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WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal provided dedicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

# **UNVEILING THE VEIL OF SILENCE: A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY ON MARITAL RAPE IN INDIA**

**AUTHORED BY - NIKHIL BAJPAI<sup>1</sup> & SAI ROHAN RAMARAJU<sup>2</sup>**

## **ABSTRACT**

Intimate partner violence that is marital rape, which is a heinous act that violates the fundamental human rights and dignity, still pervades the world both in India as well as other countries. This research work moves into the quest of the complex character of marital rape in the legal context of India, which is through examining the historical backdrop, societal ramifications, and the legal aspects related to this phenomenon. Even though there has been great development in the country's laws regarding sexual assault, the loophole that allows a person to commit the crime on their wife under the guise of marital privilege is still in the law and this goes against justice and women's control over their own bodies.

The patriarchal system is the historical backdrop on which the subject matter of marital rape in India is based and it has been in existence since the olden times and it has always been a weapon for the male dominance in marriages. It is a long-standing practice that the wife's consent is considered as presumed once married. So, women in the society are considered as second and lack agency in the marriage. Having this background provides us with the serious reforms that are aimed at pulling down the pre-existing gender inequalities and gives women the shelter during their relationships with men.

Legal framework concerning marital rape in India is mainly based on Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code which criminalizes rape but contains the exception of intercourse by a guy with his wife if she is older than 18 years. The marriage exception is essentially discriminatory because it denies married women the same protection against sexual violence as unmarried women, thereby clearly demonstrating a gaping loophole in the Indian legal system. The Apex court i.e., Supreme Court cases

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like *Independent Thought v. Union of India* (2017), have highlighted the constitutional issues of gender inequality concerning the non-recognition of rape in marriage, thus calling for an immediate parliamentary action to do away with this injustice.

The cultural repercussions of marital rape go beyond the legal aspect to the societal norms and gender power. Women who are subjected to sexual assault by their husbands usually suffer from stigmatization, lack of support and the difficulty of getting help because the traditional values that put family honor above the rights of individuals are still in the center of the society. The debate on criminalizing marital rape in the lawmaking realm shows the clash between the progressive voices of a women's right activists and the conservative groups who hold the traditional values in their hands and keep on fighting the patriarchy and the resistance to change.

Lastly, this study proves the need of acknowledging to see marital rape as a serious offence. that not only violates women's rights but also their dignity. By way of the process of repelling the open legal loopholes, championing gender equality between spouses, and raising the societal awareness, India can take a step closer to achieving justice and security of everyone within the context of relationships. Solving the issue of marital rape requires the integrated approach of legal reforms, public advocacy, and policy interventions that will result in eliminating gender-centric violence and restore the principle of equality and justice for everyone.

**KEYWORDS:** Indian Penal Code, Marital Rape, Human Rights, Law Reform, Gender equality, Gender-based violence, Intimate partner violence

## **INTRODUCTION**

Marital rape, a vicious and degrading form of domestic violence which travels against the principles of rights and dignity of individuals, remains a rampant and hidden problem in many countries including India, unsettling gender equality and personal rights. In the context of India, which is a country having a diverse cultural tapestry and a complex legal system, the occurrence of marital rape is particularly timely due to historical, social and legal circumstances that are entwined with each other to further oppression of women and to deny women the freedom to decide over their bodies



within the framework of getting married.<sup>3</sup>

Marital rape which is a horrendous form of intimate partner violence that violates a person's fundamental rights and dignity is a widespread and It is a historical fact that in India, marital rape has been deeply entrenched in patriarchal customs and social structures that have held men in a position of power and control over their wives for a long time. <sup>4</sup>The age-old beliefs and cultural practices have been relied upon to the extent that even a woman's consent is assumed after her marriage, to that effect her agency is significantly undermined and she is reduced to a subordinate position where her autonomy and bodily integrity are often neglected. Such a historical framework emphasizes the imperative of the legal reforms that challenge and undo the deep-rooted gender inequities in marriage, making sure that the women are granted the same rights and protections also within matrimony as outside of it.

