



LAWFOYER INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF DOCTRINAL LEGAL RESEARCH

[ISSN: 2583-7753]

Volume 3 | Issue 3

2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70183/lijdlr.2025.v03.99>

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SHEELA BARSE V. STATE OF MAHARASHTRA: EXPANDING HORIZONS OF PRISONERS' RIGHTS UNDER ARTICLE 21

Adv. Akshay Fand¹

I. ABSTRACT

Before D.K. Basu v. State of West Bengal, the Supreme Court, in the landmark judgment Sheela Barse v. State of Maharashtra, safeguarded the rights of women prisoners and reinforced the mandate of Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. While working as a journalist, Sheela Barse sent a letter to the Supreme Court depicting gruesome custodial violence against female inmates. The apex court decision in this case introduced systemic reforms in prison administration and expanded the scope of public interest litigation. The apex court, while dealing with the case, gave directions to form separate lockups for female inmates, provide them with proper medical care, and provide them with proper legal representation with prompt inspections from the concerned magistrate. It shifts state obligations towards the vulnerable groups in custody. The following paper undertakes a doctrinal analysis of the case and introspects its jurisprudential underpinnings and its linkage with Articles 14, 21, and 39A of the Indian Constitution. The landmark decision in this case plays a vital role in shaping the course of justice in D.K. Basu v. State of West Bengal and Nilabati Behera v. State of Orissa. Supreme Court decisions and direction were progressive, but the critical analysis exposed persistent gaps and problems of implementation at the actual ground level. The judgment throws light on the contemporary issue of custodial torture and prison reforms. The apex court judgment is in line with international human rights standards and recent custodial death statistics. This study reaffirms that Sheela Barse is still both a beacon of constitutional morality and a reminder of the incomplete promise of dignified detention in India.

¹ LLM (Criminal Law), Advocate at District and session court Buldhana (India). Email: akshayfand91@gmail.com

II. KEYWORDS

Sheela Barse vs. State of Maharashtra, Custodial Violence, Prison Reforms, Article 21, Women Prisoners, PIL (Public Interest Litigation), Custodial Justice, Constitutional Remedies.

III. INTRODUCTION

Custodial violence is one of the most prominent concerns for human rights in India, and it poses a serious threat to constitutional guarantees under Article 21.⁶ The landmark judgment in *Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration* recognized that prisoners retain fundamental rights.⁷ Subsequently, in *Hussainara Khatoon v. State of Bihar*, the apex court established speedy trials as a constitutional right.⁸ This jurisprudence laid the foundation for prisoners' rights in India. Within this dynamic, evolving framework, *Sheela Barse v. State of Maharashtra* stands out as a cornerstone in safeguarding the rights of women prisoners.⁹

A. Research Question

How did the *Sheela Barse* judgment expand the interpretative scope of Article 21 and establish precedential value for subsequent custodial rights cases?

B. Methodology

This paper follows a doctrinal analytical approach, examining constitutional provisions, Supreme Court jurisprudence, and relevant international human rights standards.

C. Additional Context

In *Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration*, the Court recognized prisoners retain fundamental rights even within custody, including dignity. In *Hussainara Khatoon v. State of Bihar*, speedy trial was elevated to a constitutional right, creating a jurisprudential foundation for the recognition of custodial rights that *Sheela Barse* further developed.

The case began when Sheela Barse sent a letter to the Supreme Court of India, highlighting the issue of custodial violence against female inmates. The court instantly treated the letter as a public interest litigation and directed the introduction of systemic reforms in prison administration.

These reforms included setting up separate lockups for women, providing dedicated medical care and legal representation, and mandating regular magistrate inspections.¹⁰ This resulted in shifting the state's obligation towards vulnerable groups in custody. This case expanded the scope of Public Interest Litigation (PIL) and reinforced constitutional mandates under Articles 14, 21, and 39A.¹¹ It had a significant influence on later jurisprudence in *D.K. Basu v. State of West Bengal* and *Nilabati Behera v. State of Orissa*, making it a cornerstone in the discourse on custodial justice and prison reform in India.

