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Right to Equality and Reasonable Classification: The Expanding Scope of Article 14 and Emerging Constitutional Challenges

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Abstract

Describing the evolution of Article 14 as a mere substitution of the test of reasonable classification by a single, wider test does not do justice to the issue. The approaches employed in the Indian jurisprudence on equality are related but different. There is no doubt that the basic structure doctrine of the Constitution and the Supreme Court's power to strike down laws as unconstitutional are basic parts of our constitutional structure. However, the existence of these powers and their legal effects do not necessitate the exact necessity tests and standards of review to apply to each law. Vishaka's promising precedent that guaranteed equity has not ensured coherent adjudication about the status of past reservations owing to the complex question of doctrinal fit. Courts ought to acknowledge the category of disadvantage, deploy the appropriate legal provision, and instruct a justification that refers to the actual results. Substantive equality requires attention beyond the face, but it does not lift evidentiary burdens, nor does it make every outcome unequally unconstitutional. Through categorization of discrimination, disadvantage, and justification and remedy, a structured inquiry would not only maintain the flexibility of Article 14 but also bring greater transparency and consistency.

Keywords: *Article 14; Reasonable Classification; Manifest Arbitrariness; Substantive Equality; Indirect Discrimination; Reasonable Accommodation.*

1. Introduction: equality beyond a single formula

Article 14 guarantees equality before the law¹, and the equal protection of the laws, to every person within India. Its wording doesn't always require the same treatment, no matter the circumstances. The challenging question is which disparities justify legal distinctions, and when apparently identical treatment entrenches disadvantage. A classification may be intelligible when its aim is constitutionally suspect; a facially neutral rule may prove administratively convenient while precluding the members of a particular class from accessing an entitlement otherwise available to them.

This article analyses the classical classification test and the subsequent doctrines of equality. The inquiry relates to the peculiar injuries each of them address and the standards to justify differential effects. The technique is doctrinal, which draws on foundational decisions and developments till the 2025 digital-accessibility judgment in *Pragya Prasun*². The contribution provides an analytical account of doctrinal fit: the relevant test should follow the constitutional problem, not become a formula attached after a preferred outcome has been selected.

2. Reasonable classification: enduring utility and structural limitations

The conventional test necessitates having a clear differentia, along with a rational connection that exists between the differentia and the object of law. The formulations by Budhan Choudhry and Ram Krishna Dalmia³ are important in this regard. The test allows for legislation that does not have to apply to everyone in relation to a particular problem. It is not unconstitutional for a distinction made on the basis of need, relevant qualification or circumstances of a regulated activity.

Its strength also has a limitation. The definition of the objective to reproduce the class causes classification analysis to be circular. A rule that seeks to exclude a group cannot be justified by merely characterizing the exclusion of that group as a purpose.

Court must draw measure's working description apart from a defensible objective. If we don't take this view, almost any classification can get a rational nexus⁴ by suitably restricting the purpose of legislature.

It is also important to choose comparator⁵. A claimant may seem dissimilar when compared to a narrowly selected group, but they are actually similarly

situated when the relevant entitlement is properly construed. On the other hand, comparing people on formal eligibility alone may mask the differences in the barriers they encounter. Thus no default happens for the classification test. The legal significance relies on a reasoned justification for the allocation of right, benefit or burden involved and the relevance of the selected distinction.

The presumption of constitutionality in the standard requires a careful way. According to Dalmia⁶, there is room for legislative classification and the surrounding circumstances must also be borne in mind. This doesn't mean the state can address a proven equal protection injury through a mere unsupported assertion of administrative ease. Evaluating justification, rather than reinventing it, is the purpose of deference. The degree of questioning must match the magnitude of the classification, the interest to suffer and any further constitutional prohibition, including that in Article 15.

3. Arbitrariness and manifest arbitrariness: related but distinct inquiries

3.1 From comparative categories to the exercise of power

In the case of *E P Royappa v State of Tamil Nadu*⁷, the court linked equality with the rejection of arbitrariness. The case of *Maneka Gandhi v Union of India* connected the fair procedure that Article 21 encompasses with the demands of Articles 14 and 19. The significance of non-arbitrariness in public decision making was further developed in *Ajay Hasia*⁸. Attention was widened violence and speedy misappropriation which don't happen within a limited domain.

