



INDIAN JOURNAL OF
LEGAL REVIEW

VOLUME 6 AND ISSUE 2 OF 2026

INSTITUTE OF LEGAL EDUCATION



INDIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL REVIEW

APIS – 3920 – 0001 | ISSN – 2583-2344

(Open Access Journal)

Journal's Home Page – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/>

Journal's Editorial Page – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/editorial-board/>

Volume 6 and Issue 1 of 2026 (Access Full Issue on – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/volume-6-and-issue-1-of-2026/>)

Publisher

Prasanna S,

Chairman of Institute of Legal Education

No. 08, Arul Nagar, Seera Thoppu,

Maudhanda Kurichi, Srirangam,

Tiruchirappalli – 620102

Phone : +91 73059 14348 – info@iledu.in / Chairman@iledu.in



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DIGITAL DEMOCRACY OR DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE? EXAMINING ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION AND A NATIONAL VOTER DATABASE IN INDIA

AUTHOR – ADV. HARSHA S. DUBEY, LL.M FINAL YEAR IN DES'S SHRI NAVALMAL FIRODIA LAW COLLEGE, PUNE UNIVERSITY

BEST CITATION – ADV. HARSHA S. DUBEY, DIGITAL DEMOCRACY OR DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE? EXAMINING ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION AND A NATIONAL VOTER DATABASE IN INDIA, *INDIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL REVIEW (IJLR)*, 6 (2) OF 2026, PG. 739-747, APIS – 3920 – 0001 & ISSN – 2583-2344. DOI –

<https://doi.org/10.65393/IJQT8867>

ABSTRACT

As democratic governance increasingly relies on digital infrastructure, the boundary between efficient administration and intrusive surveillance becomes increasingly complex. India's proposals for One Nation, One Election (ONOE) and the creation of a National Voter Database represent ambitious attempts to modernize the electoral system through synchronization and digitization. These reforms aim to conduct simultaneous elections for the national and state legislatures while consolidating voter information into a unified digital database. Proponents argue that such measures could significantly reduce the financial and administrative burden of conducting frequent elections, improve electoral roll accuracy, and enhance governance efficiency. However, critics caution that these reforms may simultaneously create risks related to data privacy, surveillance, and the erosion of federal democratic structures. The ONOE proposal seeks to address these inefficiencies by synchronizing elections across the country, thereby minimizing election-related disruptions and enabling governments to focus on policy implementation. Similarly, the creation of a centralized voter database could streamline voter registration processes, eliminate duplicate entries, and improve electoral management through digital verification systems. If integrated with digital identity systems such as Aadhaar, the aggregation of personal data may enable large-scale monitoring of citizens' political behavior. These concerns are particularly relevant in light of the recognition of the right to privacy as a fundamental right under Article 21 by the Supreme Court of India in *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India (2017)*. Additionally, critics argue that simultaneous elections could weaken federalism by overshadowing regional political issues. This paper analyzes the legal, political, and technological implications of ONOE and a national voter database.

Keywords: Aadhaar Linkage, Data Protection, Digital Governance, Electoral Reforms, Federalism, Mass Surveillance, National Voter Database.

1. Introduction

Democracy fundamentally depends upon free, fair, and transparent elections. India, as the world's largest democracy, manages elections involving over 960 million registered voters according to recent estimates by the Election Commission of India (ECI)¹⁹⁵². Conducting

elections in such a vast and diverse country requires extensive logistical arrangements, administrative coordination, and financial resources.

Over the past decade, policymakers and scholars have proposed reforms aimed at improving electoral efficiency and governance. Two such proposals have gained considerable attention:

¹⁹⁵² Election Comm'n of India, Statistical Report on General Elections to the Lok Sabha, 2019 (2020), <https://eci.gov.in>

1. **One Nation, One Election (ONOE)**
2. **Creation of a National Voter Database**

These proposals aim to restructure India’s electoral process by synchronizing elections and digitizing voter management systems.

Currently, elections for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies are held at different times due to varying legislative terms and early dissolutions. As a result, India often experiences continuous election cycles. According to several government estimates, the 2019 general elections alone cost approximately ₹60,000 crore, including both government expenditure and political party spending.¹⁹⁵³

Frequent elections also result in repeated enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct, which restricts policy announcements and government initiatives during election periods. Consequently, governance may experience interruptions.

