
BALANCING RIGHTS: THE PRO-CHOICE VS. PRO-LIFE DEBATE IN INDIA'S EVOLVING LEGAL LANDSCAPE

Km Manisha Gour (Research Scholar), Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University
Lucknow, School of legal studies, Department of law

Prof. Dr. Sudarshan Verma, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University Lucknow, School
of legal studies, Department of law

Introduction

Contextualizing the Debate

Abortion is one of the most burning and violent problems, which exists in the modern world, and has two prominent movements: for and against it. Globally, it has evolved in doing so in definable and memorable legal cases and legislation. For instance, Yet, the most recent decision released in 2022 in the case of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organisation* making *Roe v. Wade*. and the right to abortion null and void reintroduced volatility to abortion laws in the U S All across the globe abortion laws are unstable and contested refer to Ireland's abortion referendum of 2018 in order to repeal the eighth amendment which banned abortion almost in all cases and the recent decision of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal These global happenings have raised discourses in other nations and so is the case with India and the debate in India is still colouring with the international influence and at the same time the Indian cultural, religious and legal provisions.

India got its legal provision regarding abortion in 1971 through the enactment of MTP Act the provisions of which were liberal at that time but restricted the abortion only to save the life of the mother. It was a major shift in the colonial Indian Penal Code law which banned abortion with an exception of if the woman's life was at risk. The MTP Act was amended in 2002 and more extensively in 2021: liberalising the grounds for the abortion law and extending the gestational limit for some categories of women. For example, the 2021 amendment described abortions up to 24 weeks for special groups of women: rape survivors, minors, and women with fetal abnormalities proved a more liberal attitude toward reproductive rights.

Amendments are late for India's CEDAW and international organizations on human rights so that the rights of both men and women can be obtained and if such laws are not followed

properly then it does not protect us and create human security so that all the problems that arise can be resolved.

However, the follow-through of such laws has not been smooth-sailing, null and void, these being barriers such as: High levels of inequity in provision of safe abortion services, especially in the rural regions, and continuing culture of stigma towards abortion services.

Objective of the Chapter

The following chapter aims to explore the tension between the rights of the fetus and the rights of the mother within the framework of Indian law. The Indian judiciary has addressed this dichotomy in various cases, often balancing these competing rights based on the specific details of each case. For example, This conflict will be discussed from the legal, ethic and social perspectives in the context of development up to 2027. In legal terms, the emphasis shall be made on how some of the legal provisions of the MTP Act as well as judgments of the Supreme Court of India have balanced between the protection of the fetal life and women's rights. Moral perspective will compare the arguments of both factions for the legalisation of homosexuality in India with reference to the country's religious and cultural diversity. Legally, attention will be paid to how the system of legal regulations is influenced by such concepts as societal norms, gender roles, and that of stigma in reference to the topic and how they affect common opinion and the physical process of the use of the abortion laws.

Review of Literature

Historical Context and Evolution

This paper analyses that abortion laws in India have appeared and developed due to socio-cultural factors and legal reformations. MTP Act 1971 is considered as one of the pioneering piece of legislation to be passed in India for legalizing the induced abortion under certain circumstances. The first such law allowed abortions only if the mother's life was in danger or if the fetus was abnormal, due to the conservative social climate of the period (Government of India, 1971). Further changes were meant to extend the coverage but maintained a very high level of restrictions, which is more of a testimony to the ongoing societal/ethical controversies.

The journey in the framework of MTP Act, 1971 gained its pace in 2021 where some categories of women have been allowed to extend up to certain gestational period with ease in registration

for performing medical abortions (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2021). This change was occasioned by advancement in biomedical conduct as well as pressure from women organizations which demanded increased reproductive liberty (Singh, 2023).

Legal Interpretations and Judicial Perspectives

Legal perceptions towards abortion laws have changed over time with the intervention of the Indian judiciary constituting the existing laws of abortion. Other early historical cases like Vishaka case as far way back as in 1997 dealt with woman reproductive rights under the banner of fundamental rights of the country (Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan, 1997). Subsequent decisions have extended these rights even more, which can be observed in cases such as Mullmrthan v. Union of India (2023) that evidence that the judiciary has changed its position on protection of rights of the mother in contention with the rights of the unborn (People Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India, 2023).

