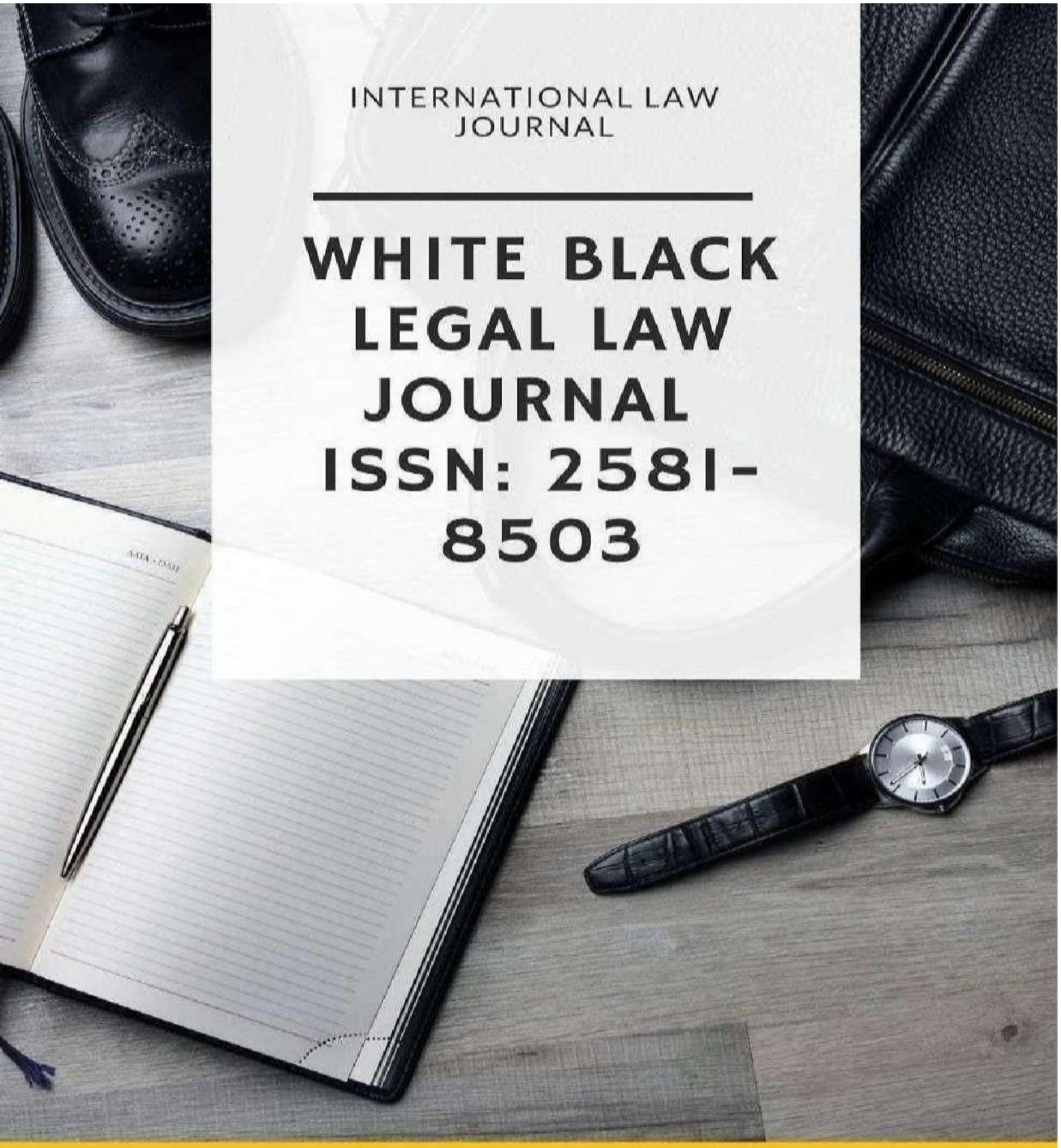

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Subhrajit did his LL.M. in Sports Law, from Nottingham Trent University of United Kingdoms, with international scholarship provided by university; he has also completed another LL.M. in Energy Law from University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, India.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

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FORENSIC EVIDENCE IN PRIYADARSHINI MATTOO CASE: CONVERTING ACQUITTAL INTO CONVICTION

