
“A CRITICAL COMPARISON OF THE BHARATIYA NYAYA SANHITA, 2023 AND THE INDIAN PENAL CODE, 1860: CONTINUITIES, CONTRASTS, AND CHALLENGES”**Abstract**

The replacement of the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (IPC) with the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 (BNS), alongside the BNSS and BSA, represents an important change to India's criminal justice mechanism. The BNS streamlines provisions by reducing 511 sections across 23 chapters of the IPC to 358 sections in 20 chapters, with improved organisation and consolidated definitions. Key innovations include recognition of transgender identity, incorporation of electronic records, introduction of community service as a punishment, and explicit definition of life imprisonment. Contemporary offences such as mob lynching, organised crime, and terrorism are codified, while outdated offences like attempt to suicide and unnatural sexual relations are repealed. Enhanced provisions for offences against women, children, and medical negligence reflect a victim-centric focus. This study examines current commentary and statutory texts (IPC and BNS) using a Comparative narrative review with Critical Legal analysis to find out procedural and substantive changes that are pertinent to medico legal practice. The results show ramifications for institutional implementation, healthcare liability, and judicial interpretation.

Key words

Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), Indian Penal Code (IPC), Criminal law reform, Decolonisation of law, Offences against women and children, Medical negligence and liability, Organised crime and terrorism.

Introduction

The IPC, enacted in 1860, was a colonial-era code that remained largely unchanged post-independence. While it provided a framework for criminal law, its archaic clauses, scattered provisions, and lack of inclusivity posed challenges in the modern context. The Government of India has now repealed IPC, CrPC, and IEA, replacing them with the BNS, BNSS and BSA. These reforms aim to modernise Indian penal jurisprudence, enhance clarity, and address contemporary social, technological, and legal challenges.

History of enactment of BNS

In India, the Bharatiya Nyaya Samhita (BNS) is currently the official criminal code. It became operative on July 1st, 2024. Indian Penal Code (IPC), Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) 1973 and the Indian Evidence Act (IEA) 1872 have been repealed and replaced by three new acts, BNS (Bharatiya Nyaya Samhita), BNSS (Bharatiya Nagrik Suraksha Samhita) and

BSA (Bharatiya Sakshya Adhinyam), respectively, announced by the Indian government. There are 358 sections in BNS as opposed to 511 in IPC, 531 sections in BNSS as opposed to 484 in CrPC, and 170 section sin BSA as opposed to 167 in IEA. The IPC persisted as a holdover from the British pre independence era, containing antiquated clauses that were out of step with the growing discourse on inclusiveness and modern rights. BNS's main goal is to modernize the criminal justice system in order to protect everyone from the rising prevalence of new crimes such as identity theft and cyber bullying and to make the law more comprehensible. IPC was developed in an unorganized fashion. Its 23 chapters and 511 sections made it challenging to comprehend the penal laws. Both BNS and BNSS apply to crimes committed and reported after July 1, 2024. In contrast, the IPC and CrPC would be applicable to crimes committed and registered before July1, 2024. However,

since BNS, a revised criminal code, has repealed IPC, the two will never be applied simultaneously. “Overall, the transition from IPC to BNS is an opportunity to embed proportionality, clarity, and due process into medico-legal adjudication.”(1)

Methodology

This paper critically examines the development and interations of India’s statutory criminal law using a Comapritive doctrinal approach. The Indian Penal Code (IPC, 1860), the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS, 2023), and pertinent procedural and evidentiary norms that support medico-legal practice are examples of primary sources. Peer-reviewed journal publications, official government press releases, and court rulings from 2018 and 2025 are examples of secondary sources that guarantee the inclusion of recent reforms and up-to-date legal knowledge. Based on their frequent mention in medico-legal contexts and apparent influence on healthcare workers, particularly those related to medical negligence, offenses against women or children, and evidentiary standards, sections were selected for in-depth analysis. This method allows for a thorough comparison of the legal theories and real-world applications that are essential to medico-legal adjudication.

Theoretical Framework

Intersecting legal philosophies that represent intense discussions on India’s postcolonial legal history, the rights of accused and victims, and criminal justice strategies have influenced the BNS reforms. The following opposing arguments can be used to understand this theoretical framework.

Decolonisation vs. Continuity

Decolonization proponents contend that this shift helps to eliminate outdated, externally imposed legal norms that frequently overlooked modern societal complexity and inclusivity, such as the official acceptance of transgender identities. Nevertheless, this reform preserves many of the common law system’s fundamental elements, including due process, procedural justice, and continuity in legal interpretation – all of which some believe are necessary for stability and predictability.

