



Swami Vivekananda Advanced Journal for Research and Studies

Online Copy of Document Available on: [www.svajrs.com](http://www.svajrs.com)

ISSN:2584-105X

Pg. 54-59



## Marital Rape in India: A Critical Legal and Evidentiary Analysis

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*Accepted: 29/01/2026*

*Published: 29/01/2026*

*DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18410779>*

### Abstract

Marital rape remains one of the most contested and inadequately addressed forms of sexual violence in India. Despite evolving constitutional jurisprudence emphasizing dignity, bodily autonomy, and gender equality, the marital rape exception under section 375 of the Indian penal code continues to provide legal immunity to husbands. This paper critically examines the legal framework governing marital rape in India, with a specific focus on the evidentiary challenges that impede effective prosecution and justice delivery.

The study adopts a doctrinal and analytical methodology, examining statutory provisions, judicial pronouncements, and constitutional principles relevant to consent, marriage, and sexual autonomy. It highlights how traditional notions of marital sanctity have influenced evidentiary standards, often placing an onerous burden on the victim to prove non-consent within the private sphere of marriage. The paper also analyzes the limitations of existing evidence laws, including issues related to corroboration, credibility assessment, and the admissibility of medical and testimonial evidence in marital rape cases.

By comparing constitutional mandates with prevailing legal practices, the paper argues that the continued exclusion of marital rape from the penal framework undermines women's fundamental rights and weakens the criminal justice system's response to sexual violence. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for legal and evidentiary reforms that balance the institution of marriage with the principles of consent, autonomy, and substantive equality.

**Keywords:** *Marital rape, Consent, Evidence law, Women's rights, Criminal law, Constitutional morality.*

## 1: Introduction

Marital rape occupies a contested space at the intersection of criminal law, constitutional rights, and the socio-legal institution of marriage. Although rape is universally acknowledged as a serious violation of bodily integrity and sexual autonomy, Indian criminal law continues to differentiate between sexual violence occurring inside and outside marriage. The marital rape exception contained in Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code, now re-enacted as Section 63 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, excludes husbands from criminal liability for non-consensual sexual intercourse with their wives, subject to limited age-based qualifications. This statutory position stands increasingly at odds with contemporary constitutional values and evolving understandings of consent. The historical justification for the marital rape exception is rooted in patriarchal assumptions that view marriage as an irrevocable consent to sexual access. Such reasoning presumes the subsuming of a woman's sexual autonomy within the marital relationship, thereby prioritizing the perceived sanctity of marriage over individual dignity and consent. However, this conception has increasingly been questioned in light of constitutional jurisprudence that recognizes bodily autonomy, privacy, and decisional freedom as integral to the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution<sup>1</sup>.

Judicial decisions such as *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India*, *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India*, and *Independent Thought v. Union of India* have collectively reinforced the principle that constitutional morality must prevail over entrenched social norms. These judgments underscore that personal autonomy cannot be extinguished by social institutions, including marriage. Despite this jurisprudential shift, criminal law continues to retain the marital rape exemption, producing a normative inconsistency between constitutional guarantees and statutory protections.

Beyond the question of criminalization, the prosecution of marital rape raises profound evidentiary challenges. Sexual violence within marriage typically occurs in private spaces, leaving little scope for independent corroborative evidence. Victims often face heightened credibility scrutiny, compounded by social stigma, economic dependence, and fear of familial repercussions. The evidentiary framework, influenced by traditional notions of marital harmony and reconciliation, frequently imposes unrealistic burdens of proof on the complainant, thereby discouraging reporting and undermining access to justice.

This paper undertakes a critical legal and evidentiary analysis of marital rape in India. It examines the statutory framework, judicial responses, and constitutional mandates governing consent and sexual autonomy within marriage. Particular emphasis is

placed on the evidentiary standards applied in cases of sexual violence and their implications for marital rape prosecutions. By analyzing the tension between the sanctity of marriage and the principles of bodily autonomy and substantive equality, the study seeks to highlight the urgent need for doctrinal clarity and evidentiary reform in the Indian criminal justice system.

