

LAWMENTO

Free Resource Series

**Top 50 Landmark
Supreme Court Judgements
Every Law Student Must Know**

A comprehensive quick-reference guide covering constitutional law, fundamental rights, criminal justice, gender rights, environmental law, and more.

Introduction

Supreme Court judgements are not merely legal pronouncements — they are the living Constitution of India. For every law student, practitioner, and competitive exam aspirant, familiarity with landmark judgements is non-negotiable. These cases define fundamental rights, shape governance, protect minorities, uphold democracy, and push boundaries of justice.

This LawMento resource compiles the Top 50 landmark Supreme Court judgements you must know — each summarised with the year, area of law, and its core significance. Use this as your quick-revision companion for exams, moots, interviews, and practice.

How to Use This Guide

- Case Name & Year — For precise citation in exams and arguments.
- Area of Law — Quickly identify the subject-matter cluster.
- Core Significance — One-line takeaway capturing the ratio decidendi.

The 50 Landmark Judgements

No.	Case Name	Year	Area of Law	Core Significance
1	Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala	1973	Constitutional Law	Established the Basic Structure Doctrine — Parliament cannot amend the Constitution so as to destroy its basic features.
2	Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India	1978	Fundamental Rights	Expanded Article 21 — 'personal liberty' includes the right to live with dignity; procedure must be fair, just, and reasonable.
3	Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan	1997	Gender & Labour Law	Laid down binding guidelines (Vishaka Guidelines) for prevention of sexual harassment at the workplace.
4	A.K. Gopalan v. State of Madras	1950	Preventive Detention	First major interpretation of Art. 21 & 22; adopted a 'procedure established by law' standard (later overruled by Maneka Gandhi).
5	Shankari Prasad v. Union of India	1951	Constitutional Amendments	Held that Parliament can amend Fundamental Rights under Art. 368 (later qualified by Golak Nath and overruled by Kesavananda).
6	Golak Nath v. State of Punjab	1967	Constitutional Amendments	Held that Parliament cannot amend Fundamental Rights at all (prospectively overruled by Kesavananda Bharati).

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7	M.C. Mehta v. Union of India (Oleum Gas Leak)	1987	Environmental / Tort Law	Introduced 'Absolute Liability' — an enterprise engaged in hazardous activity is absolutely liable for harm caused, with no exceptions.
8	S.R. Bommai v. Union of India	1994	Federalism / Art. 356	Curtailed arbitrary use of President's Rule; floor test in Assembly is the sole test of majority; secularism is a basic structure.
9	Indra Sawhney v. Union of India	1992	Reservation / Art. 16	Upheld OBC reservations (Mandal Commission) and capped total reservations at 50%; excluded creamy layer.
10	Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India	1984	Bonded Labour / Art. 21	Affirmed that right to live with dignity includes freedom from bonded labour; expanded PIL jurisdiction.
11	State of Madras v. Champakam Dorairajan	1951	Equality / Education	First case to strike down a state law for violating Fundamental Rights; prompted the First Constitutional Amendment.
12	Rudul Shah v. State of Bihar	1983	Habeas Corpus / Compensation	Supreme Court first awarded monetary compensation under Art. 32 for illegal detention — landmark in constitutional remedies.
13	Hussainara Khatoon v. State of Bihar	1979	Rights of Undertrial Prisoners	Recognised speedy trial as a Fundamental Right under Art. 21; led to release of thousands of undertrial prisoners.
14	ADM Jabalpur v. Shivkant Shukla	1976	Emergency / Habeas Corpus	Controversial ruling that suspended habeas corpus during Emergency; later effectively overruled by Maneka Gandhi.
15	Minerva Mills v. Union of India	1980	Basic Structure / Art. 31C	Struck down sections of 42nd Amendment; held that judicial review and harmony between Parts III and IV are basic features.
16	Mohd. Ahmed Khan v. Shah Bano Begum	1985	Muslim Personal Law / Maintenance	Held Muslim women entitled to maintenance beyond iddat under Sec. 125 CrPC; triggered intense political debate.
17	Aruna Shanbaug v. Union of India	2011	Right to Die / Euthanasia	Recognised passive euthanasia as permissible under Art. 21 in cases of persistent vegetative state; later affirmed in Common Cause.
18	Common Cause v. Union of India	2018	Right to Die / Living Will	Recognised the right to die with dignity as a fundamental right; permitted advance medical directives (living wills).
19	Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India	2018	LGBTQ+ Rights	Decriminalised consensual same-sex relations by reading down Sec. 377 IPC — upheld dignity, autonomy, and identity.
20	Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India	2017	Right to Privacy	9-judge bench unanimously declared privacy a Fundamental Right under Art. 21 — cornerstone of data protection law.