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IV. BRIEF FACTS OF THE CASE

Sheela Barse, a human rights activist and investigative journalist, brought to light the gruesome realities of custodial torture against female prisoners in Maharashtra. Between May 11–17, 1982, with the permission of the Inspector General of Prisons, she interviewed several women prisoners at Bombay Central Jail. Her letter to the Supreme Court mentioned the plight of victims such as Devamma and Pushpa Paeen, highlighting sexual abuse and inhuman treatment.

Sheela Barse's background as a journalist and social activist strengthened the credibility of her claims and demonstrated her long-standing commitment to prisoners' rights. The Supreme Court, exercising its power under Article 32 of the Indian Constitution, treated the letter as a writ petition and converted it into a PIL. Upon seeking a response from the State of Maharashtra, the court found serious violations, including the absence of separate lockups for women, inadequate medical facilities, and no legal aid mechanisms.

The Supreme Court, exercising its power under Article 32 of the Indian Constitution, treated the letter as a writ petition and converted it into a PIL. Upon seeking a response

from the State of Maharashtra, the court found serious violations of rules, including the absence of separate lockups for women, a lack of medical facilities, and no legal aid mechanisms. The court highlighted the vulnerability of women prisoners and the urgent need for systematic reform to uphold constitutional guarantees under Articles 14, 21, and 39A.¹³ the case became a turning point in custodial jurisprudence, reinforcing the proactive role of the judiciary in protecting the basic human rights of prisoners and ensuring humane conditions for inmates.

V. LEGAL ISSUES

1. Whether women in detention are entitled to special safeguards under Articles 21 and 39A of the Constitution.
2. Whether the denial of legal aid and speedy trial violates Articles 14 and 21.
3. Whether custodial violence against women amounts to a breach of Article 21.
4. Whether the existing prison administration framework adequately protects women prisoners from gender-based violence and discrimination.
5. Whether the state has positive obligations under Article 21 to ensure humane conditions of detention.
6. Whether the denial of legal aid and speedy trial violates Articles 14 and 21.¹⁵
7. Whether custodial violence against women amounts to a breach of Article 21, which ensures the right to life and personal liberty.¹⁶

VI. COURT RULING

Upon receiving the letter from Sheela Barse, the Court treated it as a petition under Article 32 and used it as an opportunity to expand custodial rights jurisprudence. The Court reasoned that Articles 14, 21, and 39A together establish a constitutional mandate for equality, dignity, and access to justice. Particularly, Article 21 was interpreted to include humane treatment and gender-sensitive safeguards.

The Court laid down the following guidelines:

1. **Separate Lockups for Women Prisoners:** Mandatory provision of separate lockups and deployment of female constables.
2. **Free Legal Aid and Right to Speedy Trial:** Directed the Maharashtra State Board of Legal Aid and Advice to ensure District Legal Aid Committees nominate lawyers for fortnightly jail visits.
3. **Medical Care and Safety:** Adequate medical care must be provided, and women should not be kept overnight in police stations without female constables present.
4. **Judicial Supervision:** Regular magistrate inspections were mandated.
5. The Court emphasized that women prisoners require special protection based on constitutional equality principles (Article 14) and India's international obligations under instruments such as CEDAW and ICCPR.
6. **Separate Lockups for Women Prisoners:** The court mandated that every prison and police station must have separate lockups for women inmates, as housing male and female inmates together violates their rights. It further directed that female constables must be appointed to prevent abuse and harassment.¹⁷
7. **Free Legal Aid and the Right to a Speedy Trial:** Following the National Legal Services Authorities Act and Article 39A of the Constitution, free legal aid must be provided to every woman behind bars.¹⁸ Furthermore, under Article 21, every individual has a fundamental right to a speedy trial, and delays in justice cannot be justified.¹⁹
8. **Medical Care and Safety:** Every woman prisoner must receive adequate and reasonable medical care. The court reiterated that women should not be kept overnight in police stations unless a female constable is present as a protective measure against abuse.
9. **Judicial Supervision:** The court directed timely inspections of prisons and police stations by the concerned magistrate to check on the condition of female inmates and ensure that custodial violence and abuse do not go unpunished.

