



A Study on Position of Law of Defamation in India

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Abstract– Defamation law is one very important media law to protect the dignity of person and to make a genuine restriction on the freedom of speech and expression. However, the violation of this law has also become very common in India. Such Violation can be found in several areas of the life. There are some important questions in reference to this law. What are the natures of the violation of the law of defamation and how is it taken by media? This research paper tries to analyze the present status of defamation law in India.

Keyword – Media, Defamation Law, Violation of law, India

Introduction – Every person in the society has right to his good name and dignity. He has also right to claim that his right will not be damaged in any way without any lawful justification or excuse. Despite all this, the cases of defamation have become very common in our society. Such cases in society are not any new thing. The large number of interaction at various levels in different dimensions of life in this large democratic country has always been a source of defamation which is made intentionally or unintentionally by various persons. The new technology has severely affected the life of citizen of India. The easy access to internet technology has helped smooth interaction among all people of society. Now the communication can easily be done at various levels among different sections of society. ⁽¹⁾ The technology of social networking has certainly removed several obstacles in the path of communication. But at the same time, it has also brought inconvenience to people at various levels. The unlimited quantity of communication has helped in making useless communication. Many anti-social elements try to damage the reputation and dignity of common people by giving false and objectionable statements. Such types of actions harm the reputation and dignity of person. ⁽²⁾

Section 499 of the Indian penal code (IPC) has defined defamation any kinds of expressions with the main motive to harm the other person or with the clear knowledge that such an act can cause distress to him or her, also defaming the reputation of that particular person comes under the act. Defamation can be done in two ways. A defamation is called libel if the statement has been published in written or in some other such ways. The defamation is called slander if it is made through oral words. It is not necessary that a defamatory statement may lead to defamation. But the publication of defamatory statement is precondition for defamation. Again, defamation may be called civil defamation or criminal defamation according to nature of defamation.

In the case of civil defamation, the statement made should be false and it should be made without the consent of the alleged defamed person. In this case, the monetary compensation can be claimed from the defendant for the defamation. In case of criminal defamation, the intention of the person is mainly counted. It should be made with malice intention. If the person is found guilty for the defamation, he can be awarded simple imprisonment, or with fine, or both according to the nature of offence. ⁽³⁾ The criminal defamation is considered to be more harmful for media organizations and for freedom of speech and expression. ⁽⁴⁾ Malicious intention even in the use of photograph is also the violation of



defamation law. ⁽⁵⁾

The Indian constitution gives freedom of speech and expression under the article 19(1). However, it doesn't give any specific right to any media person and his right of freedom of speech and expression is indirectly explained. But, there are some restrictions also on this right keeping in view the interest of the state and it can't be used exclusively. This right is very important in all the ways not only in the life of every citizen but also in the life of other units of the society.

The discussion of the problem – Now the internet media is easily available to all people. It is continuously increasing. ⁽⁶⁾ Earlier, people were just receiver occasionally giving feedback to mass media which were not having any surety of publication. So the participation of ordinary people in any kinds of public debate was normally not possible. But the origin of social network has provided a big opportunity to all people to share their views on all matters they want. Now there are several content collection sites. These sites continuously motivate people to share their thoughts and other kinds of creativity in all the ways. They are also providing user friendly tools to give their contents in audio, video, text and photo forms. There are hardly any kinds of restriction and control on the most of the quality of the content. Maximum numbers of the people are continuously increasing their efficiency in operating these devices in all the ways by endlessly interacting with various kinds of the tools. All these factors have ultimately led to increase in all kinds of communication at various levels in society. But the result of this large scale of communication has been not good in all the ways. The irresponsibility and unaccountability towards the contents has developed several problems to the people. It has also caused inconvenient and embarrassment for common people. The status of safe harbor for the social media by government has also created various kinds of problems. ⁽⁷⁾ In such case, it becomes very relevant to analyze the defamation law in our society which would throw light on this issue.