At the same time, digital governance initiatives have led to the idea of creating a centralized voter database that could integrate voter records nationwide. Such a system could reduce duplicate registrations and improve electoral roll accuracy.

However, while these reforms promise efficiency, they also raise critical questions:

- Could centralized voter data enable **state surveillance**?
- Would simultaneous elections weaken **federal democracy**?
- How can **privacy rights** be protected in digital electoral systems?

This paper critically examines these issues.

2. Concept of One Nation, One Election

The concept of One Nation, One Election (ONOE) refers to the synchronization of elections for the Lok Sabha (House of the People) and all State

Legislative Assemblies, so that they are conducted simultaneously across the country within a fixed electoral cycle, ideally once every five years.¹⁹⁵⁴ The primary objective of this proposal is to streamline the electoral process, reduce repeated election expenditures, and minimize disruptions in governance caused by frequent election cycles.

In India’s current electoral system, elections for Parliament and various State Assemblies are conducted at different times because each legislative body has its own constitutional tenure. As a result, the country experiences elections almost every year in some state or the other. This continuous electoral cycle leads to repeated administrative mobilization, frequent enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct, and substantial financial costs.

The ONOE proposal aims to address these issues by synchronizing election schedules, allowing voters to cast their votes for both national and state representatives at the same time.¹⁹⁵⁵ Proponents argue that such a system would increase administrative efficiency, reduce election-related expenditure, and enable governments to focus more on long-term policy implementation rather than short-term electoral considerations.

Historical Background

India originally practiced simultaneous elections after independence. During the early years of the republic, elections for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies were held together. This synchronization existed for nearly two decades.

Election Year	Election Type	Synchronization Status
1951–52	First General Election	Simultaneous
1957	Second General	Simultaneous

¹⁹⁵⁴ Centre for Media Studies, *Poll Expenditure: The 2019 Elections* (2019), <https://cmsindia.org>.

¹⁹⁵⁵ Law Comm’n of India, Draft Report: Simultaneous Elections—Constitutional and Legal Perspectives (Aug. 2018).

¹⁹⁵³ Election Comm’n of India, *Electoral Roll Summary Revision and Voter Statistics* (2023), <https://eci.gov.in>.

Election Year	Election Type	Synchronization Status
	Election	
1962	Third General Election	Simultaneous
1967	Fourth General Election	Simultaneous

The first general election in **1951–52** was a massive democratic exercise involving over **173 million voters**, marking the beginning of India’s parliamentary democracy. Elections during this period were conducted simultaneously for Parliament and state assemblies, ensuring a uniform electoral cycle across the country.

However, the synchronized cycle was disrupted due to several political developments. Between **1968 and 1971**, multiple State Legislative Assemblies were dissolved prematurely due to political instability, defections, and loss of majority governments. Additionally, the **Lok Sabha itself was dissolved early in 1970**, leading to general elections in 1971. These premature dissolutions broke the synchronization between national and state elections.¹⁹⁵⁶

Since then, India has followed a **staggered election system**, where different states conduct elections at different times depending on the tenure of their assemblies¹⁹⁵⁷. Today, elections occur frequently across the country, often resulting in India being in a near-permanent election mode.

Recent Policy Discussions

The idea of reviving simultaneous elections has gained attention in recent years. Several institutions have examined the feasibility of ONOE, including:

- **Election Commission of India**
- **Law Commission of India**

- **Parliamentary Standing Committees**
- **NITI Aayog policy discussions**

Reports from these institutions suggest that while ONOE could bring administrative and financial benefits, it would require **major constitutional amendments**, political consensus, and logistical preparedness.

Some proposals suggest implementing ONOE in **two phases**, where elections for half the states are synchronized with the Lok Sabha elections while the remaining states vote midway through the cycle.¹⁹⁵⁸ Such a phased approach may gradually restore synchronization without disrupting existing legislative terms.

