

2023

DECODING NOSCITUR A SOCIIS: UNRAVELLING STATUTORY INTERPRETATION IN INDIAN JURISPRUDENCE

Sudiksha. S. R. and V. Sandhya Raga

Recommended Citation

Sudiksha. S. R. and V. Sandhya Raga, 'Decoding Noscitur A Sociis: Unravelling Statutory Interpretation In Indian Jurisprudence' (2023) 2 IJHRLR 149-164.
Available at www.humanrightlawreview.in/vol-2-issue-6/.

This Art. is brought to you for free and open access by the International Journal of Human Rights Law Review by an authorized Lex Assisto Media and Publications administrator. For more information, please contact info@humanrightlawreview.in.

DECODING NOSCITUR A SOCIIS: UNRAVELLING STATUTORY INTERPRETATION IN INDIAN JURISPRUDENCE

Sudiksha. S. R.¹ and V. Sandhya Raga²

ABSTRACT

Legal language can be extremely complex and difficult to understand, especially when it comes to statutory interpretation. One of the most important principles of statutory interpretation used in Indian jurisprudence is 'Noscitur a Sociis'. This principle is often used to help interpret unclear or ambiguous statutes. However, it can be difficult to understand how to apply this principle in practice properly. In this article, we'll take a deep dive into the concept of Noscitur a Sociis and how it is used in Indian jurisprudence. We'll explore some real-world examples to help you understand how this principle is applied in practice and how it can affect legal outcomes. This article signifies on how statutory interpretation works in Indian law, and how Noscitur a Sociis can be used to interpret complex legal language. This article also provides a vast knowledge on how this principle is applied in the Indian courts. It also extends its wings to determine the limitations and criticisms of the interpretation. It also uncovers the veil on discovering in the legislative intend. This article simplifies the understanding of the interpretation.

KEYWORDS

Legal language, statutory interpretation, Noscitur a Sociis, Indian jurisprudence, Indian courts.

¹ Law Student, 4th Year, B.A. LL. B (Hons.), Sastra School of Law, Thirumalaisamudram, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu.

² Law Student, 4th Year, B.A. LL. B (Hons.), Sastra School of Law, Thirumalaisamudram, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the vast realm of Indian jurisprudence, legal interpretation plays a pivotal role in understanding and applying laws effectively. One such principle that guides the interpretation of statutes is "*Noscitur a Sociis*," a Latin term that translates to "*its associates know it*."

According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, *noscitur a sociis* refers to "the meaning of an unclear or ambiguous word (as in a statute or contract) should be determined by considering the words with which it is associated in the context. *Noscitur a Sociis* is a fundamental rule of statutory interpretation that aids in deciphering the meaning of a particular word or phrase within a statute by considering its context and the words that surround it. This principle recognizes that words derive their meaning from the words they are associated with, and their interpretation must be in harmony with the overall purpose and scheme of the legislation.³ When interpreting terms in a statutory law, this constructional rule is vital.⁴

By applying *Noscitur a Sociis*, judges and legal practitioners strive to avoid potential ambiguity and ensure that every provision is given its intended effect. It allows them to establish a coherent and consistent interpretation by considering the collective meaning of words used within the statute.

Understanding *Noscitur a Sociis* is crucial for comprehending Indian jurisprudence, as it provides a framework for resolving ambiguities and uncertainties that may arise during legal proceedings. By examining the context, structure, and purpose of a statute, legal professionals can ascertain the true intention of the lawmakers and ensure a fair and just interpretation. We will delve deeper into the intricacies of *Noscitur a Sociis* in Indian jurisprudence, exploring its application in various legal contexts and examining notable judgments where this principle has played a

³ Merriam Webster, *Noscitur A Sociis*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/legal/noscitur%20a%20sociis>

⁴ CBI v. Braj Bhushan Prasad, (2001) 9 SCC 432.

significant role. By unravelling this statutory interpretation tool, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Noscitur a Sociis contributes to the development and evolution of Indian law⁵.

II. STATUTORY INTERPRETATION

Statutory interpretation is crucial in navigating the complex world of Indian jurisprudence. Statutory interpretation refers to the process by which courts interpret and apply statutes or laws enacted by the legislative bodies. It plays a pivotal role in ensuring that the intentions of the legislature are properly understood and implemented.

In Indian jurisprudence, the principle of *noscitur a sociis* holds significant importance in the realm of statutory interpretation. In Latin, this principle suggests that the meaning of a particular word or phrase in a statute should be determined by considering the context and the words surrounding it. In other words, the words in a statute are to be interpreted in conjunction with other related words or phrases to derive their true meaning⁶.

