

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES

[ISSN 2581-5369]

Volume 6 | Issue 4

2023

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The Role of Public Interest Litigation in Enforcing Social Rights and State Obligations

AAYUSH KUMAR¹

ABSTRACT

*Public Interest Litigation (PIL) is a crucial legal tool in India that allows citizens to seek legal remedies for issues impacting the public. It ensures that the state fulfills its obligations towards social welfare and public interest. The Supreme Court of India plays a vital role in enforcing social rights and state obligations through PIL. It addresses various topics, such as human rights abuses, environmental degradation, corruption, and discrimination, emphasizing justice, transparency, and efficient implementation of laws. PIL enables marginalized individuals to access justice and advocates on behalf of affected communities, promoting inclusion and equality. By interpreting laws and acknowledging the interconnectedness of rights, PIL bridges the gap between legislation and societal needs, gradually fulfilling social rights. It also monitors the state's behavior, rectifying systemic flaws and creating legal precedents. PIL influences advocacy, public awareness, and pressures the state to fulfill its commitments. Upholding constitutional principles, PIL promotes social welfare and holds the state accountable while respecting the separation of powers. The Supreme Court's role in PIL has compelled the government to protect citizens' rights in cases like *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation*, *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan*, *Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India*, and *Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar*. PIL is a potent arsenal for citizen empowerment, ensuring the state's duties towards social welfare and the public interest.*

Keywords: *PIL, Supreme Court, Social Welfare, Social Rights.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Public Interest Litigation (PIL) is a legal tool available in India that empowers citizens to seek legal remedies through the courts for issues that affect the public or society. The PIL is essential to ensuring that the state meets its obligations towards its citizens, especially with regards to matters of social welfare and public interest. As the highest court in the country, the Supreme Court of India has the institutional responsibility to enforce social rights and obligations on the

¹ Author is a student at O.P Jindal Global University, India.

state through PILs. Social rights refer to fundamental rights necessary for human dignity, such as the right to education, healthcare, and housing, while social obligations refer to the state's responsibilities to safeguard and fulfill these rights for all citizens. [1] PIL lawsuits sometimes address topics of general interest, including abuses of human rights, environmental degradation, corruption, gender inequity, discrimination, and other problems that have an impact on society. For the benefit of the general welfare, the emphasis is on securing justice, encouraging transparency, and ensuring the efficient implementation of laws and regulations. PILs are filed with the intention of advancing the public interest as well as the petitioner's right to remedy. In PIL cases, the courts take an active role by determining whether laws, policies, and other governmental activities are constitutionally lawful and by offering guidance and remedies to resolve the relevant problem. Significant social and legal reforms have been made because of PIL in many different nations.

An essential and necessary part of upholding and enforcing social rights and state obligations is played by public interest litigation (PIL). It functions as a potent tool by which concerned individuals and groups can successfully hold the government responsible for the execution of social rights protected by the constitution. PIL has several essential components that significantly increase its influence in advancing social justice and guaranteeing the ethical behavior of the state. PIL makes it easier for underprivileged and marginalized people to access justice, as they frequently encounter obstacles when trying to obtain redress for violations of their social rights. PIL gives those who lack the means or skills to successfully traverse the legal system on their own a platform to advocate before the court on behalf of affected communities. With this feature of PIL, inclusion and equality before the law are promoted by ensuring that the voices of the most vulnerable are heard and that their concerns are addressed. The expansion of fundamental rights to include social and economic rights is made possible in large part by PIL. The courts can acknowledge the interconnectedness of civil and political rights with social rights through interpretation and judicial activism. This larger perspective enables the judiciary to defend and enhance a variety of social rights, including the right to housing, healthcare, education, and a healthy environment. By adopting this broad perspective, PIL aids in bridging the gap between legislative requirements and changing society needs, thereby assisting in the gradual fulfillment of social rights.

Monitoring the state's behavior with respect to its responsibilities for social rights is an important duty of PIL. PIL petitions frequently draw attention to instances when the government has fallen short of putting in place suitable policies, allocating resources wisely, or offering fundamental services required for the realization of social rights. The courts act as a check on

