

LEGAL REASONING

Landmark Supreme Court Judgments Every CLAT Aspirant Must Know 2027

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IMPORTANT DATES FOR CLAT 2027
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	APPLICATION STARTS Online registration begins	1 AUGUST 2026
	APPLICATION ENDS Last date to apply online	31 OCTOBER 2026
	ADMIT CARD RELEASE Admit card available for download	1 DECEMBER 2026
	CLAT 2027 EXAM CLAT 2027 Examination Date	7 DECEMBER 2026
	RESULT DECLARATION CLAT 2027 Result Announcement	JANUARY 2027

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Why Case Law Matters So Much for CLAT

If you are preparing for CLAT, you already know that the Legal Reasoning section is not about memorizing bare statutes. 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

Knowing the *facts*, the *issue*, the *holding*, and above all the *principle* of a landmark case gives you three big advantages. First, it helps you solve legal reasoning passages faster because you can spot the underlying principle even when the passage uses unfamiliar facts. Second, it builds your general knowledge and current

affairs base, since many GK questions revolve around constitutional history. Third, it prepares you for the kind of legal thinking you will need in law school itself, where case law is the primary source of learning. **Landmark Supreme Court Judgments** This blog walks you through the most important Supreme Court judgments that shape Indian constitutional and legal thought, organized by theme so that you can revise them systematically rather than as a random list of names and years.

Part 1: The Basic Structure and Constitutional Amendment Cases

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

This was one of the earliest cases to test the scope of fundamental rights. A.K. Gopalan, a communist leader, was detained under the Preventive Detention Act, 1950, and challenged his detention as violating his rights under Articles 19, 21, and 22 of the Constitution. The Supreme Court took a narrow, compartmentalized view, holding that each fundamental right operates in its own silo and that “procedure established by law” under Article 21 simply meant any procedure enacted by a validly passed statute, regardless of whether that procedure was fair or reasonable. This restrictive interpretation held the field for nearly three decades until it was overturned. For CLAT purposes, this case is important because it shows you the starting point of Indian rights jurisprudence, and it sets up the dramatic shift that came later in Maneka Gandhi’s case.



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

Golaknath asked a fundamental question: can Parliament amend fundamental rights under Article 368? The Supreme Court, by a narrow majority, held that Parliament could not amend Part III of the Constitution to take away or abridge fundamental rights, treating a constitutional amendment as equivalent to “law” under Article 13. This decision was controversial because it froze the amending power of Parliament with respect to fundamental rights. Landmark Supreme Court Judgments I.C.

Golaknath v. State of Punjab (1967) must know

Parliament responded with the 24th Amendment, which declared that a constitutional amendment is not “law” within the meaning of Article 13, thereby

restoring its power to amend any part of the Constitution, including fundamental rights. This tug of war set the stage for the most significant constitutional case in Indian history. CLAT 2025 – CALENDAR

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

This is, without exaggeration, the most important case in Indian constitutional history, decided by the largest bench ever assembled in the Supreme Court, comprising thirteen judges. The dispute began over Kerala's land reform laws affecting the Edneer Mutt, headed by Swami Kesavananda Bharati, but the case grew into a referendum on the scope of Parliament's amending power.

By a wafer-thin majority of seven to six, the Court held that while Parliament has wide powers to amend the Constitution under Article 368, including fundamental rights, it cannot alter the "basic structure" or the fundamental framework of the Constitution. This gave birth to the **Basic Structure Doctrine**, one of the most significant judicial innovations anywhere in the world. Elements considered part of the basic structure include the supremacy of the Constitution, the rule of law, separation of powers, judicial review, federalism, secularism, and free and fair elections, among others. The exact contents of the basic structure are not exhaustively listed and continue to be determined case by case.

For CLAT aspirants, this case is a goldmine. It teaches you about the balance between constitutional flexibility and constitutional identity, and it appears repeatedly in passages related to amendments, judicial review, and parliamentary sovereignty.

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

Decided during the Emergency period, this case tested the 39th Amendment, which sought to place the election of the Prime Minister beyond judicial scrutiny. The Supreme Court struck down this amendment, holding that it violated the basic structure of the Constitution by damaging free and fair elections and the rule of law. This case is a direct and powerful application of the basic structure doctrine established in Kesavananda Bharati, showing that the doctrine had real teeth and was not merely theoretical.

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

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This case examined the 42nd Amendment, which had attempted to give Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV) primacy over Fundamental Rights (Part III) and to place constitutional amendments entirely beyond judicial review. The Supreme Court struck down these provisions, holding that the harmonious balance between Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles is itself part of the basic structure, and that limited amending power is a feature of the Constitution that cannot itself be made unlimited. This case reinforces the idea that judicial review is a core, non-negotiable feature of the Indian constitutional scheme.

