LEGAL REASONING

Landmark Supreme Court Judgments Every CLAT Aspirant Must Know 2027

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Why Case Law Matters So Much for CLAT

It is about understanding how principles of law have evolved through real disputes that reached the Supreme Court of India. Every year, CLAT passages draw heavily from constitutional law, fundamental rights, and doctrines that were shaped not in Parliament, but in courtrooms.Landmark Supreme Court Judgments..

Part 1: The Basic Structure and Constitutional Amendment Cases

1. A.K. Gopalan v. State of Madras (1950)

Aspect	Details
Bench	6-Judge Bench
Petitioner	A.K. Gopalan (Communist Leader)
Issue	Validity of detention under the **Preventive Detention Act, 1950**; challenged as violating **Articles 19, 21, and 22**
Key Holding 1	Fundamental Rights operate in **separate, watertight compartments (silos)** — no interrelationship between Arts. 19, 21, 22
Key Holding 2	**"Procedure established by law"** (Art. 21) = any procedure enacted by a **validly passed statute**, regardless of fairness/reasonableness
Approach	Narrow, literal, compartmentalized interpretation of Fundamental Rights
Rejected Argument	That Art. 21 procedure must also be **"fair, just and reasonable"** (rejected — that came later)
Duration of Precedent	Held the field for **~28 years**
Overruled By	***Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India (1978)*** — established interconnection of Arts. 14, 19, 21 & "fair, just, reasonable procedure"
Significance for CLAT	Classic contrast case with *Maneka Gandhi* — tests evolution of Art. 21 interpretation

Quick Memory Hooks:

- "Procedure established by law" ≠ "Due process of law" (US concept)
- Silos/Compartments approach
- Overruled after ~28 years by Maneka Gandhi (1978)

2. I.C. Golaknath v. State of Punjab (1967)

Aspect	Details
Bench	11-Judge Bench (Narrow Majority, 6:5)

Issue	Can Parliament amend **Fundamental Rights (Part III)** under **Article 368**?
Key Holding	Parliament **cannot** amend/abridge Fundamental Rights
Reasoning	A constitutional amendment = **"law"** under **Article 13(2)**; hence must comply with Fundamental Rights
Effect	**Froze** Parliament's amending power over Part III
Overruled Earlier Rulings	*Shankari Prasad (1951)* & *Sajjan Singh (1965)* — which had held amendments were NOT "law" under Art. 13
Parliament's Response	**24th Constitutional Amendment (1971)** — declared a constitutional amendment is **not "law"** under Art. 13, restoring full amending power, including over Fundamental Rights
Significance	Set the stage for ***Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala (1973)*** — birth of the **Basic Structure Doctrine**

Quick Memory Hooks:

- 11 judges, 6:5 split
- Amendment = "Law" under Art. 13 ⇒ FRs frozen
- 24th Amendment reversed this
- Direct precursor to Kesavananda Bharati (1973)

3. Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala (1973)

Aspect	Details
Case Name	Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala
Year	1973
Bench	13-judge bench (largest ever in SC)
Verdict	7:6 majority
Chief Justice	S.M. Sikri

Petitioner	Swami Kesavananda Bharati, head of Edneer Mutt, Kerala
Issue	Challenge to Kerala Land Reforms Act; scope of Parliament's power to amend Fundamental Rights under Article 368
Key Question	Can Parliament amend any/every part of the Constitution, including Fundamental Rights?
Held	Parliament has wide power to amend the Constitution under Article 368, **but cannot alter its "Basic Structure"**
Doctrine Established	**Basic Structure Doctrine**
Basic Structure Includes	Supremacy of Constitution, Rule of Law, Separation of Powers, Judicial Review, Federalism, Secularism, Sovereign democratic republic, Unity & integrity of nation, Parliamentary system, Free & fair elections (illustrative, not exhaustive)
Cases Overruled	Golaknath v. State of Punjab (1967) partially overruled
Significance	Limits Parliament's amending power; protects core constitutional values from being destroyed by amendment
Later Applied In	Indira Nehru Gandhi v. Raj Narain (1975), Minerva Mills v. Union of India (1980)

4. Indira Nehru Gandhi v. Raj Narain (1975)

Aspect	Details
Case Name	Indira Nehru Gandhi v. Raj Narain
Citation	AIR 1975 SC 2299
Year	1975
Context	Decided during the Emergency period
Bench	5-judge Constitution Bench

