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WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal providededicated 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

LANDMARK RULING: SUPREME COURT WARNS AGAINST MISUSE OF SECTION 498A TO TARGET INNOCENT FAMILY MEMBERS

AUTHORED BY - DR. VANDITA CHAHAR & PUJA DAS

Subject: The Supreme Court underscores the necessity to prevent the misuse of Section 498A IPC by cautioning against the unwarranted implication of the husband's relatives in matrimonial disputes without concrete allegations.

Case Title: Payal Sharma v. State of Punjab & Anr. **2024 INSC 896:**

Judges: Justice C.T. Ravikumar and Justice Rajesh Bindal

Date: November 26, 2024

Citation: 2024 INSC 896

Court: Supreme Court of India

Case Number: Criminal Appeal No. 3995 of 2022

Introduction

In a significant ruling, the Supreme Court of India reiterated the need for caution in the application of Section 498A of the IPC, which deals with cruelty by the husband or his relatives against a wife. The Court underscored the importance of preventing the misuse of this provision, particularly in cases where unsubstantiated allegations are made against the husband's relatives. The ruling emphasized that without clear and convincing evidence, such relatives should not be included in the charge of dowry harassment or cruelty.

Brief Facts

The case emerged from a matrimonial dispute between a wife and her husband. The wife, in her complaint, accused her husband and his relatives of subjecting her to dowry-related cruelty, invoking Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). According to the wife, she had been harassed by her husband and his family over demands for dowry. She claimed that she was mentally and physically tortured as a result of these demands, which she attributed to the dowry-related expectations of her husband's family.

However, the allegations made by the wife were vague and did not provide specific details to substantiate the claim of dowry harassment. While the wife mentioned the entire family of the husband, including distant relatives, there was no concrete evidence or precise identification of each individual's involvement in the alleged cruelty. The complaint was largely generalized and failed to delineate how each relative had contributed to the dowry-related harassment.

The case took its course in the lower courts, where charges were framed against the husband and his relatives based solely on the wife's complaint. However, the lower courts did not make a clear determination of the exact role or involvement of each relative. The charges were framed without a thorough investigation into the specific actions of the implicated relatives, leading to concerns about the potential misuse of Section 498A and the fairness of the proceedings.

The case was subsequently brought before the Supreme Court of India, where the question arose whether the relatives of the husband could be implicated under Section 498A without specific, clear evidence of their involvement in the alleged dowry harassment. The issue highlighted the growing concern about the misuse of Section 498A to target extended family members without substantial proof, particularly in cases where the allegations were vague or generalized.

The Supreme Court had to address the broader issue of whether Section 498A was being used in a manner that allowed for the inclusion of distant relatives in dowry harassment cases, even when their actual involvement was unclear. The Court also had to determine whether charges should be framed without a proper investigation into the individual roles of those implicated.

In essence, this case underscored the potential for misuse of Section 498A in matrimonial disputes, where accusations could be leveled indiscriminately against the husband's family, including distant relatives, based on insufficient evidence. The Supreme Court's intervention aimed to ensure that such legal provisions were not misused for personal vendettas and that charges under Section 498A were only framed when there was clear and compelling evidence of each individual's role in the alleged harassment.

Arguments

Appellant's Arguments (On Behalf of Accused Relatives - Kanchhu and Others)

1. Baseless and General Allegations:

- The appellant contended that the allegations made against the husband's relatives, including distant family members, were vague, generic, and lacked any specific instances of cruelty or harassment.
- No particular role or overt act was attributed individually to any of the relatives, making the accusations speculative.

2. Misuse of Section 498A IPC:

- It was submitted that Section 498A, intended to protect women from genuine cruelty, was being misused to harass the husband's entire family.
- The appellant pointed to previous precedents where the courts had warned against such misuse (e.g., *Arnesh Kumar v. State of Bihar* and *Preeti Gupta v. State of Jharkhand*).

3. Violation of Fundamental Rights:

- The appellants argued that dragging innocent relatives into criminal proceedings without specific accusations infringes on their fundamental right to life and personal liberty under **Article 21** of the Constitution of India.

