to legislative development.

2.3 International Standards and Domestic Accountability

Articles 9, 10 and 14 of the ICCPR establish important protections concerning arbitrary detention, humane custodial treatment and fair trial.

These standards provide a framework for evaluating Indian criminal justice practices, including arrest, detention, prison conditions and judicial proceedings.

International human rights law therefore performs three important functions in India: guiding constitutional interpretation, establishing standards for evaluating state conduct and influencing legislative reform.

Nevertheless, its effectiveness ultimately depends upon domestic institutions and enforcement mechanisms.

3. Transformation of the Right to Life and Personal Liberty

- Article 21 provides that no person shall be deprived of life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law.
- The Supreme Court's interpretation of this provision has transformed Indian constitutional jurisprudence.
- Initially, in A.K. Gopalan v. State of Madras, AIR 1950 SC 27, the Court adopted a comparatively restrictive interpretation of personal liberty and statutory procedure.
- A significant transformation occurred in Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India, (1978) 1 SCC 248.
- The Supreme Court established that procedures interfering with personal liberty must be fair, just and reasonable. It also emphasized the relationship between Articles 14, 19 and 21.
- This judgment strengthened judicial scrutiny of arbitrary state action and created the foundation for broader constitutional protection.

3.1 Human Dignity

In Francis Coralie Mullin v. Administrator, Union Territory of Delhi, (1981) 1 SCC 608, the Supreme Court recognized that the right to life extends beyond mere physical existence.

Human dignity requires conditions necessary for living a meaningful human life.

This principle is particularly relevant to prisoners and detainees, who retain fundamental rights notwithstanding lawful restrictions upon their liberty.

The State consequently has a continuing responsibility to prevent degrading treatment and ensure humane conditions in custodial institutions.

3.2 Right to Speedy Trial

In the HussainaraKhatoon series, beginning with (1980) 1 SCC 81, the Supreme Court recognized speedy trial as an essential component of Article 21.

The decisions addressed prolonged detention of undertrial prisoners and emphasized that criminal procedure must not effectively become punishment before conviction.

Nevertheless, continuing delays demonstrate that judicial recognition alone cannot eliminate structural deficiencies in criminal justice administration.

3.3 Compensation for Custodial Violations

In NilabatiBehera v. State of Orissa, (1993) 2 SCC 746, the Supreme Court recognized monetary compensation as a public law remedy for established violations of fundamental rights.

The decision strengthened constitutional accountability by recognizing that serious violations require effective remedies.

However, compensation after a violation cannot replace preventive safeguards and independent investigations.

3.4 Privacy and Individual Autonomy

In Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) v. Union of India, (2017) 10 SCC 1, a nine-judge Supreme Court bench unanimously recognized privacy as a fundamental right.

The judgment connected privacy with dignity, autonomy and personal freedom.

It expanded constitutional protection in the context of technological developments and information-based governance.

3.5 Constitutional Significance

These judgments demonstrate the transformation of Article 21 from a protection against unlawful deprivation of liberty into a broad constitutional foundation for human dignity, fair procedure, legal assistance, speedy trial and privacy.

The continuing challenge is translating these principles into accessible institutional remedies.

4. Human Rights in Criminal Justice Administration

- Criminal justice administration provides an important measure of the practical effectiveness of constitutional rights.
- The presumption of innocence requires that an accused person should not be treated as guilty before conviction. Although lawful pre-trial detention may be necessary, prolonged incarceration raises serious constitutional concerns when it becomes disproportionate to legitimate procedural objectives.
- The problem is particularly significant for economically disadvantaged accused persons who may be unable to obtain competent legal representation or satisfy bail conditions.

4.1 Prison Overcrowding in India

The National Crime Records Bureau's Prison Statistics India 2023 reveals substantial variations in prison occupancy.

State/UT	Occupancy rate (2023)
Delhi	200%
Meghalaya	189%
Uttarakhand	183%

Maharashtra	155%
Madhya Pradesh	152%
Uttar Pradesh	150%
All-India average	121%

Source: PRS Legislative Research, Demand for Grants 2026–27: Home Affairs, using NCRB 2023 prison statistics.