CLAT



HOW TO PREPARE GK FOR CLAT

Strong GK = Strong CLAT Score!



STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE



1. READ DAILY

Read newspapers like The Hindu / Indian Express and focus on National, International, Economy, Legal & Sports updates.



2. FOLLOW MONTHLY CURRENT AFFAIRS

Use monthly current affairs magazines or reliable PDFs. Revise important events regularly.



3. COVER IMPORTANT TOPICS

Polity, Geography, History, Economy, Environment, Science & Technology, Awards, Books & Authors, Sports and more.



4. MAKE SHORT NOTES

Prepare concise notes and revise them weekly. Use charts, tables & timelines.



5. PRACTICE & REVISION

Solve GK quizzes, PYQs and mock tests. Revision is the key to retention!



TIPS TO REMEMBER

- Be consistent
- Focus on quality, not quantity
- Revise regularly
- Stay updated, stay ahead!

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Good GK can be your game-changer in CLAT!

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Part 2: Article 21 and the Expansion of Personal Liberty

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

If Kesavananda Bharati is the most important case for constitutional amendments, Maneka Gandhi is the most important case for fundamental rights and personal liberty. The Government had impounded Maneka Gandhi's passport without giving her a reason or a hearing. She challenged this under Articles 14, 19, and 21.

The Supreme Court overruled the narrow approach of A.K. Gopalan and held that the "procedure established by law" under Article 21 must be fair, just, and reasonable, not arbitrary or oppressive. It further held that Articles 14, 19, and 21 are not mutually exclusive but form an interconnected web, meaning any law depriving a person of life or liberty must also satisfy the tests of reasonableness under Articles 14 and 19. This case effectively imported the American concept of "due process" into Indian law, even though that exact phrase does not appear in Article 21.

This single judgment transformed Article 21 from a narrow procedural safeguard into the single most expansively interpreted provision in the Constitution, from which rights like the right to livelihood, right to privacy, right to a clean environment, right to legal aid, and right to a speedy trial have all been derived in later cases.

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

Pavement dwellers in Bombay challenged their eviction, arguing that it violated their right to livelihood under Article 21. The Supreme Court agreed that the right to life includes the right to livelihood, since no person can live without the means of living.

However, it also held that this right can be curtailed by a fair, just, and reasonable procedure established by law, and ultimately permitted the eviction subject to certain safeguards. This case is a good example of how a right can be recognized in principle while still being balanced against competing public interests.

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

This landmark nine-judge bench decision arose out of challenges to the Aadhaar scheme, but its scope went far beyond Aadhaar. The Supreme Court unanimously held that the **right to privacy is a fundamental right**, protected as an intrinsic part of the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21, and also flowing from the freedoms guaranteed under Part III of the Constitution.

The judgment traced privacy to encompass informational privacy, bodily autonomy, and decisional privacy, and it overruled earlier decisions such as M.P. Sharma and Kharak Singh, which had held that privacy was not a fundamental right. This case is frequently tested in CLAT because of its implications for data protection, surveillance, personal autonomy, and its role as the foundation for later judgments like Navtej Singh Johar.

Part 3: Equality, Reservation, and Social Justice

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

This case examined the constitutional validity of reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in government jobs, following the implementation of the Mandal Commission report. A nine-judge bench upheld the twenty-seven percent reservation for OBCs but introduced the crucial concept of the “**creamy layer**”, holding that economically and socially advanced members within a backward class must be excluded from reservation benefits.

The Court also held that total reservations, including SC, ST, and OBC quotas, should generally not exceed **fifty percent**, except in extraordinary circumstances. This fifty percent ceiling has become a recurring theme in later reservation litigation and is essential knowledge for CLAT, especially given ongoing debates around reservation limits and the EWS quota.

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

These cases dealt with reservations in promotions for SC/ST employees. Nagaraj upheld the constitutional validity of provisions enabling reservation in promotions but subjected them to conditions like the collection of quantifiable data on backwardness. Jarnail Singh later clarified that the “creamy layer” concept applies even to SCs and STs for the purpose of promotions, refining the reservation framework further.

Part 4: Personal Liberty Meets Personal Law and Secularism

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

Popularly known as the Shah Bano case, this judgment dealt with whether a Muslim woman was entitled to maintenance under Section 125 of the Code of Criminal Procedure even after the expiry of the iddat period following divorce. The Supreme Court held that Section 125 CrPC, being a secular provision applicable to all citizens regardless of religion, entitled Shah Bano to maintenance beyond the iddat period. The judgment created significant political controversy and led Parliament to pass the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986, to some extent diluting the judgment’s effect for Muslim women specifically. This case remains a cornerstone for discussions on the Uniform Civil Code, the relationship between personal laws and secular criminal law, and the tension between religious freedom and gender justice.

