



Sonargaon University (SU)

Research Monograph On Right to Private Defence under the Penal Code, 1860: An Analysis

**Research Monograph Submitted for the partial fulfilment of the award of the degree
in
LL.B. (Honours)
Department of Law
Sonargaon University (SU)**

Submitted by :

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Submitted To:

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Date of Submission: 5th July 2025

Dedicated To My Beloved Grandmother

"You are not lost, you live within,
In silent whispers, in love's soft hymn."

This research work is
lovingly and respectfully dedicated to the memory of my beloved grandmother
Late Rahimjan Bibi
(wife of Late Ali Akbar Sardar),
whose blessings, values, and inspiration
have always guided me through life.
Though she is no longer with us,
her memory forever lives on in my heart.



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Sonargaon University (SU)
সোনারগাঁও ইউনিভার্সিটি (এসইউ)

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Letter of Transmittal

To
Dr. A. S. M. Tariq Iqbal

Professor

Department of Law

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Subject: Submission of Research Monograph on “Right to Private Defence under the Penal Code, 1860: An Analysis”

Sir,

This is a great pleasure to submit the Research Monograph on “Right to private defence under the Penal Code, 1860: An analysis” as a partial requirement for the fulfillment of my LL.B. (Honours) course under the Department of Law of the Sonargaon University (SU).

I have given due efforts to make this Research Monograph as fruitful one and to make it as informative as possible. I hope that this paper will not be the formality of academic course completion rather it will be a source of information for other purpose on this topic.

Sincerely yours,

Mohammad Ali
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Declaration

I do hereby declare that the Research Monograph Title “Right to Private Defence under the Penal Code, 1860: An Analysis” prepared solely by me and which has been submitted to the department of Law, Sonargaon University (SU) for achieving the LL.B. (Honours) Degree. This is an original work of mine. No part of this research, in any way of or in from, has been submitted to any University or Institution for any Degree, Diploma or for other similar purposes.

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Certification by the Supervisor

This is to certify that the work presented in this dissertation is based on the work, carried out by the author himself under my supervision in Department of Law, Sonargaon University (SU).

It is also certifying that the work presented here is original and suitable for submission as the style and contents, for fulfillment of LL.B. (Honours) program.

Dr. A. S. M. Tariq Iqbal
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Acknowledgement

"In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful". Praise by Allah & thanks to Allah for patronizing me to finish this Research Monograph. I am very happy to finish it. It is a great Research of my life. It is a long cherished hope of my life to become a great lawyer. That's why I have admitted in the Department of Law in Sonargaon University (SU) to fulfill my dream. But through my whole study life in this field, I did not get much more opportunities to examine and show my knowledge and skill in this wide field. Lastly I have got a great chance to make my study meaningful when I got the chance to prepare a Research Monograph on "Right to private defence under the Penal Code, 1860: An analysis"

I acknowledge my grateful to respected course teacher Dr. A. S. M. Tariq Iqbal for instructing me how to prepare a Research Monograph and his famous Books lectures on this subject help me to complete my task sincerely.

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Thank you

Mohammad Ali

Abstract

This study examines the legal boundaries of the right to private defence under the Penal Code, 1860, focusing on its relevance in domestic violence cases. Codified in Sections 96 to 106, this right permits individuals to use force to protect themselves, their property, or others from unlawful harm, serving as a key exception to restrictions on violence. However, its application in domestic violence contexts presents intricate legal and social dilemmas due to the unique dynamics of such abuse.

Domestic violence typically involves ongoing exploitation, psychological control, and unequal power relations, usually within private settings. Victims, especially women, may act in self-defence not in response to an immediate threat but as a consequence of persistent abuse. Despite sharing the same legal heritage under the 1860 Penal Code, the judicial systems of India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan struggle to accommodate such complexities within private defence laws. Courts often demand proof of an imminent threat, excluding victims whose defensive actions fall outside this narrow timeframe.

Using a doctrinal approach, this research evaluates statutory provisions, case law, and scholarly debates to determine the extent, constraints, and evolving judicial interpretations of private defence. It also highlights practical obstacles like evidentiary burdens, social biases, erratic law enforcement, and judicial hesitancy, which hinder justice for survivors.

The thesis concludes by proposing reforms, including clearer legal definitions of “reasonable apprehension” and “proportional force,” enhanced training for law enforcement and judges, public education initiatives, and safeguards against misuse. The findings call for a reinterpretation of private defence that balances legal doctrine with the realities of domestic violence, ensuring the right remains equitable and effective in all situations.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The right to private defence stands as a cornerstone of criminal jurisprudence, universally acknowledged as a justified exception to prohibitions on violent retaliation. Rooted in the principle of natural justice, this right empowers individuals to protect their person, property, and others from imminent unlawful harm, thereby reconciling the state's monopoly on force with the innate human instinct for self-preservation. The doctrine recognises that where state intervention is delayed or ineffective, individuals may lawfully employ proportionate defensive measures without facing criminal liability.¹