Victim-Centrism vs. Offenders' Rights

Stronger penalties for serious crimes like mob lynching and collective molestation as well as consolidated protections for women, children and vulnerable groups, demonstrate the BNS’s increased emphasis on victim-centrism. This approach seeks to restore equilibrium to a system that is thought to be overly preoccupied with procedural protections for criminals, often at teh price of victim justice.

Restorative vs. Retributive Justice

The use of community service aims to lessen the need for incarceration for non-violent crimes, encourage offender accountability, and restore societal harmony. But the judicial system also has retributive features, especially for serious offences like organized crime, sexual assault, and terrorism, where the death penalty and lengthy prison terms are mandatory. The continuous debate between societal desires for retribution and deterrent and reformative objectives is reflected in this tension.

Scheme of BNS

The BNS has a very structured format. It has 20 chapters and 358 sections. For

comparable kinds of crimes, it contains distinct chapters and parts. For instance, a single chapter contains all of the crimes against women. The BNS's organizational structure facilitates everyone's comprehension of criminal legislation.

There was no defining provision in the IPC. Every interpretation clause was dispersed among IPC sections 8 through 52A. For convenience of reading and reference, the majority of these interpretation provisions from section 8 to 52A of the IPC, 1860 have been kept in BNS unchanged and are organized in section 2 of the BNS in alphabetical dictionary order.

Key Definitions and Interpretations

According to BNS Section 2(3), a "child" is anyone under the age of 18.

The IPC's section 8 definition of "gender" solely acknowledges the male and female genders. Clause 2(10) of the BNS revised definition of "gender" includes the phrase "transgender" in addition to "men" and "women". BNS codifies inclusivity not covered by the IPC by specifically incorporating transgender identification within the definition of "gender". There is still a lack of police awareness and inconsistent document recognition like ID proofs could make enforcement more difficult. Identity verification for accused and victims must not involve intrusive or biased methods. To successfully operationalize this change, police, prosecutors, and the judiciary must receive gender-sensitive and inclusive training.

BNS item 2(8) defines papers to encompass "electronic and digital records." The Supreme Court provided clarification on the admissibility of electronic data under Section 65B of the Indian Evidence Act in the 2018 case of *Shafhi Mohammad v. State of Himachal Pradesh*. By directly

recognizing digital or electronic records as documentary evidence, the BNS streamlines admissibility and brings the process into line with contemporary technical realities. There are still many technical inequalities in enforcing digital evidence; rural courts have trouble in storing digital documents securely and authenticating them. Section 65B-equivalent certification needs to be incorporated into investigative procedures. To prevent procedural errors, it is essential that police and judges nationwide receive training on how to handle digital evidence. While the IPC's Section 49 mandated that the period be computed using the British date system, the BNS's Section 2(20) mandates that it be computed using the Gregorian period.

Punishments

Chapter 53 of IPC delineates 5 separate categories of punishment: (1) death; (2) life imprisonment; (3) harsh and simple imprisonment; (4) confiscation of property; and (5) fines. In accordance with BNS Part 4(f), Community service is being adopted as the sixth sort of penalty. "To reduce the burden on jails, community service is also being included as a punishment for the first time and it is being given legal status."(2)

For minor offences such as failing to show up for a notice, preventing a civic servant from exercising their legitimate authority, minor stealing in exchange for seized funds, public misconduct by an intoxicated individual, defamation etc. BNS recommends community service as a punishment. Imprisonment over the rest of a person's actual existence will be specifically specified as the penalty of life in prison. "By introducing community service as a reformative measure, the BNS captures the true spirit of nyaya, promoting

a justice system that seeks to restore social harmony and ensure fair treatment for both victims and offenders.”(3)

Community service penalty – Failure to pay
The following sanctions apply under BNS for failing to pay a fine or complete community service.

1. A maximum fine of Rs 5000 or community service – A maximum sentence of two months in jail
2. The highest penalty of 4 months in prison, community service, or an administrative fee of upto Rs 10,000.
3. Otherwise, an ultimate fine of one year behind bars.

Advantages of Community service - Prisons are less crowded and could focus more on felony offenses when minor, non-violent offenders are save from incarceration through Community service. By carrying out unpaid labour that benefits the community, offenders make valuable contributions to society, which can increase offender accountability and lower recidivism. The reform acknowledges potential improvement in offenders, encourages citizen engagement and conforms to international trends in criminal justice reform.

Disadvantages - Inadequate infrastructure or bureaucratic hold-ups could make it less effective or result in abuse or insufficient enforcement. The public’s trust in justice may be weakened by Community service, which is perceived as being overly forgiving, especially when it comes to repeat offenders.

