

# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LEGAL RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS



Open Access, Refereed Journal Multi Disciplinary  
Peer Reviewed

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ISSN

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# **THE EVOLUTION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF CONSENT IN INDIA'S RAPE LAWS: ANALYSING THE IMPACT OF THE BHARTIYA NYAYA SANHITA, 2023**

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## **Abstract**

This research paper examines the pivotal role of consent in India's rape laws, tracing their evolution from the Indian Penal Code (IPC) of 1860 to the enactment of the Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) in 2023. It explores historical legal frameworks, significant amendments, judicial interpretations, and ongoing challenges, with a particular focus on the implications of the BNS 2023. Despite progressive reforms, issues such as the marital rape exception and societal stigma persist, necessitating continuous legal and societal efforts to uphold individual autonomy and dignity.

**KEYWORDS:** Legal Reforms on Consent, Marital Rape Exception, Consent in Rape Law, Rape Shield Laws.

## **Introduction**

The concept of consent has been a cornerstone in the legal discourse surrounding sexual offenses in India. Historically, the Indian Penal Code (IPC) of 1860 provided a limited definition of rape, primarily focusing on specific acts of non-consensual penile-vaginal intercourse. This narrow scope often excluded various forms of sexual violence, thereby inadequately addressing the spectrum of non-consensual sexual activities.

In response to societal demands for more comprehensive legal protections, the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 2013 was enacted. This amendment significantly broadened the definition of rape to include multiple forms of non-consensual sexual acts, such as oral and anal

penetration, and the insertion of objects into bodily orifices. It also provided a clear and explicit definition of consent, emphasizing that consent must be an unequivocal and voluntary agreement, and that the absence of physical resistance does not imply consent.

Despite these advancements, certain contentious issues persisted, notably the marital rape exception, which exempts non-consensual sexual acts within marriage from being classified as rape. This exception has been a focal point of criticism, as it undermines the principles of individual autonomy and bodily integrity.

The enactment of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) in 2023 marked a significant overhaul of India's criminal laws, aiming to modernize and simplify legal provisions. The BNS retained the expanded definition of rape and the explicit articulation of consent introduced in the 2013 amendment. However, it also retained the marital rape exception, thereby continuing the legal and societal debate surrounding this provision.

### **Evolution of Rape Laws in India**

India's legal system has undergone significant transformations concerning sexual offenses. The Indian Penal Code (IPC) of 1860 initially defined rape with limited scope, primarily focusing on penile-vaginal intercourse and specific conditions under which such acts were considered non-consensual. This definition excluded certain acts and did not comprehensively address various forms of non-consensual sexual activities.

**The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 2013 marked a watershed moment by expanding the definition of rape to include:**

Penetration of the penis into the vagina, mouth, urethra, or anus of a woman, or making her do so with him or another person.

Insertion of any object or any part of the body, not being the penis, into the vagina, urethra, or anus of a woman, or making her do so with him or another person.

Manipulation of any part of the woman's body to cause penetration into the vagina, urethra, anus, or any part of her body.

Application of the mouth to the vagina, anus, urethra of a woman, or making her do so with him or another person.

**These acts are considered rape when performed under any of the following seven descriptions:**

1. Against her will.
2. Without her consent.
3. With her consent, when her consent has been obtained by putting her or any person in whom she is interested, in fear of death or of hurt.
4. With her consent, when the man knows that he is not her husband and that her consent is given because she believes that he is another man to whom she is or believes herself to be lawfully married.
5. With her consent, when, at the time of giving such consent, by reason of unsoundness of mind or intoxication or the administration by him personally or through another of any stupefying or unwholesome substance, she is unable to understand the nature and consequences of that to which she gives consent.
6. With or without her consent, when she is under eighteen years of age.
7. When she is unable to communicate consent.

This comprehensive definition underscored the importance of consent in sexual activities and delineated specific scenarios where consent is considered invalid or vitiated.

**Legal Definition of Consent:**

**The 2013 amendment introduced a clear explanation of consent within Section 375:**

Consent means an unequivocal voluntary agreement when the woman by words, gestures, or any form of verbal or non-verbal communication, communicates willingness to participate in the specific sexual act.

Provided that a woman who does not physically resist to the act of penetration shall not by the reason only of that fact, be regarded as consenting to the sexual activity.

This clarification emphasized that consent must be explicit and voluntary, and the absence of physical resistance does not imply consent.

### **Presumption of Consent**

The Indian Evidence Act, as amended, includes provisions that address the presumption of consent. Specifically, if sexual intercourse by the accused is proved and the victim states in court that she did not consent, the court shall presume that she did not consent. This shifts the burden onto the accused to prove that the act was consensual, thereby strengthening the victim's

position in such cases.

### **Marital Rape Exception**

Despite the comprehensive definition of rape, the IPC retained an exception concerning marital rape. Sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under fifteen years of age, was not considered rape. This exception has been a subject of extensive debate and criticism, with advocates arguing for its removal to protect the bodily autonomy and rights of married women.