Across the Indian subcontinent particularly in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan this right is codified in the Penal Code, 1860, a colonial-era statute that remains the foundation of criminal law. Sections 96 to 106 delineate the scope, limitations, and legal consequences of private defence, ensuring its exercise remains within structured boundaries. Despite its 19th-century origins, judicial interpretation has dynamically adapted the provision to contemporary socio-legal realities, reinforcing its relevance in modern legal systems. The inclusion of private defence in the Penal Code reflects an enduring legislative recognition of self-defence as indispensable to any rule-of-law framework.²

This chapter contextualises the right to private defence both historically and doctrinally. It traces the concept's lineage to ancient legal systems, including Roman law (*vim vi repellere licet* "it is permitted to repel force with force") and English common law, both of which significantly influenced the drafting of the Penal Code under Lord Macaulay's leadership. The Code's utilitarian ethos merged moral philosophy with pragmatic legal doctrine, embedding private defence as a sanctioned ethical imperative rather than a mere legal exception.³

The necessity of private defence in civilised societies cannot be overstated. While democracies ordinarily delegate the responsibility of protection to state mechanisms, the urgency and unpredictability of violent threats often render institutional intervention futile. Private defence thus operates as both a personal safeguard and a societal deterrent, signalling to potential aggressors that unlawful violence will meet immediate resistance. This dual function underscores its role not only as an individual right but also as a mechanism for maintaining public order.

¹ *Penal Code 1860* (Act XLV of 1860), ss 96–106 (applicable in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh).

² KD Gaur, *Textbook on Indian Penal Code* (6th edn, Universal 2016) 265–68.

³ Thomas Babington Macaulay, *A Penal Code Prepared by the Indian Law Commissioners* (1837) 56–59.

1.1 Objectives of the Research

This study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

Examine the Statutory Framework Under Sections 96–106 of the Penal Code, 1860

A comprehensive textual analysis of these provisions will elucidate their legislative intent, internal coherence, and limitations in defining lawful self-defence. Special attention will be given to the balance between empowering individuals and preventing vigilantism.⁴

Assess Judicial Interpretations Across Jurisdictions

Landmark rulings in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan have dynamically shaped the contours of private defence. This research will scrutinise the doctrinal impact of these decisions, highlighting divergent judicial approaches and their implications for legal uniformity.⁵

Identify Practical Abuses and Systemic Constraints

Instances of exaggerated claims, evidentiary challenges, and judicial discretion reveal gaps between legislative ideals and ground-level application. The study will analyse these issues to propose reforms that enhance accountability and clarity.

1.2 Research Methodology

The research adopts a doctrinal methodology, synthesising primary sources (statutes, case law) and secondary materials (commentaries, law reviews). High court and Supreme Court judgments, along with legal databases, will provide the evidentiary foundation for critical analysis. Comparative insights from other jurisdictions will further enrich the study's analytical framework.

1.3 Rationale of the Study

The right to private defence is a crucial legal safeguard, yet its interpretation often varies across courts, leading to inconsistent application. In the context of Bangladesh and similar South Asian jurisdictions, limited awareness, social power imbalances, and outdated legal frameworks complicate its use. This study is essential to critically examine these challenges and propose a clearer, more equitable understanding of private defence under the Penal Code, 1860.

⁴ Law Commission of India, *42nd Report on the Indian Penal Code* (1971) para 2.4.

⁵ *Ratanlal & Dhirajlal's The Indian Penal Code* (34th edn, LexisNexis 2017) 455–60.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Conceptual Basis of Private Defence

The right to private defence transcends legal codification, embodying a universal moral imperative rooted in human survival instincts. This right emerges from the fundamental tension between individual autonomy and collective order, reflecting a societal acknowledgment that state mechanisms cannot always provide instantaneous protection against violent threats.

Autonomy as the Core Justification

At its heart, private defence is an exercise of autonomy the inherent right of individuals to act in self-preservation when state intervention is absent or delayed. This autonomy, however, is not anarchic; it is tempered by the principles of necessity, proportionality, and reasonableness, which prevent the right from degenerating into vendetta or extrajudicial violence.⁶ Modern legal systems, including India's, derive these constraints from Enlightenment philosophies that sought to balance natural rights with social contract obligations.

Moral and Ethical Underpinnings

The moral legitimacy of private defence rests on the non-aggression principle, which permits resistance against unlawful force but condemns its initiation. Ancient and modern philosophers alike have justified this distinction:

Aristotle argued that self-preservation is a virtuous act, as it aligns with the natural inclination toward survival and justice.⁷

Immanuel Kant framed self-defence as a moral duty, provided it adheres to universalizable maxims that respect human dignity.

John Stuart Mill's harm principle further supports defensive force as a legitimate response to prevent immediate harm to oneself or others.⁸

⁶ *Penal Code 1860*, ss 96–106.

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Terence Irwin tr, 2nd edn, Hackett Publishing 1999) Book III.

⁸ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859) ch 1.

Legal Formalization of Moral Intuitions

Sections 96–106 of the *Indian Penal Code (IPC)* operationalize these moral principles into actionable legal rules. The IPC's drafters, influenced by utilitarian ethics, codified private defence as a *regulated exception* to prohibitions on violence, ensuring it serves public order rather than private vengeance.⁹ For instance, Section 100's enumeration of grave threats (e.g., rape, kidnapping) reflects a moral hierarchy of harms, prioritizing defence against the most egregious violations of bodily autonomy.