The Indian legal system that regulates marital rape is mainly defined by section 375 of the Indian Penal Code which criminalizes rape. <sup>5</sup>But, it has a contentious exception in which a man can have sexual intercourse with his wife if she is not under the age of 18, without violating any law. <sup>6</sup>This legal loophole is nothing but a denial of equal opportunity for the married women in a court of law as the unmarried women which is a sheer injustice and creates the disparity in the Indian legal system that perpetuates the harms.

The societal repercussions of marital rape are not limited to the lawful aspects, but also involve cultural beliefs, social norms, and gender dynamics that make and influence people's experiences of violence and abuse within marriage. The women who suffer marital rape usually have to face with stigma, shame and social isolation which are the additional traumas besides the other problems they need to deal with. The legislative debates on criminalizing marital rape merely reflect the societal clash between the progressive voices advocating for the women's rights and the traditionalist groups defending the status quo, that reveals the deep-rooted patriarchy and resistance to change that characterize the Indian society

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<sup>3</sup> Marital Rape: The Indian and Global perspective By Manish Dalal

<sup>4</sup> The Criminalization of Marital Rape in India By Ms. Anushka

<sup>5</sup> Indian Penal Code,1860.

<sup>6</sup> Section 375, Indian Penal Code,1860.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The historical background of marital rape in India goes way back to the centuries-old patriarchal norms and societal structures that have perpetuated gender inequalities and subjugation of women within marital relationships. Traditional beliefs and cultural practices have long upheld the sanctity of marriage while simultaneously eroding women's control over their own bodies. The belief that a woman's agreement is assumed in marriage has been a prevailing narrative, relegating women to subservient roles where their agency is often disregarded.<sup>7</sup>

One significant historical influence on the legitimate treatment of marital rape in India stems from the Doctrine of Coverture, a colonial-era convention that stripped women of their individual legal identity after marriage. This doctrine, rooted in the belief that a woman loses her legal rights and identity upon marriage, has had lasting implications on laws and societal attitudes towards women's rights.<sup>8</sup> The Doctrine of Coverture, although not explicitly recognized by the Constitution, has perpetuated the idea that married women lack autonomy and legal standing independent of their husbands.

Moreover, the historical development of the IPC during British colonial rule in 1860 introduced the concept of marital rape immunity, where sexual intercourse by a man with his wife were exempted from being considered as rape. Over time, amendments to the IPC have raised the age limit for this exemption, but the core principle of marital rape being excluded from criminalization has persisted<sup>9</sup>. This historical legacy has entrenched the concept of implicit consent within marriage, drawing from archaic notions like the Doctrine of Hale, which believed a husband could not be guilty of raping his wife.

The legacy of colonial-era laws and patriarchal traditions has shaped India's legal framework and societal perceptions regarding marital rape. These historical influences have contributed to the persistence of gender-centric violence within marriages and hindered efforts to provide adequate legal safeguard for the women against intimate partner violence within marriages.

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<sup>7</sup> [springer.com/article/10.1007/s10611-017-9705-3](https://www.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10611-017-9705-3)

<sup>8</sup> Marital rape in India By T.S.Sathyanarayana Rao|| [journals.sagepub.com](https://journals.sagepub.com)

<sup>9</sup> [www.thehindu.com/news/national/explained-marital-rape-in-india-the-history-of-the-legal-exception/article65404106.ece](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/explained-marital-rape-in-india-the-history-of-the-legal-exception/article65404106.ece)

## **LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN INDIA**

The legislative framework against the marital rape in India is a complex and contentious issue that requires a comprehensive examination of existing laws, societal attitudes, and international standards. The absence of specific legislation criminalizing marital rape within the IPC has important consequences for women's rights and protection against intimate partner violence. While some argue against criminalizing marital rape citing cultural, social, and familial contexts, proponents emphasize the fundamental principles of equality, dignity, and freedom which should reinforce the legislative frameworks. Criminalizing marital rape is seen as essential to upholding women's rights, ensuring justice, and combating gender-based discrimination.