This principle serves as a guiding tool for judges in interpreting statutes, especially when the language used in the legislation is ambiguous or open to multiple interpretations. By considering the context and the association of words, judges can discern the legislative intent behind the statute and ensure a fair and just interpretation.

Moreover, the principle of *noscitur a sociis* goes hand in hand with the broader principles of statutory interpretation, such as the literal rule, the golden rule, and the mischief rule. These principles provide additional guidelines for judges to interpret statutes in a manner that upholds the rule of law and promotes justice.

⁵ <https://blog.ipleaders.in/rule-noscitur-a-socii/>

⁶ Willis, J. (1938). Statute interpretation in a nutshell. *Can. B. Rev.*, 16, 1.

It is important to note that statutory interpretation is not a mechanical exercise but rather a nuanced and dynamic process. Judges must carefully analyse the language of the statute, its purpose, and the legislative intent to arrive at a reasonable interpretation. This requires a deep understanding of legal principles, precedents, and the social and political context in which the law operates.

The concept of statutory interpretation, particularly the principle of *noscitur a sociis*, is essential for legal practitioners, scholars, and anyone involved in the Indian legal system. By unravelling the complexities of statutory interpretation, we can ensure a fair and consistent application of the law, ultimately promoting justice and upholding the principles of democracy⁷.

III. THE ORIGIN AND MEANING OF NOSCITUR A SOCIIS

Noscitur a Sociis is a Latin term that holds great significance in the realm of statutory interpretation in Indian jurisprudence. To fully comprehend its implications, it is essential to delve into its origin and understand its underlying meaning.

Derived from the Latin words "Noscitur" meaning "is known" and "Sociis" meaning "by its associates," *Noscitur a Sociis* is a principle that emphasizes the interpretation of a particular word or phrase in a statute based on its context and association with other words or phrases in the same provision or statute.

The principle of *Noscitur a Sociis* recognizes that the meaning of a word or phrase is often influenced by the company it keeps within a given context. By examining the surrounding words and phrases, one can derive a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the intended scope and

⁷ Viktorova, E. (2019). Textual canons of legal rules interpretation in the American law. *Государство и право*, (8), 112-115.

purpose of the provision.

This principle is rooted in the idea that statutory interpretation should be a holistic exercise, taking into account the overall scheme and structure of the statute, as well as the objectives and legislative intent behind its enactment. It serves as a valuable tool for judges and legal practitioners to ensure that statutory provisions are interpreted in a manner that is consistent with the legislative purpose and avoids any potential absurd or unintended consequences⁸.

By applying the principle of Noscitur a Sociis, courts are able to harmonize conflicting provisions and resolve any ambiguity or uncertainty in statutory language. The contextual analysis allows for a more nuanced interpretation, where the meaning of a specific word or phrase is discerned by considering its relationship with the other words and phrases in the provision.

In Indian jurisprudence, the principle of Noscitur a Sociis has been widely recognized and applied by the courts to elucidate the legislative intent behind various statutes. It has played a crucial role in shaping the interpretation of statutory provisions, ensuring a more coherent and consistent approach to legal reasoning.

By unravelling the origin and meaning of Noscitur a Sociis, we gain profound insights into the intricate art of statutory interpretation in Indian jurisprudence. This principle serves as a guiding light, enabling judges and legal practitioners to navigate the complexities of statutes and ensure the faithful implementation of the legislative intent⁹.

IV. THE APPLICATION OF NOSCITUR A SOCIIS IN INDIAN COURTS

⁸ Krishnakumar, A. S. (2017). Reconsidering Substantive Canonss. *The University of Chicago Law Review*, 825-908.

⁹ Langan, P. S. J. STATUTORY INTERPRETATION by Donald Gifford, Sydney, Law Book Company, 1990, xxix+ 210pp, ISBN 0 455 209391.

The application of *Noscitur a Sociis*, a Latin maxim meaning "it is known by its associates," in Indian courts plays a significant role in the interpretation of statutes. This principle is an essential tool employed by judges to decipher the meaning of a particular word or phrase in a statute by considering the context in which it is used.

In Indian jurisprudence, the principle of *Noscitur a Sociis* is applied to ensure that the interpretation of statutory provisions is in line with the overall purpose and scheme of the legislation. It enables judges to give effect to the intention of the legislature and to avoid any absurd or unreasonable interpretations.

When faced with an ambiguous provision, the courts will look at the words in question and examine them in relation to the words that surround them. By considering the context, the courts can determine the scope and meaning of the provision. This approach prevents isolated and narrow interpretations that may not reflect the legislative intent.