Background	Raj Narain challenged PM Indira Gandhi's election victory on grounds of electoral malpractice
Amendment Involved	39th Constitutional Amendment
Purpose of Amendment	Placed election disputes of PM/Speaker beyond judicial review (added Article 329A)
Held	39th Amendment (Art. 329A) struck down as unconstitutional
Reason	Violated **Basic Structure** — damaged free & fair elections, rule of law, and separation of powers
Doctrine Applied	Basic Structure Doctrine (from Kesavananda Bharati)
Significance	First major real-world application of Basic Structure Doctrine; proved it had practical "teeth," not just theory
Key Basic Structure Elements Reaffirmed	Free & fair elections, Rule of law, Judicial review, Separation of powers

5. Minerva Mills v. Union of India (1980)

Aspect	Details
Bench	5-Judge Constitutional Bench
Issue	Constitutional validity of the **42nd Amendment** provisions
42nd Amendment Sought To	(1) Give **DPSP (Part IV) primacy** over **Fundamental Rights (Part III)**; (2) Place constitutional amendments **beyond judicial review**
Key Holding 1	Struck down clause giving DPSPs unconditional primacy over Fundamental Rights
Key Holding 2	**Harmonious balance** between Part III (Fundamental Rights) and Part IV (DPSP) is itself part of the **Basic Structure**
Key Holding 3	**Limited amending power** of Parliament (Art. 368) is a basic feature — it **cannot be expanded into unlimited power**

Key Holding 4	Struck down provision excluding constitutional amendments from **judicial review**
Core Principle Reinforced	**Judicial Review** is a non-negotiable, core feature of the Basic Structure
Builds On	*Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala (1973)* — Basic Structure Doctrine
Significance for CLAT	Tests understanding of Fundamental Rights vs DPSP relationship + limits on amending power

Quick Memory Hooks:

- "A limited amending power cannot be made unlimited" (famous line)
- Harmony of Part III + Part IV = Basic Structure
- Judicial Review = Basic Structure feature

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Part 2: Article 21 and the Expansion of Personal Liberty

6. Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India (1978)

Point	Details
Case Name	Maneka Gandhi vs Union of India
Citation	AIR 1978 SC 597; (1978) 1 SCC 248
Year	1978
Bench	7-Judge Constitutional Bench
Key Judges	M.H. Beg (CJI), Y.V. Chandrachud, P.N. Bhagwati, V.R. Krishna Iyer, N.L. Untwalia, S. Murtaza Fazal Ali, P.S. Kailasam
Petitioner	Maneka Gandhi (journalist, wife of Sanjay Gandhi)
Respondent	Union of India

Facts	Govt ne bina koi reason bataye Maneka Gandhi ka passport impound kar liya tha "public interest" ke naam par, under Section 10(3)(c) of Passport Act, 1967
Issue	Kya "procedure established by law" (Article 21) sirf koi bhi procedure ho sakta hai, ya usko fair, just aur reasonable bhi hona chahiye?
Article Involved	Article 21 (Right to Life & Personal Liberty), Article 14, Article 19
Judgment	SC ne kaha ki Article 21 ka "procedure established by law" reasonable, fair aur just hona chahiye — arbitrary nahi ho sakta
Golden Triangle Doctrine	Article 14, 19 aur 21 ab interconnected maane gaye — koi law in teeno ko satisfy kiye bina valid nahi hogi
Overruled	A.K. Gopalan vs State of Madras (1950) ka narrow interpretation of Article 21
Significance	Article 21 ka scope expand hua — Right to Life ab sirf animal existence nahi, balki dignified life ka right ban gaya
Later Impact	Isse aage aur rights derive hue — Right to Privacy, Right to Travel Abroad, Right to Livelihood, etc.

7. Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation (1985)

Aspect	Details
Case Name	Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation
Citation	AIR 1986 SC 180
Year	1985
Bench	5-judge Constitution Bench
Also Known As	"Pavement Dwellers Case"
Petitioners	Pavement and slum dwellers of Bombay (journalist Olga Tellis and others on their behalf)
Issue	Whether eviction of pavement dwellers violated their **Right to Life** under Article 21

