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Protecting Minority Rights in India: An Analysis of the Indian Constitution & Judicial Interpretations

VINEET SAMUEL PANDA¹

ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the safeguarding of minority rights in India, emphasizing the Indian Constitution's role & judicial interpretations in protecting these rights. The paper opens with a discussion on the historical backdrop of minority rights in India, encompassing the struggles encountered by minority groups within the nation. Subsequently, it offers an analysis of the pertinent clauses of the Indian Constitution which affords essential rights to the minorities, namely, the right to equality, freedom of religion, cultural & educational rights. The paper further examines the judiciary's role in interpreting & enforcing these provisions, emphasizing significant judicial decisions that have influenced the dialogue on minority rights in India. The paper contends that although the Indian Constitution establishes a robust framework for safeguarding minority rights, the actualization of these measures has been uneven & inconsistent. It highlights multiple obstacles in upholding minority rights, such as the absence of political determination, insufficient inclusion of minority groups in decision-making roles, & the sway of majoritarian political dynamics. It also assesses the effectiveness of legal provisions & affirmative action policies designed for the upliftment & empowerment of the marginalised groups. Additionally, the study examines the role of the Indian judiciary in interpreting constitutional provisions related to minority rights. It evaluates significant judicial decisions that have influenced the jurisprudence of minority rights, exploring the development of legal doctrines & precedents in this area. The paper examines current challenges & discussions related to the protection of minority rights in India. It explores issues like communal tensions, religious intolerance, discrimination, & socio-economic inequalities that hinder the fulfilment of minority rights. It also critically assesses the efficacy of institutional frameworks & government policies in tackling these issues. Additionally, the paper provides a critical assessment of the role of state institutions, civil society groups, & international human rights entities in promoting minority rights in India. The paper further emphasizes the importance of civil society organizations & social movements in championing the rights of minority groups & advocating for increased accountability & transparency in the enforcement of constitutional provisions. It delves into constitutional provisions, judicial interpretations, & current

¹ Author is a student at ICAFI Law School, IFHE Hyderabad, India.

realities to present a detailed perspective on the challenges & prospects for the complete fulfilment of minority rights in the context of India's diverse democracy.

The paper concludes with recommendations to enhance the safeguarding of minority rights in India. These recommendations highlight the necessity for increased political determination & dedication, the advancement of inclusive & participatory decision-making processes, & the fortification of institutions tasked with protecting minority rights. Additionally, the paper underscores the importance of persistent involvement & advocacy by civil society organizations & social movements to promote & protect minority rights in India.

Keywords: *Religious minorities, Minority Rights, Protection of Minority Rights, Threats Against Minorities, Role of Judiciary.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The safeguarding of minority rights is crucial in any democratic society, especially in a country as diverse & pluralistic as India. Adopted in 1950, the Indian Constitution ensures fundamental rights for all citizens, including minorities, & establishes specific provisions for their protection. It acknowledges the significance of preserving the cultural, linguistic, & religious identities of minority groups & includes affirmative action measures to guarantee their representation in public life. The Indian Constitution acknowledges the significance of protecting minority rights & includes specific provisions to preserve their cultural & educational entitlements. Articles 29 & 30 of the Indian Constitution hold particular significance as they assure minority groups the right to preserve their language, script, & culture, & to establish & manage educational institutions of their preference. The Constitution acknowledges the diversity of Indian society & the imperative to safeguard the rights of minorities, who have traditionally faced discrimination & marginalization. The Constitution of India's framework for the protection of minority rights is deeply rooted in the nation's historical context of communal strife & violence, frequently directed at minority groups.

The Constitution aims to prevent violence & discrimination by implementing affirmative action measures to guarantee minority representation in public life, & by safeguarding minority languages, cultures, & religions. The constitutional provisions for the protection of minority rights are crucial not only for protecting the rights of these groups but also for the advancement of social justice & equality. Judicial interpretations have been pivotal in enforcing constitutional provisions for the protection of minority rights. The Indian judiciary has actively interpreted these provisions to safeguard minority rights, issuing numerous landmark judgments that have

broadened the scope of such protections. The judiciary plays a pivotal role in interpreting the provisions of the Indian Constitution for the protection of minority rights, which is vital to ensure that these provisions are enacted both in their letter & spirit.

