

Why NHRC's Global Downgrade Demands Urgent Reform

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Grace Anu

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A NHRC team arrives at Malda to meet people who fled violence-hit areas of Murshidabad district in West Bengal, April 18, 2025. Photo: PTI

The year 2025 was a turbulent one for the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), which proclaims to stand tall in its human rights interventions and was once considered a shelter in the storm for Indians. The recent decision by the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) to [downgrade the status](#) of the apex human rights body of the world's largest democracy, however, is a sobering story.

Since its inception in 1993, the NHRC has had chairpersons of four thematic commissions as its deemed members. In 2019, this was expanded to include three more thematic national commissions. To make its services more accessible to citizens, every state has a human rights commission and, in addition, thematic commissions meant for women, children, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, among others. In all, there are 169 such institutions, making India the country with the largest number of national and state human rights institutions.

Accreditation by GANHRI

National human rights institutions around the world are accredited by GANHRI, which ensures their compliance with the [Paris Principles](#). These principles set out the minimum parameters for national human rights institutions, emphasising their broad mandate and functions and their pluralism, independence and effectiveness.

As part of this alliance since 1997, the NHRC was subjected to GANHRI evaluation in 2016, 2023 and 2024, in which its 'A' status was deferred thrice by a sub-committee on accreditation, or the SCA. The GANHRI sub-committee [recommended actions](#) for the NHRC to consider. These included emphasising plurality of gender, ethnicity and representation of religious minorities within the NHRC. It also recommended a transparent appointment process and independent and effective functioning.

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The recommendations highlighted the need to effectively intervene in several human rights violations and the lack of civil society engagement by the NHRC. They also raised concerns that only police officers were investigating abuses by their colleagues, which was seen to greatly jeopardise independence and accountability.

These recommendations were the result of reports by civil society organisations at the regional, national and international level that communicated the NHRC's non-compliance with the Paris Principles.

NHRC downgraded after inaction

While laudable for its large network and broad mandate, the NHRC's conduct in some of the gravest instances of abuse has been deeply concerning. In 2015, the commission intervened – on the same day as the incident, April 15, 2015 – in the fake encounter [killing of 20 Tamil labourers](#) by the Red Sanders Special Task Force in the Seshachalam Forest Range of the erstwhile undivided state of Andhra Pradesh.

The NHRC intervened swiftly, conducted rapid investigations and passed effective interim orders, but thereafter [failed to ensure their implementation](#). Even after ten years, it has been unable to vacate the Andhra Pradesh High Court's [stay of its order](#) dated May 29, 2015.

Another chilling incident was that of police excesses in 2018 against demonstrators protesting Vedanta's copper smelting unit in Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu. Infamously called the Sterlite shooting, it led to 16 deaths and left hundreds critically injured. The NHRC [did not hold the police accountable](#). Instead, it [closed the case](#), citing the Tamil Nadu government's compensation and the appointment of a commission of inquiry. It thus left the victims in the dark, despite eight UN Special Procedures voicing their condemnation of the killings since May 30, 2018.

The NHRC's silence on the [arrest of student activists](#) Umar Khalid, Sharjil Imam and Gulfisha Fatima and of human rights defender Khurram Parvez also rang out on the international stage, in addition to its lack of proper action in the infamous arrests of some of the world's renowned intellectuals in the name of being 'anti-nationals' in the [Bhima Koregaon](#) case.

[Also read: NHRC to Visit Nashik Prison Five Years After The Wire's Report on Custodial Death](#)

Some, like Jesuit priest Father Stan Swamy, died during the ordeal of imprisonment, while [Professor G.N. Saibaba](#) died soon after being allowed release on bail, after undergoing long imprisonment despite serious health concerns. Many accused are still lodged in prisons without trial, denied bail for over five years for the 'crime' of being socially conscious towards the abuse of power and wealth. The NHRC did not intervene in any of these matters on its own.

It is in this context that, after three deferrals of its accreditation in 2016, 2023 and 2024, the NHRC was [downgraded in April 2025](#) at the 45th session of the GANHRI Accreditation Sub-Committee. The NHRC challenged this, but the downgrade was [upheld by the GANHRI bureau](#) comprising 16 countries on [December 4, 2025](#).

In earlier years, the NHRC had made notable interventions, such as in cases related to the Gujarat violence in 2002 when [Justice J.S. Verma](#) was the chairperson. It insisted that India [ratify the UN Convention Against Torture](#) in 1997 when Justice M.N. Venkatachaliah was the chairperson.

The present chairperson, Justice V. Ramasubramanian, a former judge of the Madras High Court, has passed judgements with a [victim-centric approach](#) in cases concerning individual rights. However, he has been in the position only since December 2024. Hence, the onus of the downgrade falls not just on him, but more so on his predecessors, including Justice H.L. Dattu and Justice Arun Mishra, who left behind a [consistent failure](#) to implement the SCA recommendations.

A call to reform

What would change look like for the NHRC, once regarded as a beacon of hope for the country? The commission ought to focus on improving its engagement with those who are critical of its downfall but passionate about its revival. Civil society organisations such as the People's Union for Civil Liberties, the People's Union for Democratic Rights and many others working on the ground, echoing people's voices, ought to be heard and collaborated with to make human rights a reality.

Criticisms of the NHRC stem from a desire for it to stand true to its founding principles – they are not an outright rejection. Although the downgrading of NHRC, India's sole representative on GANHRI, sends a wave of hurt, it also calls for reflection and for working out strategies of action with all stakeholders.

Grace Anu is a social worker at People's Watch, Madurai. Edgar Kaiser is a human rights lawyer at People's Watch and an L.L.M candidate in European and International Human Rights Law at Leiden University, Netherlands.