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

This case arose from the arbitrary dismissal of state governments and imposition of President’s Rule under Article 356. The Supreme Court held that the exercise of power under Article 356 is subject to judicial review, and that the majority of a state government must be tested on the floor of the House rather than being decided by the Governor’s subjective satisfaction. The judgment also affirmed secularism as part of the basic structure of the Constitution. This case is central to any discussion of Centre-State relations and federalism in the Indian Constitution.

Part 5: Gender Justice and Personal Autonomy

13. Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan (1997)

This case arose from the brutal gang rape of a social worker, Bhanwari Devi, in Rajasthan while she was trying to prevent child marriage. In the absence of any specific legislation on workplace sexual harassment at the time, the Supreme Court invoked Articles 14, 19, and 21, along with India's obligations under international conventions like CEDAW, to lay down the **Vishaka Guidelines**, which required employers to establish complaint mechanisms and take preventive measures against sexual harassment at the workplace.

These guidelines remained the law of the land until Parliament enacted the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013. This case is a brilliant example of judicial activism filling a legislative vacuum and is a favourite for CLAT passages on gender justice, statutory interpretation, and the role of international law in domestic adjudication.

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

This case challenged Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalized "carnal intercourse against the order of nature," effectively criminalizing consensual homosexual acts between adults. A five-judge bench unanimously held that Section 377, insofar as it criminalized consensual sexual conduct between adults of the same sex, was unconstitutional, being violative of Articles 14, 15, 19, and 21.

The Court overruled its earlier decision in *Suresh Kumar Koushal v. Naz Foundation* (2013), which had upheld Section 377, and drew heavily on the right to privacy recognized in *Puttaswamy*. The judgment is a landmark in LGBTQ+ rights jurisprudence and is frequently referenced in questions about constitutional morality, the doctrine of proportionality, and evolving standards of dignity and equality.



Part 6: Free Speech and the Digital Age

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

This case challenged Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, which criminalized sending “offensive” messages through communication services, a term so vague and broad that it was frequently misused to arrest people for social media posts. The Supreme Court struck down Section 66A in its entirety, holding that it was unconstitutionally vague and had a chilling effect on free speech protected under Article 19(1)(a), failing to meet the reasonable restriction standards of Article 19(2). This case is essential for understanding the doctrine of vagueness, the “chilling effect” concept, and the balance between free speech and reasonable restrictions in the digital era, a theme that continues to be relevant with ongoing debates about social media regulation and internet governance.

Part 7: Environmental Jurisprudence

16. M.C. Mehta v. Union of India (multiple cases, from the 1980s onwards)

Environmental lawyer M.C. Mehta filed a series of public interest litigations that fundamentally shaped Indian environmental law. Through these cases, the Supreme Court developed doctrines such as the “**polluter pays**” principle, the “**precautionary principle**,” and the concept of **absolute liability** for hazardous industries (as opposed to the traditional “strict liability” rule from the English case of Rylands v. Fletcher). The Oleum Gas Leak case (1986) is particularly notable for establishing absolute liability without any exceptions for enterprises engaged in inherently dangerous activities.

These cases also expanded Article 21 to include the right to a clean and healthy environment, and they demonstrate the power of Public Interest Litigation (PIL) as a tool for judicial activism in India. CLAT often tests these doctrines in the context of tort law and constitutional law passages together.

Part 8: Religion, History, and Constitutional Adjudication

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

This case resolved the decades-long Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid title dispute. A unanimous five-judge bench held that the disputed land should be handed over to a trust for the construction of a Ram temple, while directing the government to allot

alternative land to the Sunni Waqf Board for the construction of a mosque. The Court based its decision primarily on evidence related to possession and title rather than pure religious belief, while also acknowledging that the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 was an unlawful act.

This case is significant for CLAT not just for its outcome but for its handling of complex questions involving evidence law, property law, and the limits of judicial adjudication over matters with deep religious and historical dimensions.

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.

Conclusion

These seventeen judgments represent the backbone of Indian constitutional law and are indispensable for any serious CLAT aspirant. They are not just history to be memorized; they are living principles that continue to shape how courts, legislators, and citizens understand rights and duties in India today. Master the facts, the reasoning, and above all the underlying principle of each case, and you will find that legal reasoning passages, which often seem intimidating at first glance, become far more approachable and even enjoyable.

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.