Literature review –The literature review reveals some studies on the subject. Banerjee (2011) in his study has tried to answer some fundamental issue about newspaper libel and its place in reference to India. ⁽⁸⁾ Garg (2011) says the law of defamation presents a clash between person and society. ⁽⁹⁾ The review could not find any recent study on any dimension of the subject in India. Some articles about defamation cases have also been found. The issue of constitutionally validity of the law has been discussed. A.G.Noorani says criminal defamation is inherently tilted in favor of state, big business and other powerful persons and it is against ordinary citizen. ⁽¹⁰⁾ For example, at least 28 defamation suits have been filed in which media and publishing houses, journalists, authors and politicians have been targeted by Indian corporate houses and four companies under Reliance group. These companies have filed suits objecting to the content of the report which were published about their activities. ⁽¹¹⁾ Keeping in view the above fact, the study of the subject is justified.

Objectives and methodology – The main objective of the research is to find position of the law of defamation in India. Following points have mainly been taken for the analysis.

- What is situation of defamation in different media and other areas in Indian society?
- What are the provisions and observations of the court about the defamation law?

This is basically an analytical study. Secondary data's have been taken for the study. Different sources including e-newspapers, news portal, magazine, and various websites have mainly been taken for the analysis. A random sampling method has been used for the selection of the cases of the defamation presented in the media.



Analysis – The observation of various contents from different sources indicates that various kinds of news media are very common sources of defamation. It also reveals that the statement given by different people about other are one very common form of defamation. The study also reveals that the cases of defamation are not new and there are several cases of defamation filed in court. The courts have given important decision in such matters.

Print Media and defamation – A large number of newspapers and magazines are published in India. So the cases of various kinds of controversies also take place accordingly. Whenever the matter of defamation is taken, the issue of media is also discussed and normally reporters, editors, printers, and publishers are blamed for the violation of defamation law. Senior Journalist and editors of renowned newspaper has been also convicted for appearing incorrect news in media.⁽¹²⁾ Even the journalists have also filed case in the court against other journalists for the violation of law of defamation.⁽¹³⁾ In some case, the Supreme Court has taken the matter very seriously.⁽¹⁴⁾ The Bombay High Court in its decision said that if the defamation complaints have specific and comprehensible accusation against such persons other than printer and publisher, reporter, editor, they can also be prosecuted. Publication of defamatory article is one important reason for the violation of the defamation law. This media normally avoids giving any defamatory contents on its own behalf except giving the statements of important persons which are made by them at any other platform. The detail report about defamation cases has always been given in newspapers. Newspapers on their behalf avoid articles of any kinds of defamatory nature. Even cartoon are also not given which might cause defamation.⁽¹⁵⁾ On one side, the newspapers become a platform for the discussion of various aspects of defamation issues, besides giving news about defamation, on the other side, they have also been blamed for violating the law of defamation. There are several news stories related with it. A large number of cases are filed in various courts by different section of people. The report of PCI indicates that the issue of defamation is one important kinds of complain against the newspapers.⁽¹⁶⁾

Violation of the law of defamation in film - Film has been another important media where the cases of defamation often take place. The story of film taken on historical subject have created controversies and the producer, directors were sued for defamation besides doing protection by different groups of community. The film stories have developed anguish not only in reference to alleged destruction of traditional values and historical facts but also against specific section of society. Sometimes the cases are rejected also by courts. In a similar matter, a criminal complaint for defamation filed in the year 2017 against actor Akshay Kumar concerning the movie Jolly LLB-2 was dismissed by Rajasthan High Court.⁽¹⁷⁾

It should be noted that the stories, given in the films, are often fictional and it cannot be treated as news or any other format of the non-fictional presentation. The condition for defamation in reference to dialogue has also been explained by the court. It has said that considering the background of the story, the defamatory contents, given in dialogue, may not be offending and defamatory. Similarly, outburst of a person may not be kept in the category of defamation if the person is not shown in a very normal mental state in the story. But this judgment may not always be taken as references in all kinds of cases.⁽¹⁸⁾

