

Impact of Shreya Singhal v. Union of India on Section 66A of the IT Act

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Abstract- The Supreme Court of India's ruling in Shreya Singhal v. Union of India (2015)¹ marks a pivotal moment in the constitutional protection of free speech in the digital age. This landmark judgment struck down Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, 2000², which had criminalized the sending of "offensive" messages via electronic communication. The Court declared the provision unconstitutional, as it infringed upon the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution³. At the heart of the Court's reasoning was a careful examination of key legal doctrines such as vagueness and overbreadth. Section 66A was criticized for being vague its ambiguous terms failed to provide clear guidance on what constituted an "offensive" message, thus inviting arbitrary enforcement. The Court also highlighted the "chilling effect" the provision had on free expression, discouraging individuals from speaking out due to fear of prosecution. Importantly, the judgment distinguished between mere discussion or advocacy and incitement that could lead to public disorder, emphasizing that restrictions on speech must adhere strictly to grounds specified under Article 19(2)⁴ and maintain a proximate connection with legitimate state interests like public order. The ruling clarified that annoyance, inconvenience, or offense alone do not justify criminal sanctions unless they escalate to incitement or threaten public safety. This nuanced approach reinforces democratic principles by safeguarding robust public discourse and protecting digital rights. Beyond invalidating Section 66A, the judgment also serves as a guide for legislative drafting, urging precision and constitutional compliance in regulating online content. However, challenges remain. Despite the judgment, misuse of Section 66A persisted for some time, underscoring the difficulties in balancing free speech with the need to curb harmful online behaviour. The decision thus stands as a foundational precedent, inviting continual dialogue on how to protect freedom of expression while addressing the complexities of harm in digital spaces.

Index Terms- Freedom of Speech and Expression, Article 19(1)(a), Information Technology Act, 2000, Section 66A,

Vagueness Doctrine, Overbreadth Doctrine, Chilling Effect, Digital Rights, Constitutional Law (India), Article 19(2), Public Order, Online Speech Regulation, Judicial Review

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of communication technologies has revolutionized how individuals connect, share opinions, and engage in democratic processes. Among these innovations, the internet stands out as a transformative platform that democratizes speech by enabling vast and diverse audiences to participate in public discourse without the traditional gatekeepers of information. Social media, blogs, and online forums have dismantled many barriers, allowing marginalized voices to be heard alongside established institutions like the press and political entities. Yet, this unprecedented freedom of expression also brings challenges. The internet's speed, anonymity, and global access amplify risks such as cyber harassment, hate speech, misinformation, and threats to societal harmony. These issues complicate regulatory efforts, as governments worldwide strive to balance public safety with the protection of fundamental rights. The tension between safeguarding citizens and upholding free speech has become a defining legal and policy challenge of the digital age.

In India, this struggle crystallized around Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, which aimed to curb offensive electronic communications. However, its vague terminology—terms like "annoyance" and "grossly offensive"—lacked precise definitions—resulted in misuse, including arrests for innocuous online commentary such as political satire or casual posts. This arbitrariness raised profound constitutional concerns about state power and free speech in a democracy. The landmark Supreme Court judgment in *Shreya*

Singhal v. Union of India decisively struck down Section 66A. It reaffirmed that freedom of expression is fundamental to democracy and cannot be restricted by overly broad or ambiguous laws. Importantly, the Court recognized that free speech includes the right to voice unpopular or dissenting opinions, essential for a vibrant democratic society.

Moreover, the ruling adapted constitutional principles to the digital context, acknowledging the internet's critical role in communication and emphasizing the need to shield it from excessive government interference. By distinguishing between discussion, advocacy, and incitement, the Court established clearer criteria for permissible restrictions on speech, influencing how online expression is regulated in India today. Finally, the case underscored the judiciary's vital role in protecting fundamental rights against legislative overreach, especially amid rapidly evolving technologies. As digital communication continues to expand, the principles enshrined in Shreya Singhal provide a lasting framework for preserving free speech while addressing the complex realities of the online world.