With advantages in lowering incarceration and encouraging offender accountability, Community service under BNS can promote a more compassionate, restorative justice approach. However, successful implementation, oversight and resolution of

public perceptions and administrative obstacles are critical to its effectiveness, particularly in policing and industries like healthcare that are affected by medico-legal responsibility.

Petty theft, such as stealing small property, was punishable under the IPC by a fine or imprisonment. For first time, non-violent offenders who restore stolen property worth less than Rs 5000, the BNS offers community service as an alternative punishment. In order to promote offender rehabilitation and lessen the strain on the criminal justice system, a court may choose to sentence an accused person to unpaid public service rather than jail time. Enforcement challenges include inadequate police and municipal oversight infrastructure which increases the likelihood of uneven application and public mistrust. To maintain accountability and equity, local authorities need oversight procedures and procedural manuals.

In terms of punishments for responsible killing that is not fatal, Part 105 takes the place of Part 304. Since there were previously no minimum penalties under the IPC in this circumstance, it stipulated a statutory minimum of five years.

Section 48 has rendered abetment by someone outside of India’s crime, enabling prosecution of those who are located outside.

Offences against women

In Part V, charges committed against women and children that were dispersed across the previous Penal Code have been gathered and combined. BNS part 63 states that intercourse between an adult male and his spouse that does not involve a lady under the threshold of eighteen is not defined as a rape. The age limit was 15 years old under Clause 375 of the IPC. BNS

65 streamline the judicial framework by combining the two age groups (under 12 and 16) into a single section.

BNS 69 stipulates that a person who has sex with a woman while using deceptive methods or vowing to wed her but not intending to actually carry through on it, as well as engaging in non rape sexual relations faces as much as ten years in detention regardless of kind along with monetary penalty. “ Under section 184 regarding medical examination of rape victims in comparison to S 164A CrPC, the time limit of report submission to the investigating officer is now 7 days, which was not mentioned earlier.”(4)

BNS 70 (2) stipulates that group molestation of a woman beneath the legal age of 18 warrants the death sentence.

The age is raised to 18 by the BNS, which also creates mandatory reporting deadlines for medical examinations and unifies sexual offences against women and minors under specific chapters. With a more efficient and victim centred procedural framework, a 17-year old wife who was previously not covered by rape protection would now be completely covered under BNS. This would probably lead to a higher conviction rate and quicker forensic examination.

The BNS unifies and fortifies rules against crimes against women, including tougher punishments for group molestation and higher protective age limitations. This encourages a more victim-focused legal system and improved protection for female victims. By grouping crimes against women into a separate chapter, the BNS makes the law easier to understand and comprehend, which helps judges, attorneys and law enforcement deal with these matters more skilfully. Reducing the time limit from an indefinite period to seven

days for submitting medical evaluations of rape victim to the investigating officer may result in speedier forensic interventions, enhancing the quality of the evidence and prosecution results. The BNS’s inclusive gender definitions contribute to transgender women’s increased legal protections, which may lessen prejudice in the legal system.

Disadvantages

When it comes to crimes against women, the public’s confidence in justice may be damaged by the perception that community service and other reformative penalties are too light. Stricter procedural requirements (like rapid reporting deadlines) may strain medical staff, potentially affecting compliance, especially in resource poor settings. Doctors may be reluctant to treat female victims or practice defensive medicine out of fear of being prosecuted for their incompetence in certain situations.

All things considered, the BNS amendments promise more robust and transparent legal protections and represent a modernized, victim-centered approach to crimes against women. The achievement of better results in the areas of courts, law enforcement and medicine will require successful implementation, judicial interpretation, policing changes, and striking a balance between punitive and restorative justice approaches.

The list next to the clause on atrocities against women and children also includes violations that cause injury to the living person.

The BNS and medical profession

Significant dissatisfaction with BNS was expressed by a certain group of people in society: Doctors. Various BNS provisions have been the target of nationwide protests by medical associations. “Social media is filled with messages expressing

disappointment, fear, and apprehension among the medical community.” (5)

The causes of death resulting from rash or careless actions are covered in this section. The statutes stipulate that such a crime can result in a financial penalty and an aggregate sentence of 5 years imprisoned. It then adds that a doctor who commits such an act while conducting a medical operation face a maximum two year jail sentence and a fine. Concerns with this section have been voiced by numerous physicians. They think that since the offences carries a mandatory prison sentence, doctors would be reluctant to perform procedures or care for ill patients.

This part won't apply to every death that happens during a medical procedure. In a Court of law, it must be established beyond a reasonable doubt that the death was caused by a careless or reckless act.

