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UNIFORM CIVIL CODE IN INDIA: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES – A SOCIO-LEGAL STUDY

AUTHORED BY - DIVYANK JAIN

LLM (II Year),

Arihant Law College, Haridwar Uttarakhand Technical University, Dehradun (U.K.)

Abstract

The Uniform Civil Code (UCC), enshrined under Article 44 of the Constitution of India as a Directive Principle of State Policy, envisions a common framework of civil laws applicable to all citizens irrespective of religion, caste, or community. Despite more than seven decades of constitutional governance, its implementation remains incomplete.

This paper examines the concept of UCC through a multi-dimensional lens, tracing its historical origins from the colonial period to the post-independence constitutional framework. It critically analyses the constitutional provisions bearing on the issue—Articles 13, 14, 15, 25, 44, 51, and 51A—and their collective implications for civil law reform. The paper further explores the relationship between the UCC and gender justice, highlighting how the persistence of disparate personal law systems has perpetuated inequality, particularly for women. Judicial pronouncements in landmark cases such as *Mohd. Ahmed Khan v. Shah Bano Begum*, *Sarla Mudgal v. Union of India*, and *John Vallamattom v. Union of India* are examined for their constitutional significance. The paper concludes that while implementation is politically and socially complex, the constitutional necessity for reform can no longer be indefinitely deferred, and proposes a gradual, consultative, and inclusive approach toward civil law unification.

Keywords: *Uniform Civil Code, Article 44, Personal Laws, Secularism, Gender Justice, Judicial Review, Constitutional Law, Equality, Indian Judiciary, Legal Reform, National Integration*

1. Introduction

The expression Uniform Civil Code comprises three analytically significant terms.

'Uniform' denotes consistency of application to all persons in all circumstances. 'Civil' relates to the private rights and legal relations of individuals as distinguished from criminal or political matters—derived from the Latin *civilis*, meaning pertaining to a citizen. 'Code' signifies a consolidated, systematically organised body of laws, traceable to the Latin *codex*. Together, these terms describe a comprehensive, common body of laws governing all citizens in personal matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption, maintenance, and succession, without distinction based on religion, caste, or community.

Article 44 of the Constitution of India places this aspiration among the Directive Principles of State Policy, directing the State to endeavour to secure a Uniform Civil Code for its citizens throughout the territory of India. Although Directive Principles are non-justiciable, they are fundamental to governance and represent continuing constitutional commitments. In *Minerva Mills v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court affirmed that the harmony between Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles forms part of the Constitution's basic structure.

The roots of the UCC debate in India trace to the colonial era. The British government's Report of 1835 recommended uniformity in criminal law, evidence, and contracts, but deliberately excluded Hindu and Muslim personal laws, recognising their close connection with religious life. This policy of non-interference, reinforced by Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1858, entrenched legal pluralism in family matters. After Independence, the Constituent Assembly debated the issue at length. Proponents such as Dr B. R. Ambedkar championed a common civil code as essential to national integration and social reform. Representatives of minority communities, however, emphasised the primacy of religious freedom and cultural autonomy. The resulting compromise was the inclusion of the UCC in Article 44 under the Directive Principles—acknowledging its desirability while deferring implementation to future legislative judgment.

2. Constitutional Framework

The constitutional provisions relevant to the UCC together constitute a comprehensive normative basis for civil law reform. Article 13 ensures constitutional supremacy by rendering

void any law or custom that conflicts with the Fundamental Rights guaranteed by Part III. Since personal law rules often operate through custom and usage, they cannot claim immunity from constitutional scrutiny where they produce outcomes inconsistent with those rights.

Article 14 mandates equality before the law and equal protection of laws for all persons within India's territory. A system in which citizens are governed by different civil rules solely because of their religious affiliation creates a structural tension with this constitutional guarantee. Article 15 reinforces this by prohibiting discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. Where separate personal laws produce different legal outcomes for citizens in the same civil situation merely on account of religion, the spirit of Article 15 is implicated.

Article 25 guarantees freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practise, and propagate religion, but expressly preserves the State's power to regulate secular activities associated with religious practice and to enact laws for social welfare and reform. This provision is central to the UCC debate: it acknowledges a conceptual distinction between essential religious freedom and the secular civil dimensions of personal law. Matters such as marriage, succession, and maintenance, though historically regulated through religion-based norms, are civil in character and may legitimately be brought within a common legal framework without necessarily violating Article 25.

