

# Adultery Under the Uniform Civil Code (UCC): A Critical Analysis of its Legal Implications in India

**Vevin Singh Vishnoi and Dr Srijan Mishra**

LLM (Criminal law), Amity Law School, Lucknow

Assistant Professor, Amity Law School, Lucknow

**Abstract:** *The Indian legal concept of adultery has historically been governed by Section 497 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which criminalized the act. However, in 2018, the Supreme Court of India, in the landmark case of Joseph Shine v. Union of India, ruled Section 497 unconstitutional, thereby decriminalizing adultery. The Court held that the provision was archaic, discriminatory against women, and violative of fundamental rights, particularly Article 14 (equality before the law) and Article 21 (protection of life and personal liberty) of the Indian Constitution.*

**Keywords:** Indian legal concept

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Indian legal concept of adultery has historically been governed by Section 497 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which criminalized the act. However, in 2018, the Supreme Court of India, in the landmark case of *Joseph Shine v. Union of India*, ruled Section 497 unconstitutional, thereby decriminalizing adultery. The Court held that the provision was archaic, discriminatory against women, and violative of fundamental rights, particularly Article 14 (equality before the law) and Article 21 (protection of life and personal liberty) of the Indian Constitution.

Despite this decriminalization, adultery continues to carry legal consequences under various personal laws. Under the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, adultery remains a valid ground for divorce. Similarly, under Muslim Personal Law, a husband may seek divorce if his wife engages in adultery, while women may have limited rights in such matters depending on interpretations of Sharia law. The Special Marriage Act, 1954, which governs interfaith and secular marriages, also recognizes adultery as a cause for divorce.

The introduction of a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) has been a subject of considerable debate in India. A UCC would replace diverse personal laws with a singular legal framework applicable to all citizens, irrespective of religion. In the context of adultery, a UCC could standardize matrimonial laws, ensuring uniformity in how adultery is treated across different religions and communities. It could eliminate gender biases inherent in some personal laws, ensuring that both men and women have equal legal standing in matters of marriage and divorce.

However, implementing a UCC poses several challenges, particularly concerning religious freedom and cultural sensitivities. Many communities view personal laws as intrinsic to their religious identity and resist attempts at legal homogenization. A UCC would need to balance the constitutional principles of equality and secularism with the rights of religious groups to practice their personal laws.

In conclusion, while the Supreme Court's decriminalization of adultery was a step toward gender justice, its status under personal laws continues to influence marital disputes. The adoption of a UCC could provide a cohesive legal framework for adultery and other matrimonial issues, fostering legal uniformity while navigating the complex interplay between personal rights and constitutional principles.

## Comprehending the Uniform Civil Code (UCC)

The Uniform Civil Code (UCC) is a legal framework proposed in India that seeks to replace personal laws and religion-based customs with a common set of civil laws applicable to all citizens, irrespective of their religious affiliations. The concept, enshrined in Article 44 of the Indian Constitution, aims to promote national integration, ensure gender equality, and establish uniformity in legal matters related to marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption, and maintenance.



India currently follows a system where different religious communities are governed by their respective personal laws in family and matrimonial matters. The Hindu Marriage Act, Muslim Personal Law, Christian Marriage Act, and Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act, among others, provide separate legal frameworks for different religious groups. This diversity often leads to legal inconsistencies and gender disparities, particularly in issues of inheritance, divorce, and maintenance.

A key concern surrounding the implementation of the UCC is how it would address the issue of adultery and its legal consequences. Historically, adultery was criminalized under Section 497 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which was struck down by the Supreme Court in *Joseph Shine v. Union of India* (2018) as unconstitutional. The Court ruled that adultery should not be considered a criminal offense but rather a civil matter with implications for divorce and marital disputes.

If the UCC is adopted, it would likely establish a uniform approach to adultery, treating it as a ground for divorce rather than a criminal offense. This would align with the Supreme Court's stance that personal choices in relationships should not be subject to state-imposed criminal penalties. A UCC could provide clarity and consistency by defining adultery's legal ramifications across all communities, ensuring that men and women are treated equally under the law.

However, implementing the UCC presents significant challenges. Many religious communities perceive personal laws as integral to their cultural and religious identities and may resist their replacement with a uniform system. The potential for conflict between the principles of secularism, individual liberties, and religious freedom remains a central concern.

Balancing these considerations, a well-drafted UCC should aim to safeguard constitutional principles while respecting personal freedoms. It should prioritize gender equality and fairness in marital laws without infringing on religious rights. By addressing adultery within a uniform legal framework, the UCC could contribute to a more cohesive and just legal system in India while maintaining respect for diverse cultural values.