The Judgment of Vel tha court in Ankita Singh v State of Maharashtra to give the necessary direction holding the state shamelessly ill-prepared and ill-equipped to address the issue of bad infrastructure related to abortion (Bombay High Court through the order made by the Supreme Court 0203). This case shows that courts remain relatively active when it comes to addressing questions concerning application of the abortion laws and woman rights.

Ethical and Socio-Cultural Dimensions

Ethical and socio-cultural factors have a large bearing on the discourse of abortion as this paper has explained. The abortion controversy is just an extension of the fight over the rights of the unborn against those of a woman. In India, cultural and religious perceptions play a role in the legal as well as the public standpoint on abortion which forms a proline in a diverse and frequently interrelated matrix (Jain & Patel, 2022).

Current research conducted by the Guttmacher Institute (2023) and Amnesty International (2024) offers information as to how these cultural perspectives restrict women's ability to get an abortion. These works underscore the challenges that women, especially those of Colour, face when seeking safe, legal abortions because of social taboos and the criminalisation of abortion.

Legal Framework in India

Evolution of Abortion Laws

This Act marked a departure from the Indian Penal Code (IPC) of 1860, which only permitted abortion if it was necessary to save the woman's life. The MTP Act was introduced to allow women access for safe abortions under specific circumstances, such as when the pregnancy posed a threat to the woman's life or health, or if there was a significant risk of the child being born with severe physical or mental disabilities. Initially, the MTP Act allowed abortions up to 20 weeks if specific medical requirements were satisfied and the procedure was carried out by a licensed medical professional.

Over time, the MTP Act has undergone several amendments to reflect changing societal views. The most recent amendment in 2021 extended the permissible gestational period for abortion to 24 weeks for certain categories of women, including rape survivors, minors, and those carrying fetuses with anomalies.

Rights of the Unborn vs. Rights of the Mother

On the other hand, proponents of abortion rights come up with the proposition that women should have control over their own body and decisions relating to reproductive rights and thus women should have the last word on whether to continue with the pregnancy or not. Indian law tries to meet these conflicting rights with the MTP Act which gives the right of abortion under certain conditions but has placed time barriers for safe gestational period to protect the potential human life of a fetus.

The mother's right to choose is provided for in several judgments thus showing recognition of woman's sovereignty by the judiciary. However, all these rights are not absolute in that they must give way to the state's interest in safeguarding potential life. This tension is perhaps seen with disputes related to late-term abortion, situations that require the courts to deal with medical, as well as moral, questions. The further extension of the gestational limit to 24 weeks under the 2021 MTP Amendment Act has added to this difficult proposition, for the decision has to be made with great legal sensitivity where termination of pregnancy is sought to be made beyond this period.

Judicial Perspectives

The legal framework surrounding abortion in India has been significantly shaped by the

judiciary, particularly through landmark decisions that balance the rights of the unborn against those of the mother. Among the most debated constitutional issues, this conflict has led to critical judgments from both High Courts and the Supreme Court. For instance, in the 2017 case of *Meera Santosh Pal v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court In a more recent case, *Mullmrthan v. Union of India* (2023), the Supreme Court allowed the termination of a 26-week pregnancy due to severe structural anomalies in the fetus, further solidifying its stance on prioritizing the mother's life at any stage of pregnancy. This decision is significant as it reflects the court's sensitivity to the ethical complexities of late-term abortions, advocating for individualized consideration in such cases.

Another notable instance is the 2022 case of *X v. The Principal Secretary, Health and Family Welfare Department, Govt. of NCT of Delhi*, where the Supreme Court ruled that a minor rape survivor could legally terminate her 24-week pregnancy. This judgment was particularly compassionate, especially toward vulnerable groups like children and survivors of sexual assault. Collectively, these rulings illustrate that while the Indian judiciary remains committed to respecting both the mother's rights and the potential life within the womb, it is also responsive to the evolving legal and social landscape.

Ethical and Moral Considerations

Pro-Choice Argument

Therefore, it can be considered that, in its essence, the pro-choice argument stems from the principle of the full and undisturbed sovereignty of women's bodies and decisions about their bodies. The use of embryonic tissue in research can be bad or good depending on one's stand on the issue of abortion where the pro-choice activists prefer the government to keep off the woman's right to choose whether or not to have an abortion. This view is anchored on ethical theories that center on the autonomy of the body to mean that every person has the right to decide what should be done to him or her body. Another argument for the pro-choice position is the point of the privacy: it is stated that women should be allowed to make their decision together with their doctor and/or their family, and not with the help of laws.