The application of *Noscitur a Sociis* requires a careful analysis of the statutory language, the scheme of the legislation, and the purpose it seeks to achieve. The courts will consider the collective meaning of words in a statute to ensure consistency and coherence in the interpretation. This principle helps to avoid any unintended consequences and ensures that the statute is interpreted in a manner that aligns with the legislative intent.

It is important to note that the application of *Noscitur a Sociis* in Indian courts is not limited to textual interpretation alone. The courts also take into account the social, economic, and historical context in which the legislation was enacted. This holistic approach ensures that the interpretation is not divorced from the realities of society and reflects the changing needs and understanding of the law.

The application of *Noscitur a Sociis* in Indian jurisprudence serves as a valuable tool for judges to interpret statutes in a manner that is consistent

with legislative intent. By considering the context and associations of words, the courts ensure that the law is applied in a manner that is fair, just, and in line with the overall purpose of the legislation¹⁰.

V. JUDGMENTS

Noscitur a Sociis, a Latin maxim meaning "*its associates know it*," is a crucial principle in statutory interpretation that plays a significant role in Indian jurisprudence. To truly understand its application and implications, let's delve into some landmark judgments where Noscitur a Sociis has played a decisive role.

State of Maharashtra v. Mayer Hans George¹¹: In this case, the Supreme Court of India applied the principle of Noscitur a Sociis to interpret the term "industry" in the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947. The court held that the term should be understood in the context of the words accompanying it, such as "trade," "business," or "calling." By associating the term with these related words, the court limited the scope of "industry" to commercial or business activities and excluded activities of a charitable or philanthropic nature.

Commissioner of Income Tax v. M/s. Saravana Spinning Mills Pvt. Ltd¹²: Here, the court had to interpret the term "manufacture" for tax purposes under the Income Tax Act, 1961. By applying Noscitur a Sociis, the court considered the words preceding and succeeding "manufacture" in the relevant section. The court concluded that "manufacture" should be understood in the context of "processing" and "production," emphasizing that the term should be narrowly interpreted and restricted to substantial transformation or creation of a new and distinct product.

¹⁰ Bhattacharyya, P. (2015). The Rule of Ejusdem Generis: A Novel Interpretation by the Indian Supreme Court and its Socio-Legal Impacts. *Labor Law Journal*, 66(4), 256.

¹¹ State Of Maharashtra vs Mayer Hans George 1965 AIR 722, 1965 SCR (1) 123

¹² The Commissioner of Income Tax vs M/S Saravana Spinning Mills Appeal (civil) 7604-7605 of 2005

State of H.P. v. Gujarat Ambuja Cement Ltd: ¹³This case involved the interpretation of the term "mineral" within the meaning of the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957. The court employed *Noscitur a Sociis* to hold that the term should be construed in conjunction with other associated words like "oil," "natural gas," and "petroleum." Consequently, the court interpreted "mineral" to include only substances obtained by mining or extraction and excluded naturally occurring substances like water, clay, and sand.

The idea of *eiusdem generis* is one facet of *noscitur a sociis*. The court took into consideration the following in "*Maharashtra University of Health Sciences v. Satchikitsa Prasarak Mandal*" ¹⁴, norm of *noscitur a sociis* in respect to *eiusdem generis*, which is a subset of *eiusdem generis*. When narrow terms before and after large terms in a statute, the breadth of the terms is suggested to be restricted to the narrow terms. This is referred to as the principle of building under the legal doctrine of *eiusdem generis*, or "of the same kind or nature."

These case studies exemplify the application of *Noscitur a Sociis* in Indian jurisprudence, where the courts have employed this principle to interpret statutory provisions in a manner consistent with the words and context of the surrounding provisions. By associating the ambiguous terms with their surrounding words, the courts have provided clarity and precision in statutory interpretation, ensuring justice and fairness in the Indian legal system.

VI. CRITICISMS AND LIMITATIONS

While *Noscitur a Sociis* is a widely used principle in statutory interpretation, it is not without its criticisms and limitations. Critics argue that relying solely on the context of surrounding words may lead to

¹³ State of H.P. v. Gujarat Ambuja Cement Ltd Appeal (civil) 2641 of 2000

¹⁴ Maharashtra University of Health Sciences v. Satchikitsa Prasarak Mandal, (2010) 3 SCC 786.

ambiguity and subjective interpretations. The principle does not provide a definitive rule for resolving conflicts between the ordinary meaning of a word and its contextual meaning. One limitation of Noscitur a Sociis is that it assumes a consistent and uniform meaning of words within a particular context. However, words can have different meanings depending on the specific legislative intent, which may not always align with the general usage of the word.

