
FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AND LABOUR RIGHTS: CONFLICT AND HARMONY IN CONSTITUTIONAL ADJUDICATION

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the constitutional relationship between Fundamental Rights and Labour Rights, with particular focus on the tensions and complementarities that emerge in constitutional adjudication. In the Indian constitutional framework, labour rights are not confined to statutory protections under labour legislation, they are closely connected with the guarantees of equality, freedom, life, dignity, and protection against exploitation embodied in Part III of the Constitution, as well as the social justice vision reflected in the Directive Principles of State Policy. The paper analyses how courts have interpreted and balanced competing claims arising between workers' rights and other constitutional interests, including freedom of trade and occupation, managerial autonomy, and economic policy considerations. It explores the evolving judicial approach toward issues such as fair wages, bonded labour, child labour, the right to livelihood, collective bargaining, and humane conditions of work. The study argues that constitutional adjudication has functioned both as a site of conflict and as a mechanism of harmony, where courts attempt to reconcile civil-political liberties with socio-economic justice. By critically evaluating leading judicial decisions, the paper highlights the extent to which labour rights have been constitutionalised and whether such adjudication has advanced the transformative promise of the Constitution. Ultimately, the paper contends that labour rights are essential to the meaningful realization of Fundamental Rights in a welfare-oriented constitutional democracy.

Keywords: Rights, Labour, Constitution, Fundamental, Article, Adjudication

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INTRODUCTION

The constitutional relationship between Fundamental Rights and Labour Rights reflects one of the most dynamic and contested areas of modern constitutional adjudication. While Fundamental Rights are traditionally understood as enforceable guarantees against State action, labour rights emerge from a broader constitutional vision that seeks to secure dignity, equality, social justice, and humane conditions of work. In the Indian context, this relationship is shaped not only by Part III of the Constitution, particularly Articles 14, 19, 21 and 24,³ but also by the Directive Principles of State Policy under Part IV, which collectively provide the normative foundation for labour welfare. As a result, constitutional adjudication in labour matters often moves beyond a narrow rights-based framework and engages with the deeper transformative aspirations of the Constitution. At the same time, the interaction between Fundamental Rights and Labour Rights is marked by both conflict and harmony. Tensions frequently arise where employers invoke rights such as freedom of trade, business, and property-related interests, while workers assert claims relating to fair wages, safe working conditions, collective bargaining, livelihood, and protection from exploitation. Courts are therefore required to balance individual liberty with social welfare, market freedom with distributive justice, and contractual autonomy with constitutional morality. This balancing exercise has produced a rich jurisprudence in which the judiciary has, at different moments, both expanded and constrained labour protections depending on changing constitutional interpretations and socio-economic realities.

Research Objectives

- To critically examine how Indian constitutional adjudication addresses the relationship between Fundamental Rights and labour rights by reading enforceable rights.
- To identify the constitutional foundations of labour rights under Part III, especially Articles 14, 19, 21, 23, 24, and 32.
- To analyse how the judiciary has interpreted the right to life with dignity under Article 21 and the prohibition of forced labour under Articles 23 and 24 in labour-related disputes.

³ The Constitution of India.

- To study how courts have treated labour welfare legislation as a constitutionally valid restriction where it advances equality, humane working conditions, minimum wages, and protection from exploitation.
- To evaluate the role of constitutional remedies and public interest litigation in enabling vulnerable workers to seek enforcement of labour rights before constitutional courts.

Research Question

1. To what extent do Articles 14, 19, 21, 23, and 24 of the Constitution provide a substantive framework for the protection of labour rights?
2. How have the Directive Principles of State Policy influenced judicial interpretation of labour rights despite their non-justiciable character?
3. In what ways has the judiciary expanded the meaning of dignity, livelihood, and protection against exploitation in labour jurisprudence?
4. What role has public interest litigation played in transforming labour rights into enforceable constitutional claims?
5. How do judicial interpretations of labour welfare measures reflect the broader constitutional goal of social and economic justice?

