



INDIAN JOURNAL OF
LEGAL REVIEW

VOLUME 6 AND ISSUE 6 OF 2026

INSTITUTE OF LEGAL EDUCATION



INDIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL REVIEW

APIS – 3920 – 0001 | ISSN – 2583-2344

(Open Access Journal)

Journal's Home Page – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/>

Journal's Editorial Page – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/editorial-board/>

Volume 6 and Issue 6 of 2026 (Access Full Issue on – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/volume-6-and-issue-6-of-2026/>)

Publisher

Prasanna S,

Chairman of Institute of Legal Education

No. 08, Arul Nagar, Seera Thoppu,

Maudhanda Kurichi, Srirangam,

Tiruchirappalli – 620102

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“CRIMINALIZATION OF MARITAL RAPE: A CONSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE IN INDIA” LEGAL SOLUTIONS AND REFORMS

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BEST CITATION – ASIRWAD VIKAS & R THENDRALARASI, “CRIMINALIZATION OF MARITAL RAPE: A CONSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE IN INDIA” LEGAL SOLUTIONS AND REFORMS, *INDIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL REVIEW (IJLR)*, 6 (6) OF 2026, PG. 607-610, APIS – 3920 – 0001 & ISSN – 2583-2344.

Recognition of the issue of marital rape has prompted legal scholars, courts, and policy bodies to consider various reforms. These reforms focus on strengthening constitutional protections, introducing clear statutory recognition, improving access to justice, and enhancing institutional mechanisms to protect victims, ensuring that the legal system effectively upholds dignity, equality, and personal liberty within marriage.

1.1 Alternative Mechanisms and Their Limitations in Addressing Marital Rape

Alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, including mediation, conciliation, and negotiation, have gained prominence in India as efficient methods for resolving disputes outside formal court proceedings. These mechanisms are designed to reduce the burden on courts and provide faster, cost-effective solutions. However, their applicability to issues such as marital rape is highly limited and must be carefully examined.

While ADR mechanisms are suitable for civil and commercial disputes, they are not appropriate for addressing serious criminal offences involving violation of bodily autonomy and consent. Marital rape involves fundamental rights and questions of dignity, equality, and personal liberty, which cannot be adequately addressed through compromise-based processes. Resolving such matters through mediation may undermine the seriousness of the offence and place undue pressure on victims to settle.

Legal frameworks promoting mediation and pre-litigation settlement aim to reduce unnecessary litigation and encourage amicable resolution. However, in cases involving marital rape, the focus must remain on accountability and justice rather than reconciliation. The use of ADR in such contexts risks reinforcing existing power imbalances within marriage, where victims may already face social, economic, and emotional constraints. Online dispute resolution has further expanded the reach of alternative mechanisms by providing digital platforms for resolving disputes. While this innovation improves accessibility and efficiency in many areas, it is not suitable for handling sensitive criminal matters that require detailed investigation and judicial scrutiny.

Community-based dispute resolution systems also play a role in resolving local disputes, particularly in rural areas. However, these informal mechanisms often lack safeguards to ensure protection of fundamental rights and may perpetuate discriminatory practices. In cases of marital rape, reliance on such forums

may result in denial of justice and continued victimisation.

A clear distinction must therefore be maintained between disputes that can be resolved through alternative mechanisms and offences that require formal legal intervention. Strengthening the criminal justice system, ensuring proper investigation, and providing victim support services are essential steps in addressing marital rape effectively. A rights-based approach must guide all reforms in this area.

1.2 Lok Adalats and Their Limited Role in Addressing Marital Rape

Lok Adalats represent an important mechanism within the Indian legal system for resolving disputes through conciliation and compromise. Established to provide speedy and cost-effective justice, they have been particularly successful in settling civil disputes, matrimonial issues, and certain compoundable criminal cases. However, their role in addressing serious offences such as marital rape is highly limited.

The primary objective of Lok Adalats is to promote amicable settlement between parties. While this approach is effective for disputes involving mutual agreement, it is not suitable for offences that involve violation of fundamental rights and bodily autonomy. Marital rape is a serious issue that requires strict legal scrutiny and accountability rather than compromise-based resolution. Legal frameworks supporting Lok Adalats aim to reduce the burden on courts and improve access to justice. However, extending such mechanisms to cases involving marital rape may undermine the seriousness of the offence and fail to provide adequate protection to victims. The informal and conciliatory nature of these forums may also expose victims to social pressure, discouraging them from pursuing justice.

Despite their success in reducing pendency in specific categories of cases, Lok Adalats cannot address the structural and legal gaps associated with marital rape. A clear distinction must be maintained between disputes suitable

for settlement and offences that demand criminal prosecution. Strengthening the formal legal system, ensuring victim protection, and introducing clear statutory recognition are essential steps in effectively addressing marital rape within the constitutional framework.

1.3 Fast Track Courts

Fast Track Courts have been established in India to ensure the speedy disposal of cases involving serious offences and vulnerable victims. These courts are designed to handle cases efficiently by reducing procedural delays and prioritising sensitive matters. In the context of marital rape, such specialised courts can play a crucial role in ensuring timely justice for victims.

The expansion of Fast Track Special Courts for offences against women and children reflects a growing recognition of the need for dedicated mechanisms to address gender-based violence. However, the absence of explicit criminalization of marital rape limits the scope of these courts in addressing such cases effectively. Without a clear statutory framework, cases involving non-consensual acts within marriage may not be treated with the same urgency or seriousness as other sexual offences.