The IPC addresses the rape under the Section of 375, which historically included an exception clause stating that the intercourse by a man with his wife, not below the age of 15 years of age, is not considered rape. However, a landmark judgment in 2017 reinterpreted this age limit to be 18 years, aligning it with international standards to protect the minors from sexual offences and exploitation. This reinterpretation marked a crucial step towards enhancing legislative safeguards for women against the non-consensual sexual intercourse within marriage. Section 375 of the IPC, which addresses rape, includes an exception clause that exempts intercourse by a man with his spouse from being recognized as rape, provided the wife is not under 18 years of age.<sup>10</sup>

The inflexible nature of the Indian legislation and judiciary's position on marital rape is deeply rooted in cultural expectations and traditional beliefs about the sanctity of marriage. The hesitation to criminalize marital rape stems from existing laws that fail to acknowledge and address this form of violence, leaving victims without adequate legal recourse<sup>11</sup>. The Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill of 2013, while progressive in many aspects, did not criminalize marital rape, highlighting the persistent gap in legal protection for women within marriage<sup>12</sup>.

The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005 provides legal remedies for crimes against women, such as marital rape. However, the absence of criminalization of marital rape in India reflects a broader societal reluctance to address this issue as a crime, perpetuating gender-based

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<sup>10</sup> [blog.ipleaders.in/legal-framework-marital-rape-india](http://blog.ipleaders.in/legal-framework-marital-rape-india)

<sup>11</sup> Judicial Approaches to the criminalization of marital rape By Vijay Singh

<sup>12</sup> The Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill of 2013

discrimination and undermining the principles of equality, dignity, and autonomy<sup>1</sup>. As India strives to uphold justice and human rights, there is a pressing need for legal reforms to protect women from all sorts of assault, including those perpetrated within the institution of marriage.

As India tries to safeguard values of justice and human rights; there is a growing realisation of the need to improve the legal system to protect women from all types of violence, even inside the institution of marriage. The ongoing discussions, legal interpretations, and societal debates regarding marital rape in India highlights the complexities and challenges in addressing this issue comprehensively within the existing legal landscape.

## **SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS OF MARITAL RAPE**

Marital rape in India carries profound societal implications that intersect with cultural norms, legal frameworks, and gender dynamics, shaping individuals' experiences of violence and abuse within marriage. The societal attitudes towards marital rape reflect deeply ingrained beliefs about marriage, consent, and gender roles, perpetuating a culture of silence and tolerance towards intimate partner violence.<sup>13</sup>

In Indian society, the concept of marriage is often steeped in traditional values that prioritize the sanctity of the institution over individual rights and autonomy. Women are expected to conform to societal expectations of being obedient wives and caretakers, often at the expense of their own agency and well-being. The prevalence of arranged marriages and the emphasis on familial honor further Women who experience marital rape confront additional hurdles, such as getting aid or speaking out against violence. can be met with stigma and social ostracism.

The legal status of marital rape in India, where it is not specifically criminalized except under specific circumstances, reflects a broader societal reluctance to address this form of violence as a crime.<sup>14</sup> The lack of legal protection for victims of marital rape maintains a culture of impunity for abusers and hampers attempts to advance gender equality and women's rights within marriage. Addressing the societal implications of Marital rape in India necessitates a diverse strategy, which includes raising

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<sup>13</sup> Societal issues relating to marital rape in India: an overview By Vinayak Raina

<sup>14</sup> Marital Rape and its impact on the mental health of women in India By Nandini AAgarwal

awareness, challenging cultural norms, and providing comprehensive support services for victims. By promoting open dialogue, debunking myths surrounding marital rape, and fostering a culture of zero tolerance for gender-based violence, India can begin to dismantle the barriers that perpetuate the cycle of abuse and empower victims to seek help and justice. Moreover, the societal implications of marital rape extend to the psychological well-being of victims, with studies indicating a significant impact on mental health consequences, such as depression and PTSD. The underreporting of marital rape cases due to fear, shame, and societal norms further exacerbates the psychological trauma experienced by survivors, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive support services and awareness campaigns to address the mental health repercussions of intimate partner violence.