These figures indicate significant pressure upon prison infrastructure, particularly in jurisdictions where inmate populations substantially exceed sanctioned capacity.

Overcrowding may adversely affect sanitation, healthcare, rehabilitation, legal consultation and humane living conditions.

However, occupancy statistics alone cannot establish the occurrence of torture, negligence or other specific violations. Such conclusions require additional evidence.

4.2 Bail and Economic Inequality

The practical operation of bail provisions often reflects socioeconomic differences.

In Moti Ram v. State of Madhya Pradesh, (1978) 4 SCC 47, the Supreme Court emphasized that bail conditions must not become instruments of injustice against economically disadvantaged persons.

In Satender Kumar Antil v. Central Bureau of Investigation, (2022) 10 SCC 51, the Court addressed unnecessary arrests and the importance of protecting personal liberty through appropriate bail practices.

Section 479 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, provides safeguards concerning the maximum period of undertrial detention in specified circumstances, including a reduced threshold for certain first-time offenders.

Its effectiveness depends upon accurate detention records, timely judicial review and implementation by prison authorities.

4.3 Government Assistance for Poor Prisoners

The Government of India's Support to Poor Prisoners scheme assists eligible prisoners unable to secure release because of financial constraints.

According to the parliamentary information cited in the research paper, approximately ₹71.71 lakh had been utilized and 273 prisoners had benefited as of 10 February 2026.

These figures indicate the need to examine scheme accessibility, identification of beneficiaries and administrative implementation.

4.4 Custodial Accountability

In D.K. Basu v. State of West Bengal, (1997) 1 SCC 416, the Supreme Court prescribed safeguards against custodial abuse, including arrest documentation, communication with relatives and medical examination.

Deaths in police custody and judicial custody require careful classification and independent investigation.

The occurrence of a custodial death does not automatically establish torture, but it requires appropriate scrutiny of the State's duty of care.

5. Judicial Delay as a Human Rights Concern

- Access to justice is an essential component of constitutional governance.
- However, the mere availability of courts does not guarantee effective protection if legal proceedings remain unresolved for excessive periods.
- Judicial delay may adversely affect liberty, employment, reputation, family relationships and the practical value of legal remedies.
- The constitutional right to speedy trial therefore requires attention to both procedural fairness and institutional efficiency.

5.1 Scale of Judicial Pendency

The National Judicial Data Grid provides information concerning pending proceedings throughout the Indian judiciary.

The research paper records the following figures:

Judicial level	Pending cases
Supreme Court	96,131
High Courts	65,43,420
District and subordinate courts	5,16,39,674
Combined total	Approximately 5.83 crore

Source: NJDG dashboards, figures reported in the supplied paper for 22 October 2026. These are dynamic figures requiring verification at the final submission date.

District and subordinate courts account for the overwhelming majority of pending proceedings.

This is particularly significant because these courts handle most criminal trials, bail applications, civil disputes and other matters directly affecting everyday rights.

5.2 Duration of Pending Cases

The research records approximately 81.72 lakh district court cases pending for five to ten years and approximately 47.03 lakh cases pending for more than ten years.

These figures demonstrate that judicial pendency involves not only a high volume of litigation but also prolonged unresolved proceedings.

Nevertheless, case age alone cannot establish the causes of delay or prove that every pending case involves a constitutional violation.

5.3 Structural Causes of Judicial Delay

Judicial pendency results from several interacting factors, including insufficient judicial and administrative capacity, inadequate court infrastructure, delays in investigation, forensic reporting, witness attendance and procedural management.

Increasing the number of judges is important, but it cannot independently resolve these problems.

Effective reform requires coordinated improvements in judicial administration, policing, prosecution, forensic services and technological infrastructure.

5.4 Evaluating Judicial Performance

The effectiveness of judicial administration should not be assessed exclusively through case disposal rates.