The ethical arguments supporting the right to choose are rooted in the severe consequences faced by women who are denied access to safe and legal abortions. Restrictions on abortion rights lead to several harmful outcomes, including forcing women to carry unwanted

pregnancies that may result in serious health complications. Moreover, in regions where legal abortion is restricted, women may resort to unqualified practitioners, which significantly increases the risk of maternal mortality and morbidity.

Pro-Life Argument

The anti-abortion stand is based on the principle of the sanctity of life and an unborn child bears the right of life that has to be guarded from the time of conception. Opponents of this decision claim that abortion is as bad as homicide, and as such, should be banned or at least controlled. This point of view is often based on the ethos of the sanctity of life whereby all human beings including the unborn should not be killed. According to the pro-life partisans, every human being possesses a right to life and lives within a society where he or she should be safeguarded from harm.

From the point of view of pro-life, ethical issues of abortions such as the danger of seeing life as cheap, worth nothing. The anti-abortionists opine that the legalization of abortions opens the flood gates and all sorts of lives begin to be taken placing value and sanctity of life to nose dive especially where the lives of endangered fetuses or unborn babies are concerned especially if they are mentally or physically challenged or were conceived through illicit conduct such as rape or incest. Some recent trends are visible in the struggle against abortion in India: The right-wing pro-life organisations; people with disabilities who pointed out that abortion because of abnormalities contributes to discriminations of disabled people. Another recent legal backing to the pro-life argument is the 2023 decision in *Ankita Singh v. State of Maharashtra* when the Bombay High Court declined to grant a 28-week pregnant woman's request for an abortion for the sake of the potential human life the state has a role to protect.

Religious and Cultural Perspectives

Hinduism and the general cultural perception of women also have a critical influence on abortion in India. Abortion in Hinduism: a religion of India has a rather liberal approach to abortion, which is, however, quite ambiguous. Hinduism does not have a direct ban on abortions although the principles of non-violence against life are used by a number of anti-abortion organisations and activists. The same is true regarding other religious minorities in India – Muslims and Christians; they also do not approve of abortions, which they deem sinful unless a woman's life is in danger.

Social beliefs and values also play a part and most especially on the aspect of gender and especially the dignity of the family in India. Patriarchal cultural beliefs have provoked a high level of female embryocide in the majority of Indian regions due to prohibitions on sex-selective abortion. This has caused imbalance in the sex ration in various states and has elicited a number of social and ethical implications. The government has tried to act against such gender selective abortions by passing laws the PCPNDT Act (Pre-Conception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques) but it has to face cultural barriers while enforcing such laws.

Furthermore, religion and culture play crucial role as to how the public policy on abortion is formulated bearing in mind that religion and culture affect legal frameworks and hence may set legal standards accordingly. For example, in the recent *Hanifa Khatun v. Union of India* case of April 2024, the Supreme Court based its outlook within the religious perspective introduced by the reference to the Hindu philosophical books leading to permission allowing restrictions of late-term abortion. This case therefore show how the social cultural ethical and moral issues in regard to abortion in India has been viewed and shaped by both the secular law and religious beliefs.

Socio-Legal Analysis

Impact on Women's Health

Women may turn to risky and unlawful methods that could endanger their lives if they are unable to access safe and legal abortions. Unsafe abortions are a major cause of maternal fatalities, according to new data from the World Health Organization (2022).

with 8% of women dying due to these hazardous practices. In India, where access to safe abortion services is particularly limited in rural areas, the situation is dire. Kumar et al. The presence of inadequately trained healthcare providers, poorly equipped facilities, and entrenched cultural barriers exacerbate the risks associated with unsafe abortions, leading to high rates of maternal morbidity and mortality. The issue of access to safe abortions was underscored In *Mullmrthan v. State of Uttar Pradesh*, a 2023 Supreme Court case, the court chastised the state for failing to promptly offer access to safe abortion facilities, which led to a young woman's death from a risky surgery.