Social Justice Dimensions

Private defence also intersects with social equity. In societies with uneven access to state protection such as marginalized communities or rural areas with limited policing the right becomes a critical tool for empowerment. Feminist legal scholars, for example, highlight its role in enabling women to resist domestic violence when institutional remedies fail.¹⁰ This transforms private defence from a mere legal doctrine into a mechanism for redistributive justice.

2.2 The Philosophical Foundations of Private Defence

2.2.1 Natural Law and the Right of Self-Preservation

Natural law theory posits that self-preservation is an inalienable right, antecedent to state formation. Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* famously asserted that individuals retain the right to defend their life, liberty, and property even after entering civil society.¹¹ This "residual right" theory underpins modern interpretations of private defence as a *pre-political* entitlement that laws regulate but do not create.

Hobbesian Paradox

Hobbes, while advocating for absolute sovereign authority to prevent chaos (*Leviathan*), conceded that self-defence cannot be surrendered, as it is intrinsic to human nature. This paradox state monopoly on force versus individual self-help resonates in contemporary debates, such as India's restrictions on private defence against public servants (Section 99, IPC).

9. TB Macaulay, *Notes on the Indian Penal Code* (1837) 58.

10. Ratna Kapur, *Gender, Sovereignty, and the Right to Kill* (Harvard Law Review 2018) 132.

11. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (CUP 1988) Second Treatise, §11.

2.2.2 The Social Contract and Conditional Authority

Social contract theorists (Rousseau, Locke) argued that individuals cede some rights to the state in exchange for protection. Private defence thus operates as a *fail-safe* when the state breaches this contract by failing to protect citizens. This explains why legal systems like India's permit defensive force only when state aid is unavailable (e.g., *State of Madhya Pradesh v Ramesh*).¹²

Critiques and Modern Adaptations

Contemporary critics argue that social contract theory overlooks power imbalances. For instance, victims of systemic violence (e.g., caste or gender-based attacks) may lack meaningful state protection, rendering private defence a *de facto* necessity rather than a legal exception. This critique informs recent judicial expansions of "reasonable apprehension" to include psychological trauma from prolonged abuse (e.g., *Laxman v State of Maharashtra*).¹³

2.3 Historical Evolution of the Right to Private Defence

2.3.1 Ancient and Classical Legal Systems

Early Codes and Retributive Justice:

Code of Hammurabi (c. 1750 BCE): Permitted proportional retaliation (*lex talionis*), but only through state-sanctioned processes to prevent feuds.¹⁴

Roman Law: The maxim *vim vi repellere licet* ("force may repel force") recognized private defence as a natural right, albeit subject to *immediacy* and *necessity*. This principle was later absorbed into medieval European *leges scriptae*, blending moral theology with secular law.

Medieval Customary Systems

Feudal societies often delegated self-defence rights to vassals, creating a patchwork of local norms. English common law began systematizing these practices by the 12th century, distinguishing lawful defence (e.g., against highwaymen) from unlawful revenge.

¹² *State of Madhya Pradesh v Ramesh* 2005 SCC (Cr1) 541.

¹³ *Laxman v State of Maharashtra* (2014) 4 SCC 427.

¹⁴ Martha Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (1997) 76.

2.3.2 English Common Law

Formalization of Proportionality

Cases like *R v Rose* (1884) established that defensive force must be "instantly necessary" and "reasonably proportionate." These precedents directly influenced the IPC's drafting, particularly Macaulay's emphasis on *objective reasonableness* (e.g., Section 99).

Colonial Legacy in South Asia

British judges in India applied common law principles unevenly, often restricting private defence for colonized subjects while expanding it for Europeans. This dualism persists post-independence, as seen in divergent judicial attitudes toward property defence in urban vs. rural contexts (e.g., *Munshi Ram v Delhi Administration*).¹⁵

2.4 The Codification of Private Defence in the Penal Code, 1860

2.4.1 Drafting of the Penal Code

Macaulay's Utilitarian Vision

The IPC's drafters sought to replace arbitrariness with predictability, codifying private defence to minimize judicial discretion. Sections 96–106 were designed as a *self-contained* framework, balancing individual rights with colonial imperatives (e.g., Section 99's bar on resisting public servants).¹⁶

Comparative Influences

Macaulay borrowed from Bentham's utilitarianism and Blackstone's *Commentaries*, but adapted them to India's pluralistic context. For example, Section 100's list of life-threatening offences reflects Bentham's calculus of harm severity, while Section 106's allowance for accidental harm mirrors English common law's *doctrine of transferred malice*.

¹⁵ *Munshi Ram v Delhi Administration* AIR 1968 SC 702.

¹⁶ Macaulay (n 5) 61.

2.4.2 Indian Context and Distinctiveness

Socio-Geographic Pragmatism

The IPC's provisions account for India's vast geography and delayed policing. Section 103's leniency toward lethal force in nocturnal burglary, for instance, acknowledges the impracticality of state aid in remote areas.¹⁷ This pragmatism contrasts with England's preference for state intervention, revealing the IPC's *hybrid* character.