Potential Advantages

Supporters of ONOE highlight several benefits:

1. **Reduction in Election Costs**
Conducting elections simultaneously could significantly reduce repeated expenditure on election administration.
2. **Better Governance**
The frequent imposition of the Model Code of Conduct often delays policy decisions. Simultaneous elections could reduce such interruptions.
3. **Improved Voter Participation**
A consolidated election schedule may encourage greater voter turnout.
4. **Efficient Use of Administrative Machinery**
Government officials, security forces, and polling staff would be deployed fewer times.

However, despite these advantages, critics argue that ONOE may raise concerns regarding **federalism, constitutional flexibility, and political representation**, which require careful consideration before implementation.

3. Election Expenditure in India

Conducting elections in India involves enormous financial, administrative, and

¹⁹⁵⁶ Ministry of Law & Justice, Report of the High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections (Gov’t of India 2023).

¹⁹⁵⁷ S.Y. Quraishi, An Undocumented Wonder: The Making of the Great Indian Election (2014).

¹⁹⁵⁸ NITI Aayog, *Analysis of Simultaneous Elections: The “What, Why and How”* (2017), <https://niti.gov.in>.

logistical resources. With more than **960 million eligible voters**, India organizes the largest democratic exercise in the world.¹⁹⁵⁹ Elections require extensive arrangements including polling infrastructure, security deployment, transportation, electronic voting machines (EVMs), voter awareness programs, and election personnel.

Empirical studies conducted by research organizations such as the **Centre for Media Studies (CMS)** indicate that election expenditure in India has increased significantly over the past two decades.¹⁹⁶⁰

Estimated Election Expenditure

Election Year Estimated Total Spending

2009	₹11,000 crore
2014	₹30,000 crore
2019	₹60,000 crore

The **2019 Lok Sabha election** is widely regarded as the **most expensive election in the world**, with total spending exceeding ₹60,000 crore.¹⁹⁶¹ This expenditure includes both **government spending on election administration and campaign spending by political parties and candidates**.

Components of Election Expenditure

Election-related costs arise from several sources:

1. Administrative Expenditure

- Setting up polling stations
- Training election officials
- Printing electoral rolls
- Voter awareness campaigns

2. Security Deployment

- Deployment of central armed police forces

- State police personnel
- Security arrangements at polling booths

3. Election Technology

- Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs)
- Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) systems
- Digital voter databases and management systems

4. Transportation and Logistics

- Transportation of polling staff
- Movement of voting machines
- Logistics in remote areas

5. Political Campaign Expenditure

- Advertising and media campaigns
- Political rallies
- Campaign travel
- Social media outreach

Cost of Frequent Elections

Apart from general elections, **state assembly elections** also require significant financial resources. Since different states hold elections at different times, the Election Commission must repeatedly mobilize administrative machinery and security forces.

For example:

- Approximately **10–12 major elections occur in India every five years** when state assembly elections are considered.
- Each election requires large-scale administrative coordination involving **millions of polling officials and security personnel**.

Frequent elections also affect government expenditure indirectly. During election periods, the **Model Code of Conduct (MCC)** restricts the announcement of new development projects or

¹⁹⁵⁹ Election Comm'n of India, *Electoral Statistics Pocket Book 2023* (2023), <https://eci.gov.in>.

¹⁹⁶⁰ Centre for Media Studies, *Poll Expenditure: The 2019 Elections* (2019), <https://cmsindia.org>.

¹⁹⁶¹ Election Comm'n of India, *Statistical Report on General Elections to the Lok Sabha 2019* (2020), <https://eci.gov.in>.

welfare schemes. This often delays policy decisions and administrative initiatives.¹⁹⁶²

Economic Impact

The financial burden of repeated elections affects:

- **Public funds used for election management**
- **Political party finances**
- **Campaign-related economic activities**

While election spending also generates temporary economic activity such as advertising, printing, and transportation services, critics argue that excessive campaign expenditure may increase the influence of money in politics.

Implications for Electoral Reform

Supporters of ONOE argue that synchronizing elections could significantly reduce these repeated expenditures. If elections for Parliament and State Assemblies were held together, the government would need to mobilize administrative machinery and security forces fewer times, potentially saving substantial public resources.

However, opponents note that cost reduction alone cannot justify large-scale electoral reforms if they compromise democratic accountability, federalism, or political diversity.