### Literature Review:

Academic engagement with marital rape has expanded significantly across jurisdictions, drawing from criminal law theory, feminist jurisprudence, and international human rights discourse. Globally, legal systems have increasingly rejected the notion that marriage implies perpetual sexual consent, recognizing marital rape as a violation of fundamental human rights. Feminist scholars have long argued that rape law has been shaped by patriarchal assumptions that normalize sexual access within intimate relationships, thereby obscuring coercion in the private sphere. Scholars such as Susan Estrich and Catharine MacKinnon critique the structural foundations of rape law, emphasizing that the historical exclusion of marital rape reflects broader gender hierarchies embedded in legal systems. Their work highlights how the privatization of marriage has functioned as a barrier to state intervention, often insulating domestic sexual violence from criminal accountability. Feminist legal theory thus situates marital rape not as an anomaly, but as a consequence of unequal power relations within marriage.

Comparative legal scholarship demonstrates that several jurisdictions, including the United Kingdom, Canada, and South Africa, have dismantled marital rape immunity by explicitly rejecting the doctrine of implied or irrevocable consent. Studies examining these reforms note that criminalization was accompanied by a reconceptualization of consent as a continuous and revocable process. Importantly, empirical analyses indicate that recognizing marital rape as a crime has not eroded the institution of marriage, but has reinforced principles of mutual respect and equality within intimate relationships.

Several doctrinal studies focus on constitutional jurisprudence to challenge the validity of the marital rape exception. Scholars draw upon landmark judgments such as *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India* and *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* to argue that sexual autonomy and privacy are non-negotiable constitutional guarantees. Literature in this vein emphasizes the principle of constitutional morality, asserting that laws rooted in social morality must yield to constitutional values of dignity and equality.

Another significant body of literature examines the evidentiary dimensions of sexual offences. Studies on rape prosecutions in India reveal persistent challenges related to corroboration, credibility assessment, and

victim testimony. Scholars such as Mrinal Satish and Aparna Chandra analyze how evidentiary practices often reflect gender stereotypes, resulting in secondary victimization of complainants. However, most of this scholarship addresses rape in general, with limited focused analysis on the unique evidentiary barriers posed by marital rape. The private nature of marital relationships, absence of eyewitnesses, and reluctance of courts to interfere in marital disputes exacerbate these challenges.

Despite the growing body of scholarship, a notable gap remains in the integration of legal analysis with evidentiary critique in the Indian context. Existing literature tends to address either the constitutional validity of the marital exception or the general challenges of rape prosecutions. There is limited focused examination of how evidentiary laws and judicial attitudes specifically interact with the marital rape exception to deny effective remedies. This paper seeks to bridge this gap by providing a comprehensive legal and evidentiary analysis of marital rape in India, thereby contributing to the ongoing academic and policy discourse on sexual autonomy, consent, and criminal justice reform.

### **Legal Framework and Statutory Analysis:**

The legal framework governing marital rape in India is primarily derived from criminal law statutes that define and regulate the offence of rape. Under the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (IPC) rape was defined under section 375 (now section 63 in *Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023*), which expressly excluded non-consensual sexual intercourse by a husband with his wife from the ambit of the offence, provided the wife was not below a specified age. This exception, commonly referred to as the marital rape exemption, was based on the presumption that marriage implies permanent and irrevocable consent to sexual relation.

With the placement of the IPC by the *Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023* (BNS), the definition of rape has been re-enacted under Section 63. While the new legislation seeks to modernize criminal law and strengthen protections against sexual violence, the marital rape exception has been substantially retained. The continuance of this exemption reflects legislative adherence to traditional notions of marriage, despite significant developments in constitutional jurisprudence emphasizing dignity, equality, and bodily autonomy.

### **Concept of Consent under Criminal Law-**

Consent constitutes the foundational element of the offence of rape. The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 introduced a progressive explanation to section 375 IPC, clarifying that consent must be an unequivocal voluntary agreement communicated through words, gestures, or conduct. This reform recognized that consent is neither implied nor irrevocable and can be withdrawn at any stage.

However, the marital rape exception undermines this statutory understanding by presuming consent solely on the basis of marital status.

The inconsistency is evident when the same definition of consent applies universally except within marriage. This selective suspension of consent results in differential legal treatment between married and unmarried women, thereby weakening the principle of equality before law and diluting the protection intended by rape laws.

### **Age-Based Exception and Judicial Intervention-**

Judicial intervention has partially modified the statutory framework governing marital rape. In *Independent Thought v Union of India* (2017), the Supreme Court read down the marital rape exception to the extent that sexual intercourse with a wife below the age of eighteen would constitute rape. The court emphasized that marriage cannot legitimize sexual violence against minor girls and that bodily integrity and dignity are non-negotiable constitutional values.