A rights-based evaluation should consider the duration of proceedings, time required for interim relief, quality of adjudication, access to legal representation and implementation of judicial orders.

Judicial efficiency must therefore be evaluated alongside fairness and accessibility.

6. Statutory Framework of the NHRC

- The National Human Rights Commission was established under the Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993.
- The Act provides an institutional framework for protecting rights relating to life, liberty, equality and human dignity.
- Section 12 empowers the NHRC to examine complaints concerning human rights violations, intervene in judicial proceedings with court approval, inspect custodial institutions and review existing legal safeguards.
- The Commission also undertakes research, human rights education and examination of international human rights instruments.

6.1 Remedial Powers and Their Limitations

Under Section 18, the NHRC may recommend compensation, prosecution or other appropriate action where an inquiry establishes a human rights violation or related negligence by a public servant.

The Commission may also approach constitutional courts for appropriate directions.

However, its recommendations generally do not operate as independently executable judicial decrees.

This creates an institutional limitation: the Commission may identify violations and recommend corrective measures without possessing equivalent enforcement authority.

The effectiveness of its recommendations consequently depends substantially upon responses from public authorities and the availability of judicial remedies.

6.2 Complaints Involving the Armed Forces

Section 19 establishes a special procedure for allegations involving members of the armed forces.

The Commission may seek a report from the Central Government and make recommendations based upon the statutory procedure.

This arrangement raises questions concerning independent investigation and accountability.

The challenge is to reconcile legitimate national security considerations with meaningful scrutiny of serious human rights allegations.

6.3 Limitation Period

Section 36(2) restricts the Commission from inquiring into matters after one year from the alleged violation.

Although limitation periods support legal certainty, strict application may disadvantage victims unable to report violations promptly because of intimidation, detention, disability or lack of legal assistance.

Carefully defined legislative exceptions could improve access to remedies in appropriate cases.

6.4 Institutional Independence

The United Nations Paris Principles emphasize independence, pluralism, institutional capacity and an effective mandate for national human rights institutions.

Strengthening the NHRC requires transparent appointments, adequate staffing, professional expertise, financial autonomy and systematic reporting of compliance with recommendations.

A credible human rights institution must possess the capacity not only to process complaints but also to identify systemic violations and promote preventive reform.

7. Constitutional Foundations of Legal Aid

- Article 39A directs the State to secure equal justice and provide free legal aid so that economic or other disabilities do not prevent individuals from accessing justice.
- The Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, provides the statutory foundation for organized legal assistance.
- In Khatri (II) v. State of Bihar, (1981) 1 SCC 627, the Supreme Court emphasized the State's obligation to provide legal assistance to indigent accused persons.
- In Suk Das v. Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh, (1986) 2 SCC 401, the Court reinforced the constitutional significance of free legal representation in criminal proceedings.

- These decisions recognize that meaningful access to justice requires effective assistance rather than merely formal appointment of counsel.

7.1 Legal Aid Defense Counsel System

India has developed a dedicated Legal Aid Defense Counsel System to provide criminal defence assistance to eligible beneficiaries.

According to the government information cited in the paper, the system operated in 680 districts as of December 2025, with an approved financial outlay of ₹998.43 crore for 2023–24 to 2025–26.

Approximately 12.63 lakh criminal cases had been assigned, with around 8.72 lakh disposals recorded during the reported period.

These figures demonstrate substantial institutional activity but do not independently establish the quality of representation.

Effective evaluation requires examination of counsel availability, workload, client consultation, bail representation and continuity of defence.

7.2 Social and Economic Inequality

Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws. Articles 15 and 17 further address discrimination and untouchability.

Nevertheless, formally equal legal procedures may produce unequal outcomes where individuals possess different socioeconomic resources.

Financially disadvantaged persons may experience difficulty obtaining legal advice, arranging transportation, furnishing bail sureties or accessing relevant documentation.

7.3 Marginalized Communities

The representation of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes within prison populations raises important questions concerning social inequality and criminal justice.