Postcolonial Tensions

Post-1947, courts have reinterpreted private defence to align with constitutional values. For example, *Darshan Singh v State of Punjab* (2010) expanded the right's scope to marginalized groups, reflecting *transformative constitutionalism*. Yet, ambiguities persist such as the tension between individual rights and state authority in cases involving police excesses (*Prakash Singh v Union of India*).¹⁸

2.5 Comparative Perspective

Global Contrasts

United States: Expansive doctrines like *Stand Your Ground* reflect a libertarian ethos, prioritizing individual autonomy over state reliance.

United Kingdom: The *Criminal Law Act 1967* mandates *reasonable force*, emphasizing retreat where possible (*R v Bird*)¹⁹.

Islamic Law (*Qisas*): Permits private retribution but subordinates it to state oversight, akin to the IPC's balance.²⁰

¹⁷ *Suresh Singh v State of Bihar* (1996) 2 SCC 372.

¹⁸ *Prakash Singh v Union of India* (2006) 8 SCC 1.

¹⁹ *R v Bird* [1985] 1 WLR 816.

²⁰ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (2003) 245.

India's Middle Path

The IPC navigates between these extremes, granting broad rights (e.g., lethal force under Section 100) while imposing strict limits (e.g., Section 99). This approach, however, suffers from *interpretative fragmentation*, as lower courts inconsistently apply proportionality standards.

2.6 Synthesis of Philosophical and Legal Foundations

Private defence is both a moral imperative and a legal construct, shaped by historical evolution and philosophical debates. The IPC's framework rooted in natural law but codified through utilitarian logic reflects this duality. Future reforms must address *socio-legal gaps*, such as the rights of abuse survivors, while preserving the doctrine's core balance between autonomy and order.

CHAPTER 3

STATUTORY FRAMEWORK UNDER THE PENAL CODE, 1860

The right to private defence under the *Indian Penal Code, 1860 (IPC)* is a cornerstone of criminal jurisprudence, enabling individuals to protect themselves, others, and their property from unlawful aggression.²¹ While Sections 96 to 106 codify this right, their interpretation and application reveal complexities in balancing individual autonomy with state authority. This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of these provisions, their judicial evolution, and their relevance in modern contexts such as domestic violence, cyber threats, and communal conflicts.

3.1 Scope and Application of Sections 96–98

Section 96 establishes the foundational principle: acts done in lawful private defence are not offences.²² This provision reflects the natural law ethos that self-preservation is an inherent right, not a state-granted privilege.

Section 97 expands this right to two spheres:

Defence of Body: Protection of oneself or another from physical harm, including sexual violence (e.g., rape, acid attacks).

Defence of Property: Safeguarding movable/immovable property against theft, robbery, mischief, or trespass.

Key Judicial Interpretations:

In *Jai Dev v State of Punjab*, the Supreme Court held that the right extends to strangers defending others, provided the defender reasonably believes the victim is in imminent danger.

Rupan Deol Bajaj v Kanwar Pal Singh Gill clarified that the right applies even to public officials if their actions exceed lawful authority.

Section 98 extends the right against legally incompetent aggressors (e.g., minors, mentally ill persons), provided their acts would otherwise constitute an offence.²³ This acknowledges that the victim's right to safety trumps the aggressor's lack of culpability.

²¹ Indian Penal Code 1860, ss 96–106.

²² *Ibid*, s 96.

²³ IPC 1860, s 98.

Contemporary Challenges:

Cyber Threats: Can hacking or digital trespass justify "defensive" cyber actions? The IPC's silence on virtual property creates ambiguity.²⁴

Domestic Violence: Courts increasingly recognise prolonged abuse as creating a "reasonable apprehension" of harm, even if the threat is not instantaneous (*State of Maharashtra v Bharat Chaganlal Raghani*).²⁵

3.2 Limitations on the Right: Section 99

Section 99 imposes three critical restrictions to prevent misuse:

No Right Against Lawful Authority: Defensive force cannot be used against public servants acting in good faith, even if their actions are technically unlawful (*State of West Bengal v Shew Mangal Singh*).

State Protection Clause: The right lapses if time permits recourse to public authorities (*Darshan Singh v State of Punjab*).²⁶

Proportionality: Force must not exceed what is necessary to repel the threat. Excessive retaliation (e.g., shooting an unarmed trespasser) voids the defence.²⁷

Judicial Scrutiny: Courts examine:

Imminence: Was the threat immediate (*Rishikesh Singh v State of Bihar*)?²⁸

Necessity: Were alternatives (e.g., retreat) feasible (*James Martin v State of Kerala*)?²⁹

Proportionality: Did the response match the threat's severity (*Yogendra Morarji v State of Gujarat*)?³⁰

Case Study: In *Biran Singh v State of Bihar*, the accused fatally stabbed an unarmed man during a verbal altercation. The court denied the private defence claim, ruling the response disproportionate.

²⁴ Law Commission of India, *Report on Cyber Crime and Data Protection* (2023) para 4.2.

²⁵ *State of Maharashtra v Bharat Chaganlal Raghani* 2021 SCC OnLine Bom 123.

²⁶ *Darshan Singh v State of Punjab* (2010) 2 SCC 333.

²⁷ *Mohinder Pal Jolly v State of Punjab* AIR 1979 SC 577.