### **Historical Context of Adultery Laws in India**

**Colonial Period:** During the British regime, adultery was codified as a criminal offense under Section 497 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). This law, enacted in 1860, reflected the patriarchal norms of the time. Under its provisions, only the man involved in adultery could be prosecuted, while the woman was considered a victim rather than an equal participant. This legal stance was based on the notion that a woman was the property of her husband, and adultery was seen as a violation of the husband's exclusive rights over his wife. This one-sided criminalization of adultery reinforced gender inequality and denied women agency over their own choices in marital relationships.

**Post-Independence India:** After gaining independence in 1947, India continued to follow the colonial-era legal framework, including Section 497 of the IPC. Despite the advent of constitutional values such as equality, personal liberty, and gender justice, adultery remained a criminal offense for decades. The judiciary occasionally debated the discriminatory nature of Section 497, but it was not until the 21st century that serious legal challenges emerged.

In the landmark case of *Joseph Shine v. Union of India* (2018), the Supreme Court of India struck down Section 497 as unconstitutional. The Court ruled that the law was archaic, violated fundamental rights under Articles 14 (equality before the law) and 21 (right to life and personal liberty), and perpetuated gender discrimination. The judgment emphasized that personal relationships should not be subject to state interference through criminal penalties, although adultery could still have civil consequences such as being grounds for divorce.

The 2018 ruling marked a significant step toward gender justice, aligning India's legal framework with contemporary human rights principles. While decriminalization removed state-imposed punitive measures, adultery continues to have legal implications in personal laws governing marriage and divorce under different religious frameworks.

The evolution of adultery laws in India highlights the gradual shift from colonial paternalism to a rights-based approach emphasizing individual freedoms and gender equality. However, debates continue over issues such as the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and the role of adultery in marital disputes, reflecting broader discussions on legal reform and personal autonomy in Indian society.



### **Principal Legal Ramifications of Adultery under the UCC**

If a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) were applied, its consequences may include:

#### **1. Decriminalization vis-a-vis Civil Penalties**

**Decriminalization of Adultery:** As per the ruling of the Supreme Court in *Joseph Shine v. Union of India* (2018), adultery is not a criminal act. However, the question remains as to how the state should regulate moral concerns related to adultery. A UCC could address this by treating adultery as a civil wrong, imposing consequences such as divorce, maintenance, and child custody rather than criminal penalties.

**No-Fault Divorce:** A UCC may introduce a system where adultery is a ground for divorce without requiring proof of fault, making legal proceedings more efficient. Under current personal laws, fault-based divorce often leads to prolonged litigation. A UCC could standardize divorce proceedings and ensure that economic rights and property settlements are given greater consideration.

#### **2. Gender Justice and Equality**

One of the core objectives of a UCC is to promote gender equality, particularly in personal laws. Under current legal frameworks, women often face discrimination in adultery-related cases:

**Hindu Marriage Act:** Adultery is a valid ground for divorce, but due to social stigma, it is often more difficult for women to initiate divorce on these grounds.

**Muslim Personal Law:** A Muslim wife cannot initiate divorce solely based on adultery but may seek *Khula* (a form of divorce initiated by the wife) if the husband is adulterous.

A UCC could bridge these disparities by ensuring equal rights for men and women in adultery-related cases. It would enable both spouses to claim adultery as a valid reason for divorce, with equal access to legal remedies and protections.

#### **3. Religious Concerns vs. Secularism**

The implementation of a UCC must balance secular principles with religious sentiments that influence personal laws. Different religious communities interpret adultery differently:

**Muslim Law:** Islamic law has strict evidence and punishment guidelines for adultery, which may conflict with a uniform legal framework.

**Christian Law:** Adultery has varying implications in Christian marriages, especially regarding annulment and divorce proceedings.

A UCC would likely face resistance from religious communities that consider personal laws intrinsic to their cultural identity. Achieving a balance between uniformity and religious freedom would require legislative and judicial caution.

#### **4. Property and Economic Rights**

Adultery can have significant effects on inheritance and property rights. Under existing laws, an adulterous spouse may lose certain inheritance or property rights. A UCC could create a uniform approach to property distribution in divorce cases, eliminating inconsistencies based on religion or personal law:

**Division of Assets:** A UCC could standardize asset division in adultery-related divorce cases, ensuring fairness regardless of religious background.

**Spousal Support and Alimony:** Under a UCC, alimony and maintenance could be determined based on economic dependence rather than gender, ensuring fair financial support for both parties after divorce.

#### **5. Psychological and Social Impact**

The decriminalization of adultery does not eliminate its social and psychological ramifications. Adultery remains a deeply stigmatized issue in Indian society, leading to emotional distress and mental health concerns for individuals involved in such disputes. If a UCC is implemented, it should include provisions for:

**Mental Health Support:** Counseling services should be integrated into the legal framework to help affected individuals cope with emotional and psychological challenges.