No.	Case Name	Year	Area of Law	Core Significance
21	Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation	1985	Right to Livelihood / Art. 21	Held that the right to livelihood is integral to Art. 21; pavement dwellers cannot be evicted without notice.
22	Unni Krishnan v. State of Andhra Pradesh	1993	Right to Education	Held that the right to education up to age 14 flows from Art. 21 — a precursor to the 86th Amendment.
23	T.M.A. Pai Foundation v. State of Karnataka	2002	Minority Educational Rights	11-judge bench ruling defining 'minority' and the extent of autonomy of unaided minority educational institutions.
24	Bachan Singh v. State of Punjab	1980	Death Penalty	Upheld constitutionality of death penalty; laid down 'rarest of rare' doctrine for imposing capital punishment.
25	Machhi Singh v. State of Punjab	1983	Death Penalty	Further elaborated the 'rarest of rare' doctrine and set guidelines on when death penalty is appropriate.
26	State of Punjab v. Ram Lubhaya Bagga	1998	Right to Health / Art. 21	Affirmed that right to health is a Fundamental Right under Art. 21; State is obligated to provide health services.
27	Vineet Narain v. Union of India	1998	CBI Independence / Rule of Law	Held CBI must be independent; directed that investigation not be stalled by political interference ('Hawala case').
28	People's Union for Democratic Rights v. Union of India	1982	Labour Rights / PIL	Expanded PIL scope; held that non-payment of minimum wages is forced labour under Art. 23 — constitutional violation.
29	Fertilizer Corporation Kamgar Union v. Union of India	1981	Locus Standi / PIL	Liberalised standing rules in public interest; any member of public can approach court for constitutional violations.
30	S.P. Gupta v. Union of India	1981	Judicial Independence / Appointments	First Judges case — held executive has primacy in judicial appointments (overruled by Second Judges case).
31	Supreme Court Advocates-on-Record Assn. v. Union of India	1993	Judicial Independence	Second Judges case — established the Collegium system giving judiciary primacy in judicial appointments.
32	In re: Special Reference No. 1 of 1998	1998	Judicial Appointments (Third Judges Case)	Clarified and strengthened the Collegium system; defined 'consultation' as 'concurrence' in judicial appointments.
33	National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India	2014	Transgender Rights	Recognised transgender persons as a 'third gender'; directed affirmative measures for their social and legal inclusion.
34	Indira Gandhi v. Raj Narain	1975	Electoral Law / Free & Fair Elections	Struck down Clause 4 of 39th Amendment; held free and fair elections to be a basic structure of the Constitution.
35	State of Kerala v. N.M. Thomas	1976	Art. 16(4) / Reservation	Held that Art. 16(4) is not an exception to Art. 16(1) — it is an

