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NATURAL LAW IN INDIAN CONSTITUTIONALISM: THE JURISPRUDENTIAL FOUNDATIONS OF JUSTICE, LIBERTY, AND EQUALITY

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ABSTRACT

Natural law theory asserts that certain rights are inherent to human existence, arising from universal moral principles rather than being solely the product of legislative enactments. This paper explores the integration of natural law ideals into the Indian constitutional framework, demonstrating how justice, liberty, and equality—enshrined in the Preamble, Fundamental Rights, and Directive Principles—draw upon this philosophical tradition. Through an examination of key judicial decisions, it analyses how the Supreme Court of India has applied natural law reasoning to interpret and expand constitutional rights. The study also addresses criticisms and the need for a balanced approach that respects both moral ideals and democratic processes. In addition to jurisprudential analysis, this research situates the Indian experience within global debates and existing scholarly literature, offering a comprehensive understanding of natural law in constitutionalism.

Introduction

Natural law refers to the idea that there are objective moral principles, discoverable through reason, which form the basis of all just laws. The concept, with origins in ancient philosophy and medieval theology, has influenced the development of modern constitutional democracies. The Indian Constitution reflects a fusion of positivist structures with natural law values, ensuring that governance aligns with ethical standards that transcend political expediency.

The Indian Constitution is not merely a legal text; it is a living document embodying aspirations for justice, liberty, and equality. The Preamble explicitly articulates these values, while the chapters on Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles operationalize them. The influence of natural law can be traced both in the drafting process—through Constituent Assembly debates where leaders invoked moral ideals of freedom and justice—and in judicial interpretation that has expanded the meaning of rights.

This paper argues that natural law provides both a foundation and a method for constitutional interpretation in India. It enables judges to adapt the Constitution to evolving standards of human dignity, while anchoring governance in timeless principles of justice. However, it also raises concerns of judicial overreach, democratic legitimacy, and indeterminacy. By analyzing Indian case law in light of natural law theory and reviewing scholarly literature, this research highlights both the promise and perils of natural law in Indian constitutionalism.

Review of Literature

The relationship between natural law and constitutionalism has been a central theme in jurisprudence. Classical debates between positivism and natural law continue to resonate in Indian constitutional discourse. H.L.A. Hart, in his seminal work **The Concept of Law**, argued that legal systems function through a union of primary and secondary rules, whereas Ronald Dworkin challenged Hart's positivism by insisting that legal interpretation is inseparable from moral reasoning.[1] In the Indian context, scholars such as Upendra Baxi have highlighted

how the judiciary has consistently employed moral ideals to expand constitutional rights, portraying the Constitution as a transformative document.[2] Justice K.K. Mathew emphasized that the Constitution must be interpreted dynamically, drawing inspiration from principles of justice that transcend the constitutional text.[3] Comparative studies by John Finnis, who emphasized practical reasonableness as a foundation of law,[4] and David Dyzenhaus, who examined courts' role in resisting authoritarianism,[5] further underscore the vitality of natural law reasoning in modern democracies. However, critics such as Jeremy Bentham warned against the dangers of indeterminacy and judicial overreach in relying on vague natural law principles.[6] In India, Rajeev Dhavan similarly critiqued judicial activism as undermining parliamentary sovereignty.[7] This literature review highlights the enduring and contested role of natural law in constitutional jurisprudence, situating India within a broader global debate. In addition to these perspectives, Granville Austin's seminal work *'The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation'* emphasizes how the Constitution embodies a moral vision of social revolution, aligning with natural law ideals.[35] Madhav Khosla highlights how constitutional interpretation in India reflects a tension between textual fidelity and moral reasoning, underscoring the judiciary's role in translating abstract natural law into concrete rights.[36] Gautam Bhatia's writings further illuminate how dignity and privacy jurisprudence in India have drawn upon natural law traditions.[37] Internationally, Lon Fuller argued that law's 'internal morality' requires congruence between rules and justice, while Joseph Raz critiqued natural law for conflating legality with morality.[38] Jeremy Waldron, meanwhile, points to the democratic risks of judicial moral reasoning, cautioning against substituting judicial morality for popular sovereignty.[39]