### **Alternative Statutory Remedies and Their Limitations-**

In the absence of criminalization, married women subjected to sexual violence are compelled to seek relief under alternative legal provisions. The protection of women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA) recognizes sexual abuse within domestic relationships and provides civil remedies such as protection orders, residence rights, and monetary relief. However, the act does not criminalize marital rape, nor does it provide punitive sanctions comparable to those available under rape provisions.

Similarly, provisions relating to cruelty under Section 498A IPC (now Section 85 of the BNS) may be invoked in cases involving sexual abuse. These provisions, however, are designed to address mental and physical cruelty and are ill-equipped to capture the gravity and specificity of non-consensual sexual acts within marriage. The reliance on indirect remedies reinforces the perception that sexual violence within marriage is a lesser offence.

### **Constitutional Implications of the Statutory Framework-**

The statutory exclusion of marital rape raises serious constitutional concerns under Article 14, 15 and 21 of the Indian Constitution. The classification between married and unmarried women lacks a rational nexus with the object of rape law, which is to protect bodily integrity and sexual autonomy. Moreover, the exemption disproportionately impacts women, thereby reinforcing gender-based discrimination.

Despite repeated constitutional challenges, legislative reform has remained elusive. Parliamentary debates and committee discussions often cite concerns regarding misuse of law and disruption of marital

harmony. However, such apprehensions lack empirical justification and cannot override constitutional guarantees of dignity and equality.

### **Critical Assessment-**

The legal framework governing marital rape in India reflects a fragmented and contradictory approach. On one hand, statutory and judicial developments have progressively recognized consent, autonomy, and dignity as central to criminal jurisprudence. On the other hand, these principles are selectively suspended within marriage through the retention of marital immunity. This inconsistency not only undermines the coherence of criminal law but also perpetuates systemic gender inequality under the guise of protecting marital sanctity.

A comprehensive statutory reform aligned with constitutional morality is essential to ensure that marriage does not operate as a legal shield for sexual violence. Without such reform, the promise of equality and justice enshrined in the constitution remains incomplete.

### **Judicial Approach and Case Law Analysis:**

The judiciary has played a crucial role in shaping the discourse on marital rape in India, particularly in the absence of explicit legislative reform. While courts have not yet declared marital rape unconstitutional for adult women, judicial pronouncements have progressively expanded the understanding of consent, bodily autonomy, and gender equality within marriage.

Indian courts have increasingly emphasized that marriage does not extinguish a woman's fundamental rights. However, this constitutional recognition has not been translated into full criminal liability for non-consensual sexual acts within marriage, resulting in a cautious and fragmented judicial approach.

### **Early Judicial Silence and Deference to Legislature-**

Historically, Indian courts refrained from directly engaging with the issue of marital rape, treating it as a matter falling within the exclusive domain of legislative policy. The marital rape exemption under section 375 IPC was largely accepted as a reflection of social and cultural realities surrounding marriage. Courts often justified this exemption by citing the need to preserve marital harmony and prevent misuse of criminal law.

This period of judicial restraint reinforced the notion that sexual violence within marriage was a private matter rather than a public wrong warranting criminal sanction.

### **Independent Thought v. Union of India: A Partial Breakthrough -**

A significant judicial intervention occurred in *Independent Thought v. Union of India* (2017), where

the Supreme Court examined the constitutional validity of the marital rape exception insofar as it applied to minor wives. The court held that sexual intercourse with a wife below the age of eighteen constitutes rape, irrespective of marital status. It read down the exception to align it with child protection laws and constitutional guarantees under Article 21.

The judgment marked an important shift by affirming that marriage cannot be used as a license to violate bodily integrity. The court explicitly recognized that consent is central to sexual relations and that minors are incapable of giving informed consent. However, the ruling stopped short of addressing the exemption in relation to adult married women, thereby limiting its transformative potential.

### **Recognition of Bodily Autonomy and Sexual Privacy-**

In *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India* (2017), the Supreme Court recognized the right to privacy as a fundamental right under Article 21 of the Constitution. The judgment emphasized decisional autonomy, bodily integrity, and personal liberty, all of which are directly relevant to the issue of marital rape.

