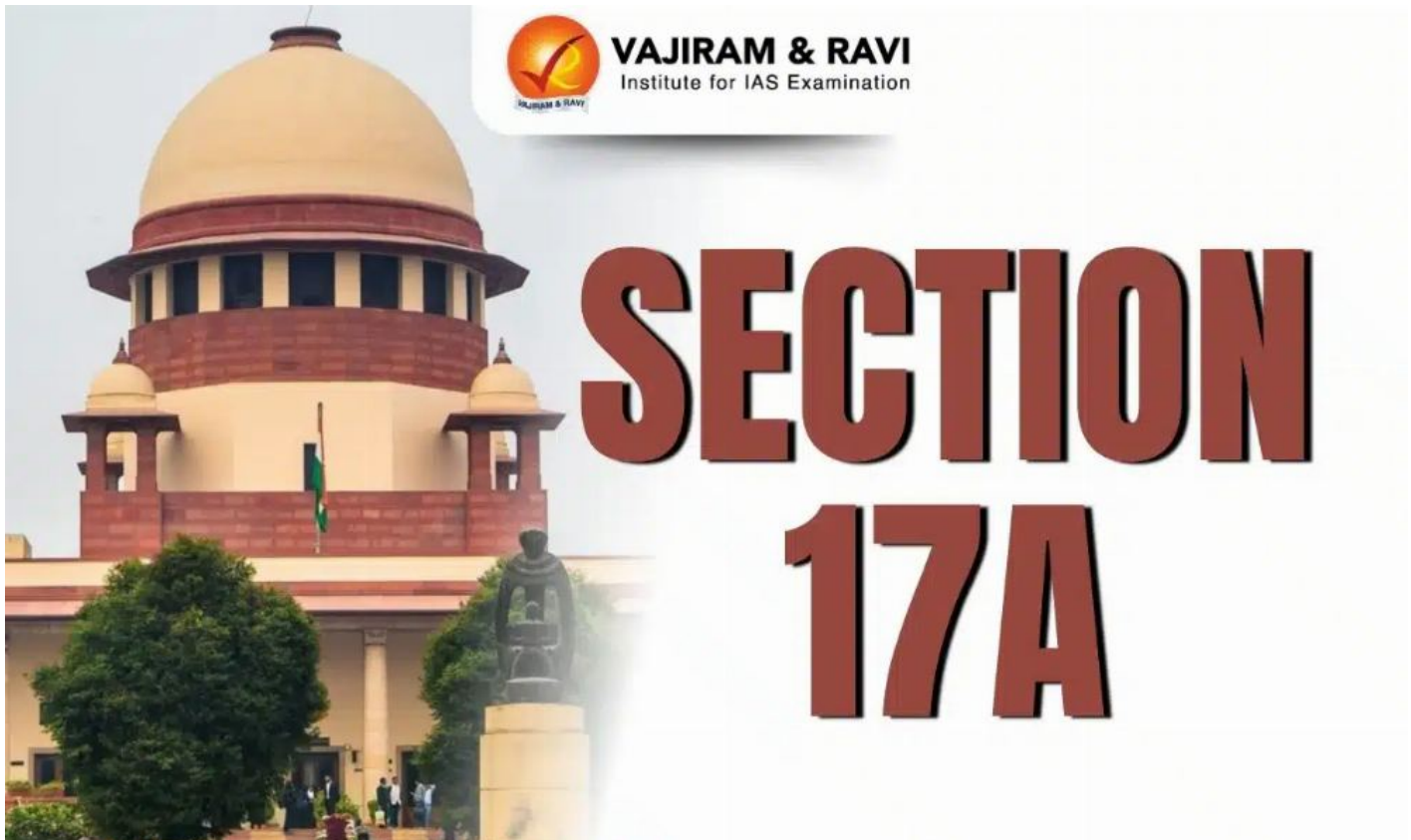


Section 17A Verdict: Corruption Control vs Officer Protection

January 15, 2026 • vajiramandravi.com



Section 17a Latest News

- A two-judge bench of the Supreme Court of India delivered a split verdict on the constitutionality of Section 17A of the **Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988**.
 - Given the divergent views, the case has been referred to the Chief Justice of India to constitute a larger bench for final adjudication.
- Inserted in 2018, the provision requires prior government approval before police can initiate enquiries or investigations against public servants for decisions taken in official duties.
- The judgment underscores a long-standing tension in administrative law — striking a balance between empowering agencies to act decisively against corruption and protecting honest civil servants from undue harassment.