Therefore, while empirical data shows that election expenditure has increased significantly, the debate on electoral reform must carefully balance **financial efficiency with democratic values and constitutional safeguards**.

4. Objectives of One Nation, One Election

The proposal for **One Nation, One Election (ONOE)** is driven by several policy objectives aimed at improving the efficiency, stability, and effectiveness of India's electoral system. The idea seeks to address the challenges posed by frequent elections in a vast and diverse

democratic country like India. By synchronizing elections for the **Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies**, the government aims to streamline administrative processes, reduce financial burdens, ensure uninterrupted governance, and potentially improve voter engagement. The following objectives explain the key motivations behind this reform.

4.1 Administrative Efficiency

One of the most important objectives of ONOE is to improve administrative efficiency in conducting elections. Elections in India involve massive logistical planning and require the participation of millions of government officials and security personnel. Teachers, administrative officers, and other public servants are often assigned election duties, which temporarily diverts them from their regular responsibilities.¹⁹⁶³ In addition, large numbers of **central armed police forces and state police personnel** must be deployed across the country to maintain law and order during polling.

The frequent conduct of elections across different states places a continuous burden on administrative machinery. Every election requires the establishment of polling stations, distribution of voting machines, training of polling staff, and coordination between multiple government departments. If elections are synchronized under the ONOE framework, these administrative arrangements would only need to be organized once within the electoral cycle. This could significantly reduce the strain on government institutions and allow officials to focus more effectively on their routine governance functions.

4.2 Cost Reduction

Another major objective of ONOE is the reduction of election-related expenditure. Elections in India involve substantial costs due to the scale of operations required. These expenses include the procurement and

¹⁹⁶² Milan Vaishnav, *When Crime Pays: Money and Muscle in Indian Politics* (Yale Univ. Press 2017).

¹⁹⁶³ S.Y. Quraishi, *An Undocumented Wonder: The Making of the Great Indian Election* (Penguin Random House India 2014).

maintenance of **Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) systems**, transportation of polling materials, security arrangements, and remuneration for polling staff.¹⁹⁶⁴

When elections are conducted separately across states at different times, the Election Commission must repeatedly incur these costs. For instance, the transportation of voting machines and election materials across remote and geographically challenging regions adds to logistical expenses.¹⁹⁶⁵ Similarly, the deployment of security forces during each election cycle requires significant financial resources.

Synchronizing elections could reduce these repeated expenditures by consolidating administrative and logistical efforts into a single electoral event. While the initial cost of preparing for simultaneous elections may be high—due to the need for additional voting machines and infrastructure—the long-term savings could be substantial. Additionally, political parties may also benefit from reduced campaign expenses, as they would not need to organize separate campaigns for multiple elections within a short period.

4.3 Policy Stability

Frequent elections also affect the continuity of governance and policy implementation. During election periods, the **Model Code of Conduct (MCC)** is enforced by the Election Commission. The MCC prohibits governments from announcing new policies, launching development projects, or making major administrative decisions that could influence voters. While the MCC is essential to ensure fair elections, its repeated enforcement across different states often delays government initiatives.¹⁹⁶⁶

Under the current system, because elections occur frequently in different parts of the country,

the MCC is often in effect somewhere at any given time. This can slow down the pace of policy implementation and hinder long-term planning for development projects. By synchronizing elections, ONOE aims to reduce these interruptions and allow governments to focus on governance and policy execution without frequent electoral constraints. In theory, this could improve the efficiency of public administration and promote long-term policy stability.

4.4 Increased Voter Participation

Another potential advantage of ONOE is the possibility of improving voter participation. Frequent elections may lead to **voter fatigue**, where citizens become less motivated to vote due to repeated electoral exercises. When elections are held multiple times over short periods, some voters may choose not to participate in every election, especially in urban areas where voter turnout is often lower.

Simultaneous elections could simplify the voting process by allowing citizens to cast their votes for both national and state representatives on the same day. This may encourage higher participation, as voters would only need to visit polling stations once within the electoral cycle. Furthermore, synchronized elections may increase political awareness by concentrating electoral campaigns and public debates into a single, nationally significant event. However, some scholars argue that simultaneous elections could also lead to national political issues overshadowing regional concerns, which remains an important point of debate.