Conceptual change is necessary. A public authority can act without criteria or ignore its own criteria or treat a person's case inconsistently even if the legislation does not create an express category of discrimination. The analysis result might not be sufficient to capture that injury. A non-arbitrary decision is one that can be justified through reasons relevant to the particular case⁹. Although the term cannot simply mean that a judge disagrees with an outcome, it remains important to identify what actually renders the decision arbitrary.

3.2 Legislative review and the threshold of manifest arbitrariness

The manifest-arbitrariness doctrine deals with a stringent type of irrationality found in laws. In the case of *Shayara Bano v Union of India*¹⁰, Nariman J, with

the concurrence of Lalit J, took this route to invalidate instant triple talaq. Meanwhile, Kurian Joseph J added his third vote to set aside the practice for different reasons. It should not, therefore, be considered a unanimous adoption of a certain constitutional rationale.

Subsequent constitutional judgments, including those in Joseph Shine and the electoral-bonds verdict¹¹, reveal the continued relevance of arbitrariness in legal arrangement reviews. However, manifest arbitrariness does not mean unreasonable classification. The former considers whether the measure is missing an adequate determining principle or has a constitutionally intolerable disparity; the latter investigates the link between the distinctions and the objectives. A ruling that applies both should clarify the different work each does.

Further questions arise regarding the relationship between aims, means, alternatives and burdens¹². It must be a right and a doctrine; it cannot be a universal replacement for any Article 14 inquiry. Limitations on rights may require a closer focus than ordinary administrative line-drawing. The aim is not to rank the tests in the abstract, but to identify a standard that will reveal the particular type of unconstitutional treatment complained of.

4. Substantive equality: institutions, effects and accommodation

4.1 Why formally neutral rules may discriminate

A criterion that seems neutral but is discriminatory can reproduce previous marginalisation when it measures opportunities that were denied by the institution itself. The difficulty in the assessment of women officers for permanent commission was examined in *Lt Col Nitisha v Union of India*¹³. The Court acknowledges the presence of indirect discrimination and systemic discrimination and independently investigates evaluation practices in relation to the service conditions of women. The relevant constitutional question went further than whether the same words were used in the criteria applied to women and men.

This type of reasoning focuses attention away from the intention alone to structures and effects. Not every statistical disparity is conclusive of a violation of the Constitution. The claimant must interlink the practice being challenged with the disadvantage¹⁴ while the institution must justify its action or practice by addressing that disadvantage. Also, it must not just

argue that it is neutral. The relevant evidence may include how opportunities were allocated, how criteria were constructed and if ostensibly orderly measures speak to unequal institutional histories.

Sandra Fredman's account of substantive equality¹⁵ identifies concerns with disadvantage, stigma, participation and accommodation of difference as interrelated. We cannot capture all equality injuries through a single comparator given these dimensions. A rule can better distribute benefits while still performing a stigma or take away an express exclusion while withholding qualification conditions. The framework is analytically useful, precisely because it requires one to ask what equality is meant to achieve, in context.

Vandita Khanna's analysis¹⁶ of *Nitisha* nonetheless warns that the mere recognition of indirect discrimination does not resolve the coherence of the legal test. The evidentiary thresholds and the relationship between disadvantage and justification still need judicial clarification. The lack of such discipline would make substantive equality a potentially appealing account of outcomes, rather than a working methodology that litigants and public authorities can apply.

4.2 Reasonable accommodation is not an exception to equality

The case of *Vikash Kumar v Union Public Service Commission*¹⁷ held that reasonable accommodation is part of substantive equality in the context of examination. Helping a person who has a disability cannot be achieved by a blanket condition that is framed around non-disabled candidates. A modification or change to the test does not automatically give an unrelated benefit. It may make a barrier disappear that prevents a person from showing the ability the test is actually trying to measure.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act¹⁸ defines reasonable accommodation as necessary and appropriate alteration and adjustment which does not impose a disproportionate or undue burden. Each component is essential. An organization must look into the required alteration seriously but it must be understood that the legal standard does not mean that all alterations must be implemented in every scenario. A reasoned response should identify the barrier and consider workable alternatives, explaining any claimed burdens with evidence.

