



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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Ms. Sumiti Ahuja, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Delhi,

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Dr. Navtika Singh Nautiyal

Dr. Navtika Singh Nautiyal presently working as an Assistant Professor in School of law, Forensic Justice and Policy studies at National Forensic Sciences University, Gandhinagar, Gujarat. She has 9 years of Teaching and Research Experience. She has completed her Philosophy of Doctorate in 'Intercountry adoption laws from Uttranchal University, Dehradun' and LLM from Indian Law Institute, New Delhi.



Dr. Rinu Saraswat

Associate Professor at School of Law, Apex University, Jaipur, M.A, LL.M, Ph.D,

Dr. Rinu have 5 yrs of teaching experience in renowned institutions like Jagannath University and Apex University. Participated in more than 20 national and international seminars and conferences and 5 workshops and training programmes.

Dr. Nitesh Saraswat

E.MBA, LL.M, Ph.D, PGDSAPM

Currently working as Assistant Professor at Law Centre II, Faculty of Law, University of Delhi. Dr. Nitesh have 14 years of Teaching, Administrative and research experience in Renowned Institutions like Amity University, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Jai Narain Vyas University Jodhpur, Jagannath University and Nirma University.

More than 25 Publications in renowned National and International Journals and has authored a Text book on Cr.P.C and Juvenile Delinquency law.



Subhrajit Chanda

BBA. LL.B. (Hons.) (Amity University, Rajasthan); LL. M. (UPES, Dehradun) (Nottingham Trent University, UK); Ph.D. Candidate (G.D. Goenka University)

Subhrajit did his LL.M. in Sports Law, from Nottingham Trent University of United Kingdoms, with international scholarship provided by university; he has also completed another LL.M. in Energy Law from University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, India. He did his B.B.A.LL.B. (Hons.) focussing on International Trade Law.

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WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal providededicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

CHILD CUSTODY & PARENTAL RIGHTS

AUTHORED BY - VIVEKANAND SHAH

Abstract

Child custody and parental rights in India are governed by a complex interplay of personal laws and secular statutes. The primary consideration in custody disputes is the welfare of the child, as emphasized by Indian courts. This paper examines the legal framework for child custody under various personal laws (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Parsi) as well as secular laws like the Guardians and Wards Act, 1890. It also explores judicial trends, the rights of biological and adoptive parents, and the impact of divorce and separation on custody decisions. The paper concludes with recommendations for legal reforms to ensure child-centric custody adjudication.

Introduction

Child custody is one of the most sensitive and contested issues arising from matrimonial disputes. In India, the legal landscape governing child custody is multifaceted, shaped by a blend of personal laws applicable to different religious communities and secular legislation aimed at safeguarding the welfare of minors. While personal laws—such as Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Parsi laws—offer distinct guidelines on custody and guardianship, the overarching secular statute, the *Guardians and Wards Act, 1890*, serves as a uniform legal framework applicable across religious boundaries in the absence of specific personal law provisions.

The paramount principle that guides Indian courts in custody matters is the welfare and best interest of the child. This doctrine has evolved through judicial interpretation, often overriding the strict application of personal laws when deemed necessary for the child's well-being. With changing social dynamics, including the rising incidence of divorce, live-in relationships, and single parenthood, Indian courts have increasingly taken a child-centric approach in deciding custody cases.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the legal provisions and judicial trends concerning child custody in India. It explores the rights of biological and adoptive

parents under various personal laws, the role of secular statutes, and the implications of marital breakdown on custody decisions. In doing so, the paper highlights the need for cohesive and progressive legal reforms that prioritize the child's best interests above all else.

Historical Background and Evolution

The concept of child custody and parental rights in India has undergone significant transformation over the years, shaped by socio-cultural norms, religious doctrines, colonial legislation, and modern judicial interpretation. Historically, custody decisions were primarily patriarchal, with the father being regarded as the natural guardian of the child in most communities. However, over time, the focus shifted from parental authority to the welfare and best interests of the child—a principle that now lies at the heart of all custody determinations in India.

Ancient and Medieval Period

In ancient Hindu society, guardianship and child-rearing were governed by *Dharmaśāstra* texts. The father was considered the primary guardian, and lineage was patrilineal. The mother had limited rights in matters of guardianship and custody, often only stepping in during the father's absence or death. Similarly, under traditional Islamic jurisprudence, while the mother was granted custody of minor children during their early years (especially sons under 7 and daughters under puberty), the ultimate guardianship (*wilayat*) remained with the father or paternal relatives.

