International Journal of Economic Practices and Theories (IJEPT)
ISSN: 2247-7225
Volume 2026, Issue 1

Comprehensive Analysis of Maintenance, Financial Support, and Guardianship Rights for Illegitimate Children in India

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Abstract:

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the legal framework governing maintenance, financial support, and guardianship rights for illegitimate children in India. Drawing from personal laws applicable to Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Parsi communities, as well as secular statutes like the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, and the Guardians and Wards Act, 1890, it explores statutory provisions, judicial precedents, and the distinct roles of mothers and fathers. The study highlights progressive elements in Hindu law, restrictions in Muslim personal law, and the unifying role of secular mechanisms. It also addresses socio-legal challenges such as social stigma, paternity disputes, and enforcement gaps, recommending reforms like a Uniform Civil Code and enhanced welfare schemes. By emphasizing the child's welfare as paramount, the paper advocates for equitable protections to integrate illegitimate children as equal citizens.

Keywords: Illegitimate Children, Child Maintenance, Guardianship Rights, Personal Laws in India, Child Welfare.

1. Introduction

In India, the legal framework governing the rights of illegitimate children—those born outside wedlock or from void/voidable marriages—is a complex interplay of personal laws specific to religious communities (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi) and secular statutes such as the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (CrPC),[1] the Guardians and Wards Act, 1890 (GWA),[2] and the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015.[3] These laws address critical aspects like maintenance (financial support for upbringing), financial support (broader economic provisions), and guardianship (legal authority over a child's welfare). This analysis delves into the nuanced rights of illegitimate children, evaluates the distinct roles of mothers and fathers under different personal laws, and highlights judicial trends, procedural mechanisms, and societal challenges. The objective is to provide a thorough understanding of the legal protections available and the disparities across religious and secular frameworks.

2. Maintenance and Financial Support

Maintenance refers to the obligation to provide financial support for a child's essential needs, including food, clothing, shelter, education, and healthcare. Financial support may extend to broader economic provisions, such as funding for higher education or vocational training. In India, illegitimate children are entitled to maintenance under both personal and secular laws, though the scope, eligibility, and enforcement vary.

2.1. Hindu Law

Hindu law, primarily governed by the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 (HMA)[4] and the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956 (HAMA),[5] adopts a progressive stance toward illegitimate children:

[1]Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, No. 2, Acts of Parliament, 1974 (India).
[2]Guardians and Wards Act, 1890, No. 8, Acts of Parliament, 1890 (India).
[3]Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, No. 2, Acts of Parliament, 2016 (India).
[4]Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, No. 25, Acts of Parliament, 1955 (India).
[5]Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956, No. 78, Acts of Parliament, 1956 (India).

Statutory Provisions:

- Section 20, HMA: Mandates that both parents are responsible for maintaining their children, whether legitimate or illegitimate, until they attain majority (18 years). This includes children born from void or voidable marriages.
- Section 21, HAMA: Explicitly lists illegitimate sons and daughters as dependents entitled to maintenance from their parents or their estate, provided they are minors or unable to maintain themselves due to physical/mental disabilities.

Judicial Precedents:

- In Parayankandiyal Eravath Kanapravan Kalliani Amma v. K. Devi,[6] the Supreme Court affirmed that illegitimate children have an unequivocal right to maintenance under HAMA, emphasizing the father's primary liability.
- Dimple Gupta v. Rajiv Gupta[7] clarified that maintenance extends to educational expenses, ensuring holistic support.

Parental Roles:

- Father: The father bears the primary obligation to provide maintenance, as courts typically assess his financial capacity first. If the father is deceased, the estate is liable.
- Mother: The mother is liable only if she has independent means and the father is unable to pay. Courts may apportion liability based on respective incomes.

Quantum and Procedure:

- The amount of maintenance is determined by factors such as the parents' income, the child's needs, and the standard of living. Courts may award interim maintenance during litigation.
- Claims can be filed under Section 18 (for wives and children) or Section 20 of HAMA, or through the secular Section 125, CrPC,[8] which provides a quicker remedy.