Despite the provisions of the Constitution & the judiciary's efforts, minority rights in India remain susceptible to violations & abuses. Minority communities are subjected to discrimination & marginalization in multiple ways, such as social exclusion, economic disparities, & lack of political representation. Additionally, the increasing prevalence of communalism & majoritarianism has further weakened the safeguards for minority rights. In summary, this research paper offers a detailed examination of the provisions for the protection of minority rights within the Indian Constitution & the impact of judicial interpretations on the enforcement of these provisions.

II. ANALYSIS OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS LAID DOWN FOR THE PROTECTION OF THE MINORITY COMMUNITIES IN INDIA

Before delving into the provisions of the Indian Constitution guaranteeing protection to the minority communities in India, it is important to understand the meaning of the expression “Minority” & the different groups included under such expression. Even though the definition of the term “Minority” has not been explicitly stated in the Constitution of India, but to in order to define it in a simpler sense, we can say the term "minority" pertains to groups with distinct cultural, linguistic, or religious characteristics. The National Commission for Minorities Act, 1992 acknowledges six minority communities, namely, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis & Jains, with the Jains being included in this list in the year 2014.

The Indian Constitution provides several key provisions to protect the rights of minorities, including religious & linguistic minorities. These provisions include:

1. Article 29 of the Constitution of India, 1950:

Article 29 of the Indian Constitution is pivotal in protecting the rights of minorities, encompassing both religious & linguistic groups. It ensures protection to any section of citizens within India that possesses a unique language, script, or culture. This article states that any group of citizens living in any part of India, with a unique language, script, or culture, has the right to preserve it. ²

On an analysis of the abovementioned provision of the Indian Constitution, we can say that:

² Article 29, The Constitution of India, 1950

- Article 29 recognizes the right of individuals to preserve their unique culture, language, or script. It safeguards the ability of minority groups to maintain their distinctive identity amidst the rich diversity of Indian society.
- This article extends protection to both religious minorities & linguistic minorities, emphasizing the importance of preserving their cultural heritage & practices.
- Although Article 29 is frequently linked to minority rights, the Supreme Court has clarified that its scope extends beyond minorities. The phrase "section of citizens" within the article includes both minority & majority groups, guaranteeing that its provisions are accessible to all.
- Article 29 guarantees that no citizen will be refused entry to educational institutions that are either state-maintained or state-aided, based on religion, race, caste, language, or any such grounds. This clause emphasizes the significance of providing equal educational opportunities to all citizens, irrespective of their background.

2. Article 30 of the Constitution of India, 1950:

The article states that all minorities, based on religion or language, have the right to establish & administer educational institutions of their choice. The safeguards of Article 30 are specifically for minorities, both religious & linguistic, & do not apply to any other citizen groups.

On an analysis of the above mentioned provision of the Indian Constitution, we can say that:

- Article 30 ensures that minorities have the freedom to establish educational institutions that cater to their specific needs & cultural identity.
- Article 30(2) mandates that the State, when providing aid to educational institutions, must not discriminate against any institution on the basis that it is managed by a minority, be it religious or linguistic. This measure guarantees that minorities receive equal treatment in the allocation of state funding to educational institutions.
- Article 30(1A) pertains to the determination of compensation for the acquisition of property belonging to educational institutions founded by minority groups. It mandates that the State must ensure the compensation established by or ascertained under such law for the acquisition of this property does not restrict or nullify the rights assured by that clause.³

³Article 30, the Indian Constitution, 1950

3. Article 25 of the Constitution of India, 1950:

Article 25 of the Indian Constitution guarantees the freedom of conscience & the right to freely profess, practice & propagate religion to all individuals. This article ensures that all persons are equally entitled to these freedoms, subject to public order, morality, health & other provisions of the Constitution.⁴

On an analysis of the above mentioned provision of the Indian Constitution, we can say that:

- Article 25 includes the freedom of conscience, the right to openly declare religious beliefs, practice religious rituals & share one's own religious beliefs with others.
- Article 25 of the Indian Constitution covers the rights of citizens & non- citizens, also prohibiting forcible conversions.
- Article 25 of the Indian Constitution allows the state to regulate or restrict secular activities associated with religious practices.