Custody norms during this period were community-specific, deeply rooted in religious customs and social structures, with little to no role for state intervention.

Colonial Era and British Legal Influence

The modern legal framework for custody in India finds its roots in the colonial period, when the British sought to codify and regulate personal laws. The *Guardians and Wards Act, 1890* (GWA) was introduced as a secular statute to provide a uniform legal mechanism for guardianship and custody, irrespective of religion, in cases where personal laws were either silent or ambiguous. The GWA gave courts the power to appoint guardians for the welfare of minors, and marked an early shift from patriarchal presumptions to the idea of judicial discretion based on the child's best interest.

However, the British simultaneously codified personal laws for different communities, such as the *Hindu Law of Inheritance Act* and the *Indian Succession Act*, maintaining a parallel system of religion-based laws even in guardianship matters.

Post-Independence Developments

Following independence in 1947, India retained the GWA as a secular law, while also reforming several personal law statutes to address modern social realities. Key developments include:

- **Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956 (HMGA):** Part of the Hindu Code Bills, this Act designated the father as the natural guardian of a minor child, but introduced a significant reform by stating that custody should be determined according to the child's welfare. It also recognized the mother as a natural guardian after the father's death.
- **Indian Divorce Act, 1869 (for Christians) and Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act, 1936** also provided courts with discretionary powers to award custody during and after divorce proceedings.

Over time, Indian courts began to interpret these laws more progressively, emphasizing that *the welfare of the child is of paramount importance*, even if it meant deviating from rigid personal law norms.

Judicial Recognition of Child-Centric Approach

Landmark judgments by the Supreme Court and various High Courts have significantly shaped custody jurisprudence in India. The courts gradually moved away from a parental rights-based approach to a child-centric one. In cases like *Githa Hariharan v. RBI* (1999), the Supreme Court interpreted "after the father" in HMGA to mean "in the absence of the father," thereby giving mothers an equal footing in guardianship matters.

Similarly, in *Roxann Sharma v. Arun Sharma* (2015), the Supreme Court reiterated that the child's welfare should override all statutory presumptions about who should get custody.

Contemporary Relevance

With the increase in divorce rates, separation, and alternative family structures (like single parenting and live-in relationships), custody matters have become more complex. The courts have begun acknowledging shared parenting, joint custody, and the psychological impact of

custody battles on children. These changes reflect an evolving jurisprudence that aligns with international child rights standards and the principle of *parens patriae*, where the state assumes the role of the ultimate guardian of the child.

Detailed Analysis of Personal Laws

1. Hindu Law

Governing Laws:

- *Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956 (HMGA)*
- *Guardians and Wards Act, 1890 (GWA)* – in cases not specifically addressed by HMGA

Key Provisions:

- Under Section 6 of HMGA, the **father is the natural guardian** of a Hindu minor boy or unmarried girl; after him, the **mother** becomes the natural guardian.
- For children below the age of 5 years, **custody is ordinarily with the mother**.
- The welfare of the child is the **paramount consideration** under Section 13 of HMGA.

Judicial Interpretation:

- In *Githa Hariharan v. Reserve Bank of India* (1999), the Supreme Court held that the term “after” in Section 6(a) should not be interpreted to mean only “after the father’s death.” This gave **equal guardianship rights to mothers**.
- Courts often **override parental rights** if they are not in the child’s interest.

2. Muslim Law

Governing Source:

- Muslim personal law is **uncodified** and based on Islamic jurisprudence, customs, and the school of thought (Sunni or Shia) followed.

Key Provisions:

- Under **Sunni law**, the mother is entitled to custody (called *hizanat*) of:
 - Male children till the age of **7 years**
 - Female children till **puberty**
- Under **Shia law**, the mother has custody only:
 - Of male children until **2 years**
 - Of female children until **7 years**
- **Guardianship of property** and the right to make major decisions typically lie with the father (*wilayat*).

Limitations and Judicial Role:

- The mother can lose custody if she remarries someone not related to the child or is considered unfit.
- Courts may intervene under the *Guardians and Wards Act* to protect the child's welfare, especially when the strict application of *hizanat* is not in the child's best interest.
- *Imran Khan v. Fathima Imran* (2010) reiterated that **welfare prevails over personal law rules**.

