



BOOK REVIEW: THE VOICE OF JUSTICE: JUSTICE GAVAI SPEAKS

Arushi Navalakha*

INTRODUCTION

The Voice of Justice: Justice Gavai Speaks, launched in 2026 under the aegis of the Commonwealth Legal Education Association, is an edited compilation of the public addresses, memorial lectures, and reflections delivered by Justice Bhushan Ramkrishna Gavai across a judicial career culminating in his tenure as the 52nd Chief Justice of India.¹ Born in Amravati, Maharashtra, in 1960, and educated at a municipal school before qualifying in commerce and law, Justice Gavai rose from independent practice at the Nagpur Bench of the Bombay High Court to become, in May 2025, only the second judge from the Scheduled Castes and the first from the Buddhist community to head the Indian judiciary. That trajectory gives the volume its organising premise: rather than a single continuous narrative, it gathers the occasions, convocations, memorial lectures, farewell addresses on which a sitting and then outgoing Chief Justice spoke about the Constitution not as an abstract text but as the instrument of his own life. The book draws from Justice Gavai's own characterisation of the Constitution as the document which authorises one who was once viewed as an outcast to speak unapologetically from the top of the judiciary. Since this is an edited collection and not an autobiography, it presents itself as a compilation of situations and asks the reader to discover repeated themes in it, like representation, social justice and democracy and judicial restraint across addresses delivered years and continents apart.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

A Life Read through the Constitution: The opening speeches collected in the book repeatedly return to Justice Gavai's own life story, such as his childhood in a semi-slum area of Amravati, a father who was a close friend of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and one of the main

*BBA LLB (HONS), SECOND YEAR, AMITY LAW SCHOOL, NOIDA.

¹ 'CLEA Announces the Launch of The Voice of Justice: Justice Gavai Speaks' (*Commonwealth Legal Education Association*, July 2026) <<https://www.facebook.com/61556336766412/posts/122313268952211225>> accessed 12 July 2026

founders of the Republican Party of India, and a start in law practice in 1985 at Barrister Raja S. Bhonsale's office in Bombay.² Justice Gavai has mentioned many times that he owed his success in life to Dr Ambedkar personally, who proved that a person educated in a city school can achieve any position.

Dr Ambedkar Memorial Lecture: The first Dr Ambedkar Memorial Lecture is a major part of the collection; it was given on 14 April 2025 at the Dr Ambedkar International Centre to celebrate the 134th birthday of Ambedkar.³ In his speech, Justice Gavai referred to the debates held in the Constituent Assembly where Ambedkar had stated that social democracy must accompany political democracy, for one cannot exist without the other. He also emphasised that there must be a balance in the federal structure in favour of the centre when it comes to emergencies and expressed his concern that the unlimited power of amendment would give the ability to the ruling party to modify the Constitution as per its ideology.⁴

CHANGING THE STORY FROM REPRESENTATION TO REALISATION

The Oxford Union Address: This particular speech has been highlighted in the media as the keynote address by Justice Gavai at the Oxford Union, with the name he gave: Changing the Story from Representation to Realisation: The Oxford Union Address.⁵ Talking about his journey from a municipal school to the highest legal position in India, the Justice highlighted that his story is proof of the constitutional promise becoming real rather than only declared and spent the following question-answer session addressing the role of technology and the issue of gender inequality in the legal sphere.

The Justice as a Constitutionalist: There are many speeches presented in the book which reference Isabel Gavai's orders in various cases to depict constitutional principles discussed at various events. In this regard, Gavai's ruling in the case: *In Re: Directions in the Matter of Demolition of Structures*⁶ is of the utmost importance. While delivering the verdict on this case,

² 'Supreme Court Observer: B.R. Gavai' (*Supreme Court Observer*)

<<https://www.scobserver.in/judges/bhushan-ramkrishna-gavai/>> accessed 12 July 2026.

³ 'Dr. Ambedkar and the Constitution: Full Text of Speech by Justice B.R. Gavai' (*Live Law*, 14 April 2025) <<https://www.livelaw.in/top-stories/drambedkar-and-the-constitution-full-text-of-speech-by-justice-b-gavai-227478>> accessed 12 July 2026.