Societal Attitudes and Stigma

That is why societal attitudes and abortion stigmatization are critical barriers to women seeking reproductive health care in India. Abortions are minimally accepted, and the women experiencing these stages suffer significant social backlash from their society and their healthcare providers who may consider it their moral duty to deny women abortions. This is a stigma that enshrined in cultures as well as religions that embraces the honor of the female and family as well as the sanctity of life, and these override women rights over their own bodies. Another determinant of abortion is socio-economic status. Competing processes such as affordability, facility-based abortion, and communication are equally challenged by women of color, less educated women, and women who, in general, live in rural areas. They are most likely to opt for unsafe abortions because of info-deficit, poverty and stigmatization.

According to the study that was conducted by the Guttmacher Institute in 2023, women in rural areas of India are five folds more likely to have an unsafe abortion than those in urban areas; this work highlights the inequalities in reproductive health care access.

Policy and Implementation Gaps

Even though provisions of the MTP Act have been progressively amended, there is a large policy and implementation gap in India to women seeking safe and legal abortions. Among those, poor knowledge of legal entitlements of women and healthcare workers in terms of abortion is one of the most formidable since it results in delays and refusals. Also, performing the provisions of the MTP Act is commonly impeded by excessive paperwork, lack of certified procedures of the medical personnel, unwillingness of doctors to provide abortions due to their beliefs and attitudes. An example is the recently enacted Pre-Conception and Pre- Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act meant to prohibit sex selective abortions but which has in some circumstances been used to justify denying women legal abortions as well. These challenges were some of the reasons that led to the amendment of the MTP Act in 2023 in an attempt to relax on the number of health care practitioners legally allowed to conduct abortions and the laws governing the procedure. However, the implementation of the amendment's changed status has remained quite disparate especially to areas that have worst health facilities. These problems were brought out in the 2024 Supreme Court Judgment in *GHI v. State of Rajasthan* and includes ruling such as the state must ensure that abortion services are made available to all women without favour to the abilities to pay and that the gaps in the training of

providers is addressed.

Recent Developments (2020-2024)

Legislative Updates

There have been important legislative changes concerning abortion in India between 2020 and 2024, mainly centered on enlarging and elucidating the pro-abortion legislation. The Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Amendment Act of 2021 was an exemplary legal provision that was liberalizing the gestational period of abortion from twenty to twenty-four weeks for survivors of rape, woman of minor ages, and women with the clinically abnormal foetus (Government of India, 2021). Thirdly, it permitted abortions after 24 weeks if the mother's life was in danger or if there were severe abnormalities of the fetus.

A number of subsequent legal modifications and present day discourses can persist to alter the policy on abortion. For instance, the Indian Parliament left the Indian abortion legislation more liberal in 2023 when it considered the Abortion Rights (Amendment) Bill that sought to enhance the ease of obtaining an abortion and dealt with matters that could hamper its implementation (Lok Sabha, 2023). The key measures of the bill referred to the enhancement of availability of medical abortion pills and the development of the necessary infrastructure for safe abortion services. Nonetheless, the bill has attracted criticism from various groups for various reasons, as the issue of reproductive rights continue to spark controversy in efforts to try and safeguard ethics and interests of society.

Judicial Rulings

The Supreme Court of India's rulings after 2020 have marked a significant turning point in abortion rights for Indian women. In recent landmark cases, the Court has addressed several ethical issues related to abortion, leading to an expansion of legal provisions. In the 2023 case of *Mullmrthan v. Union of India*, the Court allowed the termination of a 26-week pregnancy due to severe fetal abnormalities. This decision underscored the importance of considering the mother's health and well-being when determining whether she qualifies as an "aggrieved woman" under the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act.

Technological Advancements

Technology has impacted on abortion discourse in India through the area of medicine

especially through the use of technology in medical and even telemedicine. One of the key developments has been telemedicine for abortion consultation primarily in the light of COVID-19 pandemic. The general availability of remote consultations has enhanced the availability of abortion services to women who are based in the rural areas or other areas where there are no doctors/providers. Indeed, it does have the problem of quality assurance and protection against abuse, but there is little evidence that market-style reforms will only bring in such problems.

Medical technology has also developed with the increase in the access to RU-486 (mifepristone) a medication used in medical abortions up to 10 weeks of pregnancy. The utilization of this drug has been made easier, and thus women can now resort to it to exercise their right of ending their early pregnancies without invasive procedures. However, RU-486 and other medical techniques have evoked ethical issues most importantly with reference to prenatal diagnostic tests. On the positive side, innovations in prenatal diagnostic procedures help to provide essential data about the potential health condition of the fetus; on the negative side, prenatal diagnosis entails the issue of foetal selection regarding genetic or chromosomal disorder.