Article 44 itself directs the State to secure a Uniform Civil Code, constituting a continuing reminder that indefinite civil-law fragmentation is not the constitutional ideal.

Articles 51 and 51A further support reform. Article 51(c) directs India to foster respect for international law and treaty obligations, engaging India's commitments under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979. Article 51A enumerates Fundamental Duties including the promotion of harmony, renunciation of practices derogatory to women's dignity, and cultivation of a spirit of inquiry and reform—duties that collectively reinforce the case for a common civil framework.

3. Historical Background

The development of the UCC idea in India is marked by a recurring pattern of aspiration and deferral. The B. N. Rau Committee, constituted in 1941 to examine the codification of Hindu personal law, recommended reform granting women equal rights—an early institutional

recognition that personal law reform was both possible and necessary. After Independence, the Hindu Code Bill was introduced in Parliament to bring uniformity and reform to Hindu personal law. However, it faced intense opposition and had to be enacted in fragmented form through separate statutes: the Hindu Marriage Act (1955), the Hindu Succession Act (1956), the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956), and the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act (1956). These enactments represented significant legislative reform but stopped well short of a common civil code applicable to all citizens. No equivalent reform was extended to all communities. The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act of 2005 further advanced gender justice by granting daughters equal coparcenary rights in ancestral property, but this, too, remained confined to a single personal law system. The overall historical trajectory shows incremental progress within individual personal law systems, alongside the continued absence of the comprehensive common code envisioned in Article 44.

4. Personal Laws and the Plurality Challenge

India's plural social composition has historically produced a complex web of religion-based personal laws. Hindus are governed by codified Hindu personal law; Muslims by Muslim personal law rooted in Sharia and customary interpretation;

Christians by the Indian Divorce Act and the Indian Succession Act; Parsis by the Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act; and tribal communities by customary law. This mosaic creates significant inconsistency in the definition and enforcement of civil rights across communities. The political dimension of this plurality is equally complex. Successive governments have treated the UCC as politically sensitive and avoided decisive legislative action. Former Law Minister M. Veerappa Moily's reported statement in 2011—that the government would not take up the matter because it would require changes in the personal laws of all communities, especially minorities—illustrates the depth of political hesitation. In contrast, the Bharatiya Janata Party has consistently included the UCC in its election manifestos, framing it as essential for genuine gender equality and national integration.

5. Gender Justice and the Uniform Civil Code

The relationship between gender justice and the UCC constitutes one of the most compelling dimensions of the debate. Gender justice is not merely formal legal equality; it requires the removal of structural and institutional disadvantages that prevent women from realising their

constitutional rights in practice. India's personal law systems have historically preserved significant gender inequalities in matters central to civil life, including marriage, inheritance, divorce, maintenance, and guardianship.

Even Hindu law, now substantially codified, denied women equal inheritance rights for extended periods, restricted remarriage, and accorded widows and daughters a deeply disadvantaged legal position. This demonstrates that gender injustice is not the product of any single religious tradition; it has appeared across multiple personal law systems in different forms. The Committee on the Status of Women in India recognised that the continuation of personal laws discriminating between men and women infringes the constitutional guarantee of equality of status and is contrary to the ideals of secularism and national unity, recommending the early implementation of Article 44 through the adoption of a Uniform Civil Code.

India's obligations under international law reinforce this constitutional imperative. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979, requires state parties to take appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in family law and civil status matters. Article 51(c) of the Constitution, directing India to foster respect for international law and treaty obligations, provides a further basis for treating gender-based inequality in personal law as a constitutional concern that cannot be indefinitely deferred.

6. Judicial Perspective

The Indian judiciary has been the most consistent institutional voice in keeping Article 44 alive in public consciousness. Through a series of landmark decisions, the Supreme Court has exposed the contradictions created by personal law plurality and repeatedly reminded the State of its constitutional duty.

In *Mohd. Ahmed Khan v. Shah Bano Begum* (AIR 1985 SC 945), Shah Bano, a divorced Muslim woman, sought maintenance from her former husband under Section 125 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. The Supreme Court upheld her claim, and Chief Justice Y. V. Chandrachud noted that Article 44 had become a dead letter, observing that a common civil code would promote national integration by removing conflicting loyalties arising from separate personal law systems. The political response—the enactment of the Muslim Women

(Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986, curtailing maintenance rights—illustrated how constitutional reform could be reversed under political pressure.