The societal implications of marital rape in India underscore urgent need for legal changes, cultural shifts, and increased awareness to challenge the prevailing beliefs and customs that promote violence and discrimination within marital relationships. By recognizing and addressing the societal factors that played a role in the frequency of marital rape, India can take significant strides towards promoting gender equality, justice, and the safeguarding of women's rights. within intimate partnerships.

## **LEGISLATIVE DEBATES ON MARITAL RAPE IN INDIA**

The legislative debates surrounding marital rape in India have been marked by a complex interplay of legal interpretations, societal attitudes, and calls for reform to address gender-based violence within marriages. Various judicial pronouncements, legislative views, and public discourse have shaped the ongoing discussions on criminalizing marital rape, stressing the importance of comprehensive legislative reforms to defend women's rights and autonomy in intimate relationships.

### **Judicial Pronouncements and Legislative Views**

1. **Kerala High Court's Stand:** In August 2021, the Kerala HC emphasized that marital rape Although not penalised in India, it should be a genuine reason for divorce. The court's Division Bench highlighted the importance of treating spouses as equal partners and underscored that committing sexual acts against a wife's will constitutes marital rape.<sup>15</sup>
2. **Karnataka High court's Stand:** In March 2022, The Karnataka High Court noted that Women are treated equally with males under the Constitution, and marriage is viewed as an

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.barandbench.com/columns/just-law-controversy-around-marital-rape-part-i>

equal union whereas the IPC discriminates regarding such matters. The Court further stated that rape is rape, even if committed by the spouse.

3. **Chhattisgarh High court's stand:** In August 2021, Chhattisgarh HC emphasized that sexual acts between husband and wife cannot be termed rape.
4. **Recommendations of the Verma Committee:** The 2013 report of the Committee on amendments to Criminal Law, led by former Chief Justice of India JS Verma, recommended The repeal of the exclusion provision in the IPC pertained to marital rape. The committee highlighted the need for legal changes to address the prevalence of marital rape and emphasized the importance of societal awareness and police reforms to combat this form of violence.<sup>16</sup>

### **Public Discourse and Political Stances**

1. **Rahul Gandhi's Support for Criminalization:** Rahul Gandhi's recent comments supporting the criminalization of marital rape underscore the significance of consent in ensuring women's safety and autonomy within marriages. His advocacy for foregrounding consent reflects a growing awareness of the need to address marital rape as a serious violation of women's rights.<sup>17</sup>
2. **Government Stances:** The responses of successive governments, including the rejection of recommendations for criminalizing marital rape by the Congress government in 2013 and the cautious approach of the BJP government, highlight the complexities and sensitivities surrounding this issue. The government's emphasis on stakeholder consultations and comprehensive amendments underscores the need for a balanced and inclusive approach to legislative reforms.

The legislative debates on marital rape in India reflect a dynamic landscape of legal interpretations, societal values, and political considerations. The evolving discourse underscores the imperative of addressing marital rape as a major infringement of women's rights and autonomy, necessitating comprehensive legal reforms to ensure justice, equality, and dignity within intimate relationships.

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<sup>16</sup> [www.deccanherald.com/india/the-debate-over-marital-rape-what-courts-have-said-so-far](http://www.deccanherald.com/india/the-debate-over-marital-rape-what-courts-have-said-so-far)

<sup>17</sup> [www.opindia.com/2022/01/marital-rape-debate-explained-arguments-for-and-against/](http://www.opindia.com/2022/01/marital-rape-debate-explained-arguments-for-and-against/)

## **CASE STUDY:**

The case of Independent Thought v. Union of India<sup>18</sup> revolves around a significant legal battle that addressed the issue of marital rape and the protection of the rights of married girl children in India. Independent Thought, an organization specializing in child rights, filed PIL under Article 32 of the Constitution of India to challenge Exception 2 to Section 375 of the IPC. This exception stated that intercourse between a man and his wife, who is between 15 to 18 years old, is not considered rape.