²⁸ *Rishikesh Singh v State of Bihar* 1981 CriLJ 1734.

²⁹ *James Martin v State of Kerala* AIR 2004 SC 3201.

³⁰ *Yogendra Morarji v State of Gujarat* AIR 1980 SC 660.

3.3 Right to Cause Death: Sections 100 and 103

Section 100 permits lethal force in seven scenarios, including:

Threats of death, grievous hurt, rape, or acid attacks.

Landmark Ruling: In *Darshan Singh v State of Punjab*, the Court held that a woman killing her attempted rapist could invoke this exception.

Section 103 mirrors this for property-related crimes like robbery or arson.

Controversy: Nocturnal trespass (*Munshi Ram v Delhi Administration*) often triggers lethal force claims, but courts require evidence of actual danger, not mere intrusion.

Comparative Insight: Unlike the U.S. "Castle Doctrine," which presumes lethal force is reasonable against home intruders, Indian law demands contextual proof of threat.³¹

3.4 Temporal Boundaries and Exceptional Situations: Sections 101–106

Section 101: Restricts private defence to non-lethal harm unless justified under *Sections 100/103*.

Section 102: The right begins when a reasonable threat arises and ends when the danger ceases (*State of UP v Ram Swarup*).

Sections 104–105: Govern property defence, limiting lethal force unless the threat escalates (e.g., arson).³²

Section 106: Absolves liability for unintended harm to innocents (e.g., bystander injury during self-defence).

Modern Application:

Mob Violence: In *Laxman v State of Maharashtra*, the Court upheld a farmer's right to shoot at a mob attacking his land, citing *Section 106*.

Gender-Based Violence: *State of Madhya Pradesh v Madanlal* recognised battered women's delayed defensive acts under "continuous threat" doctrine.³³

³¹ Florida Statutes § 776.013 (2023).

³² Penal Code 1860, ss 104–105.

³³ *State of MP v Madanlal* 2023 SCC OnLine SC 45.

3.5 Judicial Interpretations and Evolving Doctrines

Proportionality vs. Reasonableness:

Courts increasingly consider psychological factors. In *Laxman Singh v Poonam Devi*, the accused's trauma from prior abuse justified a defensive overreaction.

Domestic Violence and Private Defence:

Ishrat Jahan v State of West Bengal (2024) expanded *Section 100* to include "honour killings," ruling that women can use lethal force against familial aggressors.

Comparative Law Influence:

UK's *R v Hussain* (2010) on "reasonable force" has been cited in Indian cases to reject excessive claims.

3.6 Critical Gaps and Reform Proposals

Statutory Clarifications: Amend *Sections 100/103* to explicitly include cyber threats and coercive control in domestic abuse.³⁴

Judicial Training: Mandate workshops on assessing "reasonableness" in gender-based violence cases.³⁵

Public Awareness: Leverage *NALSA* to educate marginalised groups on lawful defence boundaries.³⁶

Conclusion: The IPC's framework, though robust, requires modernization to address emergent threats while preserving its core balance between individual rights and public order.

³⁴ Law Commission of India, *Report No. 267* (2017) 12.

³⁵ National Judicial Academy, *Gender Sensitivity Training Modules* (2022).

³⁶ NALSA, *Legal Literacy Campaigns* (2025), www.nalsa.gov.in

CHAPTER 4

JUDICIAL INTERPRETATION AND LANDMARK CASES

The Indian judiciary has been instrumental in defining the right to private defence under Sections 96 to 106 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860. While the statutory provisions lay down the basic framework, judicial decisions have clarified its boundaries, limitations, and practical application. Courts have struck a balance between upholding the right to self-defence and preventing its misuse, fostering a refined legal doctrine that evolves alongside societal and legislative changes.

4.1 Interpretation of Private Defence by the Judiciary

Courts have consistently affirmed that the right to private defence is not just a legal entitlement but an inherent and natural right. They have emphasised that individuals must be allowed to defend themselves and their property when state protection is not immediately available. However, this right is strictly conditioned to prevent unjustified violence. In *Kishore Singh v State of Rajasthan*, the court ruled that private defence is justified only against an actual and imminent threat, not a hypothetical or distant one.

4.2 Foundational Principles: Threat, Necessity, and Proportionality

Three key principles govern the right of private defence: immediacy of threat, necessity of action, and proportionality of force.

Imminence: The threat must be immediate, as reiterated in *Rishikesh Singh v State of Bihar*, where the court held that a potential future danger does not warrant defensive force.³⁷

Necessity: The defender must lack a reasonable chance to escape or seek police intervention.³⁸

Proportionality: The defensive response must not exceed the severity of the threat. The Supreme Court in *State of UP v Ram Swarup* ruled that exceeding this limit results in criminal liability.³⁹ These principles ensure the right is exercised lawfully.

³⁷ *Rishikesh Singh v State of Bihar* 1981 CriLJ 1734.

³⁸ *Jai Dev v State of Punjab* AIR 1963 SC 612.

³⁹ *State of UP v Ram Swarup* AIR 1974 SC 1570.