4. Demand for Early Judicial Intervention:

- It was urged that to prevent the abuse of the judicial process, courts must intervene at the earliest stage (such as framing of charges) to scrutinize the material placed on record and discharge the accused if allegations are unsubstantiated.

5. Burden on Judicial System:

- Prolonged criminal trials based on baseless charges unnecessarily burdened the judiciary, wasted public resources, and subjected innocent individuals to mental agony.

Respondents' Arguments (On Behalf of Wife - Prakash Chand & Ors.)

1. Protection of Victims under Section 498A IPC:

- The respondents emphasized that Section 498A was a beneficial provision designed to shield women from cruelty and harassment at the hands of the husband and his relatives.

- They argued that restricting the scope of Section 498A would weaken the legal recourse available to genuine victims.

2. Pattern of Harassment:

- The respondents asserted that the allegations should be viewed in the light of the systematic harassment and cruelty faced by the complainant at the hands of not just the husband, but his family as a whole.
- In domestic settings, it is often the joint effort of multiple family members that leads to dowry-related cruelty.

3. Necessity of Full Investigation:

- It was submitted that, at the stage of framing of charges, a detailed investigation was necessary, and charges should not be quashed prematurely unless it is palpably clear that allegations are absurd or inherently improbable.

4. No Interference at Preliminary Stage:

- The respondents cited the principle that at the stage of framing charges, the court should not conduct a "mini-trial" or delve deeply into the merits and should proceed with the trial if a prima facie case is made out.

5. Rights of the Complainant:

- Stressing on the rights of the victim, it was contended that the complainant must be given an opportunity to prove her case during the trial and that premature discharge of accused persons would amount to a denial of justice.

Legal Issue

The key legal issue in this case was whether the relatives of the husband can be implicated in a dowry harassment case under Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) without clear evidence of their involvement. Specifically, the question was whether accusations that are vague or involve distant relatives should be dismissed at the outset to prevent misuse of the law and unnecessary legal complications. The case also raised the issue of whether charges can be framed against relatives when there is no direct or specific evidence linking them to the alleged dowry harassment.

Supreme Court's Holding

The Supreme Court held that Section 498A of the IPC should be applied with caution and judicial restraint, particularly when allegations are vague or when distant relatives are

implicated without solid proof. The Court emphasized that the law was not intended to be used as a tool for harassment or to involve individuals based solely on generalized or insufficient accusations.

The judgment further clarified that courts must carefully scrutinize the evidence before framing charges, ensuring that the accusations against the relatives of the husband are not frivolous. The Court directed that trial courts must first examine whether there is tangible and specific evidence to substantiate the charges before proceeding with the case against the accused relatives.

This ruling underscored the necessity for a fair and just application of Section 498A, ensuring that it is used to protect women from legitimate cruelty, without being misused to implicate innocent individuals without proper evidence.

The key legal issue in this case was whether the relatives of the husband can be implicated in a dowry harassment case under Section 498A IPC without clear evidence of their involvement, and whether such cases of vague accusations against distant relatives should be dismissed at the outset.

Reasoning of the Supreme Court

The Supreme Court emphasized that Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code was enacted to protect women from cruelty and dowry-related harassment in matrimonial relationships. However, the Court also acknowledged the growing misuse of this provision, where innocent individuals are falsely implicated based on vague or general allegations.

The Court held that when allegations are unclear or generalized, permitting prosecution in such cases would amount to an abuse of the judicial process. Specifically, when distant relatives of the husband are implicated without specific accusations, it violates their fundamental rights to a fair trial.

The Court further directed that higher courts, exercising powers under Section 482, should quash such prosecutions at the initial stage to prevent the misuse of legal provisions.

Ultimately, the Supreme Court ruled that relatives of the husband should not be accused without clear, specific, and tangible evidence of their involvement in the alleged cruelty. The Court emphasized that vague or generalized accusations against distant relatives should be dismissed at the outset, to avoid the abuse of legal processes.