AUTHORED BY - AISHWARYA SAREEN & SUMIT KR. JODDER

ABSTRACT

As a landmark case, the Priyadarshini Mattoo case represents a significant stage in the evolution of the criminal justice process in India. It has been clearly demonstrated in this case how forensic science has the capacity to change the course of judicial decision-making when reliable evidence is presented. Significantly, the trial court had acquitted the accused, Santosh Kumar Singh, initially partly on the basis that most of the trial evidence was circumstantial and, because of the extensive procedural missteps that did not create additional evidential links between the accused and the crime. In the result of the trial court's conclusion, however, the eventual re-evaluation of the forensic evidence, and especially the DNA profile evidence in the appellate process, led to a conviction and life-time sentence and corrects the serious error of the trial court's judgment. The relevance of the Mattoo case lies in the fact that it clearly demonstrates the gradual move towards relying on scientific, forensic techniques that are increasingly involved with our criminal trials, and the importance of collecting, preserving, and presenting the scientific evidence correctly in the appropriate courts.

This research article examines the case and it's factual details, which includes relevant scientific and forensic evidence that was available to and used in the courts and from its presentation, how it had been interpreted in terms of the Indian Evidence Act and the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam and further, what types of admissibility and standards were legally developed from a comparable U.S. law perspective. In addition this paper examines how DNA as a form of analysis could be partially substantiated through corroborative physical evidence and credible qualified expert testimony which related to the relevance of overturning the acquittal. The paper also recommends strengthening the statutory and forensic infrastructure so that in the future justice can be obtained as quickly as possible while still being accurate. The final aspect from this case is it serves as a highly important case as an example of using good science, can provide additional, powerful methods to discover latent truths related to the conviction.

Key Words: Forensic Evidence, DNA Profiling, Priyadarshini Mattoo, Indian Evidence Act, Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, Miscarriage of Justice, Conviction, Criminal Law.

INTRODUCTION

The interplay of science & law has revolutionized the nature of criminal investigations with forensic evidence gaining prominence in contemporary legal systems. The systematic use of forensic science has always been behind the curve in India, largely due to infrastructural and understanding complications, along with the reluctance of some members of the judiciary. Fortunately, in the last couple of years it has found itself an important player in resolving evidential gaps, & demonstrating that justice cannot just be done but can be seen to be done.

The Priyadarshini Mattoo case serves as a haunting reminder of the initial failures of the justice delivery system and the ultimate win by forensic science in correcting a gross miscarriage of justice. The case, involving the rape and murder of the 25-year-old law student by Santosh Kumar Singh, the son of a senior police officer, ended in acquittal by the trial court, despite very strong circumstantial evidence against Singh. Only after increased public pressure and the benefit of advanced DNA analysis did the engagement of forensic science tip the scales of justice in favor of an injustice being corrected.

In this research article we will explore the vital provisions forensic evidence related to the Priyadarshini Mattoo case played in establishing an acquittal in a conviction. We will analyze a number of the forensic types of forensic techniques employed, with special emphasis on DNA profiling, the admissibility and relevance of the evidence under the Indian Evidence Act (IEA) and the Biological Substance Act (BSA), as well as their applicability under law in the U.S. The article also gives a factual summary of the case, explores the rationale of the rulings on the ground level of various courts, and discusses how forensic evidence was significant in the conviction. The article illustrates the increasing and important role of forensic science in the Indian legal system and supports a greater systematic approach in its use in criminal trials.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What were the key pieces of forensic evidence in the Priyadarshini Mattoo case?
2. How do the pieces of forensic evidence mentioned in the article interact with sections of the Indian Evidence Act (Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam)?
3. On a comparative note, how are those forensic practices relevant in the United States?

4. How did forensic evidence impact the decisions at the trial court, high court and supreme court?

FACTS OF THE CASE

Priyadarshini Mattoo was a 25-year-old law student at the University of Delhi, who was raped & murdered in her home in Vasant Kunj on 23rd January 1996. [1]The accused and primary suspect was Santosh Kumar Singh, a classmate in the same law course and son of an influential IPS officer. Furthermore, Priyadarshini had reported Singh to the police on multiple occasions for stalking and harassment but the police did not act against Singh because of his father's rank.

On the day of the incident, Priyadarshini was home alone. Reportedly, she returned home from college in the afternoon, and around the same time Santosh Singh was seen near the college. Later that night her uncle found her body in her bedroom. This young woman was raped, then strangled with a wire, and smashed in the face with a helmet in order to hide her identity. The horrible crime shocked the nation and showed the vulnerability of women - even women who had tried to protect themselves by attempting to reach out for help. The police investigation identified Santosh Kumar Singh as the main suspect. Circumstantial evidence included his previous harassment of the young woman, his location at the scene of the crime, and possible odd behavior on his part. But several early lapses in investigation - including moving evidence, delays in forensic analysis, and failure to provide any solid witness accounts put the accused in a position to take advantage of loopholes.