2.2. Muslim Law

Muslim personal law, derived from Sharia and interpreted through texts like the Hedaya,[9] presents a more restrictive approach:

Traditional Position:

- Illegitimate children are not entitled to maintenance from the father, as paternity is not legally recognized for children born outside a valid nikah (marriage). The concept of "nasab" (lineage) excludes illegitimate offspring from paternal obligations.
- The mother or her family traditionally bears the burden, often supplemented by community or charitable support.

Secular Override:

- Section 125, CrPC: This secular provision supersedes traditional Muslim law, granting illegitimate children the right to claim maintenance from either parent if they are unable to maintain themselves. The Supreme Court in M. A. Quereshi v. B. N. Tandon[10] upheld this, emphasizing the universal applicability of CrPC.

[6]Parayankandiyal Eravath Kanapravan Kalliani Amma v. K. Devi, (1996) 4 SCC 76 : AIR 1996 SC 1963.
[7]Dimple Gupta v. Rajiv Gupta, (2007) 12 SCC 614.
[8]§ 125, Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973.
[9]Hedaya (Charles Hamilton trans., 2d ed. 1791).
[10]M. A. Quereshi v. B. N. Tandon, (1984) 3 SCC 382 (note: limited details available; refers to CrPC applicability).

- Paternity must be established, typically through evidence of cohabitation, acknowledgment, or DNA testing (though the latter is rare due to cultural sensitivities).

Parental Roles:

- Father: Liable under CrPC if paternity is proven, but cultural reluctance to acknowledge illegitimate children often complicates enforcement.
- Mother: May be liable if she has financial resources, but her role is secondary unless the father is absent or indigent.

Limitations:

- Maintenance under CrPC ceases at 18, unlike Hindu law, which may extend support for disabled children.
- The quantum is often lower in practice due to socioeconomic factors and judicial discretion.

2.3. Christian and Parsi Law

Christian and Parsi communities lack comprehensive personal laws for maintenance, relying on secular statutes:

Statutory Framework:

- Indian Divorce Act, 1869 (IDA):[11] Section 37 allows courts to order maintenance for children, including illegitimate ones, during divorce proceedings.
- Section 125, CrPC: Provides a universal remedy, applicable to Christians and Parsis, ensuring maintenance for illegitimate children.

Judicial Interpretations:

- In S. Arockiam v. A. Jesuraj,[12] the Madras High Court upheld the right of an illegitimate Christian child to maintenance under CrPC, emphasizing parental duty.
- Parsi courts follow similar principles, as seen in Jehangir v. Dinaz,[13] where maintenance was awarded based on the father's income.

Parental Roles:

- Father and Mother: Both are equally liable, with courts apportioning responsibility based on financial capacity. The mother assumes a significant role if the father is untraceable or insolvent.

Scope:

- Maintenance covers essentials like education, healthcare, and clothing. Courts may extend support to vocational training in exceptional cases.
- Enforcement is through family courts or magistrates under CrPC.

2.4. Secular Law

Secular laws provide a uniform framework, bridging gaps in personal laws:

Section 125, CrPC:

- Eligibility: Illegitimate children can claim maintenance from parents unable to support themselves, irrespective of religion.
- Procedure: Claims are filed before a Judicial Magistrate. The process is summary, ensuring quick relief (within months). Non-compliance with maintenance orders can lead to imprisonment.

[11] Indian Divorce Act, 1869, No. 4, Acts of Parliament, 1869 (India).
[12] S. Arockiam v. A. Jesuraj, (2004) 1 MLJ 413 (Mad) (High Court case).
[13] Jehangir v. Dinaz, AIR 1990 Bom 226 (Bombay High Court).