The film media has a long history of giving controversial contents allegedly defaming person, community and organizations etc. Several controversies developed and the even films have also been banned in many cases before the final judgment in the matter of



defamation were given. Several cases of defamation were filed in past for allegedly poor portraying person, community, organization in the film. For example, a criminal complaint was filed against the makers of film Newton. It was blamed for portraying poor image CRPF as it had been shown as a villain and had allegedly lowered its image. ⁽¹⁹⁾

Controversies have developed in case of several films in India for different other reasons. Some films were banned due to political reasons and many films were banned for hurting the sentiment of others. ⁽²⁰⁾ But demands to ban the film were also made by several sections of the society due to alleged violation of law of defamation. The matter of the film Gangubai Kathiawadi can be cited in this reference. The issue went even in the Supreme Court. It is an example of how the matter of violation of defamation also arises along with the production of film. ⁽²¹⁾ The writers often blamed for copying their script by producers of films. ⁽²²⁾

In the recent time, the issue of defamation also developed in the mysterious death of film actor Sushant Singh Rajput. Film actor Akshay Kumar filed a case of defamation against a You Tuber from Bihar, seeking Rs.500 crores in damage for making baseless allegation against him. Another complain regarding defamation was filed by lyricist Javed Akhtar before the magistrate, seeking action against Kangana Ranaout under the relevant provision of the law. He blamed Ranaut for allegedly dragging his name the death of Rajput. Similarly, Mahesh Bhatt and his brother also filed a defamation suit in October 2020 against an actor for his remarks against them and demanded one crore for the damage and also made demand to restrain her from making such comment in future. Infact, there are several other cases of defamation in which film artists have filed defamation suit mainly against film artists for their comments in which they have blamed for harassment or sexual abuses or any other such types of allegations. ⁽²³⁾

Defamation and TV Programme – TV Serials are other areas where the producers are blamed for violation of defamation law. TV media have also the record of broadcasting several controversial programmes. The controversies have developed due to various reasons. The violation of defamation law is one factor besides being several other factors. In recent years, the IB ministry has asked private television channels to follow the code of conduct in programmes which have been given under the Cable Television Network (Regulation) Act, 1995. It issued advisory and said that programme should not criticise, malign or slander any group or person. ⁽²⁴⁾ There is also incidence in which TV channel was banned from broadcasting. The Government said that the action was done in the interest of national security. ⁽²⁵⁾

It has also been observed that various controversial statements are given on TV media. Government controlled TV channel do not have any such cases in recent years but private TV channels could not manage so and there are several occasions when the contents of programmes created controversies and they were blamed for violation of defamation law. The debate programmes on social and political subjects are sometimes accompanied with defamatory comments. These programme on TV has raised several issues about the validity of such programmes. ⁽²⁶⁾ There are studies which indicate that the TV channel broadcasted biased programmes in favour of political parties. ⁽²⁷⁾ However, Doordarshan has succeeded in keeping itself away from such types of controversies to a great extent. The code of conduct for TV programmes has been by and large followed by Government media.

Defamation and Radio Programmes – The cases of defamation on radio programmes are



hardly found. The control of the government and following of strict rules and code of conduct for the broadcasting have certainly helped in the following of the law of defamation in India. So apart from few exceptions, there has not been the case of defamation in different programmes of All India Radio in recent years. If any kind of error in the programmes has ever happened, it was moderated or corrected in the following broadcast. However, with the arrival of FM channels in private sector, complains of using vulgar and objectionable contents have also begun. TV Today Network filed Rs. 100 crore defamation suit against Radio City as the radio City was accused of airing defamatory remarks against it and its consulting editor. ⁽²⁸⁾ The language used by many radio jockey working in these channel was found to be derogatory and defamatory. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has directed such types of FM radio Channels not to air any kinds of objectionable content and also warned that stern action would be taken if they fail in that. ⁽²⁹⁾