3. Christian Law Governing Law:

- *Indian Divorce Act, 1869* (amended in 2001)

Key Provisions:

- Section 41 of the Act empowers courts to make interim orders regarding custody, maintenance, and education of children during the pendency of divorce proceedings.
- Section 42 allows the court to issue **final custody orders** at the time of granting a decree of divorce, judicial separation, or annulment.

Judicial Discretion:

- Courts are **not bound by strict rules** and rely on the **Guardians and Wards Act** for matters not expressly provided for.
- The principle of **child's welfare supersedes all parental claims**.

4. Parsi Law

Governing Law:

- *Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act, 1936*

Key Provisions:

- Custody matters are decided at the time of granting divorce or separation.
- The Act allows courts to issue **custody, maintenance, and education orders** for minor children.
- In practice, courts refer to the *Guardians and Wards Act* for determining long-term custody and guardianship.

Emphasis on Welfare:

- Like other personal laws, the **paramount consideration is the welfare of the child**, not just religious doctrine.

5. Special Marriage Act, 1954 For Interfaith Marriages:

- Provides a secular framework for marriage and associated rights, including custody.
- Section 38 empowers courts to decide custody during divorce proceedings.
- The *Guardians and Wards Act, 1890* supplements the Act in terms of custody and guardianship.

Types of Custody in India

Child custody does not follow a one-size-fits-all model. Indian courts recognize various types of custody arrangements to ensure that the **child's best interests** are protected in each unique family situation. Below are the primary types:

◆ 1. Physical Custody Definition:

Physical custody refers to the right of a parent to have the child live with them.

Key Features:

- The child resides primarily with one parent (custodial parent).
- The other parent (non-custodial) is typically granted **visitation rights**.
- The goal is to provide the child with a **stable and nurturing environment**.

Example:

In most divorce cases, physical custody is awarded to the mother for younger children, with the father receiving weekend visitation.

◆ 2. Legal Custody Definition:

Legal custody means the right to make important decisions about the child's life, such as education, healthcare, religion, and overall welfare.

Key Features:

- Can be **joint** (both parents) or **sole** (only one parent).
- Even if one parent has physical custody, legal custody can be **shared**.

Example:

Even if a child lives with the mother, both parents might need to jointly decide on which school the child will attend.

◆ 3. Joint Custody Definition:

In joint custody, **both parents share physical custody** of the child, usually by dividing time between them in a structured schedule.

Key Features:

- Encourages the involvement of both parents.
- Time is split equally or equitably.
- Increasingly promoted in India for **balanced parenting** after separation or divorce.

Challenges:

- Requires **cooperation and communication** between parents.
- Can be disruptive for the child if not planned properly.

Case Reference:

The Law Commission of India (257th Report) advocated for **joint custody** to become the default rule, with courts tailoring the arrangement to each case.

◆ 4. Sole Custody Definition:

Only one parent is granted both physical and legal custody of the child.

Key Features:

- Usually awarded when the other parent is deemed **unfit or incapable** (due to abuse, addiction, criminal record, etc.).
- The non-custodial parent may be denied visitation or allowed **supervised visits**.

◆ 5. Third-Party Custody Definition:

Custody is awarded to someone **other than the biological parents**, such as grandparents, close relatives, or even a state-appointed guardian.

Key Features:

- Applied in situations where **both parents are unable** or unfit to care for the child.
- Welfare of the child remains the **central concern**.

Example:

In cases where both parents have died or are abusive, the court may give custody to the child's maternal grandparents.

◆ 6. Split Custody (*Rare in India*)

Definition:

Different children from the same family are placed in the custody of different parents.

Key Features:

- Rarely used, as it **separates siblings**, which courts usually avoid.
- May be considered when there is a **strong preference by an older child** or special needs involved.

Case Studies on Child Custody in India

1. Githa Hariharan v. Reserve Bank of India (1999) 2 SCC 228 Issue:

Whether the mother can act as the natural guardian of a minor during the father's lifetime.

Judgment:

The Supreme Court held that the word "after" in Section 6 of the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956 should not mean only "after the father's death" but can also mean "in the absence of the father" or when he is not in a position to take care of the child.

Significance:

This judgment **recognized mothers as equal natural guardians**, moving towards gender parity in guardianship and custody.

2. Nil Ratan Kundu v. Abhijit Kundu (2008) 9 SCC 413 Issue:

Custody dispute between the child's father and maternal grandparents after the mother's death.