The core issues put forward in this case included that whether the sexual activity between a man and his underage spouse constitutes rape, the reasonableness and discriminatory nature of Exception 2 to Section 375 of the IPC, and the creation of a new offense. The Supreme Court of India, in its landmark judgment on October 11, 2017, ruled that any intercourse between a man and his spouse below the age of 18 constitutes rape. The Court found Exception 2 of Section 375 of the IPC to be discriminatory, arbitrary, and violative of the constitutional rights of girl children under Articles 14, 15, and 21 of the Constitution of India.

By striking down Exception 2 of Section 375 of the IPC, the Supreme Court established the principle of equality and granted girls the same rights as boys, ensuring that engaging in sexual activity with a girl child below 18 years of age is a serious criminal offense. The judgment was a significant step towards recognizing and protecting the bodily integrity and dignity of married girl children, safeguarding them from archaic legal provisions that failed to uphold their rights.

In conclusion, the Independent Thought v. Union of India case marked a pivotal moment in India's legal landscape by addressing the problem of marital rape and affirming the rights of married girl children. The judgment underscored the importance of upholding gender equality, protecting the vulnerable, and ensuring that no legal provision undermines the fundamental rights and respect of individuals, especially those most in need of protection and support.

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<sup>18</sup> [indiankanoon.org/doc/87705010](http://indiankanoon.org/doc/87705010)

# **OVERCOMING THE PROBLEM OF MARITAL RAPE: A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH**

Marital rape, which is a pervasive form of intimate partner abuse, continues to be a significant challenge globally, including in India. Addressing this complex issue needs a multifaceted Plan that includes legal reforms, societal change, education, and support systems to protect the rights and respect of individuals within marriages. By adopting a comprehensive strategy, India can move towards eradication of marital rape and creating a society where all persons are protected from such abuses.

## **Legal Reforms and Enforcement**

One of the primary steps in combating marital rape is through legal reforms that criminalize this heinous act. India must unequivocally define marital rape as a criminal offense, removing any exemptions or defenses that perpetuate impunity for perpetrators. By aligning its legal framework with international standards that recognize marital rape as an abuse and violation of human rights, India can send a strong message that no individual is above the law, and all forms of sexual abuse are punishable. Enforcement of these laws is equally crucial. Authorities must be taught to handle situations of marital rape sensibly and successfully. Establishing specialized courts or units to handle cases of intimate partner violence can ensure timely justice for survivors. Additionally, providing legal aid and support services to victims can empower them to seek redress through the legal system without fear or stigma.<sup>19</sup>

## **Education and Awareness**

Education plays a vital role in preventing marital rape. Comprehensive sex education programs in schools can help young individuals understand concepts of consent, bodily autonomy, and healthy relationships. By promoting gender equality, respect, and communication skills from an early age, India can foster a culture that values mutual consent and rejects violence within marriages. Public awareness campaigns are also essential to challenge societal norms that condone or trivialize marital rape. These campaigns can debunk myths, bring awareness about the legal implications of marital rape, and encourage bystanders to speak out against all forms of intimate partner violence. Engaging with communities, religious leaders, and influencers can help shift attitudes towards supporting

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<sup>19</sup> [www.indiatoday.in/law/story/explainer-the-debate-over-marital-rape-1903050-2022-01-21](http://www.indiatoday.in/law/story/explainer-the-debate-over-marital-rape-1903050-2022-01-21)



survivors and holding perpetrators accountable.

### **Support Systems for Survivors**

Creating robust support systems for survivors of marital rape is critical in addressing the aftermath of trauma and facilitating healing. Accessible helplines, shelters, counseling services, and legal aid clinics can provide survivors with the necessary resources to seek help and rebuild their lives. Training healthcare providers to recognize signs of abuse and offer appropriate support is also essential in ensuring holistic care for survivors. Empowering survivors to speak out against marital rape without fear of retaliation is key to breaking the cycle of silence and shame. Providing avenues for anonymous reporting, survivor-centered approaches in legal proceedings, and community support networks can offer survivors the safety and validation they need to seek justice.