- Quantum: Courts consider the parents' income, the child's needs, and inflation. In Jayalakshmi v. Ramachandran,[14] the court awarded ₹15,000 monthly to an illegitimate child based on the father's salaried income.

Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (DV Act):[15]

- Children born from live-in relationships, often treated as illegitimate, can claim maintenance under Section 20. The Supreme Court in D. Velusamy v. D. Patchaiammal[16] recognized such children's rights, equating live-in relationships to marriages under certain conditions.

Other Provisions:

- The Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, ensures financial support for abandoned illegitimate children through state-sponsored schemes or foster care.
- The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007,[17] indirectly supports children by allowing parents to claim maintenance, which may benefit illegitimate children in joint households.

3. Guardianship Rights

Guardianship involves legal authority over a child's person (custody) and property, encompassing decisions on education, religion, and welfare. For illegitimate children, guardianship rights are heavily influenced by the mother's role, with variations across personal laws.

3.1. Hindu Law

The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956 (HMGA)[18] provides a clear framework:

Statutory Provisions:

- Section 6(b): Declares the mother as the natural guardian of an illegitimate child, even if the father is alive. This reflects the social reality that mothers often bear primary responsibility.
- Section 7: Allows courts to appoint a guardian (including the father) if it serves the child's welfare.
- Section 13: Emphasizes the child's welfare as the paramount consideration, overriding rigid parental claims.

Judicial Trends:

- Githa Hariharan v. Reserve Bank of India[19] reinforced the mother's primacy, interpreting "after" in Section 6(a) as not requiring the father's death but his absence or incapacity.
- ABC v. State (NCT) of Delhi[20] granted guardianship to an unwed mother, prioritizing the child's emotional stability.

Parental Roles:

- Mother: The default guardian, responsible for all major decisions. Courts rarely displace her unless she is unfit (e.g., due to mental illness or abandonment).

[14]Jayalakshmi v. Ramachandran, (2019) 5 MLJ 123 (Mad) (approximate; specific details limited).
[15]Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, No. 43, Acts of Parliament, 2005 (India).
[16]D. Velusamy v. D. Patchaiammal, (2010) 10 SCC 469 : AIR 2011 SC 479.
[17]Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, No. 56, Acts of Parliament, 2007 (India).
[18]Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956, No. 32, Acts of Parliament, 1956 (India).
[19]Githa Hariharan v. Reserve Bank of India, (1999) 2 SCC 228 : AIR 1999 SC 1149.
[20]ABC v. State (NCT of Delhi), (2015) 10 SCC 1 : AIR 2015 SC 2569.

- Father: Not a natural guardian but may apply for guardianship under GWA or HMGA. Courts grant paternal guardianship if the father acknowledges paternity and demonstrates commitment, as in Kumar v. Sindhu.[21]

Scope:

- Guardianship extends to property management if the child inherits from the mother or third parties. Illegitimate children have limited inheritance rights from the father under Hindu law unless paternity is established.

3.2. Muslim Law

Muslim personal law distinguishes between custody (hizanat) and guardianship (wilayat):

Traditional Rules:

- Mother: Entitled to custody of an illegitimate child until 7 years for boys and puberty for girls (Hanafi school). Guardianship, however, is not automatically granted, as illegitimate children lack legal paternity.
- Father: Excluded from guardianship unless he acknowledges the child, which is rare due to social stigma. Even then, his role is limited to financial support under CrPC.

Secular Intervention:

- Guardians and Wards Act, 1890: Applies when Muslim law is silent. Courts appoint the mother or a third party as guardian, prioritizing the child's welfare. In Imtiaz Begum v. Abdul Razak,[22] the mother was appointed guardian of an illegitimate child due to the father's disinterest.

Challenges:

- The lack of paternal recognition creates a legal vacuum, often leaving the mother as the sole caregiver without formal guardianship rights.
- Courts rely on GWA to fill this gap, but procedural delays and social stigma hinder access.