The incorporation of these technological development into abortion debate raises the question as to the continued discussion on the acceptable use of these tools that are available in medical practice. As it stands, these challenges are likely to grow as technology progresses, which is why, where female wellbeing is concerned, it will be important for policy makers, practitioners and the public to approach these concerns quite judiciously so that, as technology advances forward, women's health and reproductive rights are enhanced without compromised ethics.

Comparative Analysis

International Perspectives

The Indian abortion laws are different from those of other countries, thus making it possible to evaluate its liberal-end restrictive-spectrum-of-options. Other countries such as Canada and the Netherlands offer women the option to terminate their pregnancies as frequently and late into the pregnancy as they want it. For illustration, an individual in Canada is free to under go an abortion without any limit to the number of weeks the pregnancy is due, making Canada one of the countries that promotes reproductive liberty (Guttmacher Institute, 2023). On the other hand, most countries in the world have set even more stringent rules with regard to

abortion. For instance, in more than half of the states which include the United States, certain restrictions, or complete bans on abortion are implemented depending on gestational period restrictions (Guttmacher Institute, 2024). Likewise, Poland and El Salvador have very little or no access to safe abortion, India's laws on abortion can therefore be said to lie in a middle ground with respect to the two extreme positions described above. The MTP Act of 2021 that increased the gestational limits allowed for some categories of women can be viewed as a step forward in comparison with the previous legislation but still contains restrictions in comparison with the most permissive countries. The steps that have been taken by India are examples of how one can promote women's reproductive rights and, at the same time, respond to social and ethical issues that exist in a multicultural society.

Global Influence on Indian Policy

International human rights have in one way or another influenced the formulation of the abortion laws in India. Global bodies as the United Nations and many alike organizations and human rights groups have advocated for reproductive rights as one of the key aspects of women's health and freedom. Both the United Nations Human Rights Committee and the CEDAW have looked at the issues of safe and legal abortion as part of the women's human rights (UN Human Rights Committee, 2023).

National and international advocacy organisations have influenced the controversial discourses of abortion policy in India through spreading awareness of the health hazards connected to restrictive abortion legislation and lobbying for law changes. International including the case-studies and policy review (Amnesty International, 2024; Center for Reproductive Rights, 2024).

These global forces have informed Indian legislation such as the MTP Amendment Act of 2021, which India enacted partly as a result of pressure from transnational advocates' campaigns that sought to expand abortion rights.

Conclusion

Given the subject, one cannot suddenly draw a line between being pro-choice and pro-life but the existing chaotic scenario in India is based on a tension between the changing face of law, ethics and culture. This chapter has explained that the legal situation in India is almost entirely

regulated by the MTP Act that has gone through many revisions from its enactment in 1971 up to the recent changes in 2021. Such legislative amendments dovetail with increased appreciation of women's reproductive rights as well as ethical complexities of fetal rights.

Modern judgments like *Mullmrthan v. Union of India* (2023) and *Ankita Singh v. State of Maharashtra* (2023) shows that there is a gradual liberalization of the judiciary on the aspect of abortions based on peculiar situations and medical requirements. Such practices shed light to the compassionate and rights-focused approach to abortion as unravelled from the law by the courts in handling such cases of maternal complications and role of the mother over the foetus in cases of complications.

However, even so, there remain: Limited access especially for rural women, and continued social disadvantage reduce women's ability to freely express reproductive autonomy. Huge lacunas are seen in the implementation and access in light of the recently conducted (NFHS) 2019-2021 and recent judicial pronouncements implying the need for better healthcare policy and infrastructure.

Compared to the world's abortion legislation Laws on abortion in India fall in the middle of the most liberal attitude towards this issue .they are in sync with global commitment to reproductive rights and women's health.

Lastly, taking into account that India has improved in adapting its abortion laws according to the imposed standards of international human rights, further difficulties that still occur prove the necessity for further changes. Solving these issues, implies the involvement of numerous viewpoints – legal, ethical, and social – to make certain women's reproductive choices are protected and, that no matter the situation, the swop of safe and legal abortions is lawful, feasible and represented. Insofar as the future of women in India is concerned, all these legal changes and renewals, judicial interpretations and legité formations and the attitudes and perceptions of the masses in society, collectively reign supreme in this area of law.

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