Research Hypothesis

- To critically examine how Indian constitutional adjudication addresses the relationship between Fundamental Rights and labour rights by reading enforceable rights such as equality, freedom, dignity, and protection against exploitation together with labour-focused Directive Principles like Articles 38, 39, 41, 42, 43, and 43A.
- The judiciary has used Directive Principles relating to just conditions of work, living wages, and worker welfare to expand the meaning and scope of Fundamental Rights in labour matters.
- Constitutional courts have gradually reduced the conflict between economic freedom and labour welfare by adopting a social justice-oriented approach in labour

adjudication.

- Labour rights in India are not protected solely through labour statutes but are also strengthened through judicial interpretation of Fundamental Rights, especially Articles 14, 21, 23, and 24.
- Public interest litigation and constitutional remedies have played a significant role in converting labour welfare concerns into enforceable rights-based claims.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a doctrinal and analytical method of legal research, as the topic primarily concerns the interpretation of constitutional provisions, labour laws, and judicial decisions dealing with labour rights and Fundamental Rights in India. This method is appropriate because the research focuses on examining legal principles, constitutional adjudication, and the evolving judicial approach to the relationship between enforceable Fundamental Rights and labour-oriented constitutional commitments. The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of law. The primary sources include the Constitution of India, relevant labour legislations, and important judgments of the Supreme Court and High Courts relating to equality, dignity, freedom, protection against exploitation, and labour welfare. The secondary sources include books, journal articles, commentaries, research papers, and reports that help in understanding the constitutional framework and judicial developments in the field of labour rights.

The research follows a qualitative and library-based approach, since it depends on the study of legal texts and judicial precedents rather than empirical methods such as interviews, questionnaires, or field surveys. The analysis is carried out by examining constitutional provisions and leading case law thematically in order to determine whether Indian constitutional adjudication reflects conflict or harmony between Fundamental Rights and labour rights. Through this method, the study seeks to evaluate how courts have interpreted labour rights within the broader framework of social justice, constitutional morality, and the balance between individual freedoms and worker protection.

Literature Review

Existing literature on Indian labour jurisprudence shows that labour rights are no longer viewed

as purely statutory protections but as rights that derive constitutional meaning from Part III and Part IV of the Constitution. Scholars and legal commentators consistently argue that equality, dignity, freedom of association, livelihood, and protection against exploitation provide the constitutional foundation through which labour welfare is interpreted and enforced.⁴

Another important body of scholarship examines the significance of the Directive Principles of State Policy in shaping labour rights discourse. Authors highlight Articles 38, 39, 41, 42, 43, and 43A as embodying the constitutional commitment to welfare, living wages, humane working conditions, maternity relief, and worker participation in management, even though these provisions are non-justiciable in form. The literature repeatedly notes that Indian courts have used these principles interpretively to expand the content of enforceable rights, thereby reducing the traditional divide between Parts III and IV.⁵

Judicial interpretation of wage justice has received particular attention in legal writing. In *Randhir Singh v. Union of India*⁶, the Supreme Court treated “equal pay for equal work” not as a standalone Fundamental Right but as a constitutional goal enforceable through Articles 14 and 16 read with the Directive Principles, and this case is widely cited as a key example of harmony between enforceable rights and welfare principles. Commentators, however, also note that this doctrine does not operate mechanically, because courts still test comparability of work, classification, and the institutional context before granting relief.

A separate but closely related set of writings deals with Article 21 and the constitutionalisation of livelihood. The literature around *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation*⁷ emphasizes that the right to life includes the right to livelihood, thereby linking work, survival, and dignity within constitutional doctrine. This reasoning has been treated by scholars as especially important for labour law because it shifts labour rights away from a narrow contractual framework and places them within the broader constitutional vision of social justice and human dignity.

Anti-exploitation jurisprudence under Articles 23 and 24 also occupies a central place in the

⁴ Naveen Talawar, “Labour laws in India”, iPleader April, 9, 2024.

⁵ Equal Pay for Equal Work – Statutory Provisions and Judicial Pronouncements *available at*: https://manupatracademy.com/LegalPost/Equal_Pay_for_Equal_Work_Statutory_Provisions_Judicial_Pronouncements (last visited on April 12, 2026).