5. National Voter Database

The **National Voter Database** refers to a centralized digital system designed to store and manage voter information from across the country in a unified framework. Currently, electoral rolls in India are maintained separately by state election authorities under the supervision of the **Election Commission of**

¹⁹⁶⁴ Law Comm'n of India, 170th Report on Reform of Electoral Laws (1999).

¹⁹⁶⁵ NITI Aayog, *Analysis of Simultaneous Elections: The "What, Why and How"* (2017), <https://niti.gov.in>.

¹⁹⁶⁶ Law Comm'n of India, Draft Report: Simultaneous Elections Constitutional and Legal Perspectives (2018).

India (ECI)¹⁹⁶⁷. Each state maintains its own voter database, which is periodically updated to include new voters and remove outdated records.

The proposal for a national voter database aims to integrate these separate databases into a **single centralized platform**¹⁹⁶⁸. Such a system would enable election authorities to manage voter data more efficiently, ensure greater accuracy in electoral rolls, and facilitate easier verification of voter identities.

Centralized Voter Management

Under the current system, voter registration and updates are often handled at the state or constituency level. While this decentralized approach allows for local management of voter rolls, it can also lead to inconsistencies and duplication of records. For example, individuals who migrate from one state to another may remain registered in their previous constituency while also registering in their new location.

A national voter database could address these issues by enabling **nationwide voter verification**. Election authorities would be able to cross-check voter information across states, ensuring that each citizen is registered only once.¹⁹⁶⁹ This would help reduce duplicate entries and improve the overall accuracy of electoral rolls.

Removal of Duplicate and Inaccurate Records

One of the key objectives of the national voter database is to eliminate duplicate or outdated records. In large electoral systems like India's, maintaining accurate voter rolls is a complex task. Changes such as migration, death, or changes in residence require constant updates to the electoral database.¹⁹⁷⁰

¹⁹⁶⁷ Election Comm'n of India, *Handbook for Electoral Registration Officers* (2022), <https://eci.gov.in>.

¹⁹⁶⁸ Election Comm'n of India, *National Electoral Roll Purification and Authentication Programme (NERPAP) Guidelines* (2015), <https://eci.gov.in>.

¹⁹⁶⁹ Unique Identification Auth. of India, *Aadhaar and Identity Verification Framework* (Gov't of India), <https://uidai.gov.in>.

¹⁹⁷⁰ Ministry of Electronics & Information Tech., *Digital India Programme: Transforming India into a Digitally Empowered Society* (Gov't of India 2015), <https://digitalindia.gov.in>.

A centralized digital system could automate many of these processes by integrating voter data with other administrative records. For example, updates related to deaths or changes in residence could be automatically reflected in voter rolls. This would ensure that electoral lists remain accurate and up to date, reducing the possibility of electoral fraud or administrative errors.

Online Voter Registration

Another important feature of the proposed system is the facilitation of **online voter registration and updates**. Citizens could register as voters, update their personal details, or transfer their registration to another constituency through digital platforms.¹⁹⁷¹ This would simplify the voter registration process and make it more accessible, especially for young voters and citizens who frequently move between cities for education or employment.

Digital voter services could also improve transparency and accessibility. Voters would be able to check their registration status online, verify polling station details, and receive updates about election procedures.¹⁹⁷²

Potential Digital Integration

The national voter database may also be integrated with broader digital governance systems. For example, linking voter data with the **Aadhaar identity system** could allow for biometric verification and improved accuracy in voter identification.¹⁹⁷³ Similarly, integration with digital governance platforms could facilitate secure data management and efficient information sharing between government departments.

However, such integration also raises concerns regarding **data privacy and surveillance**. Centralizing voter information and linking it with other government databases could create risks

¹⁹⁷¹ Internet Freedom Found., *Electoral Data and Privacy Concerns in India* (Policy Brief 2021), <https://internetfreedom.in>.

¹⁹⁷² Access Now, *Data Protection and Voter Privacy in the Digital Age* (2020), <https://accessnow.org>.