JUDGMENTS OF TRIAL COURT, HIGH COURT, AND SUPREME COURT

Trial Court (1999) – Acquittal

The trial Court, led by Additional Sessions Judge G.P. Thareja delivered its verdict in 1999. The court found Santosh Kumar Singh not guilty, despite stating in the judgment “he is the man who committed the crime”. [2]The judge went on to say that there was “although very strong suspicion against the accused he fully agreed with the prosecution that the prosecution had failed to prove the case beyond reasonable doubt”.

[1] India Today, Priyadarshini Mattoo Case: Complete Timeline (Oct. 6, 2006), https://www.indiatoday.in/india/north/story/priyadarshini-mattoo-case-timeline-83266-2010-10-05
[2] Santosh Kumar Singh v. State through CBI, (2010) 9 S.C.C. 747.

The reasons for acquittal included:

- Tampering with forensic evidence: There was concern that DNA samples may have been tampered with.
- Chain of custody issues was also raised: the links between collected evidence and the accused were poorly maintained.
- Concerns about the accused's father, who was a senior IPS officer, possibly obstructing the investigations were also raised.

Although the judge had expressed his moral certainty of the accused's guilt, the law demands that a conviction must be based on clear, cogent, and conclusive evidence, which the prosecution was unable to satisfy.

Delhi High Court (2006) – Conviction

There was considerable public outcry and media attention setting the stage for the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to file an appeal against the decision of the trial court. In 2006, the case went before a Division Bench of the Delhi High Court, which took a fresh look at the forensic evidence, and specifically with the DNA reports.

The High Court quashed the decision of the trial court and found Santosh Kumar Singh guilty of the rape and murder of Priyadarshini Mattoo and imposed a sentence of death[3] (which was later modified to a life sentence by the Supreme Court).

Key reasons for conviction:

- The DNA report showed that the samples of the semen found on the victim was that of Santosh Kumar Singh.
- The helmet which was used to smash Priyadarshini's face was matched to Singh through the forensic examination.
- The prior behavior and stalking history of Singh along with opportunity were established and corroborated through evidence.

The High Court bluntly criticized the trial court's manner of evaluating evidence along with the demonstrated tampering in the investigation, and noted that this case was a classic case of "justice denied" and a systematic failure that had since been remedied by standards of scientific re-evaluation.

[3] State (Through Cbi) vs Santosh Kumar Singh on 17 October, 2006
Equivalent citations: 2007CRILJ964, 133(2006)DLT393

Supreme Court (2010) – Confirmation of Conviction

The Supreme Court of India heard the appeal in 2010, upheld the conviction, but commuted the sentence of death to imprisonment for life for reasons of the lack of the "rarest of rare" case for capital punishment.

Important observations made by the Supreme Court:

- The court discussed the importance of forensic evidence, specifically DNA profiling, which was at the heart of the case.
- While the Supreme Court noted the brutality of the crime, there were several mitigating circumstances such as the prior lack of criminal record of the convicted party.
- The judgment reaffirmed that forensic evidence can give the level of certainty for a conviction in cases where eyewitnesses are not available.

The criminal course of the Priyadarshini Mattoo case through the judicial system - from acquittal to conviction - confirmed some of the weaknesses and strengths of the Indian legal system. The weaknesses were many with significant losses in known investigative failures and covertly affected law enforcement practice. It also reinforced that essential truth can be resurrected by forensic precision and diligent appellate exploration.

FORENSIC EVIDENCE

1. DNA Profiling (Vaginal and Semen Samples)

Use in the Case:

In the case of Santosh Kumar Singh v. State through CBI, DNA profiling provided the most significant forensic connection between the defendant and the victim. During the post-mortem examination, a forensic doctor took two vaginal swabs and slides from the deceased, sealed them, and delivered them to the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB), Hyderabad, along with the accused's blood sample. Dr. Lalji Singh and Dr. G.V. Rao performed the DNA test, and the results confirmed that the deceased cswab contained semen that derived from the blood of the accused.[4]

Relevance (India):

The DNA profile is of direct relevance in proving whether the accused person was capable of

[4] See Testimonies of Dr. Lalji Singh & Dr. G.V. Rao in Santosh Kumar Singh v. State through CBI, (2010) 9 S.C.C. 747.

committing the offence of rape. Section 45 of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, and Section 39 of the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023, provides that expert's scientific opinion is admissible when a court is required to form an opinion on a scientific matter.[5] That is, scientific findings provide reliable evidence to establish biological identity with almost 100% certainty that is particularly relevant to sexual offences.

