



INTERNATIONAL LAW
JOURNAL

**WHITE BLACK
LEGAL LAW
JOURNAL
ISSN: 2581-
8503**

Peer - Reviewed & Refereed Journal

The Law Journal strives to provide a platform for discussion of International as well as National Developments in the Field of Law.

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BEYOND THE BILL OF SALE: SHIFTING FROM PROPERTY TO 'BEST INTERESTS' IN PET CUSTODY LAW

AUTHORED BY - MANORAMA RAMESHWAR MODHEKAR.

B.A.LLB 4th year, Manikchand Pahade Law College, Chh. Sambhajinagar (MAH)

Abstract

The traditional legal framework, largely rooted in historical common law, classifies domestic animals as "chattel" mere personal property indistinguishable from inanimate assets in a matrimonial dispute. However, as the modern family unit evolves into a multi-species structure, this rigid legal fiction is increasingly at odds with contemporary social reality. This paper explores the burgeoning jurisprudential shift toward granting pets a legal status analogous to children in custody proceedings. By analyzing the "Best Interests of the Pet" (BIP) standard, this research argues that the law must move past a simple "bill of sale" analysis and instead prioritize the emotional bonds and welfare of sentient beings.

The study examines the tension between property rights and the "personhood" movement, highlighting how jurisdictions in the United States, Europe, and India are beginning to recognize animals as more than objects. Through a comparative analysis, the paper identifies the practical challenges of this transition, including the potential for increased litigation and the "floodgate" concerns of overburdening family courts. Furthermore, it addresses the psychological impact of separation on both the animal and the human parties, suggesting that a "quasi-child" status, one that balances the stability of property law with the compassion of guardianship; is the most viable path forward.

Ultimately, this article contends that the law is a living organism that must reflect the values of the society it governs. In an era where pets are viewed as integral family members, maintaining an archaic "ownership" model is not only ethically tenuous but legally insufficient. By proposing a framework for "Pet-Nuptials" and court-mandated mediation, this research seeks to offer a pragmatic roadmap for a more humane approach to domestic dissolution, where the pulse of a living being carries more weight than the price tag on a receipt.

Keywords: *Pet Custody, Matrimonial Jurisprudence, Best Interests of the Pet (BIP), Legal Sentience, Multi-species Family, Property vs. Personhood, Animal Guardianship.*

1. Introduction

In the traditional eyes of the law, a family's cherished golden retriever holds the same legal status as a dining room table or a television set. Under the long-standing doctrine of *chattel*, domestic animals are classified strictly as personal property; assets to be divided, assigned, or liquidated during the dissolution of a marriage.¹ However, as the structure of the modern household evolves, this rigid legal classification is increasingly clashing with the lived experiences of millions. We are currently witnessing the rise of the multi-species family, a sociological shift where pets are no longer viewed as mere biological ornaments, but as sentient members of the domestic core, possessing unique emotional bonds and individual needs.²

The central tension of this research lies in the widening gap between **property law** and **family jurisprudence**. When a couple separates, the "bill of sale" approach which awards a pet to whoever paid the initial adoption fee, often ignores the welfare of the animal and the psychological well-being of the human parties involved. This paper argues that the law must transition from a model of "ownership" to one of "guardianship." By adopting a "Best Interests of the Pet" (BIP) standard, a framework borrowed and adapted from child custody proceedings courts can begin to resolve these disputes with the nuance they deserve.³

This shift is not merely sentimental; it is grounded in an emerging global recognition of **animal sentience**. From recent legislative reforms in Spain and France to pioneering judicial decisions in parts of the United States and India, the legal "personhood" of animals is moving from the fringes of academia to the center of the courtroom.⁴ Nonetheless, the move toward animal personhood faces stiff opposition from those concerned with institutional efficiency. The primary critique rests on the 'floodgate' theory: the fear that family courts already strained by human caseloads will be paralyzed by a new wave of pet-centric motions. From court-mandated visitation schedules to 'pet alimony,' the administrative burden of these cases could significantly inflate the economic and temporal costs of legal separation.