5. Emerging challenges in three institutional settings

5.1 Sub-classification within Scheduled Caste reservations

In the case of *State of Punjab v Davinder Singh*¹⁹, a panel of seven judges gave their verdict, and by majority of 6:1, they permitted sub-classification within Scheduled Caste reservation. In this bench judgment, the earlier decision of *E V Chinnaiah* was overruled. The reasoning differentiated between being part of the Presidential List under Article 341 and sharing in the benefits of reservation in the list. The ruling did not empower states to change the Presidential List via standard classification.

The case shows a conflict in affirmative action. If the whole protected category is treated the same, this can leave differences in access to benefits unaddressed. Further classification may better target disadvantage but also create opportunities for arbitrary allocation. The Court sought a defensible evidentiary basis²⁰ and allowed for their judicial scrutiny. As a result, the equality analysis does not merely identify historically disadvantaged category, but examines how a particular remedial scheme operates within it.

Two views also discussed the creamy layer²¹. The observations should not be squashed together in a single uniform holding ordering identical imitation in every context. Identifying the decided issue and the adjudicative support for each additional proposition is essential to doctrinal accuracy. The constitutional importance of *Davinder Singh* is not that all statements in the several opinions are the same binding rule, but rather that evidence-based differentiation leads to substantive equality.

5.2 Caste and the organisation of prison labour

The case of *Sukanya Shantha v Union of India*²² dealt with the impact of caste on the rules regarding work allocation and institutional status in prison. The judgement of the Court invalidated the discriminatory provisions by way of an intertwined reading of Articles 14, 15, 17, 21 and 23. This was not a matter of whether an administrative classification can be stated clearly. The classifications themselves created a forbidden hierarchy.

The ruling highlights the reason behind enforcing different constitutional provisions instead of cancelling each other. The guarantee of equality found in Article 14 deals with differential treatment, while Article 17 adds a specific prohibition against

untouchability²³. Further injuries consist of dignity as well as protection against forced labour. Prison administration cannot rely merely on a ritual of administrative continuity to justify inherited caste allocation. Constitutional scrutiny must look to the nature of the distinction and the coercive context within which it operates.

The solution also highlights the familiar division between official change and institutional use. It is necessary to delete discriminatory language where the very rules authorise it, but textual revision does not evidence changed allocation practices. The directions given by the judgment and the supervisory arrangements²⁴ provide a justification for assessing compliance and not for assuming that caste discrimination has disappeared from the prisons.

Any claim about future conditions needs evidence other than just a claim of invalidity.

5.3 Digital identification and inaccessible participation

In *Pragya Prasun v Union of India*²⁵, decided with *Amar Jain*, the Court dealt with digital-identity barriers affecting persons with disabilities, including requirements that could not be met through particular facial or visual actions. It linked digital accessibility to a constitutional right, directing for accessible alternatives and modifications. The ruling demonstrates how something labelled as universal can turn out to be limited in application to certain users' bodies.

The problem of constitutionality is not that identity verification is not permissible. It concerns whether a chosen means unnecessarily excludes a person from an entitlement and whether the means could have been chosen more reasonably. A security rationale must address the accommodation requested²⁶. According to the standard, it doesn't imply equality just because all users are described as subject to the same technical step if some users can't perform that step for disability-related reasons.

Given this reasoning, one could pose questions related to public decision-making geared towards automation, without the judgment resolving each algorithmic question. A hypothetical system for determining eligibility²⁷ may use a proxy variable that results in the disadvantage of a protected group or may create errors that those affected cannot challenge. Investigating Article 14 will then require information about the rule; its effects; available explanations and correction mechanisms. The Court has not yet declared

all purported algorithmic auditings to be constitutional, as this would be the implication for future litigation.

6. Toward a coherent and evidence-sensitive equality inquiry

The injury should be a starting point. In challenging express differential treatment, the claimant must identify the classification and the comparison²⁸. A claimant must demonstrate how disadvantage arises in a neutral practice challenge. A claim for accommodation ought to pinpoint the access impediment and the adjustment sought. A claim of arbitrariness must explain the absence or failure of a relevant governing principle. Being clear about the injury makes clear what test to perform.

The next question is justification. The state must determine a legitimate goal distinct from the classification itself and show why the difference or practice being challenged serves that goal. When disadvantage is shown, a mere equal wording assertion will not suffice. A general concern about cost or inconvenience must be attached to the particular adjustment sought²⁹ where accommodation is sought. The analysis must leave room for meaningfully rebutting the unsupported assumptions made by each side.