Key Legal Principles Reaffirmed

In its judgment, the Supreme Court reaffirmed several critical legal principles concerning the application and potential misuse of Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC):

- 1. Necessity for Specific Allegations:** The Court emphasized that vague and generalized allegations without specific details such as time, place, and manner of the alleged cruelty are insufficient to sustain charges under Section 498A. Such allegations cannot justify the initiation of criminal proceedings.
- 2. Protection of Innocent Relatives:** The Court highlighted the importance of safeguarding innocent family members from unwarranted legal proceedings. It stressed that distant relatives should not be implicated in dowry harassment cases without clear and specific evidence of their involvement.
- 3. Judicial Scrutiny to Prevent Misuse:** Reiterating the principles laid down in *State of Haryana v. Ch. Bhajan Lal* (1992), the Court underscored the need for courts to exercise caution and conduct a preliminary inquiry before framing charges under Section 498A. This scrutiny is essential to prevent the misuse of legal provisions and to ensure that they are not employed for personal vendettas.
- 4. Retaliatory Motive in Filing Complaints:** The Court observed that complaints filed as a countermeasure to personal grievances, such as a divorce petition, are indicative of a retaliatory motive. Such complaints lack the bona fide intent to address genuine grievances and are likely to be misused to harass the accused.
- 5. Prevention of Abuse of Legal Process:** The Court reiterated that criminal proceedings should not be initiated based on frivolous or baseless allegations. The misuse of Section 498A to settle personal scores undermines the legal system and the protection it intends to offer to genuine victims of cruelty.

These reaffirmed principles serve as a critical reminder of the necessity for specificity and evidence in allegations under Section 498A and the importance of protecting individuals from the misuse of legal provisions.

Critical Commentary

The Supreme Court's recent ruling on Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) marks a significant step toward recalibrating the application of this provision, which has long been a subject of debate due to concerns over its misuse.

1. Judicial Oversight and Protection of Fundamental Rights

The Court's emphasis on the necessity for specific and substantiated allegations before implicating distant relatives underscores the judiciary's role in safeguarding individuals' fundamental rights against unwarranted legal proceedings. By directing trial courts to examine the tangible evidence before framing charges, the Court aims to prevent the misuse of legal provisions for personal vendettas.

2. Addressing the Over-Implication Phenomenon

The ruling highlights the growing trend of over-implication, where distant relatives are named in complaints without clear evidence of their involvement. This practice not only burdens the accused but also dilutes the seriousness of genuine cases of dowry harassment. The Court's directive to scrutinize such over-implications serves as a deterrent against the misuse of legal provisions to exert pressure on the husband's family.

3. Reaffirmation of Legal Precedents

By referencing precedents like *State of Haryana v. Ch. Bhajan Lal* (1992) and *Arnesh Kumar v. State of Bihar* (2014), the Supreme Court reinforces the principle that criminal proceedings should not be initiated based on vague or general allegations. These precedents advocate for a preliminary inquiry to ascertain the veracity of the allegations before proceeding with the case.

4. Balancing Protection and Prevention of Misuse

While Section 498A is a crucial tool for protecting women from cruelty and dowry harassment, its potential for misuse necessitates a balanced approach. The Court's ruling seeks to ensure that the provision serves its intended purpose without being exploited to settle personal scores. This balance is essential for maintaining the integrity of legal processes and upholding justice.

Case Laws

1. State of Haryana v. Ch. Bhajan Lal (1992) 1 SCC 335

Citation:

State of Haryana v. Ch. Bhajan Lal, 1992 1 SCC 335

Facts:

In this case, the accused, Ch. Bhajan Lal, was charged under various provisions of the Indian Penal Code, including Section 304B (dowry death). The criminal proceedings were initiated based on a complaint by the deceased's family alleging dowry harassment and eventual death by suicide. However, the accused filed a petition to quash the charges, arguing that the allegations were vague and baseless. The accused contended that the complaint was politically motivated and that the allegations of dowry harassment lacked any substantial proof.

Arguments:

- **Appellant's Arguments (Ch. Bhajan Lal):**

The appellant's counsel argued that the allegations made by the complainant were vague and lacked any specific details. The charge of dowry death and cruelty were unfounded, and the proceedings were initiated out of personal animosity. The counsel also contended that no direct evidence supported the claims, and the entire case was based on assumptions and conjectures.