However, demographic disparities require careful interpretation.

Overrepresentation within prison statistics does not, by itself, establish discriminatory arrest or conviction practices. Reliable conclusions require appropriate population comparisons and examination of socioeconomic and institutional factors.

7.4 Gender and Intersectional Vulnerability

Gender-based rights violations demonstrate the relationship between constitutional protection and institutional effectiveness.

Although legal safeguards address workplace sexual harassment, domestic violence and discrimination, effective protection depends upon accessible complaints procedures, timely investigation and institutional accountability.

Intersectional vulnerability arises where disadvantages associated with poverty, caste, gender, disability or age interact.

A substantive equality approach must therefore recognize actual barriers faced by individuals rather than relying exclusively upon formally identical legal treatment.

8. Criminal Justice and Bail Reform

- Human rights reform must prioritize the reduction of unnecessary pre-trial detention.
- A possible legislative reform is the development of a consolidated bail framework providing clearer standards for release, detention and financial conditions.
- Courts should undertake individualized assessments of relevant risks, consider non-custodial alternatives and provide reasoned decisions when detention is necessary.
- Such reforms must accommodate legitimate public safety considerations and restrictions contained in special criminal statutes.

8.1 Effective Implementation of Section 479 BNSS

Section 479 of the BNSS provides an important safeguard against excessive undertrial detention in eligible cases.

Its implementation could be strengthened through digital custody records, automated identification of eligible prisoners and regular review by Undertrial Review Committees.

Coordination among prison superintendents, legal services authorities and courts would improve the identification and processing of eligible cases.

Institutional reporting should include the number of prisoners identified, applications filed, release orders granted and applications declined.

8.2 Judicial Capacity and Administrative Reform

Judicial reform requires coordinated investment in judges, court infrastructure, administrative personnel and case-management technology.

Institutional planning should be based upon measurable workload, case complexity and regional needs.

Improved coordination between courts, police, prosecutors, forensic laboratories and prisons could reduce avoidable procedural delays.

Reform outcomes should be evaluated through improvements in case duration, fairness and access to remedies.

8.3 Strengthening the NHRC

The Protection of Human Rights Act could be strengthened through greater transparency in the implementation of NHRC recommendations.

Public authorities should provide reasoned responses when recommendations are rejected or not implemented.

Additional judicially supervised enforcement mechanisms may be considered for specified categories of serious violations.

The special armed forces procedure and statutory limitation period also warrant review to improve accountability while preserving legitimate procedural safeguards.

8.4 Improving Legal Aid

The existing Legal Aid Defense Counsel System provides a foundation for further institutional improvement.

Reform should emphasize adequate remuneration, manageable workloads, professional training, early client consultation and continuity of representation.

Independent evaluation should assess the actual quality of legal assistance rather than relying solely upon beneficiary numbers or case disposal statistics.

8.5 Human Rights Accountability Indicators

A coordinated human rights accountability framework should monitor indicators concerning detention, prison conditions, judicial delay, legal aid, custodial investigations and institutional compliance.

Disaggregated data would assist in identifying persistent inequalities and evaluating the effectiveness of reforms.

Quantitative assessment should be supplemented by qualitative research into institutional practices and the experiences of affected individuals.

9. The Gap Between Constitutional Recognition and Institutional Effectiveness

- The analysis establishes that India's human rights challenges cannot be attributed to a single institutional deficiency.
- Instead, they arise from interactions among constitutional law, criminal procedure, socioeconomic inequality, administrative capacity and remedial institutions.
- The Supreme Court has developed extensive protections concerning liberty, dignity, procedural fairness and state accountability. Nevertheless, implementation remains uneven.

9.1 Principal Research Findings

Finding 1: Constitutional protection is legally extensive but institutionally uneven.

Article 21 jurisprudence has significantly strengthened human rights protection. However, legal recognition does not automatically ensure effective implementation.

Finding 2: Pre-trial detention reveals structural weaknesses.

The continued prevalence of undertrial detention demonstrates the importance of effective bail procedures, timely trials and accessible legal representation.