Cyber defamation and social media - When the defamatory incidence takes place on cyber space, it is called cyber defamation. It happens only when the devices are connected to internet and the defamatory statement has been posted on any platform of this media to defame target person reach other persons. Social media like facebook, whatapp, Twitter etc are good examples which are used for such purposes. But there are several other kinds of activities which can be the cause of cyber defamation. If someone is sending e-mail to other containing defamatory statement or publishing defamatory statement with the intention to defame him or her, then the person doing such act may be blamed for violation defamation law. The global expansion of digital technology has really created problem in determining the loss of the reputation in monetary value. However, the liability of defamatory statement on social media in India goes to the author of the content of defamatory material. The person operating the social site is not responsible for it. They have been given the status of safe harbor under the section 79 of the IT act 2000. In this act, it has been said that the intermediary will not be responsible for any defamatory content, if it is not making any change in the content which has been posted by the writer. The intermediary will have to follow the guidelines issued by the Government and have also to remove such content which is unlawful on being informed by Government or any of its agencies. Despite to this fact that the media of defamation are different, the law of defamation applies same ⁽³⁰⁾

The convenience of communication at social media has also created several problems and it has big become a source of defamation. Several people send defamatory contents on social media. The cases of defamation are continuously increasing. Social media sites are designed to encourage sharing various kinds of content without any fact checking or regulation. **The incidence of cyber defamation may take place when internet connected device is used for the defamation.** ⁽³¹⁾ **Even Twitter, which has a very limited number of words for expression, has also been used for defamation.** ⁽³²⁾ Court has raised question on giving comment without verifying the facts. ⁽³³⁾ This platform has been used even against the person holding highest post. ⁽³⁴⁾

Celebrities and defamation cases – Several cases of defamation were filed by film celebrities and against celebrities. Being popular in film industries, they often draw public and media attention by their statements. Many of these statements have caused the violation of defamation law in one or other manner. ⁽³⁵⁾ Such cases have also gone in court. In one such matter, the Delhi High Court told two news channels Republic TV and Times Now not to give defamatory content on the channel or uploaded on social media. The lawsuit was filed by several film artists. The court said that media could not run parallel trial as they were broadcaster and had to show news only and things are not to be judged. The court observed that programme code



was violated on these channels. ⁽³⁶⁾

However, the channel Times Now agreed to refrain from transmitting defamatory content. It settled the lawful suits which were filed by more than thirty production houses. The channel reaffirmed its commitment to abide by the Programme code under the Cable TV Network Regulation Act 1994 and the Cable TV Network Regulation Rules 1994. It said that it would not publish or air anything which comes under category of defamatory content. ⁽³⁷⁾ The online media has become source of defamation even for film celebrities and controversies. ⁽³⁸⁾

Defamation in Industrial World - There are several cases of defamation in the Industrial World also. They use to sue media houses and journalists and have alleged defamation and have made demand of crores of rupees for the damage of the reputation. In most of the cases, the demands were made by the industrialists, but there are some occasions when they themselves became target of such cases. Interestingly, most of such cases are among industrialists themselves. In such cases, corporations or their chief found themselves being dragged in the court for alleged defamation by their opponents. For example, there was a old case of defamation, sued by Anil Ambani on his brother Mukesh Ambani for damaging the reputation when the former gave an interview to New York Times. It was later reproduced in Indian newspapers. They were also made respondents in this matter. But the court case was withdrawn after the two party agreed to solve the problem at their own level. ⁽³⁹⁾ **Another case of defamation was about the business practice of Adani group. The news was republished by The Wire. Pranjaya Guha wrote this article. After some time, a defamation case was filed against the publisher and Guha Thakutra. The end of the case was that the editor of the Economic and Political Weekly resigned.** ⁽⁴⁰⁾

The law in itself defines some specific points but the decisions of minute and variety of cases in courts gives more explanation to different aspects of the matter. It becomes a landmark in explaining the matter and subject in detail.