#### **Legal Reforms and Judicial Interpretations:**

##### **The 2013 amendment brought significant reforms, including:**

Introduction of stringent punishments for offenses such as causing death or resulting in a persistent vegetative state of the victim, with penalties ranging from rigorous imprisonment of at least twenty years to life imprisonment or death.

Establishment of fast-track courts to expedite the trial of rape cases, aiming to provide swift justice and deter potential offenders.

Mandatory medical treatment for victims, requiring all hospitals, public or private, to provide free first aid and medical treatment to victims of rape.

**Judicial interpretations** have further reinforced the importance of consent. For instance, the Supreme Court of India has held that the absence of physical resistance does not imply consent, and the victim's testimony should be given significant weight. Additionally, the controversial "two-finger test" has been deemed unconstitutional, recognizing it as a violation of the victim's privacy and dignity.

#### **Tukaram v. State of Maharashtra (1979) 2 SCC 143 (Mathura Rape Case)**

In *Tukaram v. State of Maharashtra*, the Supreme Court acquitted two policemen accused of raping a young tribal girl named Mathura inside a police station. The Court's reasoning was based on the absence of physical resistance from the victim, implying consent. This judgment led to widespread public outcry and significant legal reforms, including the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1983, which clarified that the absence of physical resistance does not equate to consent.

### **Prashant v. State of NCT of Delhi, (2024) INSC 879**

In this recent case, the Supreme Court quashed an FIR filed under Sections 376(2)(n) and 506 of the Indian Penal Code, emphasizing that a consensual relationship between adults cannot be construed as rape merely because it did not culminate in marriage. The Court held that labeling such consensual acts as criminal would amount to an abuse of the legal process

### **Conviction in the Rape and Murder of Danielle McLaughlin**

**State of Goa v. Vikat Bhagat, Sessions Case No. 27/2017 (Goa).**

An Indian court sentenced Vikat Bhagat to life imprisonment for the rape and murder of Danielle McLaughlin, a 28-year-old Irish backpacker, in Goa in 2017. This conviction underscores the judiciary's stance on sexual violence and the critical role of consent in such cases.

### **Conviction in the Rape and Murder of a Trainee Doctor in Kolkata**

**State of West Bengal v. Sanjay Roy, Sessions Case No. 56/2024 (Calcutta).**

In August 2024, a police volunteer was sentenced to life imprisonment for the rape and murder of a 31-year-old trainee doctor in Kolkata. This case highlighted ongoing concerns regarding the safety of female professionals in India and reinforced the judiciary's commitment to addressing sexual violence.

**Lillu @ Rajesh v. State of Haryana (2013)**

In this landmark judgment, the Supreme Court declared the "two-finger test" used to determine a rape victim's sexual history as unconstitutional. The Court held that past sexual conduct of the victim is irrelevant to the issue of consent and that such tests violate the victim's right to privacy and dignity.

**Mahmood Farooqui v. State (Govt. of NCT of Delhi) (2017)**

In this controversial case, the Delhi High Court acquitted the accused, interpreting that a "feeble no" may indicate consent. The judgment sparked debates on the interpretation of consent, highlighting the need for clearer legal definitions and understanding of affirmative consent.

**State of Punjab v. Gurmit Singh (1996)**

In this case, the Supreme Court emphasized the importance of treating the testimony of a rape

victim with utmost sensitivity and respect. The Court held that the victim's evidence should not be disbelieved merely because she did not raise a hue and cry or did not have physical injuries. This judgment reinforced that the absence of physical resistance does not imply consent.

### **State of Uttar Pradesh v. Chhotey Lal (2011)**

The Supreme Court in this case reiterated that consent involves an active and voluntary agreement, and mere passive submission or absence of resistance cannot be construed as consent. The Court underscored that the societal stigma attached to rape victims necessitates a sensitive and supportive approach from the judiciary.

### **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) 2023 and Consent:**

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) 2023 represents a significant overhaul of India's criminal laws, aiming to modernize and simplify legal provisions. Regarding rape laws and consent, the BNS 2023 retains several key aspects of the previous legal framework:

**Definition of Rape:** The BNS 2023 continues to define rape in line with the expanded definition introduced in the 2013 amendment, encompassing various forms of non-consensual sexual acts.

**Consent:** The BNS 2023 maintains the explicit definition of consent as an unequivocal voluntary agreement, emphasizing that the absence of physical resistance does not imply consent.

**Marital Rape Exception:** The BNS 2023 retains the marital rape exception, wherein sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under fifteen years of age, is not considered rape. This retention has been a subject of criticism, with advocates calling for its removal to protect the bodily autonomy and rights of married women.