Theoretical Framework

Natural law theory operates as a counterpoint to legal positivism by emphasizing that the

legitimacy of law is not merely derived from procedural enactment but from its conformity with universal moral values. Hart's positivist framework, with its focus on the separation of law and morality, has dominated jurisprudence in the twentieth century. However, natural law theorists argue that this approach inadequately addresses questions of justice and legitimacy.[8] Dworkin's conception of 'law as integrity' insists that judges must appeal to principles of morality when interpreting legal rules, ensuring that constitutional interpretation is consistent with rights and fairness.[9] Similarly, John Finnis underscores the role of basic goods such as life, knowledge, and sociability as foundational to all law.[10] This theoretical framework informs the Indian judiciary's approach to cases involving fundamental rights and human dignity, where textual interpretation alone proves insufficient. Beyond Hart and Dworkin, legal realism challenged both positivist and natural law traditions by emphasizing the indeterminacy of rules and the role of judges' personal values in decision-making.[40] Post-colonial critiques also highlight that natural law in India cannot be divorced from its historical context: the colonial state often invoked 'civilizing' moral principles to justify domination.[41] Thus, the theoretical framework must reconcile universalist claims of natural law with critiques of its deployment in hierarchical and imperial contexts. Contemporary Indian constitutionalism negotiates these tensions by rooting natural law ideals in democratic legitimacy and social justice rather than abstract universality.

Classical Foundations of Natural Law

The roots of natural law are traceable to ancient Greek philosophy. Aristotle conceived of a natural justice applicable universally, independent of human conventions.[11] Cicero further argued that law is rooted in right reason in harmony with nature, eternally valid and immutable.[12] During the medieval period, St. Thomas Aquinas integrated Aristotelian philosophy with Christian theology, positing that

human law derives its legitimacy from divine and natural law.[13] These classical foundations established the enduring premise that unjust laws, being inconsistent with natural law, lack binding force. Such reasoning provided a philosophical backdrop for constitutional democracies, including India, which enshrine values of justice, liberty, and equality in their basic structures. Roman law, particularly the Stoic tradition, advanced the idea that all human beings are subject to a common rational order, laying groundwork for later universal rights discourse.[42] Canon law in medieval Europe institutionalized natural law principles into ecclesiastical jurisprudence, influencing later secular legal systems.[43] These traditions underscore the continuity of natural law as a moral thread linking ancient, medieval, and modern constitutional traditions.

Modern Natural Law

The Enlightenment era transformed natural law discourse by grounding it in human reason rather than theology. Hugo Grotius emphasized that natural law would remain valid 'even if God did not exist,' thereby establishing its secular character.[14] John Locke's articulation of natural rights—life, liberty, and property—deeply influenced constitutional democracies, including the American and Indian constitutions.[15] Rousseau's theory of the social contract reinforced the idea that political authority must align with the general will and natural justice.[16] Immanuel Kant, emphasizing human dignity, framed autonomy and rationality as the core of moral law.[17] In the twentieth century, John Finnis revived natural law through his framework of basic goods, while Dworkin advanced rights-based constitutionalism.[18] Together, these modern developments continue to influence constitutional courts worldwide, including the Indian Supreme Court. The natural rights philosophy also profoundly influenced revolutionary constitutional moments. The American Declaration of Independence proclaimed that all men are endowed with 'unalienable Rights,' echoing Lockean

principles.[44] The French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen articulated liberty, equality, and fraternity as natural rights.[45] After World War II, natural law ideals informed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), embedding dignity and freedom into international law.[46] This trajectory highlights how natural law has shaped both domestic and global constitutional orders.

Natural Law and Constitutionalism

Constitutionalism embodies the principle that governmental authority must be limited by fundamental rights and higher norms. Natural law has played a crucial role in shaping constitutional democracies by grounding these limitations in moral principles. The American Bill of Rights and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen exemplify constitutional documents rooted in natural law ideals.[19] In India, the Preamble, Fundamental Rights, and Directive Principles of State Policy reflect a similar reliance on natural law values. The insistence on justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity underscores the moral foundation of the Indian Constitution.[20] Furthermore, the doctrine of basic structure, developed in *Kesavananda Bharati*,[21] illustrates how natural law principles inform judicial efforts to safeguard constitutional identity against legislative excess. Comparative constitutionalism further demonstrates the resilience of natural law. In Ireland, the Constitution explicitly references natural rights, which courts have used to develop doctrines of unenumerated rights.[47] In Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms reflects moral reasoning about dignity and liberty, drawing parallels to natural law discourse.[48] Latin American constitutionalism, particularly in Colombia, integrates natural law ideals by recognizing human dignity and socio-economic rights as justiciable guarantees.[49] These examples illustrate how constitutionalism globally depends on moral reasoning grounded in natural law.

Natural Law in the Indian Constitutional Framework

The drafting of the Indian Constitution was influenced by both positivist and natural law traditions. The Constituent Assembly debates reveal frequent invocations of justice, morality, and human dignity as guiding ideals.[22] Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emphasized that the Constitution should guarantee social, economic, and political justice, aligning governance with moral values beyond mere legality.[23] The Fundamental Rights chapter enshrines natural rights such as equality before the law (Article 14), freedoms of speech and association (Article 19), and protection of life and personal liberty (Article 21).[24] Directive Principles further embed moral aspirations of distributive justice and welfare.[25] Together, these provisions operationalize natural law in the Indian context, ensuring that governance is measured not only by legality but also by legitimacy. Constituent Assembly debates reveal Ambedkar's insistence that political democracy must be complemented by social and economic democracy.[50] Jawaharlal Nehru emphasized freedom and equality as moral imperatives for nation-building.[51] Alladi Krishnaswamy Ayyar highlighted that constitutional provisions must reflect higher principles of justice, not merely political compromises.[52] These debates underscore how natural law ideals of justice and morality guided the drafting process and embedded themselves in constitutional text.

