



Digital Constitution Museum, Digital History Lab  
Advanced Study Institute of Asia, SGT University

---

# Teaching Module

---

## Module 4

### Duties, Directive Principles, and the Idea of the Citizen

#### I. Beyond Rights: Why the Constitution Speaks of Responsibility

Modern constitutional discussion often revolves around rights. What can I demand from the state? What protections do I enjoy against power? These questions are essential, but they are incomplete. The framers of the **Constitution of India** were acutely aware of this.

They understood that a democratic order cannot survive on rights alone. A society that treats citizenship purely as an entitlement risks becoming fragile, cynical, and divided. The Constitution therefore, speaks not only of what the state owes citizens, but also of what citizens owe to the constitutional project itself.

This is where the Directive Principles of State Policy and Fundamental Duties come in. They articulate a vision of **ethical governance and responsible citizenship**, even when those ideas cannot be enforced by courts.

#### II. Directive Principles: A Moral Compass for the State

The Directive Principles of State Policy, contained in Part IV of the Constitution, occupy an unusual constitutional space. They are explicitly declared non-justiciable, meaning that courts cannot enforce them. Yet the Constitution also states that they are fundamental in the governance of the country.

This apparent contradiction is deliberate.

The framers did not want social transformation to depend solely on litigation. They believed that certain goals, such as economic justice, welfare, and equitable distribution of resources, must be pursued through political processes, not judicial mandates.

The Directive Principles urge the state to:

- reduce inequality
- secure a living wage
- ensure humane working conditions
- promote education, health, and social welfare
- protect vulnerable communities

What this really means is that the Constitution does not imagine the state as a neutral referee. It imagines it as an **active agent of social change**.

### III. Why Make Them Non-Justiciable?

This question troubled even members of the Constituent Assembly. Why include lofty ideals if they cannot be legally enforced?

The answer lies in historical realism. The framers knew that India's economic and administrative capacity in 1950 was limited. Immediate enforcement of welfare obligations could cripple the state or produce symbolic compliance without substance.

By making the Directive Principles aspirational rather than enforceable, the Constitution created **pressure without paralysis**. Governments could be judged politically, rather than legally, for failing to pursue social justice.

Over time, these principles have exerted enormous influence. Many labour laws, land reforms, and welfare schemes draw legitimacy from them. Courts, while not enforcing them directly, have often interpreted Fundamental Rights in their light.

### IV. Welfare, Inequality, and Constitutional Intent

The Directive Principles make one thing unmistakably clear: the Indian Constitution does not endorse laissez-faire individualism. It rejects the idea that freedom alone can produce justice in a deeply unequal society.

Instead, it embraces a welfare-oriented vision. Economic arrangements are subject to constitutional scrutiny. Property rights were consciously limited to prevent the concentration of wealth and power.

This vision emerged from the framers' diagnosis of India's social condition. Political freedom without economic security would reproduce domination in new forms. The Constitution therefore, places redistribution, welfare, and social protection at the heart of governance.

This makes the Indian Constitution not just liberal, but **socially corrective**.

### V. The Citizen in the Constitutional Imagination

Up to this point, much of constitutional discussion treats citizens as rights-holders. Part IV complicates this image. Citizens are also participants in a collective moral project.

This idea became more explicit with the introduction of Fundamental Duties in Part IVA, added later through constitutional amendment. These duties include respect for the Constitution, national symbols, harmony, scientific temper, and environmental protection.

Unlike rights, duties are framed broadly. They are not backed by punishment. Their function is not coercive, but pedagogical. They signal the kind of citizen the Constitution hopes to cultivate.

### **Interesting Fact**

The language of Fundamental Duties draws partly from socialist and communitarian constitutional traditions, where civic responsibility is emphasised alongside liberty.

## **VI. Duties and the Anxiety of Disorder**

The inclusion of Fundamental Duties was shaped by a moment of political anxiety. There was growing concern that an exclusive focus on rights was encouraging irresponsibility, protest without restraint, and disregard for public institutions.

Duties were meant to restore balance. They were a reminder that constitutional freedom is not license. It carries obligations to others and to the democratic system itself.

Critics, however, have warned that vague duties can be misused. Appeals to national unity or respect for symbols can slide into suppression of dissent. This tension is built into the very idea of duties.

The Constitution does not resolve it. It forces society to confront it.

## **VII. Courts, Duties, and Symbolic Enforcement**

Although Fundamental Duties are not directly enforceable, courts have occasionally invoked them to justify restrictions or to interpret laws. Environmental protection, for instance, has been strengthened by reference to citizens' duty to protect nature.

This raises an important question: when do duties empower civic responsibility, and when do they legitimise state control?

The answer depends less on constitutional text and more on political culture. Duties can deepen democracy, but only when they are understood as shared ethical commitments, not as tools of discipline.

## **VIII. Directive Principles and Rights: A Productive Tension**

One of the most distinctive features of Indian constitutionalism is the **dialogue between rights and directives**. Initially, courts treated Fundamental Rights as superior. Over time, they moved toward harmonisation.

Rights without social welfare risk becoming privileges. Welfare without rights risks becoming paternalism. The Constitution insists on holding both together, even when they pull in different directions.

This tension is not a flaw. It is a design choice. It keeps constitutional interpretation open, contested, and responsive to changing conditions.

## **IX. Citizenship as an Ongoing Practice**

The Constitution does not define citizenship narrowly as a legal status. It imagines citizenship as an ongoing practice shaped by participation, responsibility, and ethical judgment.

Directive Principles address the state, urging it to act justly. Fundamental Duties address citizens, urging them to act conscientiously. Between the two lies democratic politics.

What emerges is a demanding vision of citizenship. Freedom is not passive enjoyment. It is active engagement. Justice is not automatic. It must be pursued.

## **X. Why This Still Matters**

In moments of crisis, constitutions are often reduced to weapons: rights are invoked defensively, duties are invoked coercively. This misses the deeper constitutional vision.

The framers did not see rights, directives, and duties as separate compartments. They saw them as parts of a single ethical framework aimed at sustaining democracy in a difficult social landscape.

Understanding this helps us read the Constitution not just as a legal document, but as a **theory of collective life**.

---

## **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

1. Why did the framers include Directive Principles despite making them non-justiciable?
2. What does the welfare orientation of the Constitution tell us about its idea of justice?
3. How do Fundamental Duties change the image of the citizen?
4. Can duties strengthen democracy, or do they risk limiting dissent?
5. Why is the tension between rights and social welfare unavoidable?
6. Should courts rely on Directive Principles when interpreting rights?

7. How does the Constitution balance individual freedom with collective responsibility?
  8. What kind of citizen does the Constitution seem to imagine?
-