⁶ 1982 AIR 879

⁷ 1986 AIR 180

literature. Discussions of *Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India*⁸ describe it as a transformative decision in which the Supreme Court treated bonded labour as a violation of Article 23 and connected freedom from forced labour with the right to live with dignity under Article 21. The literature further treats this case as significant because it used public interest litigation to make constitutional remedies accessible to vulnerable labourers who would otherwise have remained outside the legal process.

Scholarly discussion of child labour and humane working conditions similarly shows how the Constitution directly enters the field of labour protection. Article 24 is often read together with Articles 39(e), 39(f), and 42 to show that labour regulation in India is tied not only to economic governance but also to developmental protection, dignity, and humane conditions of work. At the same time, literature on collective labour rights suggests that while Article 19(1)(c) protects the right to form associations and unions, the practical exercise of collective bargaining and industrial action continues to be shaped by statutory restrictions and institutional limitations.⁹

Research Gap

A clear research gap in this topic lies in the fact that labour rights in India are constitutionally connected to both enforceable Fundamental Rights under Part III and labour-oriented Directive Principles under Part IV, yet these two constitutional domains are often discussed in isolation rather than as part of a single framework of constitutional adjudication. Although constitutional protections such as equality, life and dignity, and protection against exploitation are central to labour welfare, the specific judicial interaction between these rights and broader labour justice goals has not always been examined in an integrated and sustained manner. Another gap is that existing legal discussion frequently explains the constitutional basis of labour welfare or the methodology of doctrinal legal research, but fewer studies appear to focus specifically on whether Indian courts have treated Fundamental Rights and labour rights as conflicting claims or as mutually reinforcing constitutional values. This leaves insufficient scholarly attention on how constitutional courts have balanced individual freedoms, employer interests, and worker protection in actual adjudication.

⁸ AIR 1984 SC 802

⁹ Mr. Subham Chatterjee, Dr. Rubi Dutta, “Constitutional Protection of Workers' Rights: A Socio-Legal and Psychological Study of Labour Law Reforms in Kolkata and North 24 Parganas” *Advances in Consumer Research* 5(2025)

There is also a need for deeper analysis of how judicial interpretation has expanded labour protection through Articles 14, 21, 23, and 24, especially for vulnerable categories of workers such as bonded labourers, child labourers, and workers exposed to exploitative conditions. While the constitutional and labour welfare framework is well recognised, the doctrinal evolution showing a movement from formal rights analysis to a broader social justice approach remains underexplored in a focused study on constitutional harmony and conflict. Accordingly, the present research fills this gap by undertaking a doctrinal and analytical study of constitutional provisions, labour legislation, and judicial decisions to assess whether Indian constitutional adjudication has moved toward harmony between Fundamental Rights and labour rights. The study is significant because it seeks to connect constitutional text, labour welfare principles, and judicial reasoning within one coherent framework of social justice.

Fundamental Rights as Labour Guarantees

The constitutional basis of labour rights in India begins with Part III. Article 14 protects equality before law and equal protection of laws, Article 16 extends equality to public employment, Article 19(1)(c) protects the formation of associations or unions, Article 21 safeguards life and personal liberty, Article 23 prohibits traffic in human beings and forced labour, and Article 24 prohibits the employment of children below fourteen years in factories, mines, and other hazardous occupations. Article 32 gives enforceability to these rights by allowing constitutional remedies before the Supreme Court. Together, these provisions permit courts to examine labour issues not merely as questions of industrial regulation but as issues of constitutional justice.¹⁰

Among these provisions, Articles 21, 23, and 24 have been especially important. Article 21 has enabled courts to connect labour conditions with dignity and livelihood, Article 23 has been used to attack bonded and forced labour, and Article 24 provides direct constitutional protection against hazardous child labour. These provisions show that labour rights are not external to Fundamental Rights; they are one of the concrete settings in which Fundamental Rights become socially meaningful.¹¹

¹⁰ Constitutional Protection of Labour Rights in India, *available at*: <https://taxguru.in/corporate-law/constitutional-protection-labour-rights-india.html> (last visited on April 12, 2026).