Although the case did not concern sexual violence, its principles have been repeatedly invoked in subsequent challenges to the marital rape exemption. The recognition that individuals retain autonomy over their bodies, irrespective of social institutions such as marriage, has strengthened constitutional arguments against marital immunity.

### **High Court Perspective on Marital Sexual Violence-**

Several High Courts have adopted a more progressive stance while interpreting allied statutes. In *R v. State of Kerala* (2021), the Kerala High Court acknowledged that marital rape, though not criminalized, constitutes a form of physical and mental cruelty and can be a valid ground for divorce. The court observed that forcing a spouse to engage in non-consensual sexual acts violates her dignity and personal autonomy.

Similarly, the High Court, while hearing petitions challenging the constitutionality of the marital rape exemption, recognized that the issue raises substantial questions concerning equality and fundamental rights. Although a split verdict was delivered in 2022, both opinions acknowledged the seriousness of the issue and the need for reconsideration of the marital rape exemption.

### **Judicial Reliance on Alternative Legal Frameworks-**

In the absence of criminalization, courts have often relied on civil and constitutional remedies to address marital sexual violence. Relief under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 has been judicially expanded to include sexual abuse within

marriage. However, courts have consistently acknowledged that such remedies are inadequate substitutes for criminal prosecution .

This judicial work-around reflects both sensitivity to victims' experiences and institutional constraints imposed by statutory law.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions:**

#### **Conclusion-**

The analysis of marital rape in India reveals a persistent tension between constitutional values and statutory conservatism. Despite significant judicial and legislative developments aimed at strengthening women's rights and recognizing bodily autonomy, non-consensual sexual intercourse within marriage continues to enjoy statutory immunity under criminal law. This exemption rests on archaic assumptions regarding marriage, consent, and gender roles, which are increasingly incompatible with contemporary constitutional jurisprudence .

The legal framework, when read in conjunction with judicial pronouncements, demonstrates a fragmented approach. On the one hand, courts have consistently affirmed that dignity, equality, and personal liberty are intrinsic to the right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution. On the other hand, the continued retention of the marital rape exemption creates a legal vacuum, leaving married women without effective criminal law remedies against sexual violence. This differential treatment undermines the principle of equality before law and perpetuates gender-based discrimination .

Judicial interventions such as *Independent Thought v. Union of India* have laid a strong constitutional foundation for challenging marital immunity. However, the judiciary's reluctance to extend criminal liability to cases involving adult married women reflects institutional deference to legislative authority. As a result, the protection afforded to women against sexual violence remains contingent upon marital status, rather than grounded in the universal principle of consent.

The reliance on alternative remedies under civil and domestic violence laws further highlights the inadequacy of the existing legal response. While such frameworks provide temporary relief and recognition of harm, they fail to capture the gravity of rape as a serious criminal offence. Consequently, marital rape remains under-recognized, under-reported, and structurally normalized within the legal system.

#### **Suggestions-**

##### **1.Legislative Reform and Criminalization**

The most urgent requirement is the explicit criminalization of marital rape through statutory amendment. The marital rape exception should be removed to ensure that the definition of rape is

uniformly applicable, irrespective of marital status. Such reform must be grounded in the principle that consent is central to sexual relations and cannot be presumed by marriage alone .

##### **2.Harmonization with Constitutional Morality**

Criminal law must be aligned with constitutional morality, particularly the guarantees of equality, dignity, and bodily autonomy. Any classification based on marital status that deprives women of legal protection lacks a rational nexus with the object of rape law and should be reconsidered in light of evolving constitutional standards .

##### **3.Evidentiary and Procedural Safeguards**

Concerns regarding misuse of law can be addressed through robust procedural safeguards rather than blanket immunity. Sensitized investigation mechanisms, gender-sensitive trial procedures, and judicial guidelines on evidence assessment can ensure fairness while safeguarding victims' rights .

##### **4.Strengthening Institutional Support Mechanisms**

Legal reform must be accompanied by strengthened institutional support, including access to medical care, counseling services, legal aid, and rehabilitation programs for survivors of marital sexual violence. These measures are essential to ensure that criminalization translates into meaningful access to justice.

##### **5.Judicial Clarification and Progressive Interpretation**

Until comprehensive legislative reform is achieved, courts should continue to adopt a purposive and rights-based interpretation of existing laws. Judicial recognition of marital rape as a violation of fundamental rights can contribute significantly to dismantling entrenched patriarchal norms within legal discourse .

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