⁴ Justice BR Gavai Recalls Dr Ambedkar's Warnings on Constitutional Amendments and His Vision for Social Justice' (*Court Book*, 19 April 2025) <<https://courtbook.in/posts/justice-br-gavai-recalls-dr-ambedkars-warnings-on-constitutional-amendments-and-his-vision-for-social-justice>> accessed 12 July 2026.

⁵ 'Justice Gavai's Powerful Address at Oxford Union' (*SCC Times*, 12 June 2025) <<https://www.sconline.com/blog/post/2025/06/12/justice-gavai-oxford-union-constitution-promise/>> accessed 12 July 2026

⁶ *In Re: Directions in the Matter of Demolition of Structures* 2024 INSC 866

Justice Gavai stated that the government does not have the right to destroy the houses of the people accused or found guilty, and described the punitive demolitions as practices of a lawless society. The book also provides the context of the lawmaker's decision, linking it to his participation in the Supreme Court case that declared the abolition of Article 370⁷ unconstitutional, the decision on the law invalidating the Electoral Bonds Scheme, and his concurrence on the 'creamy layer' concept in reserving the benefits for the members of Scheduled Castes.

Farewell and Reflection: The speeches made at the time of the retirement of Justice Gavai in November 2025 after a short-lived tenure of six months as Chief Justice become more retrospective in tone as they address issues like the independence of judges, the challenges of a brief but tumultuous term as the head of the Supreme Court, and the need to provide institutional protections instead of personal legacies. All the retirement speeches bring closure to Justice Gavai's journey, characterising his stint in the Supreme Court as part of a larger process that began in the times of Ambedkar rather than concluding with his departure.

ANALYSIS OF THE BOOK

The main benefit of the book is that it is also timely. A few edited volumes provide such access to the constitutional philosophy of a Chief Justice in office that is expressed by him in his own words on many occasions, such as memorial lectures, farewell addresses, and so on, during one short term of office.⁸ If we compare the speeches of Justice Gavai with his judgment, we notice that they serve as a kind of key: repeated mention of Ambedkar's views concerning the power of amendments is a clear proof that his later decisions concerning the fundamental structure and due process are not separate doctrinal decisions but simply application of the constitutional spirit shaped before he became a judge.

At the same time, this book has its limitations due to the format used. Speeches that were given during certain occasions, such as ceremonials, should be based on the style that corresponds with the nature of the occasion instead of focusing on developing an argument, so the idea of Justice Gavai's personal travel and his respect for Ambedkar are frequently repeated. A reader

⁷ In Re Article 370 of the Constitution 2023 INSC 1058

⁸ CLEA Announces the Launch of The Voice of Justice: Justice Gavai Speaks' (Commonwealth Legal Education Association, July 2026) <<https://www.facebook.com/61556336766412/posts/122313268952211225>> accessed 12 July 2026

who reads the entire book may see the repetition far more so than if the speeches were encountered separately one after the other, months or years apart.

Additionally, it is quite clear there is a lack of adequate critical distance on the part of the author: it is a compilation of documents involving the judge's own utterances, and therefore it fails to address contradictions in his record, for instance, between his known family connection with the Congress party and service on politically sensitive benches, or between general principles offered in the demolition judgment and challenges in their application from state to state.⁹ This is not the shortcoming of this particular book; it is a problem common for a collection of a judge's own speeches rather than a piece of independent research, so the readers are advised to use the book for its originally intended purpose.

CONCLUSION

The Voice of Justice: Justice Gavai Speaks is much better off being viewed as a primary source that can complement what the judge has done in actual practice. The significance lies in comparing the ceremonial with the doctrinal: a lecture on Ambedkar's concerns regarding the amending power delivered a few weeks before a judgment on the concept of basic structure; a keynote address on representation and realisation by a judge whose life history is being cited as evidence of the same. For students of the Indian Constitution and for those interested in the links between biography and philosophy of judges, this book provides an invaluable first-hand view of a short tenure that raised some of the most important questions before the contemporary judiciary of India.

⁹ In Re: Directions in the Matter of Demolition of Structures, 2024 INSC 866.