Evidence serves a variety of purposes. The distribution of positive effects of reservation³⁰ can be gleaned from data whereas institutional records may tell us how the criteria for assessment was configured. In situations where caste hierarchy is evident, the constitutional flaw may be obvious from the rule without requiring statistical demonstrative of unequal outcomes. Misunderstanding the various nature of equality injuries would require same evidentiary form everywhere. The court ought to explain what evidence is required, and why the material at hand meets the requirement.

The solution should then follow the exclusion process. Classification ruled invalid may be severed or reassessed; procedure ruled inaccessible³¹ may be adopted or proposed; practice ruled systemic may be monitored continuously. Extending a benefit is not always the same as cancelling it for all. The disadvantaged claimants may be worse off from a symmetrical remedy. As a result, remedial reasoning ought to address the affected entitlement as well as the real-world consequences of rival lawful options.

Another boundary is institutional in nature. The judiciary is not become the general allocator of all public goods nor does Article 14 ensure identical

social outcomes³². They need to the public bodies to justify effective distinctions and overcome showed discriminatory barricades. Maintaining that boundary prevents both opposite errors, namely, reducing equality to minimal rationality, and treating any unequal outcome as sufficient evidence of constitutional wrong. The expanding doctrine will continue to have legal force only if its reasoning is sufficiently clear to provide guidance in the future.

The form of the equality claim should also match the evidence. A rule that explicitly assigns a burden due to a prohibited characteristic may show such operation on its face. If there is a suspicion of systematic exclusion from a formally neutral process, information is required on how it is implemented, who is affected, and on what basis the institution is operating. Just because there is not a large amount of number data, that does not mean that the latter claim fails automatically. On the other hand, nor does a plausible narrative erase the need³³ to link the rule and the disadvantage.

The evidence from forensic documents, testimony and institutional history may differ.

Choosing a comparator deserves similar attention. In acknowledgment of 'strategy' in any given policy domain, it is necessary to define and study pre-requisites to bring 'relevancies' to the fore. On the other hand, a comparison that is too general might hide relevant differences in the task or benefit. The selected comparator should illuminate the constitutional injury³⁴, which is the appropriate question. Offering a clear explanation of that choice would enhance the transparency of equality reasoning as compared to the option of treating the comparator as a self-evident starting point.

The proposed repair should thus address the mechanism producing unequal treatment. It may be sufficient to remove an express category where the category is the defect. When inaccessible procedures or inherited evaluation criteria lead to adverse effects, identical treatment after removal may leave much of the harm in place.

7. Conclusion

Rising shared body of approaches is probably more apt descriptor for evolution of Article 14 than evolving Article 14. The reasonable classification test is still being used to test disparity of treatment. Public power, likewise, must uphold the standard of non-arbitrariness. Another development known as manifest arbitrariness examine serious irrationality in

legislation. In addition, substantive equality uncovers institutional disadvantages and facilitates accommodation measures. Not everyone provides a full answer to every equality dispute.

The recent verdicts on reservation and digital identification indicate the importance of matching the doctrine with the injury. Further, they indicate the need to differentiate between binding holdings and mere observations and between constitutional recognition and established success. A logical equality contract should identify the relevant disadvantage, require justification that is responsive and pick a remedy that tackles the actual barrier. The present-day guarantee of Article 14 is not necessarily the abolition of legal tests of general fairness, but rather the application of suitably differentiated tests to ensure effective equal constitutional membership.

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3. *Budhan Choudhry v State of Bihar* AIR 1955 SC 191; *Ram Krishna Dalmia v Justice S R Tendolkar* AIR 1958 SC 538.
4. For the differentia-and-object framework against which this critique is developed, see *Ram Krishna Dalmia v Justice S R Tendolkar* AIR 1958 SC 538.
5. Vandita Khanna, 'Indirect Discrimination and Substantive Equality in Nitisha' (2022) 22(1) *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law* 74.
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24. *Sukanya Shantha v Union of India* 2024 INSC 753, operative directions.
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27. *Pragya Prasun v Union of India* 2025 INSC 599. The algorithmic example is the author's hypothetical extension; the cited case concerns accessible digital identification, not a general constitutional algorithm-audit rule.
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31. For remedies directed at specific access and assessment barriers, see *Pragya Prasun v Union of India* 2025 INSC 599; *Lt Col Nitisha v Union of India* 2021 SCC OnLine SC 261.

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