II. HISTORICAL AND LEGISLATIVE BACKGROUND OF CYBER LAW IN INDIA

Evolution of Cyber Law in India

The Information Technology Act, 2000, marked a pioneering step in India's legal landscape by granting legal recognition to electronic transactions and facilitating the growth of e-commerce. This legislation was crafted to align India with international standards, particularly the UNCITRAL Model Law on Electronic Commerce, addressing early concerns such as hacking, data theft, unauthorized computer access, and the validity of digital records and signatures. At the time of its enactment, internet usage in India was limited, and the Act did not anticipate the complexities introduced by social media and user-generated content. As digital technologies evolved rapidly, so did cyber offences, expanding to include cyber harassment, identity theft, online fraud, and the dissemination of harmful content across social platforms.

To address these emerging challenges, the Information Technology (Amendment) Act, 2008 was introduced. This amendment broadened the scope of cyber law by incorporating provisions on cyber terrorism, identity theft, privacy violations, and intermediary liability. Notably, it introduced Section 66A, aimed at curbing the misuse of electronic communication. However, this provision used vague language that broadened state control over online speech, sowing seeds for later constitutional debates.

Scope of Section 66A

Section 66A criminalized sending information through electronic means that was deemed "grossly offensive," "menacing," or false with intent to annoy or mislead. It covered all forms of digital communication, from emails to social media posts, prescribing penalties of up to three years' imprisonment and fines.

The provision's critical flaw lay in its use of subjective terms like "annoyance" and "grossly offensive," which were undefined, leaving interpretation to personal discretion. It failed to differentiate between trivial speech and genuinely harmful communication, thus potentially criminalizing political criticism or dissent. Moreover, it did not require intent to harm public order or security, allowing even private communications to be targeted.

Misuse and Controversy

Section 66A quickly became notorious for its misuse by law enforcement, with numerous instances of arrests over seemingly innocuous online expressions, such as criticizing government policies or sharing satirical content. This arbitrary application raised serious concerns about the suppression of free speech and the absence of safeguards against unjust arrests.

The ensuing public and legal outcry highlighted the chilling effect on digital expression and the need to balance regulation with fundamental freedoms. Civil society, legal experts, and the media strongly challenged the provision's constitutionality, culminating in the landmark Supreme Court case of Shreya Singhal v. Union of India. This case underscored the necessity for precision and respect for constitutional rights in cyber legislation, marking

a pivotal moment in the development of India's cyber law framework.

III. JUDICIAL ANALYSIS

Vagueness Doctrine in Depth

The Supreme Court held that vague laws violate the principle of due process because they fail to provide clear standards for determining prohibited conduct. Terms like “annoyance,” “inconvenience,” and “grossly offensive” are inherently subjective, varying widely among individuals due to differences in perception, cultural background, and social context. Such ambiguity creates legal uncertainty, invites arbitrary enforcement, and opens the door to abuse of power. The Court emphasized that penal statutes must define offenses with sufficient clarity so that ordinary citizens understand what behaviour is unlawful. This principle, known as the vagueness doctrine, has been reinforced in past rulings like *K.A. Abbas v. Union of India* (1970) and *State of Madhya Pradesh v. Baldeo Prasad* (1961), where laws lacking clear definitions were struck down. Applying this doctrine, the Court found Section 66A unconstitutional for failing to meet clarity and precision standards.

Overbreadth Doctrine

A law is overbroad if it restricts not only unprotected speech but also constitutionally protected expression. Section 66A cast a wide net, covering legitimate criticism, political dissent, satire, and even casual online communication, thereby suppressing lawful speech. The Court noted that the provision's sweeping reach extended beyond permissible limits and violated the principle that restrictions on fundamental rights must be narrowly tailored. This reasoning aligns with earlier cases such as *Romesh Thappar v. State of Madras* (1950) and *Chintaman Rao v. State of Madhya Pradesh* (1950), which stressed that laws curbing fundamental rights must avoid excessiveness. The Court's application of the overbreadth doctrine ensured that only speech falling under specific grounds in Article 19(2) could be legitimately restricted.