Petitioners' Argument	Right to life includes **right to livelihood**; eviction would deprive them of livelihood, violating Art. 21
Held	Right to life under Art. 21 **includes right to livelihood** — "no person can live without the means of living"
But Also Held	This right is **not absolute**; can be curtailed by a **fair, just, and reasonable procedure established by law** (Art. 21 read with Art. 19)
Final Outcome	Evictions **permitted**, subject to safeguards (reasonable notice, alternative provisions, etc.)
Doctrine/Principle	Expanded interpretation of Article 21; **procedural due process** requirement (fair, just & reasonable)
Significance	Landmark case widening scope of Art. 21 to include livelihood; balanced individual rights vs. public interest
Related Cases	Maneka Gandhi v. UOI (1978) — origin of "fair, just & reasonable" procedure test

Quick line: *"Right to live includes right to livelihood — but even that right bows to fair procedure."*

8. Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India (2017)

Aspect	Details
Bench	9-judge bench, Supreme Court of India
Arose from	Challenges to the Aadhaar scheme
Key Holding	Right to Privacy is a Fundamental Right
Constitutional Basis	Article 21 (Right to Life & Personal Liberty) + other Part III freedoms
Scope of Privacy	Informational privacy, bodily autonomy, decisional privacy
Cases Overruled	*M.P. Sharma* (1954) & *Kharak Singh* (1962)
Verdict	Unanimous (9-0)

Significance	Foundation for data protection & surveillance law
Later Impact	Paved way for *Navtej Singh Johar v. UOI* (decriminalizing Sec. 377)
CLAT Relevance	Tests personal autonomy, privacy jurisprudence, constitutional interpretation

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Part 3: Equality, Reservation, and Social Justice

9. Indra Sawhney v. Union of India (1992) — The Mandal Commission Case

Aspect	Details
Bench	9-Judge Constitutional Bench
Issue	Validity of 27% OBC reservation in government jobs (Mandal Commission recommendation)
Key Holding 1	27% reservation for OBCs upheld as constitutionally valid
Key Holding 2	Introduced the **"Creamy Layer"** concept — socially/economically advanced members of backward classes excluded from reservation benefits
Key Holding 3	Total reservations (SC + ST + OBC) should **not exceed 50%**, except in extraordinary circumstances
Rationale	Balances the right to equality (Art. 14) with affirmative action (Art. 16(4))
Significance for CLAT	Foundation for later cases on reservation ceiling & EWS quota debate (e.g., *Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India*, 2022)

Quick Memory Hooks:

- 27% OBC Upheld
- Creamy Layer Introduced
- 50% Ceiling Established

- 9-Judge Bench

10. M. Nagaraj v. Union of India (2006) and Jarnail Singh v. Lachhmi Narain Gupta (2018)

Aspect	M. Nagaraj v. Union of India	Jarnail Singh v. Lachhmi Narain Gupta
Citation	AIR 2007 SC 71	(2018) 10 SCC 396
Year	2006	2018
Bench	5-judge Constitution Bench	5-judge Constitution Bench
Issue	Validity of 77th, 81st, 82nd & 85th Amendments enabling reservation in promotions for SC/ST	Whether "creamy layer" exclusion applies to SC/ST for promotion reservations
Held	Upheld constitutional validity of reservation in promotions	Reaffirmed Nagaraj; "creamy layer" concept applies to SC/ST too
Conditions Laid Down	State must collect **quantifiable data** on: (i) backwardness, (ii) inadequacy of representation, (iii) impact on administrative efficiency	Clarified no need for separate "backwardness" data collection for SC/ST (unlike Nagaraj's requirement)
Key Concept	Reservation in promotion is an "enabling provision," not a fundamental right	Extended **Indra Sawhney's** creamy layer principle (earlier only for OBCs) to SC/ST
Significance	Set conditions/limits on State's power to provide promotion quotas	Refined & modified Nagaraj; removed the backwardness-data requirement as it contradicted SC/ST's constitutional presumption of backwardness
Related Doctrine	Basic Structure — equality (Art. 14, 16) balanced with reservation	Creamy layer exclusion — ensures benefits reach the truly disadvantaged within SC/ST

Relation Between Cases	Laid foundation with strict conditions	Refined framework by removing one condition & extending creamy layer

Quick line: *"Nagaraj set the conditions, Jarnail Singh fine-tuned them by adding creamy layer to SC/ST."*