Reliability (India):

The Supreme Court upheld the reliability of the DNA evidence in this case. The test carried out per scientific protocol and by the national experts in the field. The Court noted that the trial court had wrongly questioned the evidence, especially without credible scientific evidence and data to counter it. It also pointed out that expert results from tests done through an established and accepted methodology cannot simply be overturned as a result of mere speculation. It also noted that the storage, transport, and testing of the samples were diligently documented, and thus thorough compliance was in order.

Admissibility (India):

DNA results were held to be admissible as they could be shown to meet all procedural and legal requirements. The samples were appropriately sealed, there was an established chain of custody, and the expert results were properly documented. The Supreme Court was very critical of the trial court for failing to appreciate scientific evidence, and reminded that courts must be respectful of expertise when dealing with complicated evidence unless there is a valid reasoning against it.

Comparison with U.S. Law:

In the U.S. the admissibility of DNA evidence must meet either the Frye test, which looked at the general acceptance in the scientific community,[6] or the Daubert test, which looked at whether it could be tested, peer reviewed, quoted error rate, or were otherwise accepted standards of science.[7] DNA profiling in this example could clearly meet the standards of both. The processes used had been accepted, were reproducable, and were conducted by qualified people. In addition the handling of the samples preserved the chain of custody, and its other

[5] THE INDIAN EVIDENCE ACT, NO. 1 of 1872, Section 45 and THE BHARATIYA SAKSHYA ADHINIYAM, 2023
ACT NO. 47 OF 2023
[6] Frye v. United States, 293 F. 1013 (D.C. Cir. 1923).
[7] Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharms., Inc., 509 U.S. 579 (1993)

factors also met the admissibility standards of U.S. evidentiary standards.

2. Blood Samples

Use in the Case:

The blood samples of the accused were taken at Dr. R.M.L Hospital, under a doctor's order and presence of medical officers, and under the supervision of a CBI officer. The blood samples were important for comparison with the semen from the victim. Even though only 12 ml of the 20 ml of blood originally taken from the victim made it to the lab, the expert evidence confirmed the samples were unadulterated and potentially treated in accordance with scientific protocols.

Relevance (India):

The blood samples were the basis for the comparison for DNA profiling. They were important for establishing the accused's biological connection to the semen recovered from the victim. Under section 45 Indian Evidence Act or Section 39 Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, testimony involving figures relating to scientific data from blood samples based on expert opinion is likely to be taken into account when determining culpability for the offence of bodily harm or sexual assault.

Reliability (India):

Forensic experts confirmed that the blood evidence was trustworthy, and that the blood was appropriately refrigerated, sealed and stored. Dr N.S. Kalra was present when the blood was collected and refrigerated and testified to there being no tampering with the blood. The Supreme Court affirmed this evidence and found that the trial judge's doubts were speculative and not based on the facts.

Admissibility (India):

The blood samples were admitted because proper chain of custody was disclosed and expert evidence established proper protocols for the collection of, storage of and transport of the blood sample. The trial court wrongly questioned slight variations, along the same lines as a reduced volume, which the Supreme Court rightfully held was no reason to disallow otherwise credible evidence.

Comparison with U.S. Law:

Blood sample evidence in U.S. courts has to pass a threshold of having been, collected, stored and handled by qualified field experts. If the chain of custody can be established, and tests were done according to scientific protocols, then such blood evidence is admissible. In our case, the procedures used, and documents that would meet the U.S. standard for blood analyses, were available.

In U.S. courts, the admissibility of blood sample evidence is contingent on proper collection, storage, and expert handling. Provided that the chain of custody is demonstrable and testing conforms to scientific norms, such evidence is admissible. In this case, the procedures followed and documentation available would meet U.S. standards for forensic blood analysis.

3. Hair Sample

Use in the Case:

Hair strands were obtained from the deceased's body on the first investigation, and together with the hair samples of the accused, they were sent for comparison analyses. Again, those strands should not be viewed as primary evidence, but they were still useful in supporting that the accused was at the crime scene.