## **Rape Shield Laws**

To protect the privacy and dignity of survivors, India has implemented rape shield laws that limit the ability to introduce evidence about the past sexual activity of a complainant in a sexual assault trial. Sections 151 and 152 of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, forbid indecent, scandalous, insulting, offensive, and irrelevant questions during cross-examinations, even if they have some significance, to prevent attempts to harass and intimidate witnesses. The Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2013, further strengthened these provisions by introducing Section 53A to the Indian Evidence Act, stating that in prosecutions for sexual offences, evidence of the victim's character or previous sexual experience with any person would not be

relevant for deciding the issue of consent or its quality. Additionally, Section 146 of the Indian Evidence Act was amended to include clear instructions not to refer to the previous sexual history of the victim for determining the question of consent during cross-examinations. Anonymity to survivors and victims of sexual crime in India was provided under Section 228A of the Indian Penal Code and is now found in Section 72(1) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. Anyone found breaching the anonymity of the survivor/victim can be imprisoned for up to two years and shall also be liable to a fine. This protection was upheld by the Supreme Court of India in various judicial pronouncements, the last in **Nipun Saxena v Union of India (2018)**.

### **Challenges and Criticisms:**

**Despite legislative advancements, challenges persist in effectively addressing consent in rape laws:**

**Marital Rape Exception:** The retention of the marital rape exception in the BNS 2023 continues to be a contentious issue, with critics arguing that it undermines women's autonomy and perpetuates patriarchal norms.

**Implementation and Enforcement:** Ensuring that law enforcement agencies and the judiciary are sensitized to the nuances of consent remains a challenge. Instances of victim-blaming and inadequate investigations highlight the need for systemic reforms.

**Social Stigma:** Survivors of sexual assault often face societal stigma, discouraging them from reporting offenses and seeking justice. This societal pressure can impede the effective implementation of consent-based laws.

### **Comparative Analysis:**

**Examining consent in rape laws across different jurisdictions provides valuable insights:**

**United States:** The legal definition of consent varies by state, with some adopting affirmative consent standards, requiring clear, voluntary, and mutual agreement to engage in sexual activity.

**United Kingdom:** The Sexual Offences Act 2003 defines consent as an agreement by choice, with the freedom and capacity to make that choice, emphasizing the importance of autonomy.

**Australia:** Australian states have implemented affirmative consent laws, shifting the focus to ensuring that consent is actively given and maintained throughout sexual activity.

These comparative perspectives highlight the global trend towards recognizing and codifying explicit consent in sexual offenses.

**Conclusion:**

The role of consent in India's rape laws has evolved significantly, reflecting a growing recognition of individual autonomy and bodily integrity. The enactment of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023 signifies a continued commitment to addressing sexual offenses comprehensively. However, challenges such as the marital rape exception, societal stigma, and effective enforcement persist. Ongoing legal reforms, coupled with societal education and systemic changes, are crucial to ensuring that consent remains central to India's approach to sexual offenses, thereby upholding the rights and dignity of all individuals.

**Bibliography & References****Primary Legal Sources:**

- ✚ Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 – This legislation replaced the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and retains key provisions on consent, rape definitions, and marital rape exceptions.
- ✚ Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 – Expanded the legal definition of rape to include non-penile-vaginal acts and reinforced the importance of unequivocal consent.
- ✚ Indian Penal Code, 1860 – The foundation of India's rape laws, with limited provisions on consent.
- ✚ Indian Evidence Act, 1872 – Includes provisions on the presumption of consent and protections against victim-blaming.

**Landmark Cases Referenced:**

- ✚ *Tukaram v. State of Maharashtra* (1979) (Mathura Rape Case) – Supreme Court acquitted policemen based on lack of physical resistance, leading to major reforms.
- ✚ *Lillu @ Rajesh v. State of Haryana* (2013) – Declared the “two-finger test” unconstitutional.
- ✚ *Mahmood Farooqui v. State* (2017) – Controversially suggested that a “feeble no” could indicate consent.
- ✚ *State of Punjab v. Gurmit Singh* (1996) – Strengthened the credibility of a rape victim’s testimony.
- ✚ *State of Uttar Pradesh v. Chhotey Lal* (2011) – Clarified that passive submission does not equal consent.
- ✚ *Prashant v. State of NCT of Delhi* (2024) – Reaffirmed that consensual adult relationships do not constitute rape.

- ✚ State of Goa v. Vikat Bhagat (2017) – Conviction in the rape and murder of an Irish backpacker.
- ✚ State of West Bengal v. Sanjay Roy (2024) – Police volunteer sentenced for rape and murder of a trainee doctor.
- ✚ Nipun Saxena v. Union of India (2018) – Upheld survivor anonymity protections.

**Comparative International References:**

- ✚ Sexual Offences Act, 2003 (United Kingdom) – Defines consent as an agreement made with free choice and capacity.
- ✚ Affirmative Consent Laws (United States & Australia) – Shift toward requiring clear, voluntary, and ongoing consent.

