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No Public View, No Offence: Telangana HC Clarifies Limits of SC/ST Act in Marital Disputes

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PUBLISHED 25 August 2025

Introduction

The Telangana High Court's decision in Smt. K. Swathi v. The State of Telangana & Another[1] marks a defining moment in the interpretation of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Telangana High Court has ruled that caste-based insults exchanged between spouses in the privacy of their home cannot be treated as an offence under the Act unless made in "public view." Justice E.V. Venugopal, however, drew a crucial distinction: not every caste-related remark amounts to an "atrocity" under the law. For an offence to stand, the humiliation must take place in public view, exposing the victim to the indignity of social disgrace. Since the alleged insults occurred within the private confines of a home, and without independent witnesses, the Court quashed the proceedings. This ruling is more than a resolution of a marital dispute, it reaffirms the Act's true purpose i.e. shielding SC/ST communities from systemic public humiliation and discrimination, while ensuring it is not misapplied in private quarrels.

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Background

The case arose out of Criminal Petition No. 3799 of 2021, filed before the Telangana High Court seeking to quash proceedings in S.C. No. 229 of 2020, pending before the Special Sessions Judge for SC/STs (POA) Act, Ranga Reddy District.

The dispute traces back to an inter-caste marriage solemnised in 2014 between the complainant, a member of a Scheduled Caste, and the petitioner-wife, belonging to the Kapu community. After initial years together, serious marital discord developed, leading to their separation and a divorce decree granted in 2019. Subsequently, the husband lodged a complaint alleging that his wife subjected him to caste-based slurs, threats, and harassment. Based on these allegations, the police registered offences under Section 504 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and Sections 3(1)(r) and 3(1)(s) of the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Amendment Act, 2015. The petitioner challenged the proceedings on the ground that the alleged remarks were confined to the privacy of the home, away from public view, and thus outside the ambit of the special legislation.

It was also highlighted that there was a delay of nearly ten months between the alleged incident in July 2018 and the filing of the complaint, raising questions on the credibility of the accusations. On the other hand, the complainant argued that whether the acts occurred in "public view" had been wrongly applied to a private domestic dispute.

Court's Judgment and Reasoning

Justice E.V. Venugopal examined whether the allegations, even if accepted at face value, disclosed an offence under Sections 3(1)(r) and 3(1)(s) of the SC/ST Act. The Court stressed the statutory requirement that caste-based insults or intimidation must occur "in any place within public view" for the provisions to apply.

Key observations of the Court included:

1. **Domestic setting not 'public view':** The alleged remarks arose out of marital discord and were made within the private confines of the couple's residence. No independent witnesses were present, and no evidence suggested that the humiliation occurred in a public space.
2. **Delay weakens credibility:** The Court took note of the substantial delay in lodging the complaint, which cast doubt on the veracity of the allegations.
3. The law was enacted to shield SC/ST individuals from targeted humiliation and discrimination in public life, not to convert every private marital spat into a criminal offence under special legislation.
   In this case, there was no evidence that the alleged caste-based slurs were uttered in public or in front of independent witnesses. Continuing the prosecution, the Court held, would therefore amount to an abuse of legal process rather than the

pursuit of justice.

On this basis, the High Court concluded that continuation of proceedings would amount to an **abuse of the process of law**. It accordingly quashed the charges under Sections 3(1)(r) and 3(1)(s) of the SC/ST Act, while highlighting that the Act is intended to address systemic and public humiliation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, not private quarrels behind closed doors.

Reliance on Precedents

The Telangana High Court's ruling drew strength from a consistent line of judicial precedents that underlined the importance of the "public view" requirement.

In Hitesh Verma v. State of Uttarakhand[2], the Supreme Court made it clear that the SC/ST Act cannot be stretched to cover insults arising out of purely private disputes, especially when those quarrels are unrelated to caste identity.

More recently, both the Supreme Court and the Kerala High Court have reiterated that without the element of public view, allegations of caste-based slurs cannot sustain prosecution under Sections 3(1)(r) and 3(1)(s).
These rulings establish a clear judicial thread: the SC/ST Act is meant to punish public humiliation, not private altercations hidden from the public eye.

Implications of the Ruling

The Telangana High Court's decision carries wide significance, both legally and socially:

Clearer Boundaries of the Law: The ruling narrows the scope of offences under the SC/ST Act to cases of public humiliation, making it clear that private spousal quarrels cannot automatically invite the rigours of this special legislation.

Prevention of Misuse: By striking down the charges, the Court sent a strong message that protective laws should not be weaponized for settling personal scores, particularly in the aftermath of marital discord.
Preserving the Act's Core Purpose: Importantly, the judgment does not dilute the Act's protective spirit. Its primary aim shielding SC/ST individuals from systemic discrimination and public humiliation remains firmly intact.In essence, the ruling draws a sharp line between genuine protection against caste atrocities and misapplication of the law in private disputes, ensuring that the Act continues to serve its intended purpose without being stretched beyond its limits.

Conclusion

The Telangana High Court's ruling in this case is more than a resolution of a marital dispute, it is a powerful reminder of the delicate balance the judiciary must maintain, protecting the dignity of marginalized communities while guarding against the misuse of protective laws in personal disputes. By reaffirming that the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act applies only when caste-based insults occur in public view, the Court has drawn a decisive boundary: private altercations, however offensive, do not meet the threshold of a public atrocity. In doing so, the judgment not only safeguards the spirit of the Act, shielding SC/ST individuals from systemic discrimination and humiliation, but also ensures that its extraordinary provisions are reserved for genuine cases of public harm, not private quarrels behind closed doors. This judgment highlights a vital principle: protective legislation must remain a shield against systemic oppression, not a sword wielded in personal conflicts. At the same time, it reminds us that caste-based slurs, even in private, are socially reprehensible and corrosive to the values of equality and respect.

For more details, write to us at: contact@indialaw.in

[1] Crlp NO. 3799 of 2021

[2] (2020) 10 SCC 710

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