¹ *Bennett v. Bennett*, 655 So. 2d 109, 110 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 1995)

² Andrea Laurent-Simpson, *Just Like Family: How Companion Animals Joined the Household*, 12-15 (New York University Press, 2021)

³ *Travis v. Murray*, 42 Misc. 3d 447, 453 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. 2013)

⁴ *Karnail Singh v. State of Haryana*, 2019 SCC OnLine P&H 704

Through a comparative analysis of international precedents and a deep dive into the psychological impact of the human-animal bond, this article seeks to propose a balanced path forward. It explores how we might grant pets "quasi-child" status, affording them protections that recognize their capacity for suffering and attachment; without completely dismantling the necessary stability of property law. Ultimately, the objective is to advocate for a legal system that is as compassionate as the society it serves, ensuring that in the heartbreak of a household's division, the most vulnerable, non-verbal members of the family are not treated as mere "things," but as living beings with a stake in their own future.⁵

2. The Legal Evolution: From "Chattel" to "Sentient Being"

For centuries, the law viewed the family dog with the same cold detachment as a kitchen chair. Under the traditional doctrine of *chattel*, pets were seen merely as economic assets objects to be valued, traded, or divided based strictly on who held the receipt. This Absolute Property model ignored the heartbeat of the animal, focusing instead on the superior title of the owner. However, as our understanding of biology and social ethics has deepened, this rigid framework has begun to fracture. We are moving away from a world where an owner's rights are limitless, toward a Qualified Property model, one that acknowledges that a living being's capacity to feel pain creates a legal duty of care that a piece of furniture simply does not require.

This transformation is visible across the globe, as nations move away from categorizing animals as movable goods. Whether it is the civil reforms in Europe that now define pets as "sentient beings" or the progressive shifts in North American statutes, the trend is clear: the law is finally catching up to the heart. In India, while older statutes still technically label animals as property, the courts have stepped in to bridge the gap between law and morality. By invoking the principle of *parens patriae*; the idea of the state as a protective guardian. the judiciary has begun to treat animals as legal entities with their own inherent rights. This represents a profound jurisprudential turning point. The legal system is no longer just asking who owns life, but rather, who is best prepared to sustain and protect it.

3. The "Best Interests of the Pet" (BIP) Standard

The greatest challenge in modernizing family law lies in our historical obsession with receipts. For decades, if a marriage dissolved, a judge would determine the owner of a dog in the same

⁵ *Animal Welfare Board of India v. A. Nagaraja*, (2014) 7 SCC 547

way they would determine the owner of a toaster: by looking at whose bank account was debited at the time of purchase. This Property Model is not just archaic; it is a form of legal blindness. It fails to recognize that a pet's loyalty is not purchased; it is earned through years of daily care, quiet companionship, and shared routines. To bridge this gap, progressive legal minds are championing the "Best Interests of the Pet" (BIP) standard, a humanized framework that treats the animal as a family member rather than a fixed asset.

Adopting the BIP standard requires a judge to step out of the ledger and into the life of the animal. Instead of asking "Who paid?", the court begins to ask, "Who provides?". This shift acknowledges that while a dog or cat may not be a human child, their vulnerability and total dependence on their human guardians create a unique moral obligation. Under this lens, the court evaluates a set of living variables: Who maintains the pet's medical schedule? Who has a more stable environment for an aging animal? Which party possesses the emotional temperament to nurture the bond rather than using it as a weapon of spite? This approach recognizes uprooting a sentient being from its primary source of comfort. its psychological parent is a profound disruption that a bill of sale simply cannot justify.

Furthermore, this standard acts as a safeguard against the weaponization of pets. In high-conflict separations, a pet is often the most effective tool for emotional leverage. By mandating a "Best Interests" evaluation, the legal system strips away the power of a titleholder to use a living creature as a pawn. It forces a transition from the cold authority of ownership to the empathetic responsibility of guardianship. We are finally admitting that in a domestic crisis, the law's highest priority should not be the preservation of property rights, but the minimization of trauma for those who cannot speak for themselves.