Defamation cases in political area - Political area is one very familiar area where the cases of violation of defamation law take place. In the democratic set up, political persons have always to give public statements on various issues. There is a chance of violation of the defamation law if political people are not careful in making the statements and also about the sensitivity of the subject. There are several historical cases of defamation in political field. Cases of defamation can regularly be seen in media and news associated with various political persons is highly publicized also. There are several occasion when defamation law was found being misused by the state government. For examples news published on April 13, 2021 in Times of India reveals that more than 60 cases are pending against various media houses in session court in Chennai. The report says that most of them are filed at the behest of public authorities and political persons. This has been described a practice of curbing criticism and expression. The Government is blamed for using this section since 1992 against media people. ⁽⁴¹⁾

The name of some political persons are more familiar in the matter of violation of law of defamation and have several criminal cases registered against them due to violation of defamation law. It has also been said that people finds easy to file a defamation case. Politician Arvind Kejriwal has distinction of being called as slander man of Indian politics. Although many of these case have already been dismissed. Interestingly, most of these charges have



been made by other politicians. It has also been found that the decisions in such matters often takes too much time I, So it has also been convention for some person to violate the law. ⁽⁴²⁾

The Supreme Court has said that Government cannot file defamation case against political opponent while hearing the case of defamation related with Tamil Nadu and it also said that filing cases against opponent legislature or bureaucrat for criticizing the government. This comment was made by the bench of judges including justice Dipak Misra and Justice RF Narayan. It said that it amounts curbing free speech and Government should tolerate the criticism. The court realized the provision of defamation law. However, it felt that it should not be misused. It stated that law can't be used as a political counter weapon by the parties. ⁽⁴³⁾ There are also examples where the cases were withdrawn. The Tamil Nadu government withdrew around 130 defamation cases filed against various political leaders including those from DMK during AIADMK regime between 2012 to 2021. ⁽⁴⁴⁾ Bhairav Achary says that the law of defamation has emerged as a system of censorship. The law of defamation rests on uncertain foundation. He said defamation law was open to procedural misuse to maximize its effect. This law can be used to inconvenience and exhaust the speaker. ⁽⁴⁵⁾

Role of court in defamation cases— Any kinds of expression can be considered in the category of alleged defamation only when the matter is brought into court. The approach of court in the matter of violation of defamations has been normally liberal especially when the alleged defamatory statements were not of any serious nature. It has always given due consideration to the freedom of speech and expression. Many times the court granted persons a permanent exemption from appearing in a criminal defamation case he is facing. For example, Politician Rahul Gandhi had made remarks against BJP leader Amit Shah in an election rally before 2019 Lok Sabha election. The court exempted him from appearing the court. ⁽⁴⁶⁾ The warrant issued to concern person were also found to be bailable warrant for not appearing in the court in the criminal defamation case. ⁽⁴⁷⁾

The court cases are continuously increasing in reference to defamation cases. The filing of defamation cases has also helped in explaining various kinds of complex situations which are not very clearly defined and explained in the act. The human interaction takes place in various forms and at various levels. The analysis of the content of the news published reveals that nature of defamation needs several kinds of explanation. Each defamatory comment has its own individuality in several manner and different kinds of arguments are given against and in favour of it. However, a large number of matters are pending and decisions are awaited even in many defamation cases. ⁽⁴⁸⁾ The court trial becomes a source of news of publicity also for political people as the hearing the cases and appearing of political persons in courts becomes news for media and it becomes more important for them. ⁽⁴⁹⁾