The Supreme Court, in this landmark judgment, expanded the scope of Articles 14, 21, and 39A to ensure the protection of women's basic human and fundamental rights.²⁰ The court reiterated that personal liberty is not merely freedom from detention but must also include the principles of natural justice and adherence to dignity in custody. The verdict clarified the State's constitutional obligation to protect vulnerable sections of society, bring about model prison and administrative reforms, and ensure justice for all.

VII. ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY

A. Constitutional Interpretation and Expansion of Article 21

The Court reaffirmed that Article 21 encompasses not just physical liberty but also the dignity and humane treatment of prisoners. It extended constitutional guarantees to vulnerable women inmates.

B. Impact on Prison Administration Reform

The decision mandated structural changes, including separate facilities, regular inspections, and access to legal aid.

C. Gender-Sensitive Jurisprudence Development

The Court's directions recognized gender-specific vulnerabilities in custody, laying the foundation for further jurisprudence protecting women prisoners.

D. Doctrinal Evolution

The case influenced later rulings, particularly *D.K. Basu v. State of West Bengal*, which further expanded protections against custodial torture, and *Nilabati Behera v. State of Orissa*, which introduced state liability for compensation.

E. International Law Integration

The Court's approach resonated with the Nelson Mandela Rules and aligned with obligations under CEDAW and ICCPR.

F. Contemporary Relevance

Despite judicial activism, custodial violence persists. NCRB data in recent years reveal a worrying rise in custodial violence against women, underscoring the continuing importance of this judgment.

VIII. POSITIVE IMPACT

The decision affirmed that fundamental rights cannot be deprived, even when liberty is curtailed. The verdict established a mandate that prison administration and rules must align with constitutional values. It recommended the implementation of modern prison reforms where human rights standards are strictly followed. The judgment also acted as a precedent, with its guidelines on arrest and detention being followed subsequently.

IX. CRITICISM AND LIMITATIONS

Although progressive directions were made, a gap between law and reality persists. Custodial torture and the inhuman conditions of inmates remain a burning issue. India lacks comprehensive legislation that is universally and uniformly applicable within its territories to address this. This implementation gap undermines the effect of judicial decisions.

X. INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The court's decision resonates with the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the "Nelson Mandela Rules"), which state that there must be humane treatment and gender-specific safeguards available to all prisoners.²² However, without binding domestic legislation, such international standards may lack credibility and enforcement.

XI. LINKAGE WITH LATER CASES

The ratio decidendi in Sheela Barse was further invoked in *D.K. Basu v. State of West Bengal* and *Nilabati Behera v. State of Orissa*, which strengthened protections against custodial violence and torture and also made provisions for compensation to victims.²³

Together, these cases form a significant part of Indian jurisprudence on the rights of prisoners and the accountability of the state.

XII. CONCLUSION

The landmark judgment in *Sheela Barse v. State of Maharashtra* remains a milestone in protecting women's rights under Article 21. By mandating separate lockups, free legal aid, and inspections, the Court shifted focus toward gender-sensitive custodial justice. However, persistent gaps between judicial pronouncements and ground reality highlight the need for comprehensive prison reform legislation and effective enforcement mechanisms. Going forward, reforms must include a uniform model prison manual, better monitoring systems, and gender-sensitive training for prison officials.

Future directions should focus on integrating international standards, enhancing accountability, and strengthening legal remedies. The case thus stands as both a constitutional beacon and a reminder of unfinished reform in custodial justice.

However, much work remains to be done, including the enactment of legislation on model prison reform. There is a need to implement a standard prison manual across India to address the persistent issue of custodial violence. This case brought transformative changes to Indian constitutional jurisprudence and the criminal justice system, and its legacy continues to be a call for further action.

XIII. REFERENCE

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2. *Sheela Barse v. State of Mah.*, (1983) 2 S.C.C. 96 (India).
3. INDIA CONST. art. 21.
4. See INDIA CONST. Art. 14; INDIA CONST. art. 21; INDIA CONST. Art. 39A.
5. See *Basu* (1997) 1 S.C.C. 416; *Nilabati Behera v. State of Orissa*, (1993) 2 S.C.C. 746 (India).
6. INDIA CONST. art. 21.

7. Sunil Batra v. Delhi Admin., (1978) 4 S.C.C. 494 (India).
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14. Id. Arts. 21, 39A.
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