Chilling Effect

The Court recognized that vague and overbroad laws produce a chilling effect, discouraging individuals

from exercising their fundamental rights out of fear of legal repercussions. This self-censorship undermines freedom of speech and weakens democratic debate. The chilling effect is especially pronounced on the internet, a platform for spontaneous and informal expression. Fear of arrest under Section 66A deterred many from participating in online discussions, limiting the diversity of viewpoints. The Court reinforced this concept, as previously acknowledged in *S. Rangarajan v. P. Jagjivan Ram* (1989), underscoring that free criticism and open debate are vital to democracy. In *Shreya Singhal*, this principle was extended to protect digital expression from undue restrictions.

Proximity Test

The proximity test demands that any restriction on speech must have a direct and close connection to the grounds specified under Article 19(2), such as maintaining public order or preventing incitement to crime. Remote or speculative links are insufficient. Section 66A failed this test as it penalized speech causing mere annoyance or inconvenience without any actual or imminent threat to public order. The Court relied on precedents like *Superintendent, Central Prison v. Ram Manohar Lohia* (1960) and *Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia v. State of Bihar* (1966), which clarified that only serious threats justify restrictions. Consequently, Section 66A was found lacking the necessary proximity to legitimate state interests.

Clear and Present Danger

The Court adopted the “clear and present danger” test, asserting that only speech posing an immediate and real threat to public order or safety can be restricted. Originating from U.S. jurisprudence in *Schenck v. United States* (1919) and refined in *Brandenburg v. Ohio* (1969), this test limits punishment to speech inciting imminent lawless action. Indian jurisprudence, such as *Arup Bhuyan v. State of Assam* (2011), echoes this standard by requiring incitement to violence for conviction. The Court found that Section 66A did not require any element of incitement or imminent danger, thus allowing punishment for speech that posed no real threat, rendering it unconstitutional.

This thorough judicial analysis reveals that the Supreme Court's ruling in Shreya Singhal was firmly anchored in established constitutional doctrines and precedents. By invoking the vagueness and overbreadth doctrines, addressing the chilling effect, and applying the proximity and clear and present danger tests, the Court safeguarded freedom of speech from arbitrary and excessive governmental interference, reinforcing the foundation of democratic expression in India.

IV. DISTINCTION BETWEEN DISCUSSION, ADVOCACY, AND INCITEMENT

In the realm of free speech and legal protections, the line between acceptable and punishable expression is a cornerstone of democratic societies. The Court has articulated a vital framework that differentiates three key types of speech: discussion, advocacy, and incitement. Understanding this distinction is essential to balancing the right to express ideas with the need to maintain public safety and order.

Discussion: The Exchange of Ideas

Discussion represents the open exchange of ideas and opinions. It is the foundation of democratic dialogue, allowing individuals to share diverse viewpoints, debate concepts, and challenge prevailing norms. This type of speech is fully protected, even when it involves unpopular or dissenting opinions. The protection of discussion encourages a marketplace of ideas where society can evolve through reasoned argument rather than censorship.

Advocacy: Promoting Ideas

Advocacy goes a step further by actively promoting or supporting certain ideas or policies. While it seeks to influence others, advocacy remains protected speech under the law. It empowers citizens to campaign for change, mobilize support, and participate in the democratic process. Crucially, advocacy does not cross the threshold into unlawfulness simply because it advances a particular viewpoint passionately or persuasively.

Incitement: When Speech Becomes Harmful

Incitement stands apart as speech that explicitly encourages violence or imminent unlawful acts. Unlike discussion and advocacy, incitement is subject to legal restriction because it poses a clear and

immediate threat to public safety and order. The Court's framework ensures that only speech directly linked to imminent harm is curtailed, preventing the suppression of legitimate expression while protecting society from dangerous outcomes.

Balancing Liberty and Security

This nuanced distinction is critical for upholding democratic principles. It allows individuals the freedom to express even controversial or critical opinions without fear of repression, fostering a vibrant public discourse. Simultaneously, it establishes a safeguard against speech that could provoke violence or disorder, thereby maintaining a delicate balance between liberty and security. By regulating only harmful speech, the framework preserves the essence of free expression while protecting the community from tangible threats.