Judicial Interpretation and Natural Law

The Indian Supreme Court has frequently relied on natural law reasoning in expanding the scope of rights. In **Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala**, the Court developed the basic structure doctrine, ensuring that essential constitutional values such as democracy and liberty remain inviolable.[26] In **Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India**, Article 21 was expansively interpreted to include the right to live with human dignity, an approach rooted in natural law principles of justice.[27] Similarly, in **Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India**, the right to

privacy was recognized as intrinsic to dignity and liberty, underscoring natural law's continuing influence on constitutional interpretation.[28] These decisions highlight the judiciary's role as a guardian of moral ideals in Indian democracy, ensuring that governance aligns with higher principles of justice and fairness. Beyond the landmark cases already discussed, the Court in **Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation** recognized the right to livelihood as part of the right to life, embedding socio-economic justice in natural law reasoning.[53] In **Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan**, the Court invoked international human rights norms to frame guidelines on sexual harassment, underscoring natural law's role in advancing gender justice.[54] More recently, in **Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India**, the decriminalization of homosexuality was grounded in dignity and equality, echoing natural law principles of universal moral rights.[55]

Comparative Perspectives

Comparative constitutional jurisprudence reveals that natural law reasoning is not unique to India. In the United States, the Supreme Court's reliance on substantive due process reflects a natural law orientation in protecting rights beyond explicit text, as in **Roe v. Wade** and **Obergefell v. Hodges**. [29] South Africa's post-apartheid Constitution explicitly grounds itself in dignity, equality, and freedom, reflecting natural law ideals in transformative constitutionalism.[30] The European Court of Human Rights similarly interprets the European Convention dynamically, recognizing evolving standards of human dignity.[31] These comparative perspectives show that Indian constitutionalism is part of a broader global movement where natural law provides a moral compass for courts to expand rights and resist authoritarianism. The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights integrates both individual and collective rights, reflecting a communitarian natural law orientation.[56] The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has expansively interpreted dignity and liberty,

grounding its decisions in universal moral principles.[57] Global constitutionalism thus demonstrates how natural law reasoning transcends borders, influencing courts to secure rights even in contexts of democratic fragility.

Criticism and Limitations

Despite its transformative potential, reliance on natural law raises concerns of judicial overreach and democratic legitimacy. Critics argue that unelected judges invoking abstract moral principles risk undermining parliamentary sovereignty.[32] Jeremy Bentham dismissed natural rights as ‘nonsense upon stilts,’ highlighting the indeterminacy of moral reasoning.[33] Rajeev Dhavan has similarly critiqued the Indian judiciary for stretching constitutional text to pursue moral goals without democratic accountability.[34] Moreover, natural law reasoning risks subjectivity, with different judges grounding their decisions in divergent moral frameworks. These limitations suggest that while natural law can guide constitutional interpretation, it must be balanced with respect for democratic processes and textual fidelity. Feminist scholars have critiqued natural law for historically universalizing male experiences as ‘rational,’ thereby marginalizing women’s perspectives.[58] Dalit scholars similarly argue that appeals to universal morality have often masked entrenched caste hierarchies.[59] These critiques caution that natural law, if uncritically invoked, can perpetuate rather than dismantle social injustice. Thus, natural law must be contextualized within India’s socio-historical realities.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This study concludes that natural law has profoundly shaped Indian constitutionalism by grounding governance in moral principles of justice, liberty, and equality. Judicial interpretation has drawn upon natural law to expand rights and preserve constitutional identity. However, unchecked reliance risks judicial overreach and indeterminacy. A balanced approach is therefore necessary,

where natural law guides interpretation but remains tethered to constitutional text and democratic processes. Future scholarship may focus on reconciling moral reasoning with democratic legitimacy, ensuring that natural law enriches rather than destabilizes constitutionalism. Looking forward, natural law principles could guide constitutional adjudication in emerging areas such as climate justice, where intergenerational equity and the right to a healthy environment embody universal moral claims.[60] Similarly, debates about artificial intelligence and digital rights raise questions of dignity, autonomy, and fairness, requiring natural law frameworks.[61] By integrating natural law with democratic processes, Indian constitutionalism can remain responsive to new challenges while grounded in timeless principles of justice.

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