Fast Track Courts have demonstrated the importance of specialised judicial infrastructure, including trained judges, dedicated prosecutors, and victim support services. These elements are essential for handling sensitive cases with care and ensuring that victims are not subjected to further trauma during legal proceedings. However, concerns regarding the quality of justice and consistency in implementation highlight the need for balanced reform. Speed must not come at the cost of fairness and thorough investigation.

Providing permanent institutional support, expanding the scope of Fast Track Courts, and including cases of marital rape within their jurisdiction would significantly strengthen the legal response to this issue and improve access to justice.

1.4 Role of Technology and Digital Justice in Addressing Marital Rape

The integration of technology into the judicial system has significantly improved access to justice and efficiency in legal processes. Digital initiatives have enabled better case management, transparency, and accessibility, which are particularly important in sensitive cases such as marital rape. Technology can play a vital role in ensuring that victims are able to seek justice without unnecessary delays or barriers.

The introduction of online filing systems, virtual hearings, and digital case tracking has made it easier for individuals to access legal remedies. For victims of marital rape, these developments can reduce the need for repeated physical appearances in court, thereby minimising trauma and social stigma. Confidential handling of cases through digital platforms can also enhance privacy and protection for victims.

Technological tools also support better monitoring of case progress and institutional accountability. Data-driven systems can help identify delays and ensure timely disposal of cases involving serious offences. This is particularly relevant in ensuring that cases of gender-based violence are prioritised within the judicial system.

However, the effectiveness of digital reforms depends on accessibility and proper implementation. Issues such as digital literacy, internet connectivity, and infrastructural limitations must be addressed to ensure inclusive access. A balanced approach that combines technological advancement with legal reform and institutional support is essential to strengthen the response to marital rape and ensure effective protection of constitutional rights.

1.5 Procedural Reforms

Procedural reforms play a significant role in improving the efficiency and fairness of the legal system. Measures such as limiting unnecessary adjournments, introducing structured timelines,

and strengthening case management have been designed to ensure timely justice. In the context of marital rape, such reforms are essential to prevent prolonged litigation and additional trauma for victims. The introduction of structured case management systems has improved the organisation of legal proceedings. These systems ensure that different stages of a case are completed within a reasonable time, reducing uncertainty and delay. However, without clear legal recognition of marital rape, procedural improvements alone cannot ensure effective justice for victims.

Recent reforms have also focused on establishing timelines for investigation and trial in criminal cases. While these measures enhance efficiency, their success depends on consistent implementation and adequate institutional support. A change in judicial approach is equally important. Courts must adopt a sensitive and proactive stance when dealing with cases involving marital relationships and consent. Combining procedural efficiency with substantive legal reform is necessary to ensure that victims of marital rape receive timely and meaningful justice.

1.6 Judicial Reforms and the Need for Sensitivity in Marital Rape Cases

Judicial reforms play an important role in strengthening the justice delivery system, particularly in cases involving sensitive issues such as marital rape. While debates around judicial appointments focus on efficiency and transparency, equal attention must be given to the capacity of the judiciary to address evolving social and constitutional concerns. The absence of explicit legal recognition of marital rape places a greater responsibility on judges to interpret existing laws in light of constitutional principles. A progressive and sensitive judicial approach is essential to ensure that issues of consent, dignity, and personal autonomy within marriage are adequately addressed.

Improving the quality of judicial training can contribute significantly to this objective. Training

programmes that focus on gender sensitivity, human rights, and evolving legal standards can help judges better understand the complexities of marital rape cases. Institutional reforms must therefore go beyond appointment processes and include capacity building, awareness, and accountability. A well-equipped and responsive judiciary is essential for ensuring that constitutional protections are effectively applied in practice.

1.7 Analysis of Effectiveness

The issue of marital rape in India remains one of the most debated and complex areas of criminal law, raising significant constitutional and human rights concerns. Despite growing awareness and advocacy, marital rape is still not fully criminalized under Indian law, except in limited circumstances such as when the wife is below a certain age. This legal exception has been widely criticized for violating the fundamental rights guaranteed under the Constitution of India, particularly the right to equality, dignity, and personal liberty.

The persistence of this exception reflects deep-rooted societal norms and traditional views regarding marriage, which often prioritize marital privacy over individual autonomy. However, such justifications are increasingly being challenged in light of evolving constitutional jurisprudence and international human rights standards. Courts have begun to recognize the importance of consent within marriage, yet a clear legislative framework is still lacking.

Efforts to address this issue have included judicial interpretations, public interest litigations, and recommendations by various law commissions. However, progress has been slow and inconsistent. A comprehensive legal reform is necessary to align domestic laws with constitutional values. Criminalizing marital rape would not only strengthen legal protections for women but also affirm the principle that marriage does not imply irrevocable consent.

1.8 Conclusion

Addressing the issue of marital rape in India requires a comprehensive and sustained legal approach grounded in constitutional principles. No single reform can adequately resolve the complexities involved in recognizing and criminalizing non-consensual acts within marriage. A combination of legislative action, judicial interpretation, and societal awareness is essential to ensure meaningful change. Strengthening legal provisions, clarifying the definition of consent, and aligning laws with fundamental rights such as equality, dignity, and personal liberty are critical steps. Additionally, the role of the judiciary, policymakers, and civil society is vital in shaping a progressive framework that acknowledges individual autonomy and ensures justice for victims.



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ISSN 2583-2344



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