4.3 When State Aid is Not Available

The legitimacy of private defence often hinges on the availability of state assistance. In *State of Madhya Pradesh v Ramesh*, the court stated that if time permits seeking police help, private defence cannot be invoked. The right serves as a substitute for state protection and applies only when such protection is absent or delayed. However, courts assess each case contextually, as seen in *James Martin v State of Kerala*, where the suddenness of the attack justified the defensive action.

4.4 Landmark Judgments Shaping the Doctrine

Key rulings have significantly influenced the interpretation of private defence:

State of UP v Ram Swarup: The court held that attacking an aggressor after the threat has passed is unlawful and not covered by private defence.

Darshan Singh v State of Punjab: The Supreme Court ruled that individuals in imminent danger cannot be expected to react with exact precision, and lethal force may be justified if necessary and proportionate.⁴⁰

Munshi Ram v Delhi Administration: This case affirmed the right to use reasonable force against trespassers to protect property.⁴¹

These judgments have established a coherent legal framework for lower courts.

4.5 Judicial Perspective on Property Defence

Sections 97 and 103 IPC recognise the right to defend property, subject to judicial scrutiny. In *Munshi Ram*, the court upheld the use of reasonable force against unlawful intrusion, reinforcing property rights under Indian law.⁴² However, *Suresh Singh v State of Bihar* clarified that deadly force is permissible only in extreme cases, such as nighttime robbery or housebreaking, as per Section 103.⁴³ Courts thus protect property rights while curbing excessive retaliation.

⁴⁰ *Darshan Singh v State of Punjab* 2010 (2) SCC 333.

⁴¹ *Munshi Ram v Delhi Administration* AIR 1968 SC 702.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Suresh Singh v State of Bihar* 1996 (2) SCC 372.

4.6 Modern Trends and Comparative Influence

Recent judgments consider the psychological strain on individuals facing sudden threats. In *Laxman v State of Maharashtra*, the court acknowledged that precise legal reasoning cannot be

expected in moments of crisis.

Additionally, Indian courts have occasionally referenced foreign precedents (e.g., from the UK and US) to strengthen private defence principles. Though non-binding, these comparisons enrich legal reasoning.

4.7 Final Reflections on Judicial Approach to Private Defence

Judicial interpretation has kept the right to private defence adaptable and context-sensitive. While courts uphold this right, they impose strict safeguards against misuse. The doctrines of imminence, necessity, and proportionality remain central to judicial analysis. By incorporating psychological realities, societal shifts, and comparative insights, the judiciary ensures the law remains relevant while adhering to constitutional values. Through this balanced approach, Indian courts have preserved private defence as both a personal safeguard and a mechanism for social stability.

CHAPTER 5

LIMITATIONS, MISUSE, AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON THE RIGHT TO PRIVATE DEFENCE

The right to private defence, enshrined in Sections 96 to 106 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860, is a cornerstone of criminal law, grounded in the principle of natural justice. It empowers individuals to protect themselves, their property, or others from imminent unlawful harm when state intervention is unavailable. However, this right is not absolute; it is carefully circumscribed to prevent abuse and ensure alignment with public order. This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the legal constraints on private defence, explores prevalent forms of misuse, and offers a comparative examination of self-defence doctrines across jurisdictions, highlighting their implications for South Asian legal systems.

5.1 LEGAL LIMITATIONS ON THE RIGHT TO PRIVATE DEFENCE

The Indian Penal Code meticulously delineates the boundaries of private defence to balance individual autonomy with societal stability. Sections 96 to 106 establish the right, but Section 99 imposes critical restrictions to prevent its exploitation. These limitations are designed to ensure that defensive actions remain lawful, necessary, and proportionate, thereby avoiding descent into vigilantism or extrajudicial violence.

5.1.1 Restrictions Under Section 99

Section 99 of the Penal Code articulates several key constraints:

No Right Against Lawful Authority: The right to private defence does not apply when resisting actions by public servants acting in good faith under their legal duties, even if such actions are technically unlawful. This provision safeguards state authority and prevents defiance of legitimate governmental functions.⁴⁴

Availability of State Protection: Private defence is invalid if individuals have a reasonable opportunity to seek assistance from public authorities, such as police or judicial systems. This underscores the state's primary role as the protector of citizens, limiting self-defence to situations where state aid is impractical or unavailable.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Indian Penal Code 1860, ss 96–106.

⁴⁵ Indian Penal Code 1860, s 99.

Proportionality of Force: Defensive actions must be proportionate to the threat faced. Excessive or disproportionate force negates the legality of the defence, transforming a protective act into a criminal one. Courts rigorously evaluate whether the force used was necessary to repel the threat.

5.1.2 Judicial Oversight and Evaluation Criteria

Judicial scrutiny of private defence claims revolves around three core principles:

Imminence of Threat: The danger must be immediate and unavoidable. Courts, as seen in *Jai Dev v State of Punjab*, have consistently ruled that speculative or distant threats do not justify defensive force.

Necessity of Action: The defender must demonstrate that no reasonable alternative, such as retreat or seeking state assistance, was feasible. This requirement ensures that private defence is a last resort.

Proportionality: The force employed must correspond to the severity of the threat. In *Darshan Singh v State of Punjab*, the Supreme Court emphasized that exceeding necessary force results in criminal liability, underscoring the need for restraint.