¹¹ *Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India* AIR 1984 SC 802

Directive Principles as Labour Commitments

Part IV deepens the constitutional foundation of labour rights by embedding worker welfare within the broader ideal of social and economic justice. Article 38 calls on the State to promote welfare and reduce inequalities, Article 39 directs the State toward adequate livelihood and equal pay for equal work, Article 41 addresses work and public assistance, Article 42 concerns just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief, Article 43 speaks of living wages and a decent standard of life, and Article 43A concerns worker participation in management. Although these provisions are non-justiciable under Article 37, they are fundamental in the governance of the country and have repeatedly informed judicial interpretation.¹²

The constitutional design therefore does not place labour rights in a purely statutory compartment. Instead, it distributes labour protection across enforceable rights and guiding principles, creating a structure in which adjudication becomes the bridge between text and social reality.¹³

Conflict and Harmony in Constitutional Adjudication

Equality and fair wages

The issue of fair wages demonstrates how courts have transformed a Directive Principle into a constitutional norm through equality analysis. In *Randhir Singh v. Union of India*¹⁴, the Supreme Court held that the principle of equal pay for equal work is not expressly declared a Fundamental Right, yet it is certainly a constitutional goal deducible from Articles 14 and 16 read with Article 39(d). This decision is significant because it shows harmony rather than conflict between Parts III and IV, a non-justiciable directive was used to give substantive content to enforceable equality guarantees.¹⁵

At the same time, the case also illustrates the limits of constitutionalisation. The doctrine does not automatically eliminate every wage disparity, because courts still examine comparability of work, classification, and the institutional setting in which the claim is raised. Even so,

¹² *Supra* note 4 at 4.

¹³ *Supra* note 12 at 7.

¹⁴ 1982 AIR 879

¹⁵ Equal Pay for Equal Work – Statutory Provisions and Judicial Pronouncements *available at*: https://manupatracademy.com/LegalPost/Equal_Pay_for_Equal_Work_Statutory_Provisions_Judicial_Pronouncements (last visited on April 12, 2026)

Randhir Singh remains a foundational authority for the proposition that labour welfare can be judicially enforced when it is framed through equality and non-arbitrariness.¹⁶

Livelihood, Dignity, and Labour

The expansion of Article 21 has been central to the constitutionalisation of labour rights. In *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation*¹⁷, the Supreme Court recognised that the right to life includes the right to livelihood, because no person can live without the means of living. Although the case arose in the context of pavement dwellers, its constitutional reasoning has direct labour relevance because it links survival, work, and dignity within Article 21.¹⁸

The importance of *Olga Tellis* lies in its refusal to treat livelihood as a mere economic interest outside constitutional concern. By connecting Article 21 with the constitutional vision of social justice reflected in Articles 39(a) and 41, the decision narrowed the separation between civil liberties and socio-economic rights. This interpretive move supports labour claims relating to insecure work, displacement, and denial of basic subsistence, even though it does not create an unrestricted positive right to employment in every circumstance.¹⁹

Forced Labour and Bonded Labour

The most direct fusion of Fundamental Rights and labour rights is found in anti-exploitation jurisprudence under Article 23. In *Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court treated bonded labour as a constitutional wrong and read Article 21 together with Article 23 to hold that the right to live with human dignity includes protection against exploitative labour conditions. The case is also notable for its use of public interest litigation, which enabled the Court to act on behalf of labourers who lacked effective access to justice.²⁰

The reasoning in *Bandhua Mukti Morcha* strongly supports the idea of constitutional harmony. The Court did not treat labour welfare as a policy matter left wholly to the executive; instead, it treated freedom from bonded labour as an enforceable constitutional entitlement supported

¹⁶ *Randhir Singh v. Union of India*, 1982 AIR 879

¹⁷ 1986 AIR 180

¹⁸ *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation*, 1986 AIR 180

¹⁹ *Supra* note 18 at 8.