The BNS has a number of other sections that are helpful when defending physicians in court.

According to Section 18, anything that is done unintentionally, with due care and caution, and without criminal intent is not illegal. Section 19 states that even knowing that something is probable to cause injury is not a crime if it is done with the intention of preventing or preventing further damage to the person and without criminal intent. Section 26 states that if an act is carried out with consent, in an honest manner, and with no intent to cause death, it is not considered unlawful. Chapter 30 states that if an activity is carried out with good faith, it is not regarded as an infringement, has no purpose of causing death, and is done despite a person's assent – so long as the subject is unable to give approval.

By limiting arbitrary criminal responsibility under Section 304A of the IPC on medical

negligence, the revisions attempt to lessen doctors' defensive medicine, worry and dread. In order to assist healthcare professionals, hospitals are urged to implement legal compliance measures like medico-legal audits and specialized legal officers.

The Supreme Court ruled in *Jacob Mathew v. State of Punjab* (2005) that criminal culpability under IPC Section 304A is limited to acts of gross negligence that directly cause death, and prosecution should only begin if this condition is satisfied. Under the IPC, judges had discretion over punishment, which usually consisted of a fine or two years in prison. In addition to introducing a statutory minimum and maximum period, the BNS(Section 106) provides certain protections, making it clear that actions carried out with permission, in good faith, and without malicious purpose are not illegal.

Despite shorter jail sentences for physicians, Section 106 eliminates court's authority to impose just penalties and requires incarceration for proved criminal negligence. Healthcare workers may become more stresses and legally vulnerable as a result. Even if criminal liability rules are subtle, there are worries that they could encourage defensive medicine, a reluctance to treat high-risk cases, or an excessive use of investigations to avoid legal liabilities.

All the while preserving patient safety and accountability, these reforms should ideally increase equity and decrease pointless prosecutions. Nonetheless, obligatory incarceration, a lack of procedural safeguards, heightened administrative workloads, and potential defensive medical procedures continue to raise concerns.

Novel Clauses - Substantive Changes in Offences

Mob lynching – BNS Section 103 (1)/IPC SECTION 302 - BNS 103 (2) states that if more than five offenders plot to execute assassination on basis of ethnicity, sect or social standing, geographic location of birth, dialect, individual opinions, or any other factor, per participant of the criminal syndicate deserves a capital judgement or lifetime in jail in addition to a compensation.

According to BNS 111, Organized crime is any continuous illegal activity, including abduction, pillaging, car burglary, corruption, theft of property, deal murder, revenue offense, cybercrimes, trading in people, substances, arms or illegal commodities or amenities, or trading persons for sex or slavery, that is carried out by a person or a team of persons acting solely or in collaboration, whether they are a part of an illicit activity network or on the orders of a group like that gang, using violence, threats of violence, intimidation, or any other illegal means. Extortion, cybercrime, trafficking and financial fraud are all included in the BNS's initial statutory definition of organized crime. Economic offences are added to the scope; however there are concerns that overlap with other regulatory rules. Police departments struggle to distinguish between loosely connected criminals and Organized crime syndicates, necessitating state-to-state collaboration and clarity in investigative jurisdiction. Sophisticated surveillance, digital tracking, and financial forensics are necessary to provide continuous evidence of "continuing unlawful activity" and syndicate membership – areas in which local law enforcement frequently falls short. .

Interagency intelligence-sharing protocols and specialized training in anti-mafia operations and evidence chain management are crucial.

Anyone found guilty of organized crime faces the following penalties. Death or life in prison if the crime has caused the death of another person, and a levy of at least 1 crore rupees must be paid. In other instances, a penalty of no more than 5 hundred thousand rs must be paid and an initial term of 5 years in custody, with the potential of life in prison.

Terrorist act: New offence

There were no provisions for the Terrorist Act in the IPC. The BNS's Section 113 defines the Terrorist Act as that intimidates the people and jeopardizes India's security, unity and integrity. Terrorism is to kill someone or destroy property using bombs, dynamite or other explosive materials. Although the new section partially aligns with the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, it runs the danger of creating jurisdictional redundancies by combining definitions of terrorism within the general penal framework. The functional overlap between state police and national agencies such as NIA might make attribution of evidence more difficult. Communication metadata and digital traceability are essential, but they require precise chain-of-custody and strong technical literacy. Coherent enforcement necessitates cyber-forensics training and coordinated prosecution under two acts (BNS and UAPA)

BNS 116 has reduced the quantity of days granted to an individual experiencing severe discomfort for the reason of grievous harm from twenty to fifteen days. It is carried out in light of the progress made in medical care, which speeds up

recuperation. “Other than this, S.117(4) of BNS makes it illegal for five or more people to act together and cause grievous harm to someone due to their race, caste, community, sex and place of birth and prescribes imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to seven years along with fine.”(6)

A more severe penalty of harsh incarceration for at least ten years, with the potential for an extension to life in jail (a reminder of the person’s inherent life), will be imposed if grievous harm results in a chronic incapacity or irreversible impairment. This is in contrast to a maximum penalty of seven years of imprisonment for grievous harm alone.