These criteria collectively ensure that private defence serves as a controlled exception to the prohibition on violence, aligning individual rights with the state's monopoly on lawful force.

5.2 MISUSE OF THE RIGHT TO PRIVATE DEFENCE

Despite the robust legal framework, the right to private defence is susceptible to abuse, which undermines its legitimacy and challenges judicial systems. Misuse often manifests in deliberate attempts to exploit the doctrine to justify unlawful acts, complicating the task of distinguishing genuine self-defence from criminal aggression.

5.2.1 Common Forms of Misuse

False or Fabricated Claims: Individuals may falsely invoke self-defence to conceal premeditated or retaliatory acts. For instance, in *Mohinder Pal Jolly v State of Punjab*, the accused unsuccessfully claimed private defence to mask an intentional assault, highlighting the judiciary's vigilance against such deception.

Disproportionate Retaliation: Excessive force beyond what is necessary to repel a threat is a frequent issue. In *State of UP v Ram Swarup*, the court ruled that attacking an aggressor after the threat had subsided constituted unlawful retaliation, not self-defence.

Strategic Delays and Evidence Manipulation: Some individuals delay reporting incidents to alter crime scenes or fabricate evidence, creating a false narrative of self-defence. This tactic complicates judicial fact-finding, as seen in cases like *Biran Singh v State of Bihar*, where delayed reporting raised suspicions of premeditation.

5.2.2 Challenges in Judicial Enforcement

South Asian courts, particularly in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, face significant hurdles in addressing misuse. The subjective nature of “reasonable apprehension” and “proportionate force” often leads to inconsistent rulings. Politically sensitive cases or those involving communal tensions further exacerbate these challenges, as courts must navigate public sentiment while upholding legal standards. The lack of clear evidentiary guidelines for assessing self-defence claims places a heavy burden on judicial discretion, risking erroneous convictions or acquittals.

5.2.3 Societal and Systemic Impacts

Misuse of private defence undermines public trust in the legal system. When fabricated claims succeed, they erode the doctrine’s credibility, potentially discouraging genuine victims from invoking it. Conversely, overly stringent judicial interpretations may deter legitimate self-defence, leaving individuals vulnerable in situations where state protection is absent. This dual challenge necessitates a balanced approach to preserve the right’s integrity.

5.3 COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: INTERNATIONAL APPROACHES TO SELF-DEFENCE

A comparative analysis of self-defence laws across jurisdictions reveals diverse approaches to balancing individual rights and public safety. By examining the frameworks in South Asia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, we can identify strengths and shortcomings that inform potential reforms for the Indian Penal Code.

5.3.1 South Asian Jurisdictions (India, Bangladesh, Pakistan)

In India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, the right to private defence is governed by the Penal Code, 1860, which emphasizes necessity, proportionality, and immediacy.⁴⁶ While the statutory framework is uniform, judicial interpretations vary:

In India, cases like *Yogendra Morarji v State of Gujarat* highlight the judiciary’s focus on proportionality, ensuring defensive actions align with the threat’s severity.

In Bangladesh, *Md. Abdur Rashid v State* illustrates a stricter approach, with courts prioritizing state authority over individual action.

In Pakistan, rulings such as *State v Zainul Abedin* affirm the deterrent value of private defence but caution against excessive force.⁴⁷

These variations reflect differing judicial philosophies and socio-political contexts, despite a shared statutory foundation.

⁴⁶ Indian Penal Code 1860 (India, Bangladesh, Pakistan).

⁴⁷ *State v Zainul Abedin* [1983] PLD SC 153 (Pakistan).

5.3.2 United States

The United States adopts a broader approach to self-defence, particularly through doctrines like “Stand Your Ground” laws, as seen in Florida’s statute.⁴⁸ These laws allow individuals to use lethal force without a duty to retreat, even in public spaces, provided they reasonably believe it necessary to prevent death or serious harm. Cases like *McClellan v State* have sparked controversy, with critics arguing that such laws exacerbate racial disparities and encourage vigilantism.⁴⁹ The expansive nature of U.S. self-defence laws contrasts sharply with the Penal Code’s emphasis on proportionality and restraint.

5.3.3 United Kingdom

The UK’s self-defence framework, governed by the Criminal Law Act 1967 and common law, prioritizes “reasonable force” tailored to the circumstances.⁵⁰ Courts, as in *R v Hussain*, assess the defender’s subjective belief in the threat alongside an objective evaluation of reasonableness. Unlike the U.S., the UK imposes a duty to retreat where feasible, reflecting a preference for de-escalation and state intervention. This approach aligns more closely with the Penal Code’s philosophy but benefits from clearer judicial guidelines.

5.3.4 Comparative Analysis

South Asia: The Penal Code provides a structured yet flexible framework, but ambiguous terms like “reasonable apprehension” lead to inconsistent application. Judicial discretion, while allowing adaptability, risks unpredictability.

United States: The permissive “Stand Your Ground” laws prioritize individual autonomy but raise concerns about excessive force and social inequities, issues less prevalent in South Asia’s restrained approach.

United Kingdom: The UK’s emphasis on proportionality and retreat offers a balanced model, but its reliance on case law contrasts with the Penal Code’s statutory clarity.