Finding 3: Judicial delay weakens the practical value of rights.

Large-scale pendency and prolonged proceedings may reduce the effectiveness of constitutional remedies, particularly where personal liberty is affected.

Finding 4: The NHRC faces limitations in enforcement.

Although the Commission possesses important investigative and recommendatory functions, its effectiveness is constrained by limitations upon direct enforcement and special statutory procedures.

Finding 5: Legal aid requires qualitative evaluation.

Expansion of legal aid institutions is important, but meaningful access to justice depends upon competent and timely representation.

Finding 6: Socioeconomic inequality affects access to rights.

Poverty and social disadvantage may create substantial barriers even where legal procedures are formally neutral.

Finding 7: Empirical accountability is necessary for institutional reform.

Human rights reform should be evaluated through reliable data, institutional transparency and measurable improvements in rights protection.

9.2 Constitutional and Institutional Interdependence

Constitutional jurisprudence and institutional performance operate in a reciprocal relationship.

Judicial decisions establish normative standards, while administrative institutions determine whether those standards are implemented consistently.

Empirical evidence identifies areas where legal guarantees are not being realized and assists in designing corrective measures.

Human rights protection must therefore be understood as a continuing process of constitutional accountability.

9.3 Significance of the Research

The study contributes to human rights scholarship by integrating constitutional doctrine with institutional performance and secondary empirical evidence.

It challenges the assumption that expanding judicial recognition alone is sufficient to ensure meaningful rights protection.

Instead, it emphasizes the importance of examining whether ordinary individuals can obtain remedies without extraordinary financial resources, prolonged litigation or exceptional judicial intervention.

The central analytical distinction is between the formal existence of constitutional rights and the actual institutional capacity to enforce them.

10. Conclusion

- India possesses a comprehensive constitutional framework protecting human dignity, equality and personal liberty.
- Through progressive judicial interpretation, particularly under Article 21, the Supreme Court has recognized substantive procedural fairness, speedy trial, legal assistance, privacy and constitutional remedies for custodial violations.

- These developments represent significant achievements in Indian constitutional jurisprudence.
- Nevertheless, the practical realization of human rights continues to face institutional challenges.
- Undertrial detention, prison overcrowding, judicial pendency, unequal access to legal representation and limitations upon institutional enforcement demonstrate the continuing gap between constitutional commitments and ground realities.
- The evidence does not establish that constitutional protections are merely symbolic. Courts, legal services institutions and human rights bodies perform essential functions and provide important remedies.
- However, their effectiveness is influenced by administrative capacity, economic inequality and institutional accountability.
- The principal challenge is therefore to transform existing legal guarantees into accessible, timely and enforceable protections.
- Meaningful constitutionalism must be assessed not only by the rights recognized in judicial decisions but also by the ability of individuals to exercise those rights in everyday life.

10.1 Principal Recommendations

1. Criminal justice reform: Reduce unnecessary pre-trial detention through improved bail administration, individualized risk assessment and effective implementation of Section 479 BNSS.
2. Judicial efficiency: Strengthen judicial and administrative capacity, improve infrastructure and reduce avoidable procedural delays.
3. Institutional accountability: Improve transparency and compliance mechanisms relating to NHRC recommendations.
4. Effective legal aid: Strengthen the existing Legal Aid Defense Counsel System through professional training, manageable workloads and independent performance evaluation.
5. Prison administration: Improve custodial conditions, healthcare, detention records and independent oversight.
6. Substantive equality: Address socioeconomic and intersectional barriers affecting access to justice.
7. Evidence-based governance: Develop reliable, comparable and disaggregated indicators for evaluating human rights institutions.

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Final Research Finding

The study establishes that the principal challenge to human rights protection in India is the transition from constitutional recognition to effective institutional implementation. Judicial interpretation, legislative safeguards and international human rights commitments provide the legal foundation, but substantive protection depends upon accessible justice, accountable institutions, adequate resources and measurable enforcement outcomes.