BLOGS

Law of Abortion in India: Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 [2001 & 2002]

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Edit TABLE OF CONTENTS Introduction Evolution of Abortion Law in India The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 Amendments to the MTP Act Supreme Court's 2022 Judgment: Key Clarifications to the MTP Act Amendments Current Laws on Abortion in India Conclusion

Read this post to learn more about the law of abortion in India, focusing on the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act, and its amendments.

Introduction

The primary legislation governing abortion in India is the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act, first enacted in 1971, with subsequent amendments made in 2002, 2021, and most recently, clarifications provided by the Supreme Court in 2022. Here's a detailed look into the structure, amendments, implications, and challenges associated with abortion laws in India.

Evolution of Abortion Law in India

Prior to 1971, abortion was largely criminalized under the Indian Penal Code of 1860, with rare exceptions allowed only to save a woman's life. However, with high maternal mortality rates in the 1960s and increasing concern over unsafe abortion practices, the government formed the Shantilal Shah Committee in 1964 to study the issue.

Based on the committee's recommendations, the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 was enacted. This Act legalized abortion under specific conditions, marking a critical shift in women's healthcare and autonomy.

The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971

The MTP Act of 1971 provided a legal basis for abortion under the following conditions:

1. The Act allowed abortions up to 20 weeks, contingent upon meeting certain legal and medical requirements.
2. The law specified that abortion was permitted if:
    1. Continuing the pregnancy posed a risk to the woman's physical or mental health.
    2. There was a risk to the woman's life.
    3. The fetus displayed significant physical or mental abnormalities that could result in severe disabilities.
3. For pregnancies up to 12 weeks, the consent of one medical practitioner was required, while pregnancies between 12 and 20 weeks required the approval of two medical practitioners.
4. The Act made provisions for cases such as pregnancies resulting from rape or contraceptive failure, both viewed as justifiable grounds for abortion.

Amendments to the MTP Act

1. 2002 Amendment

The 2002 amendment to the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act aimed at improving access, particularly in rural areas, by permitting more registered medical practitioners to perform abortions in approved facilities, thereby broadening the range of available healthcare providers.

2. 2021 Amendment

To further align with advancements in reproductive rights, the 2021 amendment introduced significant changes:

- For certain groups, including survivors of rape, minors, and cases involving fetal abnormalities, the permissible period for abortion was extended to 24 weeks.
- The amendment mandated that the identity of the woman undergoing the procedure must remain confidential.
- For abortions up to 20 weeks, the approval of one medical practitioner is sufficient. Between 20 and 24 weeks, approval from two practitioners is required.
- The amendment allowed abortions beyond 24 weeks in cases where a medical board confirms substantial fetal abnormalities.

Supreme Court’s 2022 Judgment: Key Clarifications to the MTP Act Amendments

The Supreme Court’s 2022 judgment provided much-needed clarifications to the MTP Act, significantly expanding its interpretation. The Court held that both married and unmarried women could seek abortions due to contraceptive failure, establishing equality under the law.

The Court also emphasized that a woman’s decision regarding her body is a fundamental right, reinforcing the right to privacy. The ruling placed unmarried women on equal footing with married women regarding reproductive autonomy, reflecting a progressive stance on women’s rights.

The judgment underscored the importance of women’s rights over reproductive decisions, aligning Indian abortion law more closely with international reproductive rights standards.

Current Laws on Abortion in India

Based on the MTP Act and the Supreme Court’s interpretations, the current legal criteria for abortion are as follows:

- Abortion is generally allowed up to 24 weeks for certain groups, such as minors, differently-abled women, and rape survivors. In cases of substantial fetal abnormalities, abortion may be allowed beyond 24 weeks if recommended by a medical board.
- Eligible Categories for Abortion:
  - Rape and incest survivors.
  - Minors and women with disabilities.
  - Women facing risks to their health due to pregnancy.
  - Cases involving fetal abnormalities.
- The woman’s identity must be protected, and she must provide informed consent for the procedure.

Conclusion

Abortion remains a topic of ethical debate, particularly regarding the balance between fetal rights and the woman’s right to bodily autonomy. Varying religious, cultural, and moral beliefs influence

these discussions, creating challenges in reaching a national consensus on issues like gestational limits and permitted circumstances.

India's abortion laws represent a forward-looking approach to reproductive rights, with legal safeguards in place to protect women's health and autonomy. Despite these progressive legal provisions, abortion law in India faces significant challenges. Many rural areas lack registered medical facilities and trained practitioners, creating barriers for women in rural regions seeking safe abortions. Persistent cultural and social stigmas around abortion often discourage women from accessing legal and safe abortion services.

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