²⁰ Four Decades of Constitutional Vigilance: Article 23 and India's War Against Forced Labour available at: <https://m.thewire.in/article/law/four-decades-of-constitutional-vigilance-article-23-and-indias-war-against-forced-labour> (last visited on April 12, 2026)

by welfare legislation and by the Directive Principles. This approach enlarged the role of Article 32 and demonstrated that labour adjudication can become a vehicle for the transformative Constitution.²¹

Child Labour, Humane Conditions, and Collective Dimensions

Article 24 expressly prohibits the employment of children below fourteen years in factories, mines, and other hazardous occupations, which makes child labour one of the clearest instances where the Constitution directly enters the labour field. When read with Articles 39(e) and 39(f) and with the wider emphasis on humane working conditions under Article 42, the constitutional framework shows that labour regulation is tied to dignity and developmental protection rather than merely to administrative control. This is another example of harmony between rights and welfare principles.²²

The collective dimension of labour rights is more complex. Article 19(1)(c) protects the right to form associations or unions, but labour action continues to be mediated by statutory regimes, reasonable restrictions, and institutional limits on bargaining and industrial action. Constitutional protection therefore exists, but it is less absolute than the protection available in cases of forced labour or hazardous child labour.²³

Conclusion

The relationship between Fundamental Rights and labour rights in India reflects not merely a constitutional overlap but a deeper commitment to social justice, human dignity, and welfare-oriented governance. This study shows that labour rights are not confined to statutory enactments alone, but are meaningfully protected through Articles 14, 19, 21, 23, and 24 of the Constitution, read together with the Directive Principles of State Policy. The judicial approach in India has gradually moved from a formal understanding of rights toward a more purposive and socially responsive interpretation of the Constitution. Through decisions relating to equal pay, livelihood, bonded labour, child labour, and humane conditions of work, courts have treated labour protection as an essential part of constitutional justice rather than as a purely administrative or economic matter.

²¹ *Supra* note 5 at 5.

²² *Supra* note 6 at 5.

²³ Naveen Talawar, "Labour laws in India", iPleader April, 9, 2024.

At the same time, the study also reveals that constitutional adjudication in labour matters involves a constant balancing exercise between individual freedoms, employer interests, and collective welfare. While tensions do arise between economic liberty and labour regulation, Indian constitutional jurisprudence has largely attempted to harmonise these interests by giving primacy to dignity, equality, and protection against exploitation. The role of the judiciary has therefore been central in transforming labour concerns into enforceable constitutional claims, especially for vulnerable and marginalised workers who often lack effective access to ordinary legal remedies. Public interest litigation and expansive interpretation of constitutional rights have significantly strengthened the position of labour within the broader framework of constitutional democracy.

In essence, the paper concludes that labour rights and Fundamental Rights are not competing constitutional categories, but mutually reinforcing principles that together advance the transformative vision of the Indian Constitution. The harmony between these rights becomes essential for ensuring that constitutional promises of liberty, equality, and dignity are made real in the everyday lives of workers.

Suggestions and Recommendations

In light of the analysis undertaken in this study, it is suggested that Indian constitutional adjudication should continue to adopt an integrated approach toward Fundamental Rights and labour rights. Labour welfare should not be viewed as a matter confined only to statutory regulation, but as a constitutional concern connected with equality, dignity, livelihood, and protection against exploitation. A broader and more purposive interpretation of constitutional provisions is necessary to ensure that workers, especially those in vulnerable and unorganised sectors, receive meaningful protection under the law. The study also suggests that courts should continue to play an active role in preserving the balance between economic freedom and labour welfare. While employer interests, business autonomy, and market considerations are relevant in a constitutional democracy, they should not override the basic commitment of the Constitution to human dignity and social justice. Judicial interpretation must therefore remain sensitive to the lived realities of labour and ensure that economic development does not come at the cost of exploitation or denial of basic rights.

It is also recommended that collective labour rights, including the right to form associations and unions, receive more effective protection within the constitutional framework. Democratic

participation in the workplace is an important aspect of labour dignity and industrial fairness. Stronger recognition of collective representation can contribute to more balanced labour relations and reduce inequalities between employers and workers. Finally, future labour law reforms should be guided by the transformative vision of the Constitution. Legislative and policy changes must align with the goals of welfare, equality, and humane working conditions rather than being driven only by economic efficiency. A constitutional approach to labour rights is essential for ensuring that the promises of justice, liberty, equality, and dignity are reflected in the everyday experiences of workers across India.

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