Addressing Policy Paralysis in Governance

- Section 17A was introduced to prevent “policy paralysis” by protecting civil servants from investigative harassment over bona fide decisions.
- The concern was that fear of probes could deter officials from taking bold, necessary policy decisions.

Protecting the ‘Steel Frame’ of India

- Justice K V Viswanathan underscored the need for such protection, invoking Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel’s description of civil servants as the “Steel Frame of India.”
- He warned that without safeguards, honest officers would adopt a risk-averse “play-it-safe” approach, ultimately harming national interests.

The Constitutional Flaw in Section 17A

- Justice Viswanathan acknowledged a key defect in the provision: the authority to grant or deny approval for investigations rests with the government itself, undermining the independence essential for corruption inquiries.
- To preserve the provision’s constitutionality, Justice Viswanathan adopted a “**constructive approach**.”
- He upheld the requirement of prior approval but ruled that decision-making must not be confined to the government alone.
- Instead, complaints must be independently **screened by the Lokpal** at the Centre and **Lokayuktas** in the States.

How the Proposed Mechanism Works

- Under this framework, when police seek approval to investigate, the government must forward the request to the Lokpal.
- The Lokpal’s Inquiry Wing conducts a preliminary assessment, and if a prima facie case is found, the government is obliged to grant approval.
- This ensures independent scrutiny of corruption allegations while retaining necessary protection for honest public servants, thereby balancing administrative efficiency with accountability.

Section 17A as a Shield for the Corrupt

- Justice B V Nagarathna held that **Section 17A** is contrary to the very objective of the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988.
- She argued that by blocking enquiries at the threshold, the provision effectively protects corrupt officials rather than safeguarding honest ones.

Conflict of Interest in Government Approval

- She rejected the assumption that the government can act as an impartial authority in granting approval for investigations.
- She highlighted the risks of policy bias and conflict of interest, especially where allegations involve senior officials or ministers, making impartial decision-making by subordinate officers unrealistic.

Violation of the Right to Equality

- She found Section 17A **violative of Article 14**, as it grants protection only to officials involved in “recommendations or decisions.”
- This, she said, unfairly discriminates against lower-level officials who perform clerical functions or record file notings and are denied similar safeguards.

Rejection of Judicial Reconstruction

- Justice Nagarathna strongly disagreed with Justice Viswanathan’s effort to save the provision by routing approvals through the Lokpal.
- She termed this “judicial legislation,” asserting that courts cannot rewrite statutes by replacing “Government” with “Lokpal.”

‘Cart Before the Horse’ Argument

- She dismissed the government’s claim that Section 17A acts as a gatekeeper against frivolous complaints.
- Without a preliminary police enquiry, she argued, it is impossible to assess whether allegations are genuine or baseless.

A Tool of Control Over Officials

- Justice Nagarathna warned that Section 17A enables the government to wield a “Damocles’ sword” over public servants, pressuring them to conform to political interests under the threat of investigation approvals being selectively granted.

Divergent Readings of Supreme Court Precedents

- A key disagreement in the split verdict centred on how to interpret two landmark rulings of the Supreme Court of India: ***Vineet Narain v. Union of India*** and ***Subramanian Swamy v. CBI***.
- Both judgments had struck down prior approval requirements that restricted corruption investigations.

Justice Nagarathna: Section 17A as a Revival of Invalid Law

- Justice B V Nagarathna viewed Section 17A as “old wine in a new bottle,” arguing that it resurrects protections earlier invalidated.
- She relied on Subramanian Swamy Case, where the Court held that any fetter on even a preliminary enquiry undermines the investigation process.
- In her view, Section 17A creates the same barrier—now extended to all public servants—and therefore suffers from the same constitutional infirmity.

Justice Viswanathan: Distinguishing the Earlier Rulings

- Justice K V Viswanathan took a different approach, distinguishing Section 17A from the provisions struck down earlier.
- He noted that Subramanian Swamy invalidated **Section 6A of the DSPE Act** mainly because it discriminated between officers based on rank, violating equality under the Constitution.
- Since Section 17A applies uniformly to all public servants, he argued that this defect does not arise.
- Justice Viswanathan further reasoned that the core principle of Vineet Narain and Subramanian Swamy was preventing executive control over investigations.
- By routing prior approval through an independent body like the Lokpal, he argued, Section 17A addresses this concern and meets constitutional requirements.

The Crux of the Disagreement

- Thus, while Justice Nagarathna saw Section 17A as fundamentally incompatible with binding precedent, Justice Viswanathan believed that institutional redesign—through independent screening—was sufficient to reconcile the provision with earlier Supreme Court rulings.

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