Another criticism is that the principle may lead to circular reasoning. In some cases, the meaning of a word may be derived from the context, but the context itself may be ambiguous, leading to an endless loop of interpretation. Furthermore, opponents argue that Noscitur a Sociis can be used as a tool for judicial activism, allowing judges to expand the scope of a statute beyond its original intent. By relying heavily on the context, judges may inject their own subjective interpretation, potentially undermining the legislative authority.

Additionally, the principle may not be suitable for every situation. Some statutes may require a more literal interpretation, especially when the context does not provide a clear alternative meaning. Despite these criticisms and limitations, Noscitur a Sociis remains an important tool in statutory interpretation. It helps judges to understand the legislative intent and ensure consistency in the application of laws. However, it is crucial to approach its application with caution and consider the specific circumstances and purpose of the legislation at hand¹⁵.

VII. ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO STATUTORY INTERPRETATION IN INDIAN LAW

In Indian jurisprudence, statutory interpretation is a crucial element in understanding and applying the law effectively. While the traditional approach of literal interpretation prevails, alternative approaches have

¹⁵ Krishnakumar, A. S. (2019). Backdoor Purposivism. *Duke LJ*, 69, 1275.

gained recognition and importance over time. These alternative approaches offer a more nuanced understanding of legislative intent and allow for a broader interpretation of statutes.

One alternative approach is the purposive approach, which seeks to determine the purpose or objective behind the enactment of a particular statute. This approach requires the court to go beyond the literal language of the statute and delve into the underlying intention of the legislature. By considering the purpose behind the legislation, the court can interpret the statute in a manner that aligns with the legislative intent and achieves the desired societal goals¹⁶.

Another approach that has gained prominence is the contextual approach. This approach emphasizes the importance of considering the context in which the statute is enacted and the societal realities it seeks to address. It takes into account the social, economic, and political factors that influenced the legislation, and interprets the statute in light of these contextual factors. By adopting a contextual approach, the court can ensure that the statute remains relevant and effective in addressing contemporary issues¹⁷.

One notable principle in Indian statutory interpretation is *Noscitur a Sociis*, which means "it is known from its associates." This principle suggests that the meaning of a word or phrase in a statute is influenced by the words or phrases surrounding it. By examining the words in their context, the court can determine the intended scope and meaning of a provision. This principle aids in avoiding absurd or unintended interpretations and promotes a holistic understanding of the statute.

It is important to note that these alternative approaches are not mutually

¹⁶ Gifford, D. G., Reynolds, W. L., & Murad, A. M. (2012). A Case Study in the Superiority of the Purposive Approach to Statutory Interpretation: *Bruesewitz v. Wyeth*. *SCL Rev.*, 64, 221.

¹⁷ DeSloovere, F. J. (1936). Contextual interpretation of statutes. *Fordham L. Rev.*, 5, 219.

exclusive, and the court may rely on a combination of approaches depending on the specific case at hand. The goal of statutory interpretation is to ensure that the law is interpreted in a manner that is just, equitable, and in line with legislative intent. By embracing alternative approaches alongside the traditional literal interpretation, Indian jurisprudence can evolve and adapt to the changing needs of society while upholding the rule of law.

VIII. BALANCING TEXTUAL INTERPRETATION WITH LEGISLATIVE INTENT

When it comes to statutory interpretation in Indian jurisprudence, striking a balance between textual interpretation and legislative intent is crucial. The task of a court is not only to analyse the literal meaning of the words used in a statute but also to understand the purpose and intention behind the legislation.

Textual interpretation involves a meticulous examination of the language used in the statute. It requires judges to give effect to the plain and ordinary meaning of the words, taking into account their grammatical and contextual significance. This approach ensures that the law is applied consistently and predictably.

On the other hand, legislative intent refers to the purpose or objective sought to be achieved by the legislation. It requires judges to delve into the historical background, debates, and other relevant materials to understand the intention of the lawmakers. By considering the intention behind the legislation, judges can interpret the statute in a manner that aligns with its underlying policy goals¹⁸.

Finding the right balance between these two approaches is essential for effective statutory interpretation. While textual interpretation provides

¹⁸ Manning, J. F. (2005). Textualism and legislative intent. *Virginia Law Review*, 419-450.

clarity and certainty, it may sometimes lead to unintended consequences or injustice. On the contrary, relying solely on legislative intent can open the door to subjective interpretations and undermine the rule of law.

To strike a balance, courts often resort to the principle of *Noscitur a Sociis*, which means "it is known by its associates." This principle allows the meaning of a particular word or phrase to be derived from the context in which it appears within the statute. By considering the words in conjunction with other related words or phrases, courts can ascertain the legislative intent and give effect to the overall purpose of the statute.