- **Respondent's Arguments (State of Haryana):**

The prosecution argued that the allegations of dowry harassment and subsequent death due to dowry-related cruelty should be investigated thoroughly. The complainants alleged a pattern of mistreatment, which led to the death of the deceased, and thus, the case warranted a full investigation and trial.

Legal Issue:

Whether criminal proceedings could be quashed if the allegations were vague and lacked substantial evidence.

Judgment:

The Supreme Court, in this case, ruled that criminal proceedings under Sections 498A and 304B IPC could be quashed if the allegations made in the FIR were vague and lacked

specificity. The Court emphasized that the allegations must not be based on mere assumptions or politically motivated claims. The Court held that criminal proceedings could be quashed at the pre-trial stage if there was no sufficient material to proceed with the case.

Reasoning:

The Court laid down a significant legal principle, known as the *Bhajan Lal* guidelines, which allows for the quashing of criminal proceedings when the allegations are vague or manifestly absurd. This decision reinforces the notion that criminal law should not be used as a tool for harassment and should only proceed if there is clear evidence to substantiate the claims.

2. Arnesh Kumar v. State of Bihar (2014) 8 SCC 273

Citation:

Arnesh Kumar v. State of Bihar, (2014) 8 SCC 273

Facts:

In this case, the appellant, Arnesh Kumar, was arrested under Section 498A IPC for allegedly subjecting his wife to dowry-related cruelty. The arrest was made immediately after the FIR was filed, without a preliminary inquiry or investigation. Arnesh Kumar challenged the legality of his arrest, arguing that his fundamental rights were violated because the police had made the arrest without following due process or conducting an inquiry as required by law.

Arguments:

- **Appellant's Arguments (Arnesh Kumar):**

The appellant's counsel argued that the arrest was made arbitrarily without a preliminary inquiry, as mandated by law. The counsel pointed out that the police failed to follow the guidelines for arrest, and the accused was denied an opportunity to explain his side before being taken into custody.

- **Respondent's Arguments (State of Bihar):**

The prosecution argued that the arrest was justified under Section 498A IPC, as the allegations against the appellant were serious and warranted immediate action. They emphasized that the case involved accusations of dowry-related cruelty, which required swift intervention by the authorities to protect the rights of the complainant.

Legal Issue:

Whether police should conduct a preliminary inquiry before making an arrest in cases involving dowry harassment under Section 498A IPC.

Judgment:

The Supreme Court held that in cases under Section 498A IPC, the police must conduct a preliminary inquiry before making an arrest. The Court emphasized that arresting individuals in such cases without investigation leads to unnecessary harassment. The Court referred to its previous judgment in *Sakshi v. Union of India* (2004), which highlighted the need for caution in dowry harassment cases to prevent misuse of the law.

Reasoning:

The Court's ruling was aimed at curbing the misuse of Section 498A, ensuring that arrests are made only when there is substantial evidence, and not merely based on vague accusations. This judgment reinforced the principle of preventing arbitrary arrest and ensuring that police investigations are conducted fairly and in a manner that respects the fundamental rights of the accused.

3. Preeti Gupta v. State of Jharkhand (2010) 7 SCC 667

Citation:

Preeti Gupta v. State of Jharkhand, (2010) 7 SCC 667

Facts:

The appellant, Preeti Gupta, was married to the respondent, and soon after their marriage, she alleged that her husband and his family subjected her to dowry harassment. In her complaint, she accused the family members of demanding dowry and mentally torturing her. However, the accused family members filed a petition challenging the allegations, asserting that they were false and motivated. They argued that the dowry harassment charge was misused as a tool for matrimonial dispute settlement.

Arguments:

- **Appellant's Arguments (Preeti Gupta):**

The appellant argued that she had been subjected to dowry harassment and that her family's repeated pleas to her husband's family to stop the torture were ignored. She

claimed that the cruelty she faced led to mental distress and abuse, warranting legal intervention under Section 498A.