4. Article 26 of the Constitution of India, 1950

Article 26 of the Indian Constitution grants religious denominations & sections the freedom to manage their religious affairs, institutions & property. The provision upholds the autonomy of diverse religious groups, allowing them to establish & maintain institutions for religious & charitable purposes, manage their own affairs in matters of religion, own & acquire movable & immovable property & to administer such property in accordance with law.⁵

On an analysis of the abovementioned provision of the Indian Constitution, we can say that:

- Article 26 maintains the independence of various religious communities, permitting them to create & sustain institutions dedicated to religious & philanthropic objectives.
- Religious groups are entitled to self-governance in religious matters, possess & acquire both movable & immovable assets, manage such assets as per the law.
- Article 26 is crucial in preserving India's secular essence, as it guarantees religious diversity & freedom, while also recognizing the state's legitimate interest

III. THREATS AGAINST MINORITIES IN THE CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SOCIETY

The contemporary Indian society is confronting several threats against minority groups, as detailed below:

⁴ Article 25, The Constitution of India, 1950

⁵ Article 26, The Constitution of India, 1950

1. Violence & repression:

In India, religious minorities face violence, hate crimes, social boycotts, desecration of their places of worship, & discrimination. Hate crimes, assaults, & killings are tragically targeting religious minorities, including Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, & Dalits. Forced conversions, desecration of places of worship, & social boycotts are the other prevalent forms of direct violence taking place against the minority communities. The introduction of discriminatory laws & policies curtailing religious freedom, for example the 'Anti-Conversion' laws which imposes penalties for converting from Hinduism has predominantly affected Christians.⁶ In India, there has been several instances of allegations of forceful conversions on the part of Churches, alleging that there are financial motives or benefits associated with such conversions. Such false allegations have resulted in the damaging of churches by Nationalist groups, assaults on the Priests & members of the congregations worshipping & ultimately spreading hatred against the religion & members of such religious community in the society

2. Arbitrary arrests & detentions:

The Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) has been employed by Indian authorities to address individuals criticizing the government, encompassing journalists, human rights advocates, & activists from minority groups. The arrests & raids are perceived as efforts to suppress free speech & quell dissent, especially in light of the intensifying clampdown on the media & civil society. The employment of anti-terrorism legislation to prosecute journalists & activists erodes the freedoms of the press, which is an essential component of the Right to Freedom of Speech & Expression guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution. The UAPA broadly defines terrorism, permitting extended detention without trial or charge for up to 180 days, & generally presumes against the granting of bail.⁷ The most prevalent example of such type of arbitrary arrest was the arrest of Father Stan Swamy. On October 8, 2020, Swamy was arrested & charged by the National Investigation Agency under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act for his alleged involvement in the 2018 Bhima Koregaon violence & supposed links with the Communist Party of India (Maoist). Suffering from Parkinson's disease, Swamy had sought bail on medical grounds, but it was repeatedly denied. His health worsened during his incarceration, leading to his death on July 5, 2021.

3. Threat to places of worship of the minorities:

In India, religious minorities, especially Muslims & Christians, are experiencing escalating

⁶ Religious Freedom & Mass Conversion in India, by Laura Jenkins

⁷ The State, Democracy and Anti-Terror Laws in India, by Ujjwal Singh

threats & attacks on their places of worship. Such attacks on the places on the places of worship of the minority communities, has indeed posed a threat & hindrance on the minority communities to freely carry out their worship & rituals in their respective places of worship thereby violating their fundamental right to practice religious rituals as guaranteed under Article 25 of the Indian Constitution. Communal violence disproportionately affects religious minorities, with attacks on places of worship, threats, & hate crimes. The Places of Worship Act, 1991, was enacted to prohibit the conversion of any place of worship & to preserve the religious character of places as it was in 1947. However, it has encountered resistance from Hindu nationalist groups.⁸ Recent reports indicate that Hindu groups have attacked churches, interrupted worship services, & defaced statues of Jesus, leading to the displacement of Christians in areas such as Chhattisgarh, Odisha. The government stands accused of not safeguarding minorities from assaults & of offering political support to Hindu nationalist factions that menace & intimidate minorities without consequence.