Judgment:

The court emphasized that **the child's welfare must override all other considerations**, including parental rights.

Significance:

Reiterated that **biological relationships do not automatically confer custody rights** unless they align with the child's welfare.

3. Roxann Sharma v. Arun Sharma (2015) 8 SCC 318 Issue:

Custody battle involving a very young child (under 5 years) between parents undergoing separation.

Judgment:

The Supreme Court granted **interim custody to the mother**, holding that for children below 5 years of age, the mother's custody is normally more appropriate, unless proven unfit.

Significance:

Strengthened the **presumption in favour of maternal custody** for very young children.

4. Sheoli Hati v. Somnath Das (2015) 11 SCC 445 Issue:

Dispute over permanent custody of the child, with the father seeking transfer of custody from the mother.

Judgment:

The court considered the **emotional and psychological well-being** of the child and ruled in favour of maintaining custody with the mother.

Significance:

Highlighted that **stable environment and continuity** in upbringing matter more than parental claims.

5. Vivek Singh v. Romani Singh (2017) 3 SCC 231 Issue:

Whether joint custody should be granted in the best interest of the child.

Judgment:

The court encouraged **shared parenting responsibilities** and upheld that **visitation rights** should be flexible and meaningful.

Significance:

Supported the idea of **joint custody and shared parenting**, especially when both parents are fit and willing.

Factors Considered by the Courts when Granting Custody

The welfare of the minor is very broadly defined and includes many diverse factors, notably:

1. Apart from the age, sex and religion of the minor, Courts consider the personal law of the father. The welfare of younger children is generally regarded as being in the mother's custody.
2. The character and capacity of the proposed guardian, Courts usually reject baseless allegations against mothers. The wishes, if any, of a deceased parent, for example specified in a will is taken into consideration.
3. Any existing or previous relations of the proposed guardian with the minor's property, Courts do not look kindly on guardians seeking custody just to have control over the minor's property. But if, for example, the minor's property is shared with the mother and she is otherwise a suitable guardian, the Court will regard the property relationship as an additional factor in the mother's favour.
4. The minor's preference if she/he is old enough to form an intelligent preference, usually

accepted as about 9 years old. Courts prefer to keep children united and award custody of both to either the mother or the father.

5. Whether either/both parents have remarried and there are step-children, Although the mother's remarriage to someone who is not the children's close blood-relative often means the Court will not grant her custody, this rule is not strictly followed. Although the father's remarriage usually denies him custody, sometimes the Courts agree to grant him custody especially when the children's step-mother cannot or will not have her own children.
6. Whether the parents live far apart, Courts sometimes do not give the mother custody because she lives very far away from the father who is the natural guardian. But in 1994 an Uzbek woman living in Uzbekistan was given custody; the judge said modern transport had shortened distances and meant that the father could depart from his home in the morning and return by evening.
7. The child's comfort, health, material, intellectual, moral, and spiritual welfare this very broad category includes the adequate and undisturbed education of the child.
8. However, the mere fact that the mother is economically less secure than the father, or that she suffers from ill-health or a disability is not usually reason enough to deny her custody because maintenance is the father's responsibility irrespective of who holds custody.
9. The mental and psychological development of the minor should not be disturbed and the parents and the courts must maintain status quo; Courts will consider the likely impact of a change in guardians and the child's reaction to this change

Conclusion

Child custody and parental rights in India lie at the intersection of personal law traditions and the evolving demands of a modern, pluralistic society. While each religious community has its own set of rules and customs governing guardianship and custody, the unifying thread across all legal frameworks is the principle that the *welfare of the child is paramount*. Indian courts have consistently interpreted personal laws through a progressive and child-centric lens, emphasizing emotional, psychological, educational, and physical well-being over mere legal entitlements of parents.

Despite this, challenges remain—outdated statutory provisions, gender biases, inconsistent

judicial practices, and the lack of a uniform civil framework often hinder the delivery of truly equitable outcomes. The role of the judiciary has been instrumental in navigating these gaps, but reliance solely on judicial discretion is not sustainable in the long term.

There is a pressing need for comprehensive legal reform that ensures uniformity, prioritizes the best interests of the child, promotes shared parenting where suitable, and recognizes diverse family structures. Strengthening mediation, child counseling, and enforcement mechanisms will also enhance the custody process. Ultimately, child custody laws must evolve to reflect contemporary realities and uphold the rights and dignity of the child above all else.

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