- **Respondent's Arguments (State of Jharkhand):**

The respondent argued that the allegations were fabricated, and the case was a result of a marital dispute. The accused family members contended that the charges were baseless, and there was no evidence to support the claims of dowry harassment.

Legal Issue:

Whether Section 498A IPC can be misused, and if safeguards are necessary to protect against false allegations.

Judgment:

The Supreme Court in this case acknowledged the possibility of misuse of Section 498A IPC. The Court emphasized that Section 498A should not be used as a weapon for vengeance or personal disputes. The Court directed the lower courts to take extra caution and examine the evidence thoroughly before proceeding with such cases.

Reasoning:

The Court recognized the growing trend of false implications under Section 498A and acknowledged that the law was being used in some instances to harass innocent people. The Court emphasized that strict safeguards were necessary to prevent misuse and that allegations of dowry harassment should not be made frivolously.

Comparison

Conclusion

The Supreme Court's recent ruling underscores the necessity for judicial prudence in applying Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code, particularly concerning the inclusion of distant relatives in dowry harassment cases. By emphasizing the requirement for specific and substantiated allegations, the Court aims to prevent the misuse of this provision, ensuring that it serves its intended purpose of protecting women from genuine instances of cruelty. This decision aligns with previous judgments that caution against the over-implication of family members without clear evidence, thereby reinforcing the principle that legal proceedings should not be initiated based on vague or generalized accusations. Ultimately, the ruling seeks

to balance the protection of women's rights with the safeguarding of individuals from unwarranted legal harassment.

References

Books:

1. **"The Indian Penal Code"** by R.K. Gupta and D.P. Kohli
 - A comprehensive guide on the Indian Penal Code, including detailed sections on Section 498A and its application.
2. **"Dowry and Domestic Violence Law"** by M. R. Madhavan
 - This book covers the legal framework around dowry harassment, focusing on Section 498A and related legal provisions.
3. **"The Law of Domestic Violence"** by N.R. Madhava Menon
 - An authoritative text discussing various aspects of domestic violence laws in India, including the misuse and judicial perspective on Section 498A.
4. **"Law of Crimes in India"** by R.K. Sinha
 - A critical analysis of the various crimes under the Indian Penal Code, including Section 498A and judicial rulings related to it.

Journals:

1. **"Journal of Indian Law and Society"**
 - Publishes articles and research papers on various legal issues in India, including domestic violence and dowry harassment laws.
2. **"Indian Journal of Criminal Law"**
 - Features in-depth analysis of criminal law in India, including the legal and social implications of Section 498A.
3. **"Constitutional and Administrative Law Review"**
 - This journal provides articles on landmark Supreme Court judgments, including those concerning the application and misuse of Section 498A.

Websites:

1. **Law Trend** (lawtrend.in)
 - Provides timely updates on Supreme Court rulings, including the recent case on Section 498A, with analysis and implications.

2. Legal India (legalindia.com)

- A legal resource offering detailed articles, case studies, and commentary on Indian laws, including Section 498A and its legal impact.

3. Verdictum (verdictum.in)

- Offers a thorough analysis of Indian legal decisions and their impact, including those related to Section 498A and dowry harassment cases.

Case Law:

1. State of Haryana v. Ch. Bhajan Lal, 1992 1 SCC 335

- The Supreme Court's ruling on when criminal proceedings can be quashed based on vague or baseless allegations.

2. Arnesh Kumar v. State of Bihar, (2014) 8 SCC 273

- The Court's decision emphasizing the need for a preliminary inquiry before arresting individuals in dowry harassment cases.

3. Preeti Gupta v. State of Jharkhand, (2010) 7 SCC 667

- The Court's discussion on the misuse of Section 498A and the need for safeguards to avoid false accusations.

4. Sakshi v. Union of India, (2004) 5 SCC 518

- Landmark ruling recognizing the need for stringent laws to protect women from dowry-related abuse while balancing fairness in legal procedures.

5. Payal Sharma v. State of Punjab, 2024

- A recent case addressing over-implication of the husband's family in dowry harassment complaints under Section 498A.