

DECRIMINALIZATION OF ATTEMPTED SUICIDE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF INDIAN PENAL CODE AND BHARTIYA NYAYA SANHITA

Author's Name: Dr. Parul Pareek¹

Affiliation:

1. Associate Advocate; Independent Researcher; Former Assistant Professor, School of Law, Mody University of Science & Technology, Lakshmangarh, Sikar, Rajasthan, India.

Corresponding Author Name and Email ID: Dr. Parul Pareek,

dr.parulpareek@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The legal framework surrounding the attempt to commit suicide in India has undergone significant transformation, reflecting a broader shift in the nation's socio-legal perspective on mental health and personal autonomy. Under the Indian Penal Code (IPC), the attempt to commit suicide was criminalized under Section 309, which faced widespread criticism for being punitive towards individuals in distress. In contrast, the recently introduced Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) has marked a departure from this approach by decriminalizing the act, aligning the legal stance with modern views on mental health and human rights. This article undertakes a comparative analysis of the legal treatment of attempted suicide under both the IPC and BNS, examining the rationale for change, its implications for criminal law, and the broader socio-legal impact on individuals suffering from mental health crises. The paper explores how this shift aligns with India's commitment to human rights and the changing global attitudes towards suicide prevention and mental health care.

Keywords: Suicide Decriminalization, Indian Penal Code (IPC), Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), Mental Health, Legal Reform, Human Rights, Suicide Prevention.

INTRODUCTION

Suicide and its attempted act have long been a sensitive issue across societies, with varying legal, moral, and ethical perspectives shaping how the law treats those who attempt to take their own lives. For decades, India criminalized the attempt to commit suicide under Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), a law introduced by the British in 1860. Despite repeated calls for reform, this provision remained in force, subjecting individuals to legal action for their actions, often driven by mental health struggles or emotional turmoil. The introduction of the Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) in 2023 marks a turning point in Indian criminal law, with significant reforms designed to address contemporary societal issues. Among these changes is the decriminalization of attempted suicide. This research article explores the journey of this legal provision from the IPC to the BNS, analyzing the societal, legal, and psychological contexts that informed these changes.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF SUICIDE LAWS IN INDIA

1. The Indian Penal Code and Section 309:

The evolution of India's legal stance on suicide, particularly under Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), reflects a complex interplay between historical perspectives and shifting societal values. Section 309 criminalized attempts to take one's own life, mandating imprisonment or fines for individuals who survived such acts. This provision emerged from a colonial moral framework that construed self-harm as an offense against both state and societal order.

The rationale behind criminalizing suicide attempts came under scrutiny over time, particularly as mental health considerations gained prominence. In landmark cases such as *P. Rathinam v. Union of India* (1994), the judiciary grappled with the compatibility of Section 309 with fundamental rights, sparking debate on whether the penal approach was constitutionally sustainable. In *Gian Kaur v. State of Punjab* (1996), however, the Supreme Court upheld the validity of Section 309, concluding that the provision did not infringe upon personal liberty in a way that would render it unconstitutional. Despite this reaffirmation, Section 309 faced increasing criticism for failing to reflect evolving humanitarian principles and the need for a more nuanced understanding of mental health. Legal scholars and reform advocates argued that the punitive approach was incongruent with contemporary insights into mental health, ultimately paving the way for decriminalization initiatives within the Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita.

2. Public and Legal Criticism:

The legal framework surrounding the criminalization of suicide attempts began to attract significant criticism for its punitive nature, particularly in relation to individuals who were already vulnerable and in need of support, rather than punishment. Human rights advocates and mental health experts contended that penalizing suicide attempts did not address the root causes of such distress; instead, it deepened the psychological trauma and further isolated affected individuals. This punitive approach was increasingly seen as inadequate in the face of modern understandings of mental health. Consequently, law commissions and various reform bodies in India issued recommendations advocating for the repeal of Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code. These bodies emphasized the necessity of adopting a more compassionate legal stance, one that prioritized rehabilitation and therapeutic care over punitive measures, aligning with evolving global norms regarding mental health care and human rights.