4. Threat to educational institutions run by minority groups:

Educational institutions founded by minority religious communities are subject to various threats that can affect their operation, endurance, & the calibre of education they offer. Laws or policies could be implemented that specifically target minority religious groups, complicating their ability to establish or operate educational institutions, ultimately violating the fundamental right guaranteed to the minority communities under Article 30 of the Indian Constitution, 1950, which gives such communities the right to establish & administer educational institutions of their choice. Religious minority schools frequently receive less financial support from the government than mainstream institutions.⁹ Legal constraints on international funding can substantially diminish the financial resources these schools rely on. Local communities might resist the founding of such institutions due to biases or apprehension towards unfamiliar religious practices

5. Threat to religious & charitable institutions run by minority groups:

Article 26 of the Indian Constitution ensures that every religious denomination has the right to manage its own affairs in religious matters. It allows these groups the freedom to establish & maintain institutions for religious & charitable purposes, to manage their religious affairs, to own & acquire property, & to administer such property as per the law. State authorities might exercise control over the administration of these institutions, which could potentially

⁸ Religious Politics and Communal Violence, by Steven Wilkinson

⁹ Social Justice and Reservation, by TK Oomen

compromise their independence in carrying out religious & charitable activities. Regulations like the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) may restrict minority religious institutions from obtaining international funds, which are vital for their functioning. Minority institutions might encounter legal hurdles related to property ownership & management, which can result in prolonged litigation that impact their operations.¹⁰

IV. ROLE OF JUDICIARY IN SAFEGUARDING THE RIGHTS OF THE MINORITY COMMUNITIES

The Indian judiciary, especially the Supreme Court & High Courts, is pivotal in protecting the rights of the country's minority religious communities. As we have seen earlier, the Indian Constitution offers a range of protections for religious minorities, particularly through Articles 25 to 30. The judiciary plays a crucial role in interpreting & enforcing these provisions, guaranteeing that minorities have the freedom to profess, practice, & propagate their faith. It also safeguards the rights of minorities to establish & manage educational institutions according to their preference. The Supreme Court & High Courts possess the power of judicial review under Articles 13 & 32 of the Indian Constitution, enabling them to invalidate any law or executive action that infringes upon the fundamental rights of religious minorities. The National Commission for Minorities (NCM) & the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) are statutory organizations responsible for overseeing the enforcement of safeguards for minorities. The judiciary supervises the operations of these entities to ensure the effective protection of minority rights.

Religious minorities have the right to seek recourse from the Supreme Court under Article 32 of the Indian Constitution or from High Courts under Article 226 of the Indian Constitution for the redressal of grievances related to the infringement of their rights.¹¹ The courts have entertained petitions concerning issues such as the denial of minority rights & communal violence, & have issued orders to safeguard the interests of minorities. The Supreme Court has clarified that minority status of religious & linguistic communities is “State Dependent”.¹² A community that is numerically smaller or socially & educationally disadvantaged in a particular state can assert minority rights within that state, even if it is part of the majority at the national level. As stated earlier, the religious minorities, in India, are afforded special protections under Articles 29 & 30 of the Constitution, which are designed to preserve their cultural, linguistic, & educational rights. The judiciary upholds the enforcement of provisions to safeguard the distinct

¹⁰ Secularism & its Critics, by R. Bhargava

¹¹ Minorities & the Indian Judicial System, by Gopal Nayar

¹² Law & Religion in India: An Overview, by MP Singh

identity & educational autonomy of minority communities.

The judiciary has played a crucial role in safeguarding the rights of religious minorities against the tendencies of the majority. Amidst challenges & occurrences of majority influence, the judiciary has endeavoured to uphold constitutionalism & ensure the religious liberty of every individual, including those in minority groups. ¹³Fundamentally, the Indian judiciary serves as a pivotal institution in protecting the rights of minority religious communities. Through its constitutional interpretations, judicial review, defense of cultural & educational rights, & efforts to counteract majoritarianism, it ensures these communities receive equal treatment & protection under the law.