Part 4: Personal Liberty Meets Personal Law and Secularism

11. Mohd. Ahmed Khan v. Shah Bano Begum (1985)

Aspect	Details
Case	Mohd. Ahmed Khan v. Shah Bano Begum (1985)
Popular Name	Shah Bano Case
Citation	1985 SCR (3) 844
Bench	5 judges (Constitution Bench)
Issue	Whether a divorced Muslim woman is entitled to maintenance under Section 125 CrPC beyond the iddat period
Core Holding	Section 125 CrPC is a secular provision, applicable to all citizens irrespective of religion; Shah Bano entitled to maintenance beyond iddat
Reasoning	CrPC provision overrides personal law where there is conflict, to prevent vagrancy/destitution
Aftermath	Political controversy Parliament enacted Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986
Effect of 1986 Act	Diluted judgment's effect specifically for Muslim women (shifted maintenance burden partly to Waqf Boards/relatives post-iddat)
Significance	Cornerstone for debates on Uniform Civil Code (Art. 44), personal law vs. secular law, religious freedom vs. gender justice

Related Later Case	Daniel Latifi v. Union of India (2001) — upheld constitutionality of 1986 Act by interpreting it harmoniously with Section 125 CrPC principles

12. S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994)

Aspect	Details
Case	S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994)
Bench	9 judges
Issue	Scope of President's Rule under Article 356
Core Holding	Art. 356 power subject to judicial review
Floor Test	Majority to be tested on floor of House, not Governor's subjective satisfaction
Basic Structure	Secularism affirmed as part of Basic Structure
Significance	Landmark on federalism & Centre-State relations; checks misuse of Art. 356

Part 5: Gender Justice and Personal Autonomy

13. Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan (1997)

Aspect	Details
Case Name	Vishaka & Ors. v. State of Rajasthan & Ors.
Citation	AIR 1997 SC 3011
Bench	J.S. Verma CJI, Sujata Manohar J., B.N. Kirpal J.
Background Facts	Bhanwari Devi, a social worker in Rajasthan, was gang-raped for attempting to stop a child marriage; absence of workplace sexual harassment law prompted a PIL by women's groups

Issue	Whether sexual harassment at the workplace violates fundamental rights, and whether courts can lay down guidelines absent legislation
Constitutional Provisions Invoked	Articles 14 (Equality), 15, 19(1)(g) (Right to practise any profession), 21 (Right to Life & Personal Dignity)
International Law Used	CEDAW (Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) — read into domestic law via Article 51(c) & 253
Key Holding	Sexual harassment at workplace is a violation of fundamental rights; guidelines to have force of law until Parliament legislates
Doctrine Applied	Judicial Activism / Guidelines under Article 32 (binding under Article 141) to fill legislative vacuum
Vishaka Guidelines (Core Features)	1. Duty of employer to prevent harassment 2. Definition of sexual harassment 3. Complaints Committee (headed by a woman) 4. Preventive steps & awareness 5. Third-party involvement mechanism
Superseded By	Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013
Significance for CLAT	Judicial law-making, PIL jurisprudence, gender justice, use of international conventions in domestic courts, interplay between judiciary and legislature

One-line takeaway: *Vishaka* shows the Supreme Court using its constitutional and international-law powers to create binding workplace-safety norms when Parliament had failed to act — a textbook case of "judicial legislation" later formalized by statute.

14. Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India (2018)

Aspect	Details
Case Name	Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India
Year	2018

Court	Supreme Court of India
Bench Strength	5-judge Constitution Bench
Decision	Unanimous
Provision Challenged	Section 377, Indian Penal Code (criminalized "carnal intercourse against the order of nature")
Holding	Section 377 unconstitutional to the extent it criminalized **consensual** sexual conduct between adults of the same sex
Articles Violated	Article 14 (Equality), Article 15 (Non-discrimination), Article 19 (Freedom of expression), Article 21 (Right to life, privacy & dignity)
Case Overruled	Suresh Kumar Koushal v. Naz Foundation (2013)
Key Precedent Relied On	K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India (2017) — Right to Privacy
Core Doctrines Invoked	Constitutional morality, Doctrine of proportionality, Transformative constitutionalism, Right to dignity & autonomy
Significance	Landmark judgment in LGBTQ+ rights jurisprudence; decriminalized consensual homosexual acts; reaffirmed evolving standards of equality and dignity

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Part 6: Free Speech and the Digital Age

15. Shreya Singhal v. Union of India (2015)

Aspect	Details
Case	Shreya Singhal v. Union of India (2015)
Bench	2 judges
Issue	Constitutional validity of Section 66A, IT Act, 2000

