



CIVIL

Bombay High Court Quashes Charges Against Bank Manager in Modesty Insult Case: Balancing Women's Rights and Fair Treatment

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PUBLISHED 8 May 2025

In a significant ruling, the Bombay High Court has quashed charges against Satyaswarup Meshram, an Assistant General Manager at the State Bank of India (SBI), who was accused of insulting the modesty of a female employee under Section 509 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). The case, *Satyaswarup Meshram v. State of Maharashtra* (Criminal Application No. 736 of 2023), was heard at the Nagpur Bench of the Bombay High Court. This judgment outlines the broader issue of balancing women's rights with the fair treatment of individuals accused of offenses.

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Background of the Case

Satyaswarup Meshram, the applicant, was posted as an Assistant General Manager at the SBI in Gondia. On August 11, 2021, he visited the Bhandara Branch for a review of the employees' performance. During this meeting, Meshram allegedly made a comment to the complainant, a Senior Clerk at the bank, suggesting that she should try to convince the customer as she convinces her husband. The complainant felt that these words insulted her modesty and lodged a complaint with the police on November 13, 2022, more than a year after the incident. The police registered a First Information Report (FIR) under Section 509 IPC, and Meshram was subsequently charge-sheeted.

Rival Contentions

Meshram, through his counsel, argued that the words he used were intended for the better administration of the bank and did not intend to insult the complainant's modesty. He contended that the prerequisites to attract Section 509 IPC were absent and sought the quashing of the charge-sheet. On the other hand, the State, represented by the Additional Public Prosecutor and counsel for the complainant, argued that there was sufficient material on record to show Meshram's complicity in the alleged offense. They submitted that the words used by Meshram were intended to insult the complainant's modesty and that the FIR's allegations constituted the offense under Section 509 IPC.

Legal Provisions and Judgments Relied Upon

The court analysed Section 509 IPC, which states that anyone who, with the intention of insulting the modesty of a woman, utters any word, makes any sound or gesture, or exhibits any object, intending that such word or sound shall be heard, or that such gesture or object shall be seen by the woman, or intrudes upon her privacy. The court also relied on the Delhi High Court judgment in *Varun Bhatia v. State and Another*, which discussed the essential ingredients of Section 509 IPC, emphasizing that the intention to insult a woman's modesty is a crucial element. Additionally, the court referred to the Supreme Court judgment in *State of Punjab v. Major Singh*, which clarified that the test for outraging modesty is whether a reasonable man would think that the act was intended to outrage the woman's modesty, focusing on the intention and knowledge of the accused rather than the woman's reaction.

Analysis of the Court

The court carefully examined the facts and the legal provisions. It noted that the words allegedly used by Meshram, while potentially disgraceful, did not meet the threshold of insulting a woman's modesty as required by Section 509 IPC. The court highlighted that Meshram's role as an Assistant General Manager involved administrative responsibilities, including overseeing staff performance and ensuring compliance with organizational policies. The court found that the context of the conversation was aimed at improving the complainant's performance, not insulting her modesty. The court also considered the delay in lodging the FIR, which was filed more than a year after the incident. This delay, coupled with the lack of evidence showing an intent to insult the complainant's modesty, led the court to conclude that the charge under Section 509 IPC was not substantiated.

Final Decision

The Bombay High Court allowed the criminal application and quashed the charge-sheet against Satyaswarup Meshram. The court held that the allegations, even if taken at face value, did not constitute an offense under Section 509 IPC. The court emphasized that compelling Meshram to face trial under these circumstances would be unjust and improper. Consequently, the court set aside the charge-sheet and the related criminal case.

Conclusion

The Bombay High Court's decision in *Satyaswarup Meshram v. State of Maharashtra* highlights the importance of context and intent in determining whether an act constitutes an offense under Section 509 IPC. The court's careful analysis highlights the need for clear evidence of intent to insult a woman's modesty, emphasizing that administrative comments, even if harsh, do not necessarily meet this threshold. This judgment is a reminder that the law must balance the protection of women's rights with the fair treatment of individuals accused of offenses. The court's ruling ensures that justice is served while maintaining the delicate balance between safeguarding women's rights and ensuring fair treatment for the accused.

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