No.	Case Name	Year	Area of Law	Core Significance
				emphatic facet of equality (broader equality reading).
36	Balaji v. State of Mysore	1963	Reservations / 50% Cap	First case capping reservations at 50% — a rule later reaffirmed in Indra Sawhney and maintained in subsequent jurisprudence.
37	R.C. Cooper v. Union of India (Bank Nationalisation)	1970	Property Rights / Art. 19 & 31	Struck down bank nationalisation ordinance; rejected 'pith and substance' silos — any law can be tested against all rights.
38	Rustom Cavasjee Cooper v. Union of India	1970	Right to Property	Also known as Bank Nationalisation case; Parliament responded with 25th Amendment inserting Art. 31C.
39	I.R. Coelho v. State of Tamil Nadu	2007	Ninth Schedule / Judicial Review	9-judge bench held that laws placed in the Ninth Schedule after April 1973 are subject to basic structure review.
40	Shreya Singhal v. Union of India	2015	Freedom of Speech / Cyber Law	Struck down Sec. 66A IT Act as unconstitutional for being vague and over-broad; major victory for online free speech.
41	Lily Thomas v. Union of India	2013	Electoral Disqualification	Struck down Sec. 8(4) RPA — convicted MPs/MLAs are immediately disqualified; no protection pending appeal.
42	Subramanian Swamy v. Union of India	2016	Defamation / Criminal Law	Upheld constitutional validity of criminal defamation (Secs. 499-500 IPC); reputation is part of Art. 21.
43	Arnesh Kumar v. State of Bihar	2014	Arrest Powers / Sec. 498A IPC	Issued directions to prevent automatic arrest under Sec. 498A IPC without prima facie satisfaction of necessity of custody.
44	Joseph Shine v. Union of India	2018	Adultery / Gender Equality	Struck down Sec. 497 IPC (adultery law) as unconstitutional — discriminatory against women and archaic.
45	Indian Young Lawyers Assn. v. State of Kerala (Sabarimala)	2018	Religion / Gender Equality	Allowed women of all ages to enter Sabarimala temple; held exclusion violates Art. 14, 15, and 17.
46	Suresh Kumar Koushal v. NAZ Foundation	2013	LGBTQ+ Rights	Reversed Delhi HC's reading down of Sec. 377; later overruled unanimously by Navtej Singh Johar (2018).
47	Mohd. Arif v. Supreme Court of India	2014	Death Penalty / Review	5-judge bench held death row convicts must be given oral hearing in review petitions before a 3-judge bench.
48	Prem Shankar Shukla v. Delhi Administration	1980	Prisoner's Rights / Art. 21	Handcuffing of undertrial prisoners is violative of Art. 21 — allowed only in exceptional, documented circumstances.
49	Chameli Singh v. State of U.P.	1996	Right to Shelter / Art. 21	Held that right to shelter is a Fundamental Right under Art. 21,

No.	Case Name	Year	Area of Law	Core Significance
				encompassing adequate living space and safety.
50	State of Uttaranchal v. Balwant Singh Chaufal	2010	PIL / Judicial Discipline	Cautioned against misuse of PIL for personal or political motives; issued guidelines to regulate frivolous PILs.

Key Themes to Remember

1. Basic Structure Doctrine

Kesavananda Bharati (1973) is arguably the most important judgement in Indian constitutional history. It drew the line Parliament cannot cross while amending the Constitution. Subsequent cases like *Minerva Mills* and *I.R. Coelho* reinforced and extended this doctrine.

2. Evolution of Article 21

Trace the journey from *A.K. Gopalan* (narrow procedural reading) → *Maneka Gandhi* (expanded liberty + fairness) → *Olga Tellis* (livelihood) → *Unni Krishnan* (education) → *Puttaswamy* (privacy). Article 21 has become the constitutional home for virtually every unenumerated right.

3. Judicial Independence & Collegium

The Three Judges Cases (*S.P. Gupta*, *SC Advocates-on-Record*, and *Re: Special Reference 1998*) represent the complete arc of how judicial appointments evolved from executive primacy to the Collegium system.

4. Rights & Social Justice

Judgements on gender equality (*Vishaka*, *Joseph Shine*, *Sabarimala*), LGBTQ+ rights (*Navtej Singh Johar*), transgender recognition (*NALSA*), and marginalised communities (*Bandhua Mukti Morcha*, *PUDR*) reflect the Court's role as a counter-majoritarian institution.

5. Criminal Justice & Prisoner Rights

Hussainara Khatoon (speedy trial), *Prem Shankar Shukla* (handcuffing), *Rudul Shah* (compensation for illegal detention), *Arnesh Kumar* (arrest guidelines), and *Bachan Singh* (rarest of rare for death penalty) collectively define the humane boundaries of criminal justice.

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