Relevance (India):

Hair evidence has more corroborative value than being used for identification compared to DNA evidence. Under Section 45 IEA or Section 39 BSA, having similar hair types is useful in establishing closeness or contact with the victim by the accused. In this case, the hair evidence continued the circumstantial evidence link that the accused was personally present when the crime was committed.

Reliability (India):

Hair comparison based on microscopic analysis is the least scientifically robust of any sample compared to DNA analysis, and Indian courts analyze this accordingly so that it is not given conclusive value. But on its own, it does not provide for a firm confirmation of the identity or provenance of a hair sample. If used with other more certain forensic markers such as DNA or blood, it could provide corroborative context. In this circumstance the hair samples were collected and dealt with appropriately, in accordance with procedural reliability.

Admissibility (India):

The hair samples were accepted as corroborative expert evidence, in accordance with the Evidence Act, and although they were admissible within the trial context of the case they were less significant from an evidential weight stance yet they were effectively used as corroborative, circumstantial evidence to support the larger forensic narrative put forward by the prosecution.

Comparison with U.S. Law:

In the U.S.A, microscopic hair analysis has been heavily scrutinised due to the past abuses of microscopic hair analysis which resulted in wrongful convictions. [8]Today hair analysis is regarded cautiously, where it will almost always appear with a DNA analysis evidentiary limitation. Should the hair analysis have been presented as evidence there would be little doubt that it would be admitted, but it would likely have limited probative value unless placed in context with either DNA or another digestable scientific evidence.

4. Fingerprint Evidence

Use in the Case:

Although the case file did not refer to fingerprints as a key evidenced marker, there was acknowledgement during the initial investigation that it had been procedurally collected, and potentially relevant. In the matter at hand from a prosecution perspective, its evidential weight paled to that of the collection of DNA & blood based evidence.

Relevance (India):

If presented, fingerprint evidence would be directly relevant to proving physical presence or contact, and would fall under Section 45 IEA / Section 39 BSA. However, since the case was largely decided on the strength of biological and circumstantial evidence, fingerprint data played no prominent role.

If it was presented for evidence, it would be directly relevant to establish physical presence or contact with regards to the questions of the issues of prove, and would fit within the ambit of Section 45 IEA or Section 39 BSA. However, as the case was decided primarily on the evidentiary weight of biological & circumstantial evidence, by virtue of the conclusion reached

[8] Max M. Houck & Bruce Budowle, Correlation of Microscopic and Mitochondrial DNA Hair Comparisons, 47 J. FORENSIC SCI. 964, 964–67 (2002).

on the premise of establish biological contact evidence, fingerprint data is subordinate connected to both weight and value.

Reliability (India):

Fingerprint analysis is generally accepted in Indian courts when lead by evidentially certified expert. It is highly reliable in respect to those samples that are easily matched and have been properly preserved. But in this case, since there is no mention of fingerprint matching, either it was of no value, or it was not taken to its full forensic potential.

Admissibility (India):

The fingerprint information could then be admissible under normal evidentiary rules, if it also met the levels for expert information, and if the evidence or information was in an unbroken chain of custody.

Comparison with U.S. Law:

In the United States, fingerprint information is generally admissible and reliable under the Frye and Daubert tests of admissibility when there is appropriate documentation stating that the fingerprint standards or protocols of matching have been met. Fingerprint evidence is used commonly in civil and criminal trial to demonstrate identification and presence.

5. Post-Mortem Report

Use in the Case:

There was a post-mortem examination, a report was prepared using a board of three physicians. The report indicated that there were nineteen injuries, three fractured ribs and ligature marks were present around the neck. The conclusion was that the cause of death was strangulation. The autopsy also obtained vaginal swabs that were subsequently DNA sequenced. There were bruises, torn clothing and other marks indicating that force had been applied to the victim prior to her death.

Relevance (India):

Post-mortem reports are important as they address the cause and manner of death, which were necessary in this case. The report supported the prosecution's case theory of rape and murder. Under Section 45 IEA / Section 39 BSA such expert medical evidence is relevant in proving bodily harm and time of death.

Reliability (India):

The post-mortem report's reliability was bolstered by three doctors' testimony, who were all medical officers appointed by the government, and they used a common methodology and arrived at similar conclusions that were consistent with the injuries observed.[9] The Supreme Court accepted the report as reliable and authoritative.

Admissibility (India):

On the issues of the intact hymen, the trial court's addition of significant importance to signs that were not very relevant, were addressed by the Supreme Court with the comment that absence of tearing did not rule out rape.

