REPORTABLE

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF INDIA

CRIMINAL APPELLATE JURISDICTION

SUNIL BATRA V. DELHI ADMINISTRATION (1980)

BENCH: Mr. Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, Mr. Justice R.S. Pathak & Mr. Justice O. Chinnappa Reddy

DECIDED: December 20, 1979

RATIO DECIDENDI & PRECEDENTIAL CRUX:
Prisoners retain all fundamental rights not stripped by lawful incarceration; solitary confinement and prison torture violate Article 21.

1. Factual Matrix & Background:

A death row prisoner sent a letter written on a piece of paper to a Supreme Court judge complaining that a prison warder had inflicted brutal physical torture on a fellow prisoner. The Supreme Court converted the letter into a habeas corpus proceeding under Article 32.

2. Substantive Legal Questions Framed:

Whether prisoners retain fundamental rights guaranteed by Part III of the Constitution, and whether constitutional courts have jurisdiction to intervene against prison cruelty.

3. Analysis & Ratio Decidendi:

The Supreme Court held that imprisonment does not reduce a human being to a non-person. Prisoners retain all basic fundamental rights under Articles 14, 19, and 21 that are not inevitably lost by the fact of lawful incarceration. Solitary confinement, bar fetters, and corporal torture without judicial sanction are unconstitutional and prohibited.

4. Principles Enunciated:

- 1. Convicted prisoners retain fundamental rights protected by Article 21.
- 2. Inhuman treatment, torture, and unauthorized solitary confinement are illegal.
- 3. Courts have ongoing supervisory jurisdiction over prison conditions through habeas corpus.

5. Practical Litigation Implications:

- When clients face torture, beatings, or solitary confinement in jail, file an immediate complaint before the Sessions Judge and seek judicial inspection of prison cells.

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[SUPREME COURT BENCH]

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