V. CHALLENGES FACED BY THE JUDICIARY IN SAFEGUARDING THE RIGHTS OF THE MINORITY COMMUNITIES

Even though the Indian Judiciary has been instrumental in upholding the religious freedoms of minority communities, there are still few substantial challenges that persist in completely safeguarding their rights, to state a few:

1. Lack of diversity in the judiciary:

Historically, the Supreme Court has not had sufficient representation from religious minorities & marginalized communities. In 2023, out of 33 Supreme Court judges, only three were from religious minority backgrounds—one Muslim, one Christian, & one Parsi—even though Muslims constitute 14.2% of India's population. This underrepresentation may affect the judiciary's capacity to comprehend & respond to the issues faced by minority communities fully.¹⁴

2. Extrajudicial violence & discrimination:

Religious minorities, especially Muslims & Christians, are increasingly subjected to violence, torture, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, & discrimination by law enforcement agencies. ¹⁵Often, perpetrators are granted impunity, as the government does not sufficiently investigate & prosecute these violations of human rights. Laws such as anti-conversion acts often disproportionately affect minority groups.

3. Interpreting Personal Laws:

In India, religious communities are permitted to adhere to their personal laws regarding

¹³ Judicial Protection of Human Rights in India, by KP Saxena

¹⁴ Minority Rights in India: A Comparative Legal Perspective by Jayna Kothari

¹⁵ The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future, by Martha Nussbaum

marriage, divorce, inheritance, & other personal matters. This diversity sometimes results in clashes between constitutional rights & religious customs. Consequently, the judiciary is often tasked with determining if personal laws ought to undergo constitutional examination, especially when they seem to infringe upon fundamental rights.¹⁶

4. Communal Violence & Hate Crimes:

The judiciary encounters difficulties in dealing with communal violence & hate crimes against minorities. It is crucial to guarantee prompt & fair justice in these instances, yet this is frequently hindered by insufficient investigations, a scarcity of evidence, & societal pressures.¹⁷

5. Implementation of judicial decisions:

Even when the judiciary rules in favour of the minority rights, the implementation of such decisions can face obstacles & oppositions. Obstacles such as resistance from local authorities, societal backlash, & bureaucratic inertia frequently impede the effective enforcement of these decisions.

6. Public perception & trust:

Establishing & preserving public trust & confidence in the judiciary's capacity to safeguard the rights of minorities is essential. Any perception of prejudice or delay in the administration of justice can diminish the trust of minority groups in the legal system.¹⁸

VI. MEASURES TO BE TAKEN BY THE JUDICIARY FOR UPHOLDING THE RIGHTS OF THE MINORITIES

To safeguard the rights of minorities, it is imperative for the judiciary to embrace a comprehensive strategy that guarantees protection against discrimination, ensures equal justice access & affirms & upholds their rights. The following are the essential measures that judiciaries ought to adopt:

1. Strict Enforcement of Anti-Discrimination Laws:

It is imperative for the judiciary to rigorously enforce existing anti-discrimination laws. Laws that discriminatory against the minorities, whether directly or indirectly, ought to be thoroughly examined & rendered invalid. Judicial rulings must guarantee the impartial application of laws to everyone, without discrimination towards minority groups.¹⁹

¹⁶ The Judicial System & Reform in Post-Independence India, by A Desai

¹⁷ Minority Rights & the National Question in India, by T Fazal

¹⁸ Minorities & the constitution of India, by Subhash C. Kashyap

¹⁹ Judicial Politics in India: Courts & the Quest for Justice, SP Sathe

2. Judicial Review & Constitutional Protection:

Courts must interpret the Constitution in a way that strongly safeguards minority rights, which entails acknowledging these rights as fundamental rights. Courts, when necessary, should proactively broaden the interpretation of rights to enhance the protection of minority groups.