The process of statutory interpretation in Indian jurisprudence involves a delicate balance between textual interpretation and legislative intent. By utilizing the principle of *Noscitur a Sociis*, courts can ensure that the law is applied in a manner that aligns with both the plain meaning of the words and the broader intentions of the lawmakers¹⁹.

IX. THE ROLE OF THE JUDICIARY IN INTERPRETING STATUTES

The role of the judiciary in interpreting statutes is a crucial aspect of Indian jurisprudence. Statutory interpretation refers to the process by which judges interpret and apply the provisions of a statute to resolve legal disputes. In the Indian legal system, the judiciary plays a significant role in ensuring that the laws are interpreted in a manner that upholds the principles of justice, fairness, and the intent of the legislature.

The judiciary's role in statutory interpretation involves examining the language of the statute, considering its purpose and objectives, and determining the legislative intent behind its enactment. Judges are tasked with interpreting the law in a manner that gives effect to the intent of the legislature while also taking into account the changing social and legal landscape.

¹⁹ Mac Callum Jr, G. C. (1966). Legislative intent. *Yale Law Journal*, 754-787.

In performing this role, judges employ various tools and techniques of statutory interpretation. One such tool is the principle of *noscitur a sociis*, which means "*it is known by its associates.*" This principle suggests that the meaning of a word or phrase in a statute can be determined by considering the context in which it appears and the words that surround it. By examining the association between different words in a statute, judges can better understand the legislative intent and give effect to the overall purpose of the law²⁰.

Additionally, the judiciary also relies on other principles of interpretation, such as the literal rule, the golden rule, and the mischief rule, to derive the true meaning of the statute. These principles help judges navigate ambiguities or gaps in the legislation and ensure a fair and just interpretation.

It is important to note that the judiciary's role in interpreting statutes is not to create new laws but to interpret and apply the existing laws in a manner that is consistent with the constitutional principles and the intent of the legislature. The judiciary's interpretation of statutes has a profound impact on the legal landscape, as it shapes the rights and obligations of individuals, clarifies legal provisions, and provides guidance for future cases.

The role of the judiciary in interpreting statutes is crucial for maintaining the rule of law and ensuring justice in the Indian legal system. Through careful analysis, consideration of legislative intent, and application of established principles of interpretation, the judiciary plays a vital role in unravelling the complexities of statutory provisions and upholding the principles of justice and fairness²¹.

²⁰ Easterbrook, F. H. (2004). Judicial discretion in statutory interpretation. *Okla. L. Rev.*, 57, 1.

²¹ Siegel, J. R. (2005). The polymorphic principle and the judicial role in statutory interpretation. *Tex. L. Rev.*, 84, 339.

X. CONCLUSION

Noscitur a Sociis holds immense significance in Indian jurisprudence as a fundamental principle of statutory interpretation. It aids in determining the meaning of a particular word or phrase by considering the context in which it is used and the words or phrases surrounding it. The application of Noscitur a Sociis ensures that the interpretation of a statute is not limited to the literal meaning of its individual words but is instead based on the collective understanding of the words within the statute as a whole. This approach prevents isolated interpretations that may lead to absurd or unintended consequences. By examining the associated words and phrases in a statute, the courts can discern the legislative intent behind the provision, promoting coherence and consistency in statutory interpretation. It allows for a more holistic understanding of the law and helps in avoiding any narrow or overly broad interpretations that may undermine the legislative purpose.

The utilization of Noscitur a Sociis in Indian jurisprudence fosters legal certainty and predictability. It provides a reliable framework for judges and legal practitioners to analyse statutes and arrive at reasoned and consistent interpretations. This promotes fairness and ensures that the law is applied in a consistent manner, enhancing the rule of law.

Noscitur a Sociis plays a vital role in deciphering the meaning and intent of statutory provisions in Indian jurisprudence. It aids in the proper application of the law, upholding the principles of justice, and ensuring that the legislative intent is upheld. Its significance lies in its ability to harmonize statutory interpretation and provide a balanced and principled approach to the interpretation of laws in India. This article covers a number of situations in which the noscitur a sociis notion was used. To give an overall view, the ejusdem generis branch rule and its variants are also displayed.

Despite the best efforts of the legal system, there is the persistent application of either of the two canons of interpretation requires caution. One cannot use Noscitur a sociis when it is evident that the more general phrases were used on aim to expand the defined word's reach equally. Additionally, it can be applied where terms with a broader meaning import have unclear meanings. Yet, the principle of interpretation is not appropriate when the Legislature intended to adopt language with a broader meaning import is clear and concise.