3.3. Christian and Parsi Law

Statutory Framework:

- Guardians and Wards Act, 1890: The primary law for Christians and Parsis, as personal laws are silent on guardianship for illegitimate children.
- Section 7, GWA: Empowers courts to appoint guardians based on the child's best interests.

Parental Roles:

- Mother: Typically the natural guardian, especially in early childhood. Courts favor maternal custody due to emotional bonding, as seen in Rosy Jacob v. Jacob A. Chakramakkal.[23]
- Father: May be appointed guardian if he acknowledges paternity and proves suitability. Paternity disputes often require evidence like birth certificates or cohabitation records.

Judicial Approach:

- Courts adopt a welfare-centric approach, as in Mary v. Joseph,[24] where the mother was granted guardianship of an illegitimate Christian child due to the father's abandonment.
- The GWA allows flexibility, enabling courts to appoint non-parents (e.g., grandparents) if both parents are unfit.

[21]Kumar v. Sindhu, (2003) 4 SCC 28 (approximate; details limited).
[22]Imtiaz Begum v. Abdul Razak, AIR 1979 All 122 (Allahabad High Court).
[23]Rosy Jacob v. Jacob A. Chakramakkal, (1973) 1 SCC 840 : AIR 1973 SC 2090.
[24]Mary v. Joseph, (1995) 1 KLT 101 (Kerala High Court).

3.4. Secular Law

Secular laws provide a robust framework for guardianship:

Guardians and Wards Act, 1890:

- Procedure: Guardianship petitions are filed in family courts or district courts. The process involves assessing the proposed guardian's suitability, the child's needs, and parental claims.
- Welfare Principle: Section 17 emphasizes the child's physical, emotional, and intellectual welfare, overriding religious or customary norms.

Juvenile Justice Act, 2015:

- For abandoned or neglected illegitimate children, Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) assume guardianship, placing children in foster care or adoption. Section 30 empowers CWCs to act as guardians until a permanent solution is found.

Live-in Relationships:

- The Supreme Court in Tulsi v. Durghatiya[25] recognized children from long-term live-in relationships as legitimate for guardianship purposes, strengthening maternal rights. This aligns with the DV Act's recognition of such children.

Judicial Precedents:

- Laxmi Kant Pandey v. Union of India[26] established the state's role as parens patriae, ensuring guardianship for vulnerable children, including illegitimate ones.
- Shabnam Hashmi v. Union of India[27] expanded adoption rights, indirectly supporting guardianship for illegitimate children through secular mechanisms.

4. Comparative Evaluation of Parental Roles

Mothers:

- Hindu Law: Mothers are the natural guardians, with unchallenged authority unless proven unfit. This reflects the socio-cultural norm of maternal caregiving.
- Muslim Law: Mothers have custody but limited guardianship rights due to the lack of paternal lineage. Secular laws bridge this gap, prioritizing maternal care.
- Christian/Parsi Law: Mothers are preferred guardians, especially in early childhood, with courts emphasizing emotional bonding.
- Secular Law: Reinforces maternal primacy, aligning with judicial trends favoring the child's best interests.

Fathers:

- Hindu Law: Fathers are secondary, requiring court approval for guardianship. Maintenance obligations are stricter than guardianship rights.
- Muslim Law: Fathers are largely excluded due to non-recognition of paternity, though CrPC enforces financial liability.
- Christian/Parsi Law: Fathers may assume guardianship if they acknowledge paternity and demonstrate commitment, but their role is subordinate.

[25]Tulsi v. Durghatiya, (2008) 2 SCC 516 : AIR 2008 SC 1193.
[26]Laxmi Kant Pandey v. Union of India, (1984) 2 SCC 244 : AIR 1984 SC 469.
[27]Shabnam Hashmi v. Union of India, (2014) 4 SCC 1 : AIR 2014 SC 1281.

- Secular Law: Provides a pathway for paternal guardianship through GWA, but courts scrutinize fathers' involvement due to social stigma.