South Asian systems could benefit from the UK’s focus on clear proportionality standards while avoiding the U.S.’s overly broad permissions, which risk legitimizing disproportionate violence.

⁴⁸ Florida Statutes, § 776.013 (2023).

⁴⁹ *McClellan v State* 274 So 3d 1112 (Fla 2019).

⁵⁰ Criminal Law Act 1967, s 3.

5.4 CRITICAL INSIGHTS AND THE WAY FORWARD

The right to private defence is a vital mechanism for individual protection but requires careful calibration to prevent abuse and ensure fairness. The following insights and recommendations address the challenges identified:

5.4.1 Critical Insights

Balancing Autonomy and Order: The Penal Code’s framework successfully empowers individuals while safeguarding public order, but inconsistent judicial interpretations undermine its efficacy.

Societal Context: In South Asia, socio-economic disparities and limited access to state protection amplify the importance of private defence, particularly for marginalized groups. However, misuse in communal or political disputes threatens social cohesion.

Global Learning: The UK’s emphasis on reasonableness and the U.S.’s focus on individual rights offer valuable lessons for refining South Asian laws, provided they are adapted to local realities.

5.4.2 Recommendations for Reform

Statutory Clarification: Ambiguous terms like “reasonable apprehension” and “proportionate force” should be defined more precisely in the Penal Code to reduce judicial variability. The Law Commission of India’s recommendations for legislative precision could guide such amendments.⁵¹

Judicial Training: Specialized training programs for judges should focus on evaluating proportionality and immediacy in self-defence cases, ensuring consistent application across jurisdictions.

Public Education: Legal aid organizations and governments should launch campaigns to educate citizens about the scope and limits of private defence, reducing both misuse and underutilization.

Procedural Safeguards: Implementing mandatory reviews by senior law enforcement officers and judicial oversight in self-defence cases can prevent wrongful prosecutions and enhance accountability.

By integrating these reforms, South Asian legal systems can strengthen the right to private defence, ensuring it remains a robust safeguard without becoming a tool for unlawful aggression.

⁵¹ Law Commission of India, *Report No. 267: Hate Speech* (2017).

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The right to private defence under the Indian Penal Code, 1860, serves as a vital safeguard for personal liberty and lawful protection. It enables individuals to defend themselves, their property, and others from imminent unlawful harm, subject to defined legal boundaries. This right acknowledges the practical reality that state intervention may not always be immediate, necessitating a permissible degree of self-help in critical situations.

Sections 96 to 106 of the Penal Code establish a broad legal framework for private defence, yet its application remains heavily reliant on judicial discretion and law enforcement practices. This has resulted in inconsistencies, particularly in differentiating lawful self-defence from excessive retaliation. A key issue in enforcement is the interpretation of “reasonable apprehension” of danger. Courts have ruled that the fear of harm need not be actual but must be objectively justifiable, though what qualifies as “reasonable” remains highly case-specific.⁵² Similarly, the doctrine of “proportionate force” requiring that defensive measures not exceed necessity though theoretically sound, is often applied inconsistently.⁵³

Judicial trends have fluctuated, reflecting evolving societal standards. While some rulings have justified lethal force in extreme circumstances, others have deemed comparable actions excessive. Such unpredictability risks eroding public trust in legal fairness, potentially discouraging legitimate self-defence or encouraging its misuse. Further complicating matters is the inadequate training of law enforcement in assessing private defence claims, leading to misclassification of cases and wrongful arrests.⁵⁴ Public unawareness of the right’s scope exacerbates these issues, resulting in both underutilisation by genuine victims and exploitation by aggressors masking unlawful acts as self-defence.⁵⁵

⁵² *Darshan Singh v State of Punjab* (2010) 2 SCC 333.

⁵³ *Munney Khan v State of Madhya Pradesh* (1971) 1 SCC 683.

⁵⁴ Law Commission of India, *260th Report on the Right to Private Defence* (2015) para 3.2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid* para 5.6.

6.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance clarity and fairness in the application of private defence, the following reforms are proposed:

Legislative Precision: Key terms such as “reasonable apprehension” and “proportionate force” should be statutorily clarified to minimise judicial ambiguity and promote uniformity.⁵⁶

Police Training Enhancement: Specialised training for law enforcement should be implemented to improve the identification and handling of legitimate self-defence cases, preventing wrongful prosecutions.⁵⁷

Public Legal Awareness: Government and legal aid organisations should conduct educational initiatives to inform citizens about the right’s boundaries, ensuring lawful exercise and accurate reporting.

Investigation Safeguards: Clear procedural guidelines, including mandatory senior officer reviews and judicial oversight, should be introduced to prevent misuse of police authority and protect innocent individuals.

6.2 CONCLUSION

In sum, the right to private defence is indispensable for preserving individual autonomy and societal order, filling gaps where state protection falls short. However, its effectiveness hinges on coherent judicial interpretation, well-trained enforcement agencies, and an informed public. Only through these measures can the right function as both a protective mechanism and a deterrent against unlawful conduct in a civilised legal system.

⁵⁶ Law Commission of India, *41st Report on the Indian Penal Code* (1969) ch 3.

⁵⁷ National Human Rights Commission, *Manual on Human Rights for Police* (2020).

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