THE SHIFT TO BHARTIYA NYAYA SANHITA (BNS)

1. Decriminalization under BNS:

In 2023, the Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) replaced the Indian Penal Code, introducing reforms to align with contemporary legal principles and societal shifts. One significant change was the removal of penalties for attempting suicide, a practice that had previously led to legal punishment under the IPC. By decriminalizing the act, the BNS reflects a growing recognition of the need for more empathetic and supportive responses to mental health challenges. This change also aligns with India's commitment to international human rights standards, emphasizing care and rehabilitation over punishment in cases involving individuals facing mental health crises.

- 2. Rationale for Reform:** The reform reflects a shift in the understanding of mental health as a public health issue rather than a criminal one. It emphasizes the need for support systems and intervention rather than criminal prosecution. Additionally, the change demonstrates an acknowledgment of the right to life, dignity, and mental health care, ensuring that vulnerable individuals are not further victimized by the legal system.

COMPARATIVE LEGAL ANALYSIS

1. IPC vs. BNS on Suicide:

Under the IPC, suicide attempts were met with criminal prosecution, which critics argued ignored the underlying psychological distress of individuals who attempted to end their lives.

The BNS's approach is more aligned with global best practices, which advocate for mental health support and decriminalization, recognizing the need for therapeutic intervention rather than legal punishment.

2. Implications for Criminal Law:

The decriminalization of attempted suicide raises important questions about how the legal system should address cases involving individuals in mental health crises.

With the removal of Section 309-type provisions, the focus shifts to preventive care, mental health services, and social support networks, rather than punitive responses.

SOCIO-LEGAL IMPACT

1. Mental Health and Legal Systems:

The decriminalization under BNS represents a shift towards a rights-based approach, emphasizing the need to treat mental health with dignity and care.

Law enforcement and judicial systems will need to adapt to this new framework by providing support services rather than following a prosecutorial approach in cases involving suicide attempts.

2. Public Perception and Stigma:

While decriminalization is a step forward, the deep-rooted stigma surrounding mental health and suicide persists. This legal change needs to be accompanied by public awareness campaigns and mental health education to reduce stigma.

Mental health services in India, especially in rural areas, remain underfunded and understaffed. Ensuring that individuals have access to appropriate care is critical to the success of this legal reform.

CONCLUSION

India's move to decriminalize attempted suicide under the Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) represents a crucial shift in its approach to mental health and the justice system. Previously, under Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), individuals who survived suicide attempts could face criminal charges, which created a punitive environment for those already experiencing profound distress. With the BNS's updated approach, the legal stance has changed from one of punishment to one that seeks to provide care

and support. This shift mirrors the growing understanding that individuals who attempt suicide are often in the midst of severe mental health crises and need compassionate support, not legal consequences.

The decriminalization reflects an evolving awareness that mental health issues deserve the same dignity and sensitivity as physical health concerns. By removing criminal penalties, India aligns itself with a more humane perspective, recognizing that punitive actions only compound the suffering of individuals already facing immense emotional pain. A legal system that treats those in crisis with empathy not only reflects a commitment to the well-being of its citizens but also ensures that individuals feel safer in seeking help without fear of prosecution.

Reforming these laws also brings India closer to international standards that view mental health through a human rights lens, promoting dignity and respect for all individuals, regardless of their psychological state. The BNS's progressive approach signifies India's acknowledgment of the importance of individual rights, particularly in addressing mental health issues, which are often overlooked in discussions about justice and criminality.

As India continues to modernize its legal framework, prioritizing mental health and human rights will remain essential. This legal reform encourages a shift towards rehabilitative rather than repressive justice, allowing the law to play a role in healing rather than punishing. Such changes set a valuable precedent, emphasizing that the purpose of the law is not merely to penalize but to protect, support, and rehabilitate. This shift under the BNS offers a more compassionate approach, with a legal system increasingly dedicated to ensuring the dignity, care, and rights of those it serves, especially those struggling with mental health issues. Through these efforts, India is taking meaningful steps toward a more supportive and humane justice system that aligns with global human rights standards.

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