In *Sarla Mudgal v. Union of India* (AIR 1995 SC 1531), the Court addressed the misuse of personal law conversion, holding that a Hindu man who converted to Islam without dissolving his first marriage was guilty of bigamy. Justice Kuldip Singh strongly observed that Article 44 had been kept in cold storage since 1949 and that no valid reason existed to further postpone a Uniform Civil Code when over eighty per cent of the population was already governed by codified personal law.

In *John Vallamattom v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court struck down Section 118 of the Indian Succession Act as unconstitutional, with Chief Justice V. N. Khare reiterating Parliament's failure to enact a common civil code. These decisions, taken together, establish a consistent judicial posture: constitutional insistence on reform combined with institutional restraint that recognises legislative finality. The judiciary has functioned as a constitutional conscience—exposing injustice and urging reform—while leaving the definitive step to Parliament.

7. Critical Analysis: Advantages and Challenges

7.1 Advantages

The case for a Uniform Civil Code rests on several firm constitutional and social foundations. First, it would secure equality before the law by ensuring that no citizen's civil rights are diminished on account of religious identity. Second, it would advance gender justice by providing a single platform for removing discriminatory rules across all personal law systems. Third, it would promote national integration by reducing legal fragmentation along communal lines, a concern the Supreme Court has articulated in multiple decisions. Fourth, it would create legal certainty and simplicity, reducing the complexity and potential for misuse inherent in parallel legal systems. Fifth, it would concretise constitutional secularism by bringing civil matters within a religion-neutral legal framework, consistent with the Preamble's commitment to a Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic.

7.2 Challenges

Significant challenges nonetheless attend implementation. The fear of interference with religious freedom and community identity is particularly powerful among minority

communities, who may perceive a common code as a majoritarian imposition. The challenge of formulation is equally substantial: the personal laws of different religions embody different principles, institutions, and values, and a viable UCC must balance Fundamental Rights with the legitimate sentiments of communities coexisting in India. The risk of communal tension if reform is imposed abruptly is real, and the absence of a broad consultative process has historically deepened resistance rather than building consensus.

Some scholars further argue that internal reform of personal laws—cleansing them of patriarchal accretion and misinterpretation—may, in certain contexts, be preferable to an externally uniform code. The view that an Indian Code of Muslim Law drawn eclectically from various schools of the Shariat could address contemporary problems illustrates this alternative perspective. A critical analysis, therefore, suggests that the debate is not simply about uniformity versus diversity, but about whether a just and constitutionally sound common civil framework can be built through dialogue, consultation, and phased implementation.

8. Conclusion and Suggestions

The Uniform Civil Code represents one of the most enduring and complex constitutional questions in India. The constitutional mandate of Article 44 is clear; the doctrinal basis in Articles 13, 14, 15, 25, 51, and 51A is sufficient; and judicial guidance across decades of significant decisions is unambiguous. What has been absent is sustained political will and a constructive civic process capable of building the social trust necessary for reform. The central conclusion of this study is that the question is not whether reform is necessary, but how it should be pursued.

Several practical suggestions emerge from this analysis. First, education and social awareness must precede legislative action; citizens must understand the constitutional purpose of the UCC as a measure of equality and secular civil regulation, not an assault on faith. Second, the State should engage in genuine consultative processes with all communities, ensuring that reform emerges from dialogue rather than unilateral assertion. Third, a phased or optional approach—allowing a common civil code to coexist initially with existing personal laws, in the manner of the Special Marriage Act (1954)—may reduce resistance and build wider acceptability over time.

Fourth, any UCC enacted must not replicate any single personal law tradition; it should draw

the most progressive, humane, and just principles from all legal traditions in India. Fifth, enlightened voices within all communities must actively engage in the reform debate to distinguish religious principle from patriarchal practice and historical distortion. Finally, reform should be gradual and phased, recognising that India's social complexity requires institutional wisdom rather than legislative haste.

Marriage, divorce, succession, inheritance, and maintenance are civil matters of a secular character that are capable of legal regulation within a common framework. A carefully designed, inclusive, and constitutionally sound Uniform Civil Code—or, at a minimum, a sustained programme of personal law reform—is essential if India is to fully honour its constitutional commitments of equality, secularism, gender justice, and national integration. The constitutional direction is unmistakable. The need for reasoned reform can no longer be denied.

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