Any action, speech or writing that incites hostility toward the government among the general public is considered Sedition under Section 124 A of IPC. The concept was extremely ambiguous and open to interpretation making it vulnerable to abuse. The Sedition act had a maximum sentence of 3 years in prison and a fine.

An additional part on deeds of separatism, violent conflict, disruptive or separatist acts, or actions harming the autonomy, solidarity, or dignity of India has been added to Chapter 152 of the BNS, 2023. This provision stipulates that engaging in or attempting to engage in any of the aforementioned behaviours is maximum sentencing up to seven years in lock up or life in prison.

The crime of “attempt to commit suicide” is being abolished in the BNS.

Newly added BNS 226 says that any individual, who contemplates oneself with the intention of preventing a public servant from exercising their lawful authority, faces a total sentence of 12 months in jail, a cash penalty, both, or community service.

IPC 377 was construed as punishing men, women or transgender people for engaging in Unnatural sex. Unnatural sexual relations find no place in the BNS. Section 377 of the Colonial Code was abolished by the new criminal legislation during a period of significant changes. “Through case law and judicial interpretation, ambiguities in the BNS will eventually be clarified.”(7)

Conclusion

BNS incorporates contemporary offenses, new sections and new penalties. The fact that the legal system is changing shows that we are progressing. Significant systemic reforms were brought about by BNS, including harsh penalties for egregious crimes, a victim friendly approach, reduced complexity, and above all the elimination of colonial elements from India’s legal system after independence. While updating specific definitions, procedural timetables, and punitive mechanisms, the new framework preserves a number of fundamental legal notions. There are advantages to the updated code, but there are also some things to reconsider. The need for precise court direction to interpret new regulations, the creation of standard operating procedures by the police and prosecutors, and focused medico-legal training to guarantee appropriate adherence by medical personnel are some of the immediate implementation issues. Practical next steps should concentrate on developing capacity across jurisdictions, issuing comprehensive guidelines for courts and law enforcement, and initiating pilot projects that test innovative mechanisms like community service and digital evidence handling prior to national rollout in order to close these gaps. The successful implementation of BNS’s mission to provide effective, fair and

inclusive justice in Indian society depends on ongoing assessment and iterative change grounded in real-world input.

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Table-1 IPC vs BNS

Aspect / Component	IPC (1860)	BNS (2023)	Comments / Implications
Total Sections	511	358	Streamlined and reorganized for clarity
Chapters	23	20	Thematic grouping of offences (e.g., crimes against women)
Definition of Child	Not uniform	Under 18 years (Sec 2[3])	Standardised, protects minors uniformly
Gender Recognition	Male, Female only	Male, Female, Transgender (Sec 2[10])	Inclusive, modernised
Documents	Physical only	Includes electronic/digital (Sec 2[8])	Reflects digital age
Punishments	5 types: Death, Life, Rigorous/Simple imprisonment, Property forfeiture, Fine	Adds Community Service	Life imprisonment explicitly defined; community service for minor offences
Offences Against Women	Marital rape exception age 15	Age 18, combined sections, stricter penalties	Gang rape minor → death penalty
Mob Lynching	Not defined	Section 103: Death/Life imprisonment + fine	First-time recognition of mob-based crimes
Organised Crime	Not defined	Section 111: Minimum 5 years to life, fines	Covers syndicates, human trafficking, cybercrime, etc.
Terrorism	Not defined	Section 113: 10 years to life imprisonment	Explicit definition and severe punishment
Sedition / Secession	Section 124A: max 3 years	Section 152: Up to 7 years or life	Clarifies acts threatening sovereignty
Medical Negligence	Section 304(A): Up to 2 years / fine	Section 106: Up to 5 years; reduced for doctors	Protective clauses (good faith, consent) reduce professional liability



Suicide Attempt	Criminalised (Section 309)	Decriminalised; Section 226 restricts interference with public servants	Reflects mental health approach
Unnatural Sexual Relations	Section 377 criminalised	Repealed	Aligns with human rights standards
Calendars / Time Reckoning	British calendar (Sec 49)	Gregorian calendar (Sec 2[20])	Standardised for modern legal practice

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