the government's behavior, forcing it to rectify systemic flaws and carry out its duties through close examination and judicial interventions. This PIL feature makes sure that the government is still accountable and responsive to the wants and desires of its people. PIL has the capacity to create permanent legal precedents that influence upcoming rulings and direct the framework of the law governing social rights. Landmark PIL cases have sparked social change in addition to resulting in the creation of new laws, regulations, and guidelines. PIL acts as a catalyst for revolutionary reforms by establishing precedents, ensuring stronger and more long-lasting protection and enforcement of social rights. PIL also gives the courts the authority to enact corrective actions and promote policy modifications for the efficient application of social rights. With this power, the judiciary can assist those who are harmed or impacted communities, direct the creation of new policies, allot appropriate funds, and set up monitoring systems to keep tabs on the implementation of social rights. These judicial interventions through PIL have the potential to result in real changes in people's lives, advancing equity and advancing the general advancement of society. PIL cases also significantly influence advocacy and public awareness campaigns. PIL sheds light on covert injustices, structural issues, and societal concerns by bringing important social issues to the fore. These situations spark debate, stoke public dissent, and encourage group action. The state is under pressure to address social rights and effectively carry out its commitments because of the heightened public awareness and activism brought on by PIL cases. PIL thus becomes a catalyst for fostering a society that is more informed, involved, and participatory. Finally, PIL upholds constitutional principles including justice, equality, and human rights. It promotes the idea that the government has a responsibility to advance social welfare, defend the rights of vulnerable groups, and make sure that everyone has access to the needs of life and can live in dignity. The judiciary, serving as the guardian of the constitution and a protector of the rights of all citizens, displays its commitment to these basic values by actively participating in PIL. Therefore, a difficult balance must be struck between judicial activism and the concept of separation of powers, even while PIL has been crucial in furthering social rights and holding the state accountable. The courts must make sure that their interventions respect the functions and duties of the legislative and executive branches of government while remaining within the bounds of the constitution. This cautious approach guarantees that PIL will continue to be a potent vehicle for social justice while upholding the legitimacy and efficacy of the larger democratic system.

The Supreme Court has played a vital role in propelling PIL as a triumphant means to champion social rights and obligations in India. The right to a pristine and salubrious environment, the attainment of healthcare and education, and various other concerns have all been redressed

through PIL. PILs have also been utilized to challenge discriminatory laws and regulations that transgress upon the fundamental rights of citizens. The Supreme Court possesses the authority to compel the government and its agencies to undertake the requisite measures to safeguard citizen rights, to mandate the compensation of victims of rights violations, and to instruct the government to implement policies that prevent future transgressions through the utilization of PILs. The Indian Supreme Court has effectively employed its jurisdiction to direct the executive branch and its agencies to undertake the necessary actions to safeguard the rights of citizens. The ensuing are some pertinent legal cases that exemplify the Supreme Court's role in employing PILs to enforce social rights and obligations upon the State.

In the case of "**Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation** [2] (1985)," it was decreed that "the right to livelihood is an inherent right enshrined within the Indian Constitution," and the government was commanded to provide shelters for the destitute in Mumbai. The Supreme Court observed that the State bears the responsibility of catering to the basic needs of its citizens, including the right to shelter.

In the case of "**Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan** [3] (1997)," the Supreme Court acknowledged sexual harassment of women in the workplace as a violation of their fundamental rights to equality and dignity. The Court directed the government to implement guidelines to prevent sexual harassment and provide redressal mechanisms for victims"². In the case of "**Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India** [4] (1984)", the Supreme Court commanded the government to execute guidelines that would thwart sexual harassment and establish effective mechanisms for victims seeking redress. During the proceedings of "**Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar** [5] (1991)", the Supreme Court pronounced that pollution of the river Ganga was an egregious infringement upon the right to life as guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. Consequently, the Court directed the government to implement measures aimed at averting pollution of the river and ensuring the safe disposal of industrial waste. These instances vividly demonstrate the Supreme Court's pivotal role in compelling the State to fulfill its social obligations and uphold the rights of the citizens. Through Public Interest Litigations (PILs), the Court tackles multifarious issues such as environmental degradation, access to healthcare and education, and the imperative right to a pristine and salubrious environment.

Public interest litigation (PIL) emerges as a pivotal legal instrument empowering citizens to ardently pursue justice for predicaments that profoundly impact the public and society at large. The Supreme Court of India has played a paramount role in bolstering PIL as a triumphant

² Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan (1997), 6 SCC 241

strategy for championing social rights and responsibilities. Through the PIL process, the Supreme Court deftly directs the government and its agencies to undertake imperative measures ensuring the protection of people's rights. The Supreme Court adroitly employs PILs to tackle a myriad of pressing concerns, encompassing environmental degradation, healthcare accessibility, education, and the imperative right to a pristine and salubrious environment. These illustrative cases underscore the Supreme Court's pivotal role in enforcing social rights and obligations upon the state through the instrumentality of PILs. PIL serves as a potent arsenal for citizens to hold the state accountable for upholding its obligations towards social welfare and the public interest, thereby necessitating the imperative enforcement of the state's duties towards its citizens. The Supreme Court adroitly employs PILs to tackle a myriad of pressing concerns, encompassing environmental degradation, healthcare accessibility, education, and the imperative right to a pristine and salubrious environment. These illustrative cases underscore the Supreme Court's pivotal role in enforcing social rights and obligations upon the state through the instrumentality of PILs. PIL serves as a potent arsenal for citizens to hold the state accountable for upholding its obligations towards social welfare and the public interest, thereby necessitating the imperative enforcement of the state's duties towards its citizens.

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