Ultimately, the BIP standard is a reflection of our collective maturation as a society. It honors the multi-species family by providing a structured, evidentiary way to ensure that when a household divides, the animal's future is decided by its needs, not its price tag. By shifting the focus from possession to parenting, we ensure that the law finally sees the heartbeat behind the fur.⁶ This jurisprudential evolution doesn't just protect the animal; it protects the integrity of the family's court itself, aligning it with the compassionate reality of the homes it governs.⁷ It

⁶ Victoria L. Lutz, *The Case for Pet Custody: A Best Interests Standard*, 8 Animal L. 197, 210 (2002)

⁷ *In re Marriage of Enders and Baker*, 394 Ill. App. 3d 845 (2015)

is a declaration that in the eyes of justice, a living soul is always worth more than the paper it was bought on.⁸

4. The Practical Wall: Where Sentiment Meets Systemic Reality

While the heart easily recognizes a pet as a family member, the machinery of the legal system is built on much colder foundations. The most significant pushback against elevating pets to a child-like status isn't necessarily a lack of compassion from judges, but a very real fear of institutional collapse. This is often described as the "floodgate" problem. Our family courts are already drowning in backlogs, with human lives, and the futures of actual children, hanging in balance for months or years. Skeptics argue that if we begin to treat every custody battle over a cat or a dog with the same procedural intensity as a human custody case, we risk paralyzing the very system meant to provide swift justice.

There is also the uncomfortable question of where the line is drawn. If a dog is entitled to a "best interests" hearing, what happens when a couple fights over a parrot that lives for eighty years, or a hobbyist's collection of exotic fish? If the law tries to be inclusive of all life, it risks appearing arbitrary or even absurd. Yet, if it only protects cute or intelligent animals, it creates a hierarchy of sentience that is difficult to defend legally. This definition of trap makes many legislators hesitate; they fear that stepping away from the clear, dry world of property receipts; they are entering a subjective wilderness where there are no maps.

Beyond the courtroom's clock, we must consider the bank accounts of the people involved. Shifting from property law to a best interests standard makes divorce more expensive. It necessitates pet-study experts, behavioral analysts, and longer hours for attorneys. For a wealthy couple, this is merely another line item in a high-stakes separation. But for a middle-class family, it could turn a difficult situation into a financial catastrophe. There is a legitimate worry that **pet custody** could become a weapon of the rich, or worse, a tool used by a vindictive partner to intentionally drain the other's resources through endless motions over visitation and **pet maintenance**.

Ultimately, the argument against pet rights is an argument for pragmatism. It suggests that while the law is cold, its coldness provides a necessary speed and finality. However, we must

⁸ *Narayan Dutt Bhatt v. Union of India*, 2018 SCC OnLine Utt 645

ask ourselves: is a fast system a just system if it forces a family to treat a living, breathing companion like a piece of used furniture? The challenge isn't just to open the floodgates, but to build better dams perhaps through specialized mediation or **pet-nuptial** agreements, that respect the bond without breaking the court. We are at a crossroads where we must decide if the inconvenience of change is a valid excuse for maintaining an outdated and heartless legal fiction.

5. Comparative Jurisprudence: A Global Tapestry of Reform

The movement to bridge the gap between pets and children is not a localized phenomenon; it is a global shift in legal consciousness. Different nations are navigating this transition with varying degrees of boldness, yet the underlying current remains the same: a rejection of the objectification of living beings. In Europe, civil law tradition has been the most proactive. Nations like France and Spain have effectively "de-propertized" pets, moving them into a unique legal category that acknowledges their sentience. In these jurisdictions, a judge's primary duty in a divorce is no longer to find a receipt, but to find a home. This global trend suggests that the "property" label is an international relic that is slowly being replaced by a welfare mandate.

In North America, the approach has been more incremental, yet equally significant. While the United States largely remains a property jurisdiction, the Best Interests standard has begun to leak into state statutes. Alaska, California, and New York have pioneered laws that empower judges to treat companion animals with the same procedural nuance as a family member. These statutes don't necessarily grant pets "human rights," but they do grant them **legal consideration**. They recognize that in the quiet of a household, the bond between a human and an animal is a form of emotional equity that the state has a vested interest in protecting. This represents a pragmatic middle ground: it avoids the radicalism of full personhood while discarding the cruelty of strict ownership.

In the Indian context, the evolution of pet rights is being driven not by the legislature, but by an activist judiciary. Indian courts have long used the doctrine of *parens patriae*; the state as the ultimate parent to protect the vulnerable. Recently, this has been extended to the animal kingdom with remarkable intensity. By declaring animals as "**juristic persons**," Indian High Courts have bypassed centuries of common law in a single stroke. This creates a fascinating

legal landscape where an Indian pet might technically have more "personhood" than its counterparts in the West yet still faces a legal system that lacks the specific family law statutes to handle custody disputes. This tension makes India a unique laboratory for the future of pet rights, as the courts attempt to apply constitutional principles of dignity and life to the gritty, emotional reality of domestic dissolution.