V. IMPACT OF THE SHREYA SINGHAL JUDGMENT ON SECTION 66A

Immediate Impact

The landmark Shreya Singhal judgment brought about a decisive and immediate transformation by declaring Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, unconstitutional. This ruling nullified the provision entirely, rendering it void from the outset. Consequently, all ongoing prosecutions, investigations, or legal actions initiated under Section 66A were invalidated, freeing individuals previously charged from any legal jeopardy associated with this section.

Beyond its legal ramifications, the judgment sent a clear and firm message to law enforcement agencies: the use of vague and subjective criteria for arrests or prosecutions related to online speech is impermissible. This led to a notable decline in arbitrary detentions concerning digital expression and encouraged authorities to exercise greater restraint and precision when addressing matters of speech.

Symbolically, the ruling restored public faith in the judiciary's role as a protector of fundamental rights in the digital era. It reassured citizens that their right to free expression online would be safeguarded against unjustified censorship or misuse of power.

Long-Term Impact

Over time, the Shreya Singhal judgment has profoundly influenced digital rights and constitutional law in India. By affirming that online speech merits the same constitutional protection as traditional forms of expression, the Court recognized the internet's vital role in democratic participation and discourse. This has fostered a more open and inclusive digital environment where ideas and opinions can be shared freely.

The judgment also imposed important constraints on government censorship, emphasizing that any restrictions on online speech must be clearly defined and justified under Article 19(2) of the Constitution. This prevents arbitrary or excessive governmental interference, ensuring that digital communication is regulated only when there is a legitimate and proximate interest such as public order or security.

Additionally, the ruling underscored the necessity for legislative clarity and precision. It highlighted the risks of vague laws, urging lawmakers to draft narrowly tailored statutes consistent with constitutional safeguards. This has shaped ongoing debates and policies around digital regulation in India.

The decision has also raised public awareness about digital rights, empowering citizens to challenge unlawful restrictions and encouraging civil society activism in the realm of free speech online. Yet challenges remain as some authorities continue to invoke Section 66A mistakenly, revealing a gap between judicial directives and their implementation. Moreover, the judgment has sparked continued discussion on balancing the regulation of harmful online content, such as hate speech and cyberbullying, with the protection of free expression. In summary, the Shreya Singhal judgment has been transformative. It not only eliminated a problematic legal provision but also established enduring principles that continue to shape the evolving landscape of free speech and cyber law in India, maintaining a vital balance between liberty and regulation in the digital age.

VI. IMPACT OF THE SHREYA SINGHAL JUDGMENT ON INDIAN CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

The landmark Shreya Singhal judgment marked a pivotal moment in Indian constitutional law by significantly expanding and clarifying the contours of freedom of speech and expression under Article 19(1)(a). This ruling recognized that the right to free speech is not confined to traditional media but extends robustly to digital platforms, underscoring the internet's essential role as a modern forum for political discourse, social interaction, and information dissemination.

One of the most profound contributions of the judgment lies in its emphatic reinforcement of the vagueness doctrine. While this principle had previously influenced Indian jurisprudence, the Court in Shreya Singhal explicitly held that laws must be clear, precise, and unambiguous to withstand constitutional scrutiny. Vague legislation, the Court emphasized, infringes on fundamental rights by failing to provide citizens with fair notice of prohibited conduct, thereby raising the bar for legislative drafting and judicial review.

The decision also fortified protections against arbitrary and excessive state power. By invalidating Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, the Court underscored that laws granting overly broad discretion to authorities are unconstitutional. This affirmation bolsters the rule of law, ensuring that governmental actions remain within well-defined legal limits and do not impose disproportionate restrictions on fundamental freedoms.

Furthermore, the judgment enriched Indian constitutional doctrine by integrating concepts such as the chilling effect and the proximity test more firmly into free speech jurisprudence. These doctrines now serve as vital analytical tools for courts assessing whether restrictions on speech are justified or excessive.

In essence, the Shreya Singhal case has left a lasting imprint on India's constitutional landscape by shaping a more nuanced, rights-oriented framework that balances individual liberties with legitimate state interests in the digital age.