¹⁹⁷³ Privacy Int'l, *Voter Data and Political Micro-Targeting* (2019), <https://privacyinternational.org>.

of unauthorized access, misuse of personal data, or political profiling. Therefore, experts emphasize that the development of a national voter database must be accompanied by strong data protection laws, cybersecurity measures, and independent oversight mechanisms.

In conclusion, while a national voter database has the potential to improve electoral administration and voter convenience, its implementation must carefully balance technological efficiency with the protection of citizens' fundamental rights, particularly the right to privacy.

6. Empirical Evidence from Electoral Data Studies

Research reports by election monitoring organizations highlight several challenges in voter data management.

Duplicate Voter Records

Studies suggest that **duplicate or outdated entries may account for 3–5% of electoral rolls** in some regions.

Migration and Urbanization

India experiences significant population mobility. Voters moving between states often remain registered in multiple locations.

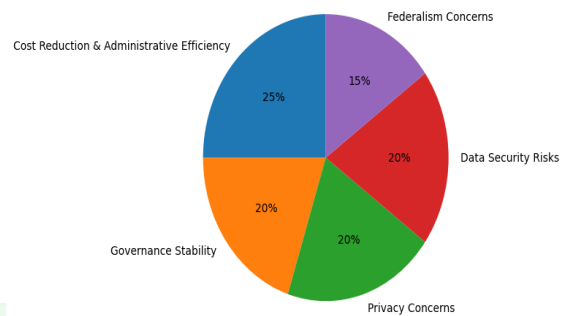
Data Management Challenges

Election officials must frequently update voter rolls to account for:

- deaths
- migration
- new voters

A centralized digital database may improve these processes.

Perceived Impacts of ONOE and National Voter Database (Literature Synthesis)



(Figure 1: Perceived impacts of One Nation One Election and a National Voter Database based on policy literature and empirical reports.)

The pie chart illustrates the perceived impacts of One Nation, One Election (ONOE) and the proposed National Voter Database based on a synthesis of policy reports and academic discussions on electoral reforms in India. The chart reflects the broader debate between improving electoral efficiency and safeguarding democratic rights and institutional balance.

7. Privacy and Surveillance Concerns

The creation of a centralized voter database introduces serious privacy concerns.

Data Centralization Risks

Centralized databases can become attractive targets for:

- cyberattacks
- political misuse
- unauthorized surveillance

Political Profiling

Large voter databases combined with analytics could allow political actors to analyze:

- voting patterns
- demographic behavior
- political preferences

Such profiling could influence electoral campaigns.

Risk of Data Breaches

Past incidents globally demonstrate how electoral data leaks can compromise democratic systems.

8. Constitutional Implications

Implementing ONOE requires **constitutional amendments** affecting legislative tenure and election cycles.

Relevant constitutional provisions include:

- **Article 83** – Duration of Parliament¹⁹⁷⁴
- **Article 172** – Duration of State Legislatures¹⁹⁷⁵
- **Article 324** – Powers of the Election Commission¹⁹⁷⁶

Additionally, the **Right to Privacy** established in the **Puttaswamy judgment (2017)** imposes limits on state data collection.¹⁹⁷⁷

Any centralized voter database must satisfy the **threefold constitutional test**:

1. Legality
2. Legitimate state purpose
3. Proportionality

9. Conclusion

The proposals for One Nation, One Election and a National Voter Database represent one of the most significant potential transformations of India's electoral system. These reforms promise substantial benefits in terms of administrative efficiency, cost reduction, and improved voter management. However, they also raise complex constitutional, political, and technological questions. The centralization of electoral data could create risks related to privacy violations, political profiling, and digital surveillance. Additionally, simultaneous elections may alter the balance between national and regional political dynamics. Therefore, the success of these reforms depends on carefully balancing efficiency with democratic safeguards. India's democratic system must ensure that technological modernization enhances electoral integrity without compromising fundamental rights. Ultimately, the future of

electoral reform lies not only in digital innovation but also in the protection of privacy, transparency, and democratic accountability.

¹⁹⁷⁴ India Const. art. 83.

¹⁹⁷⁵ India Const. art. 172.

¹⁹⁷⁶ India Const. art. 324.

¹⁹⁷⁷ Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) v. Union of India, (2017) 10 S.C.C. 1 (India).