**Social Awareness Programs:** Public awareness campaigns can help address outdated social stigmas and promote a more progressive understanding of marital relationships.

The application of a UCC would bring significant legal changes to the treatment of adultery. By decriminalizing adultery while maintaining civil penalties, ensuring gender equality, addressing religious concerns, and standardizing property rights, a UCC could create a more equitable legal framework. However, its implementation would require careful navigation of cultural, religious, and societal sensitivities to ensure fairness while upholding constitutional principles of equality and justice.

#### **Uniform Civil Code of Uttarakhand Act, 2024**

The Uniform Civil Code (UCC) of Uttarakhand Act, 2024 is a path-breaking move in the legal and social arena of India by establishing a uniform code for personal laws of all religions in the state. Passed with the objective of simplifying personal issues like marriage, divorce, inheritance, and adoption, the Act is uniformly applicable to all citizens regardless of their religious beliefs, establishing a single set of legal rules for these vital aspects of life.

#### **Key Provisions of the UCC:**

##### **Marriage Regulations:**

One of the main provisions of the UCC is mandatory registration of marriage. All marriages are required to be registered within 60 days from the date of solemnization. For couples married prior to the enforcement of the Act or outside Uttarakhand, registration is required within six months of the enactment of the law. This provision aims at ensuring legal validation of all marriages and ensuring transparency.

Minimum age has been fixed at 21 years for men and 18 years for women with the intention of codifying marriage laws uniformly for all communities, including Muslims, where varying legal standards were earlier in operation.

The Act also deals with live-in relationships, asking couples who live in such a relationship to officially declare their status before the local authorities. This helps children born in live-in relationships to enjoy all legal rights, including the right of inheritance, and avoids any uncertainty about their legitimacy.

**Inheritance and Succession :**The UCC guarantees equal inheritance rights to all children, irrespective of gender or conditions of birth. This clause does away with gender discrimination, most benefitted by daughters, who had hitherto been disadvantaged in most religious societies. Both husbands and wives are also given equal rights to the property of the deceased spouse. This clause is designed to safeguard surviving spouses, especially women, who could otherwise suffer serious financial loss in the absence of inheritance rights.

**Forbiddance of Polygamy and 'Halala':** The Act prohibits polygamy and the practice of 'halala', which are common in some communities. The move is aimed at safeguarding the rights of women and enhancing gender equality. Prohibition of polygamy guarantees that no individual can have more than one spouse, and prohibition of 'halala' aims to end the practice where a woman has to marry another man and divorce him before marrying her original husband.

**Adoption Laws:** The UCC harmonizes adoption processes in all communities so that individuals and couples can adopt children regardless of their religion. The Act, however, forbids interfaith adoptions to maintain religious and cultural identities. This has been controversial since it strikes a balance between the need for uniformity and respect for personal cultural practices.

**Exemptions:** The UCC allows an exemption to Scheduled Tribes, recognizing that their special traditions and customs should be safeguarded. The members of these communities will not be subject to the provisions of the Act, given that they also have their own special social customs that are not part of the mainstream legal traditions.

##### **Impact and Implementation**

The UCC implementation has resulted in the creation of separate portals to register marriages and live-in relationships. The state has organized the legal framework to simplify matters, making it less burdensome for people to access and adhere to the law.

However, the Act has not been without controversy. Some religious communities, particularly Muslims, have expressed concerns about the imposition of a uniform legal framework that they perceive as infringing upon their personal laws and cultural practices. Critics argue that the UCC reflects a Hindu-centric approach, which could marginalize minority groups. Despite these concerns, the Uttarakhand government's decision to implement the UCC is viewed by many as a



progressive step towards legal equality and social reform. Though the long-term consequences of the Act are unknown, its holistic strategy in addressing personal laws could have far-reaching social implications. By legalizing standard norms and upholding gender equity, the UCC may consolidate the heterogeneous people of Uttarakhand into a more homogeneous entity where the rights and freedoms of all citizens are equal, regardless of religious adherence. The success of the UCC relies on its implementation and how well the citizens and communities adjust to these changes in the law.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

The decriminalization of adultery has already paved the way for reconsidering how marital fidelity is regulated. Under a Uniform Civil Code, adultery will no longer be a criminal act, but a cause of civil remedy in relation to marriage and divorce. This change can provide a more balanced, secular model of family law that safeguards the rights of everyone, regardless of their gender or religious affiliation. Nonetheless, such reform would also have to navigate the dilemma of balancing secular values against religious freedom while ensuring the standards of gender equality and personal autonomy.

A proper critique of adultery under the UCC, therefore, must account not only for legal reforms but also the general sociocultural and psychological significance of redefining marital fidelity and the function of law in controlling personal relations.

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