VII. IMPACT OF THE SHREYA SINGHAL JUDGMENT ON GOVERNANCE AND POLICY

The Shreya Singhal judgment stands as a landmark ruling that has significantly shaped governance and public policy within India's digital ecosystem. Central to this decision was the protection of free speech online, which has since influenced the development and interpretation of Information Technology regulations and the manner in which online content is governed.

At the heart of this transformation is the requirement for policymakers to ensure that digital laws respect constitutional safeguards, particularly those enshrined in Article 19(1)(a) and the reasonable restrictions laid out in Article 19(2). The striking down of Section 66A of the IT Act marked a critical shift, prompting a re-evaluation of how harmful content is managed without encroaching upon fundamental rights. This has sparked ongoing debates on content moderation, focusing on how intermediaries like social media platforms should balance user freedoms with the need to curb abuse and misinformation.

Another profound impact of the ruling is observed in the domain of platform accountability. The judgment clarified that online platforms cannot be held liable for third-party content unless specific legal criteria are fulfilled, as outlined under Section 79 of the IT Act. This has compelled platforms to adopt nuanced policies that carefully weigh the removal of objectionable content against preserving free expression.

Moreover, the judgment has ushered in a culture of greater transparency and rights-based governance. Authorities are now obligated to provide clear, evidence-based justifications whenever restrictions on online speech are imposed, thereby curbing arbitrary or unchecked censorship. This shift enhances the accountability of regulatory actions and fosters a more balanced approach to digital governance.

Lastly, the ruling has underscored the urgent need for comprehensive and forward-looking policy

frameworks to address contemporary challenges such as fake news, online harassment, and data privacy protections. While removing an unconstitutional provision, the judgment has opened avenues for thoughtful policymaking that reconciles the imperatives of freedom and responsibility in India's rapidly evolving digital landscape.

VIII. POST-JUDGMENT CHALLENGES: CONTINUED MISUSE OF SECTION 66A

Although the Supreme Court decisively struck down Section 66A, a legal provision that once curtailed online expression, reports persist of its invocation by law enforcement agencies. This ongoing misuse reveals a troubling disconnect between the highest judicial rulings and their application in everyday law enforcement. In many instances, police have either filed complaints or pressed charges under Section 66A, often due to outdated legal knowledge or reliance on obsolete statutes.

Such actions not only erode the authority of the Supreme Court but also infringe upon individuals' fundamental rights, exposing them to wrongful prosecution. This persistent problem highlights deeper systemic flaws within the legal and administrative framework—chief among them, the inadequate dissemination of critical judicial decisions and insufficient training for those tasked with enforcing the law.

The repercussions extend beyond legal technicalities. Continued reliance on a repealed law fosters confusion among citizens about their rights and responsibilities, perpetuating a climate of fear around online speech. This chilling effect undermines the very progress the Supreme Court aimed to achieve by invalidating Section 66A.

Ultimately, the striking down of a law marks only the beginning of a broader process. To ensure that judicial pronouncements translate into real-world change requires vigilant monitoring, institutional reform, and robust accountability mechanisms. Only through sustained efforts can the law's spirit be fully realized, safeguarding individual freedoms and restoring public trust in the justice system.

IX. LACK OF AWARENESS

One of the most significant challenges following the landmark judgment on Section 66A is the widespread lack of awareness among key stakeholder's law enforcement authorities, government officials, and the general public alike. Despite the Supreme Court's clear ruling declaring certain provisions unconstitutional, many officials tasked with enforcing the law remain uninformed or inadequately educated about the decision and its far-reaching implications. This gap in knowledge results in continued misuse of defunct legal provisions and mishandling of causes related to online speech.

The problem is exacerbated by the absence of structured training programs and ongoing legal education initiatives designed to keep officials abreast of recent judicial developments. In fields such as cyber law, which evolve rapidly alongside technological advancements, continuous education is indispensable. Without it, authorities risk acting on outdated legal frameworks, undermining justice and citizens' rights.

Equally concerning is the limited awareness among ordinary citizens. When people do not know that Section 66A has been struck down, they are less likely to contest wrongful applications of the law, thereby enduring unnecessary legal hardships. This underscores the urgent need for enhanced public outreach efforts, comprehensive legal literacy campaigns, and the effective dissemination of information concerning pivotal judgments.