### **Cultural Shifts and Gender Equality**

At the heart of combating marital rape lies the need for profound cultural shifts that challenge patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, and power imbalances within relationships. Promoting gender equality through policies that empower women economically, socially, and politically can reduce vulnerabilities that lead to marital rape. Engaging men as allies in ending violence against women through education programs on healthy masculinity and respectful relationships is crucial in changing harmful attitudes towards women's autonomy.

In conclusion, overcoming the problem of marital rape in India demands a comprehensive approach that combines legal reforms, education, awareness campaigns, support systems for survivors, and cultural shifts towards gender equality. By addressing this issue holistically and collaboratively at all levels of society—from legislative bodies to grassroots organizations—India can create a safer and more equitable environment where every individual's rights are respected, protected, and upheld within marriages.

## **CONCLUSION**

The discourse surrounding marital rape in India reflects a complex interplay of legislative, societal, and human rights considerations that underscore the urgent requirement for comprehensive adjustments to protect women's rights, autonomy, and dignity within intimate relationships. The evolving legal landscape, marked by court decisions, legislative debates, and public discourse,

highlights the imperative of recognizing marital rape as a very serious violation of women's rights and addressing the systemic barriers that promote gendered violence within marriages.

The judicial pronouncements and legislative debates on marital rape in India have brought to the forefront critical issues related to gender equality, bodily autonomy, and the criminalization of non-consensual sexual activity within marriages. The Supreme Court's role in redefining marital rape as rape and challenging regressive legal provisions underscores a growing recognition of the necessity to protect women's rights and ensure justice within familial contexts. These legal reforms signal a shift towards a more equitable legal framework that prioritizes gender equality, consent, and the Protection of women against intimate relationship abuse.<sup>20</sup>

The debates on marital rape in India also reflect broader societal attitudes, cultural norms, and challenges in addressing gender-based violence within familial settings. The stigma, shame, and silence surrounding marital rape perpetuate a culture of impunity and hinder victims from seeking help and justice. Addressing these societal attitudes requires a multifaceted approach that includes raising awareness, challenging stereotypes, and fostering a culture of respect, consent, and zero tolerance for violence within marriages. By promoting open dialogue, debunking myths, and empowering survivors to speak out, India can begin to dismantle the barriers that perpetuate the cycle of abuse and ensure the protection and empowerment of women.

This issue demands urgent attention and action. Ensuring justice, equality, and dignity for all individuals within intimate relationships needs a comprehensive approach that combines legal reforms, social advocacy, and policy interventions. By recognizing marital rape as a violation of fundamental human rights, India can take significant strides towards developing a society that maintains gender equality, autonomy, and fairness for all persons. Upholding the principles of equality, dignity, and autonomy within marriages is essential to fostering a society that respects and protects the rights of all individuals, regardless of their marital status.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>[www.researchgate.net/publication/374418837\\_Exploring\\_Concerns\\_Associated\\_With\\_Marital\\_Rape\\_In\\_India\\_An\\_In-Depth\\_Legal\\_Analysis\\_Section\\_A-Research\\_paper\\_Eur](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374418837_Exploring_Concerns_Associated_With_Marital_Rape_In_India_An_In-Depth_Legal_Analysis_Section_A-Research_paper_Eur)

<sup>21</sup> [www.barandbench.com/columns/just-law-controversy-around-marital-rape-part-i](http://www.barandbench.com/columns/just-law-controversy-around-marital-rape-part-i)

In conclusion, the discourse on marital rape in India underscores the imperative of recognizing and addressing this form of violence as a serious violation of women's rights and dignity. By evolving legal frameworks, challenging societal norms, and promoting a culture of respect and equality, India can pave the way for a more just, equitable, and inclusive society where all individuals are empowered to live free from violence and discrimination.