Comparison with U.S. Law:

This is not the case in U.S.courts, and post-mortem reports are admissible through the testimony of medical examiners. Courts rely on post-mortem reports to establish the time, cause, and manner of death. The multiple injuries which furthered or lessened the state of death, along with expert opinions in this case would meet the admissibility test in U.S. jurisdictions as well.

6. Forensic Expert Evidence

Use in the Case:

The expert testimony of Dr. Lalji Singh, Dr. G.V. Rao, and Dr. N.S. Kalra was most important in the case. They discussed DNA profiling, blood sample storage, and the reliability of the scientific tests. Their testimony directly affected the interpretation of all pieces of forensic evidence.

Relevance (India):

Expert evidence was necessary to fill the knowledge gap of the court with respect to specialized scientific procedures. Section 45 IEA or Section 39 BSA recognizes the need for expert understanding and interpretation of scientific data, not available to lay people or judges, in order to establish facts. The experts spoke in detail about the procedures, results and their conclusions.

[9] Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Govt. of India, Post-Mortem Guidelines (2018).

Reliability (India):

The credentials and experience of forensic scientists in issue cannot be overstated. They relied upon scientifically validated, and peer-reviewed methods for their conclusions. The Supreme Court held that, expert findings ought to be accepted unless contradicted by equally plausible scientific evidence.

Admissibility (India):

All of the expert testimony was accepted in accordance with the rules of evidence. The Supreme Court held that the trial court's rejection of the expert opinion was perverse and speculative. The continuity of custody and record keeping of the loose evidence weighed heavily in favour of confirming the admissibility of the experts' findings.

Comparison with U.S. Law:

U.S. law, as established by Daubert would require expert testimony to be based on reliable methodology and principles. The experts in this case relied upon procedures that could satisfy the Daubert criteria. The experts' training, standing and record of documentation would be sufficient to secure their testimony in American courts. Expert evidence was essential to bridge the court’s knowledge gap in specialized scientific procedures. Section 45 IEA / Section 39 BSA recognizes the need for expert interpretation of scientific data to establish facts not commonly known to laypersons or judges. The experts explained procedures, results, and their conclusions in detail.

Reliability (India):

The credentials and expertise of the scientists involved were well-established. Their conclusions were based on validated, peer-reviewed methods. The Supreme Court emphasized that expert findings should be trusted unless contradicted by equally credible scientific evidence.

Admissibility (India):

All expert testimony was admitted as per the rules of evidence. The trial court’s rejection of expert opinion was deemed perverse and speculative by the Supreme Court. The chain of custody and documentation further strengthened the admissibility of their findings.

Comparison with U.S. Law:

U.S. law, under the Daubert standard, requires expert testimony to be based on reliable methodology and relevant principles. The experts in this case used procedures that would meet these criteria. Their training, reputation, and documentation would suffice to admit their testimony in American courts.

CONCLUSION

In the Priyadarshini Mattoo case, the evidence, made admissible via scientific uncertainty resolution mechanisms, provided the evidentiary building blocks that defeated the trial court's acquittal and ultimately resulted in a determination of guilt. The DNA profile, the vaginal swabs from Priyadarshni's body, and the DNA profile from the semen samples, along with corresponding blood samples from the accused and the identification of hair from Priyadarshini's body as longstanding biological and DNA-RFLP counterparts, conceptually tightened the certification of the accused as a participant in the crime. These pieces of evidence were accepted as pertinent and credible, and presented before and accepted by the appellate court, which further displayed how analytical evidence can inform the gaps of process as appellate courts work to determine which facts determine the ruling of lower courts and how courts can note the scientific precision that continues to tighten its relevance in criminal law as a result of its account of substantive evidence accepting admissibility within the touted evidentiary reliability and certainty of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872 and now, even more so, in the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam In 2023; or, contrast that with the standardization tracking with the admissibility testing process of forensic science as is witnessed in US courts and the Daubert admissibility series, despite the US experience, even in improving India's systems, can be seen contextually proportionate to the notion of argued gaps regarding the evidence without sameness in experience. In this way, the forensic science context as they can be published in this ideation, glimpse the potential enhancement of justice owing to the precision and exploitation of justice resolving advancements. In short, the potential of forensic evidence as capture context, evidence can create fulcrum choices and potentially, delays, as have transpired in this case where science can shift acceptance to find conviction against doubt and beliefs of innocence can happen.