Tackling this challenge demands a coordinated approach involving the judiciary, the executive branch, and civil society organizations. Only by working together can they ensure that the principles enshrined in the Shreya Singhal judgment are fully understood and implemented across all levels, safeguarding constitutional rights and promoting informed legal practice.

X. CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE SHREYA SINGHAL JUDGMENT

Strengths

The Shreya Singhal judgment is widely recognized as a landmark ruling, primarily because of its robust protection of fundamental rights. By invalidating Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, the Supreme Court reaffirmed the vital role of freedom of speech and expression in a democratic society. This decision empowered individuals to voice their opinions without fear of arbitrary government interference, thereby reinforcing democratic engagement.

A significant strength of this judgment lies in the clarity and depth of the legal principles it articulated. The Court meticulously applied constitutional doctrines such as vagueness, overbreadth, and the chilling effect, setting a clear standard for assessing laws that affect free speech. This framework not only resolved the immediate issue but also serves as a guiding precedent for future cases concerning freedom of expression.

Moreover, the judgment is distinguished by its judicial clarity and precision. The Court thoroughly analysed the language of Section 66A and decisively struck it down instead of attempting to reinterpret or modify its provisions. This approach eliminated ambiguity and ensured a consistent and predictable interpretation of constitutional protections.

Importantly, the decision underscored the judiciary's crucial role as a protector of fundamental rights. It sent a powerful message that laws infringing on constitutional freedoms will be scrutinized and invalidated, thereby boosting public trust in the legal system.

Weaknesses

Despite its merits, the judgment has faced criticism, particularly regarding the regulatory gap it created. The removal of Section 66A left a vacuum in the legal framework for addressing harmful online behaviours such as cyberbullying, harassment, and the dissemination of offensive messages. Existing laws may not be adequately equipped to handle the unique challenges posed by digital communication.

This has sparked debates about the necessity for new, carefully crafted legislation that can curb harmful online conduct without compromising free speech. The judgment, while firmly protecting fundamental

rights, does not offer a comprehensive strategy to tackle complex issues like hate speech, fake news, and misinformation problems that demand nuanced and balanced solutions.

Some critics also contend that the ruling places a heavy evidentiary burden on the state to justify restrictions on speech, which might hinder swift government responses to online threats. Nevertheless, this concern must be weighed against the imperative to prevent misuse of power and uphold individual liberties.

XI. CONCLUSION

The Shreya Singhal verdict stands as a pivotal moment in Indian constitutional jurisprudence, profoundly reaffirming the sanctity of free speech in the digital era. By invalidating Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, the Supreme Court underscored the essential role of free expression as a pillar of democracy, especially as online platforms increasingly shape public dialogue and dissent. This judgment not only protects the internet as a space for open exchange of ideas but also enshrines freedom of speech as a fundamental right indispensable for a vibrant democratic society.

Equally significant is the Court's emphasis on legislative precision. The ruling highlighted the necessity for laws impacting fundamental rights to be narrowly defined, unequivocal, and constitutionally sound. By invoking principles such as vagueness, overbreadth, and the chilling effect, the judgment set critical safeguards against arbitrary state interference. These doctrines now serve as a benchmark for assessing the constitutionality of speech regulations amid rapidly evolving technological landscapes.

Nonetheless, the judgment also exposes ongoing challenges. The repeal of Section 66A has revealed gaps in legal frameworks addressing cyber harassment, hate speech, and misinformation. Future laws must carefully strike a balance between safeguarding individual freedoms and maintaining public order without falling into the traps of vague or excessive regulation.

Moreover, the true strength of this landmark decision depends on its effective implementation. Persistent misuse of similar provisions and limited awareness among enforcement agencies indicate that judicial rulings alone are insufficient. There is a pressing need for institutional measures—including training, awareness campaigns, and accountability mechanisms—to ensure adherence and promote legal literacy.

In sum, *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* is a foundational precedent for protecting digital free speech in India. Its guiding principles will continue to influence constitutional interpretation, legislative drafting, and policy formulation, helping to preserve a delicate equilibrium between liberty and regulation in an increasingly digital world.

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