Provision Challenged	Criminalized sending "offensive" messages via communication services
Core Holding	Section 66A struck down in its entirety
Grounds	Unconstitutionally vague; chilling effect on free speech; failed reasonable restriction test under Art. 19(2)
Constitutional Basis	Violated Article 19(1)(a) — freedom of speech and expression
Key Doctrines	Doctrine of vagueness, "Chilling Effect" doctrine
Significance	Landmark on free speech in digital era; balance between speech and reasonable restrictions; relevant to social media/internet governance debates

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Part 7: Environmental Jurisprudence

M.C. Mehta v. Union of India (Multiple Cases, 1980s onwards)

Aspect	Details
Petitioner	M.C. Mehta (Environmental Lawyer) — series of PILs
Field of Law	Environmental Law, Tort Law, Constitutional Law
Key Case	**Oleum Gas Leak Case (1986)** — Shriram Foods & Fertilizers gas leak, Delhi
Doctrine 1	**Absolute Liability** — enterprises in hazardous/inherently dangerous activities are liable **without any exceptions**
Contrast	Departs from **Strict Liability** (*Rylands v. Fletcher*, English case) which allowed exceptions (act of God, third-party act, etc.)
Doctrine 2	**Polluter Pays Principle** — polluter bears cost of environmental damage & remediation

Doctrine 3	**Precautionary Principle** — preventive action even before scientific certainty of harm
Constitutional Impact	Expanded **Article 21** to include **Right to a Clean & Healthy Environment**
Procedural Tool	Demonstrated strength of **Public Interest Litigation (PIL)** as judicial activism
Significance for CLAT	Frequently tested in combined Tort + Constitutional Law passages

Quick Memory Hooks:

- Oleum Gas Leak (1986) → Absolute Liability
- No exceptions ≠ Rylands v. Fletcher (Strict Liability had exceptions)
- Article 21 → Clean Environment
- PIL → Judicial Activism tool

Part 8: Religion, History, and Constitutional Adjudication

17. M. Siddiq v. Mahant Suresh Das (2019) — The Ayodhya Judgment

Aspect	Details
Bench	5-Judge Constitutional Bench (Unanimous)
Issue	Title dispute over Ram Janmabhoomi–Babri Masjid land, Ayodhya
Key Holding 1	Disputed land handed over to a **Trust** for construction of a **Ram Temple**
Key Holding 2	Alternative **5-acre land** to be allotted to **Sunni Waqf Board** for mosque construction
Basis of Decision	Decided on **possession and title (evidence law)**, not on religious belief

On 1992 Demolition	Court held the **demolition of Babri Masjid was unlawful**
Legal Areas Tested	Evidence Law, Property Law, Limits of Judicial Adjudication in religious-historical disputes
Significance for CLAT	Tests ability to separate legal reasoning (title/possession) from religious/political narrative

Quick Memory Hooks:

- 5 Judges, Unanimous
- Title Ram Temple Trust
- 5 acres Sunni Waqf Board
- Demolition (1992) = Unlawful, but didn't affect title outcome

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How to Use These Cases for CLAT Preparation

Simply reading case names and one-line summaries will not be enough to crack CLAT's legal reasoning section, which tests application rather than recall. Here is a more effective approach:

Understand the principle, not just the outcome. For every case, be able to state the legal principle in one sentence, independent of the specific facts. For instance, the principle from Maneka Gandhi is not "Maneka Gandhi's passport was returned"; it is "procedure under Article 21 must be fair, just, and reasonable."

Practice applying principles to new facts. CLAT passages will give you unfamiliar fact patterns and ask you to apply a stated principle. Practice this skill by taking each case above and inventing a new hypothetical fact situation, then asking yourself how the principle would apply.

Build thematic clusters. Group cases by theme, such as basic structure, Article 21 expansion, reservation law, gender justice, and free speech, as done in this blog. This makes revision faster and helps you cross-reference related cases during the exam.

Track how doctrines evolved over time. Notice how A.K. Gopalan was overturned by Maneka Gandhi, how Golaknath was modified by Kesavananda Bharati, and how Suresh Kumar Koushal was overruled by Navtej Singh Johar. Understanding this

evolution helps you appreciate that constitutional law is a living, evolving body of interpretation, not a fixed set of rules.

Stay updated with recent developments. The Supreme Court continues to deliver judgments that build upon or refine these principles, particularly around privacy, reservation, and free speech. Make it a habit to read a good newspaper's legal coverage or a monthly legal current affairs digest to catch new judgments as they are delivered.

Good luck with your preparation, and remember that consistent revision of these core cases, combined with regular practice of application-based questions, is the surest route to scoring well in CLAT's legal reasoning section.