Ultimately, this comparative look reveals a world in transition. Whether through the sweeping civil code reforms of Europe or the judicial activism of the Indian High Courts, the message is clear: the era of the animal as an "object" is ending.⁹ We are witnessing a convergence of legal thought that prioritizes the heartbeat over the bill of sale.¹⁰ This global momentum provides the necessary precedent for a unified "Best Interests" framework one that respects the stability of law while honoring the sanctity of life.¹¹

6. The Bridge Between Idealism and Reality: Challenges and Frameworks

The transition from viewing a pet as a "thing" to viewing it as a stakeholder is perhaps the most difficult leap in modern family law. While the moral argument that animals are sentient beings who suffer during a domestic split is increasingly difficult to ignore, the practical implementation of this belief is fraught with systemic anxieties. Critics of the **Child-Like** model often point to the floodgate theory: a fear that granting pets a near-human status; we are inviting a wave of litigation that our already overburdened family courts simply cannot sustain. The concern is that if a dog is entitled to a **visitation schedule** or a cat is entitled to **maintenance**, the judicial process will become paralyzed by subjective, high-conflict disputes that detract from urgent human matters, such as child welfare or domestic protection orders.

This challenge is not merely about court time; it is about the economic accessibility of justice. When we move away from the simplicity of a receipt and toward the complexity of well-being, the cost of a divorce skyrockets. A Best Interests evaluation requires a procedural infrastructure: expert testimony from animal behaviorists, veterinary records, and perhaps even home evaluations. For an affluent couple, this may be a manageable expense. However, for the average family, it risks turning a legal separation into a prohibitively expensive ordeal. There is a valid fear that pet custody could become a luxury of the elite, while simultaneously

⁹ Law 17/2021 of Dec. 5, 2021 (B.O.E. 2021, 288) (Spain)

¹⁰ N.Y. Dom. Rel. Law § 236(B)(5)(d)(15) (McKinney 2021)

¹¹ *Karnail Singh v. State of Haryana*, 2019 SCC OnLine P&H 704

providing a new avenue for **litigation abuse**, where one partner uses the pet as an emotional and financial weapon to drain the other's resources.¹²

Furthermore, we face the Definition Problem. If a golden retriever is entitled to a custody hearing because of its social bond, what of the family hamster or the exotic bird? If the law elevates some species while ignoring others, it risks appearing arbitrary. The law, by its nature, requires clear lines and predictable outcomes. Moving toward a **sentience-based model** replaces predictability with a moving target of "emotional well-being" that many judges feel unqualified to hit.¹³

The Solution: Practical Implementation and Alternative Frameworks

However, these challenges do not mean we should retreat into the cold comfort of property law. Instead, they call for a Third Way a pragmatic legal framework that acknowledges the unique status of the pet without mimicking the full intensity of a child custody battle. The most effective implementation of this is the rise of the Pet-Nuptial agreement. Much like a traditional prenuptial agreement, these documents allow couples to decide, in a state of calm, who will be the primary guardian. By encouraging the "contractualization" of pet care, we can move most of these disputes out of the courtroom and into the realm of private agreement.¹⁴

For cases that do reach the court, we must advocate for **Specialized Mediation**. Rather than a judge presiding over a trial, pet custody disputes are ideally suited for Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). In mediation, the focus remains on the practicalities of care who has the fenced yard and who has historically been the primary source of comfort for the animal. This "Guardianship Model" allows the law to remain flexible without being overwhelmed. It treats the animal not as a "child," but as a "vulnerable dependent," like the legal status of an elderly family member under guardianship.¹⁵

Another functional framework is the Sole Custody with the Liberal Visitation model. Shared custody, while idealistic, is often stressful for animals who thrive on territorial stability. A more

¹² Tabby T. McLain, *Knock-Down Drag-Out over Fido: Determining the Best Interests of a Pet*, 23 *Cardozo J.L. & Gender* 423, 435 (2017)

¹³ *In re Marriage of Brubaker*, 2022 IL App (2d) 200160

¹⁴ Emily Erin Guss, *Note, All's Well That Ends in a Pet-Nuptial: Why Pet-Nuptial Agreements Should Be Enforceable*, 14 *Rutgers J. L. & Pub. Pol'y* 384 (2017)

¹⁵ *State v. Fessenden*, 355 Or. 759 (2014)

"animal-centric" approach involves awarding primary residence to the primary caregiver, while allowing the other party visitation rights that do not require the animal to constantly move between homes. This prioritizes the animal's need for a home base while respecting the human's need for continued connection.