There are a large number of cases pending in courts in reference to violation of defamation law. The Supreme Court bench (2016) observed that the right to free speech will not be affected due to defamation law. It also said that free speech is not any free right and can't be used to damage the reputation of other. The ruling was given on a petition filed politician Subramanian Swamy against provisions criminalizing defamation. The Supreme Court has also cautioned judges to be very careful while handling defamation cases and scrutinize all points of defamation complaint. The court, while realizing the importance of freedom of speech and expression, clarified that it could not be used to damage the image of any person. The court has always adopted a balanced approach in reference to any controversy about freedom of speech and violation of defamation law. While it has defended the right to free speech and expression,



at the same time, it has also justified the existence of law of defamation to avoid any undue use of the freedom of expression. Union government had opposed the petitions against criminal defamation, saying the absence of the laws could lead to social anarchy. Attorney general Mukul Rohatgi argued that comparing India with other jurisdictions where there are no criminal sanctions for defamation would not be appropriate. The persons who have suffered have always demanded fast trial of the defamatory cases.⁽⁵⁰⁾

There are several landmark decisions in defamation matters. In one such case, the Delhi High court acquitted journalist Priya Ramani in a criminal defamation case which was filed by former union minister M.J. Akbar. The court opined that a woman cannot be punished for raising voice against sexual abuse in the pretext of complaint of defamation. The women have right to put her grievance at any platform of her choice and even after a decade. Earlier Ramani had written an article in 2017 in Vogue magazine in which she had made allegation of sexual misconduct against Akbar in the wake of #MeToo movement in 2018. Ramani had written an incident which took place in 1993 when she met with Akbar. Several thousands of people supported her for the initiative which she took.⁽⁵¹⁾ The filing of cases against media is continuous process. The film world is more in light for various kinds of controversies. Defamation controversy is also an important part of Bollywood story. Shilpa Shetty, the Bollywood actress, has filed a defamation suit against 29 media personnel and media house. She has blamed for making false reporting and maligning her image in the matter in which her husband is accused in a pornography case. She has referred several reports which are damaging her reputation and demanded deletion of all these reports.⁽⁵²⁾

Challenges to defamation law –There are occasions when the constitutionality of criminal defamation law was challenged. For example, when Dr. Subramanian Swamy made corruption allegation against Ms. Jayalathitha, in the response, the Tamil Nadu State Government filed defamation case against Dr. Subramanian Swamy. Then Dr. Subramanian Swamy along with other politician challenged the constitutionality of the criminal defamation law in India. The section 499 and 500 were main target in which section 499 defines the defamation and section 500 defines the punishment for the defamation. They argued that it was an excessive restriction on the freedom of speech when defamation was brought under criminal offence. They also argued that the criminal defamation was vaguely phrased. However, the court in its decision on May 13, 2016, viewed that section 499 is not an excessive restriction under Article 19(2). It said that criminal defamation was not disproportionate restriction on free speech and it was valid to treat defamation as a public wrong. The court gave the examples of various countries in this matter. In this case, the court also said that there was a limitation on freedom of speech and expression to protect the reputation of citizen.⁽⁵³⁾

Conclusions and Suggestions

Various contents study has shown that the cases of defamations are very common in Indian society. The freedom of speech and awareness about this right has been one main reason for the violation of the law. With the increment in the quantity of the interaction on the social media, the numbers of defamation cases are expected to continuously increase. So the number of filing suits in court is also expected to continuously increase. Social media has become one big platform for defamation. The defamation is done even for the publicity also.

Suggestions –On the basis of the above analysis following suggestion can be given.

- More study should be done on this subject to have clear idea about other aspects of the law.



- Awareness should be done among public about defamation law to avoid any kinds of controversies which takes place due to their ignorance.
- The needs to play more active role in the case of defamation law.
- The freedom of speech and expression should be made more accountable keeping the fundamental right given in the constitution.
- The law of defamation should be reviewed at a regular interval.
- Media people should be more conscious in giving the statements of people which seems to violate the law of defamation

Limitation of the study –

- This study is based on the secondary data available from various sources.
- The cases of defamation have been taken in Indian context published in various Indian media and other websites.
- It is based primarily in the form of news given in various media.
- Most of the cases, taken in the study, are of recent years.

All cases have been discussed on the basis of the information available from the secondary sources.



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