3. Addressing Systemic Issues:

It is essential for courts to oversee & scrutinize the practices of law enforcement agencies to prevent & address the discriminatory practices against minority groups. Courts should enact reparative justice measures in cases where historical wrongs have been inflicted upon minority groups. This includes providing compensation & making public admissions of these injustices.²⁰

4. Addressing communal violence & hate crimes:

To effectively curb communal violence & hate crimes against minorities, the judiciary can adopt various measures to reinforce legal frameworks, improve enforcement mechanisms, & promote a culture of accountability & inclusivity. The judiciary must enforce laws strictly that ban hate speech, incitement to violence, & discrimination.²¹ It is imperative for the judiciary to accelerate the legal proceedings against those individuals & groups that are culpable for instigating communal violence & hate crimes. The judiciary must also ensure that the victims of communal violence & hate crimes are provided with sufficient compensation & support, which should include psychological counselling & legal assistance.

5. Technology & Data Utilization:

The judicial system must develop & utilize technology to monitor & examine trends in communal violence & hate crimes, enabling more proactive & preventive actions. Establishing a centralized database for hate crime incidents & judicial outcomes is crucial to guide policy decisions & judicial practices.

6. Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Methods & Community Engagement:

The judiciary must encourage the use of alternative dispute resolution methods, like mediation & reconciliation committees, to manage communal tensions & prevent them from escalating into violence. The judiciary must promote community policing efforts that involve law enforcement agencies working in partnership with community leaders to uphold peace & order.

²⁰ Constitutional Protection to Minorities: An Indian Perspective, by SR Kumar

²¹ Judicial Activism & Human Rights in India: The Role of the Supreme Court, by MK Sinha

VII. CONCLUSION

In India, safeguarding minority rights is not just a constitutional duty but also a fundamental element of the nation's democratic principles. The Indian Constitution establishes a detailed framework to protect minority rights through its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, & Directive Principles of State Policy. Articles 29 & 30 specifically guarantee the cultural & educational rights of minorities, preserving their unique identity & heritage. Judicial interpretations have been crucial in reinforcing & elucidating the provisions of the constitution.

VIII. CASE STUDY

1. St. Xaviers College Society Vs State of Gujarat

In this case, the Supreme Court upheld the right of religious & linguistic minorities to establish & manage educational institutions of their preference as per Article 30(1) of the Constitution. The petitioner, a religious denomination operating St. Xavier's College in Ahmedabad, in order to offer higher education to Christian students, contested specific provisions of the Gujarat University Act, 1949, as amended in 1972. The contested provisions mandated the college to establish a governing body with university nominees, transform affiliated colleges into constituent colleges, obtain the consent of the Vice Chancellor for disciplinary measures against the staff & delegate the staff-management disputes to an arbitrator nominated by the university. The petitioner contended that such provisions infringed upon the rights of minorities to manage their educational institutions as guaranteed by Article 30(1). The Supreme Court, through a ruling by a nine-judge bench, determined that the core of Article 30(1) is to guarantee equal treatment to both majority & minority educational institutions, & that no legislation can diminish or restrict this right. The Court invalidated the contested provisions for contravening Article 30(1), as they encroached upon the minority's autonomy in selecting their governing body & management. The Supreme Court affirmed the extensive scope of Article 30(1), safeguarding the rights of religious & linguistic minorities to establish & manage educational institutions of their choice without excessive interference from the state.

2. St. Stephens Vs Delhi University

In this case, The Supreme Court upheld the rights of St. Stephen's College as a minority institution to implement its own admissions policy & prioritize Christian students, provided it adheres to reasonable state regulations & maintains academic excellence. St. Stephen's College, a minority institution affiliated with the University of Delhi, had an admission program that offered preference to Christian students. The validity of this program was challenged. The

Supreme Court ruled that, as a minority institution, the college was entitled under Article 30(1) of the Constitution to establish its own admission procedure & to give preference to Christian students within reasonable limits to preserve its minority status. The court stated that the right to select students was a significant aspect of administration & inherent to the rights granted under Article 30(1). The court also stated that the college, being a minority aided institution, was under an obligation to adhere to the reasonable regulations set by the state to uphold academic standards & excellence. The court directed the college to adopt a system of admission, where 50% of the seats were allocated based on merit, & the remaining 50% may be reserved for Christian students.