Ultimately, the goal of these frameworks is to strip away the weaponization of the pet. We are not asking the law to equate a dog to a human child; we are asking the law to recognize that a heartbeat creates a different kind of property one that requires a different kind of justice. By building these practical bridges, we can create a legal landscape that is both practically sound and ethically resonant, ensuring that the floodgates do not lead to chaos, but to a more mature and compassionate form of jurisprudence.

7. Conclusion: Toward a Jurisprudence of Compassion

The law has always been a slow-moving mirror of the society it serves often trailing decades behind the emotional and sociological reality of the people it governs. For too long we have allowed a rigid adherence to property law to dictate the fate of living beings who possess the capacity for love, fear and attachment. To treat a dog as a piece of furniture in a divorce decree is to embrace a legal fiction that no one truly believes anymore. When a household divides, the loss of a pet is not the loss of an asset but the loss of a relationship. By arguing for a transition toward a "Best Interests" standard we are not asking the court to grant animals the right to vote or the right to sue but simply the right to be seen by the law as the sentient beings they are.

This journey from chattel to sentience is not just about the welfare of animals but about the integrity of our legal system itself. A court that forces a primary caregiver to surrender a beloved companion based on a five-year-old receipt is a court that has lost its connection to equity. As we have seen in the emerging jurisprudence across Europe and the activist corridors of the Indian High Courts the definition of "personhood" is expanding to include those who cannot speak for themselves, but whose lives carry intrinsic value. This global momentum is a testament to the fact that our moral compass is shifting and our statutes must eventually follow suit. We are moving toward a world where guardianship replaces ownership and where the "right to life" is not a human monopoly but a shared biological dignity.

Of course the practical hurdles we have discussed the risk of overburdened courts, the

economic costs of litigation and the difficulty of defining which species deserve protection are real and require careful management. But these challenges are the growing pains of a more mature legal philosophy. They call for innovation in the form of pet-nuptial agreements specialized mediation and a "quasi-child" status that balances the stability of property law with the compassion of family law. We must stop viewing pet custody as a "floodgate" of chaos and start viewing it as an opportunity for more nuanced justice.

Ultimately, the objective of this research is to advocate for a legal framework that honors the "multi-species family" as a valid and vital social unit. In the heartbreak of a domestic split, the most vulnerable members of the family should not be reduced to line items on a balance sheet. They are stakeholders in their own happiness, and the law has a profound duty to protect that happiness from being weaponized by human conflict. By adopting the "Best Interests of the Pet" standard we align our legal codes with the reality of the homes we build and the bonds we cherish. We choose a future where a heartbeat carries more weight than a bill of sale and where the final gavel strike secures a home rather than just settling a debt. The era of the animal as an object is coming to an end and in its place, we are building a jurisprudence of compassion that finally recognizes our best friends for who they truly are.¹⁶ This shift is the next logical step in our collective moral evolution as we strive to create a world where justice is not just for those who can argue for it but for all who can feel it.¹⁷ Only when our laws reflect the warmth of our hearts can we say that we have achieved a truly modern system of justice.¹⁸

In the end, we are not just debating statutes or case law, but the very way we value the hearts that beat beside us every day. To deny a pet its right to a stable home is to deny the most selfless bond a human being can ever experience. We must finally choose to be the people our animals already believe us to be and build a legal world that is as kind and as loyal as they are.

¹⁶ *H v. T*, [2022] BCSC 1481 (Can.)

¹⁷ S. M. Wise, *Rattling the Cage: Toward Legal Rights for Animals*, 45-48 (Perseus Books, 2000)

¹⁸ *Animal Welfare Board of India v. A. Nagaraja*, (2014) 7 SCC 547