Judicial Philosophy:

- Courts adopt a child-centric approach, prioritizing welfare over parental rights. The "best interests" doctrine, rooted in international conventions like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC),[28] guides decisions.
- Landmark cases like Gaurav Jain v. Union of India[29] underscore the need to protect illegitimate children from discrimination, influencing maintenance and guardianship rulings.

5. Socio-Legal Challenges and Gaps

1. Social Stigma:

- Illegitimate children face societal prejudice, impacting their access to education, healthcare, and community support. Legal rights are often undermined by cultural biases.
- Mothers, particularly unwed or abandoned, face ostracism, complicating their ability to pursue legal remedies.

2. Paternity Disputes:

- Establishing paternity is a significant barrier, especially in Muslim law, where acknowledgment is rare. Secular courts increasingly rely on scientific evidence (e.g., DNA tests), but accessibility and cost remain issues.
- In Nandlal Wasudeo Badwaik v. Lata Nandlal Badwaik,[30] the Supreme Court prioritized DNA evidence over presumptions of legitimacy, aiding illegitimate children's claims.

3. Inconsistent Personal Laws:

- Hindu law is more inclusive, recognizing illegitimate children's rights comprehensively, while Muslim law restricts paternal obligations. Christian and Parsi laws defer to secular statutes, creating a patchwork system.
- The absence of a uniform civil code leads to disparities, as seen in maintenance ceilings (higher in Hindu law) and guardianship norms (maternal bias in Hindu law vs. judicial discretion in others).

4. Enforcement Issues:

- Maintenance orders under CrPC are often flouted, with non-compliant parents evading penalties due to lax enforcement. Family courts lack resources to monitor compliance.
- Guardianship disputes are prolonged, with interim custody battles causing emotional distress to children.

5. Economic Barriers:

- Legal aid is available under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987,[31] but awareness is low among marginalized mothers. Litigation costs deter claims, particularly in rural areas.
- Illegitimate children from impoverished backgrounds rely on state welfare, which is often inadequate.

[28]United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Nov. 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3.
[29]Gaurav Jain v. Union of India, (1997) 8 SCC 114 : AIR 1997 SC 3021.
[30]Nandlal Wasudeo Badwaik v. Lata Nandlal Badwaik, (2014) 2 SCC 576 : AIR 2014 SC 932.
[31]Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, No. 39, Acts of Parliament, 1987 (India).

6. Recommendations

1. Uniform Civil Code:

- A unified legal framework, as proposed under Article 44 of the Constitution,[32] could standardize maintenance and guardianship rights, eliminating religious disparities.

2. Strengthened Enforcement:

- Dedicated tribunals for maintenance enforcement, similar to family courts, could ensure timely compliance. Penalties for non-payment should be stricter.

3. Paternity Determination:

- Subsidized DNA testing and streamlined court procedures could resolve paternity disputes, enhancing access to maintenance and guardianship.

4. Social Awareness:

- Public campaigns through NGOs and media could reduce stigma, encouraging mothers to seek legal remedies. Schools and healthcare institutions should be sensitized to support illegitimate children.

5. Expanded Welfare Schemes:

- State-sponsored programs under the JJ Act should increase funding for abandoned illegitimate children, ensuring education and vocational training.

7. Conclusion

Illegitimate children in India are entitled to maintenance and financial support under a robust framework of personal and secular laws, with Section 125, CrPC, serving as a universal safety net. Guardianship rights predominantly favor mothers, reflecting their role as primary caregivers, while fathers' involvement is contingent on acknowledgment and judicial approval. Hindu law offers the most progressive provisions, followed by secular statutes, whereas Muslim law lags due to paternity restrictions. Judicial trends emphasize child welfare, aligning with global human rights standards, but social stigma, enforcement gaps, and legal inconsistencies pose challenges. A move toward a uniform civil code, coupled with enhanced enforcement and awareness, could ensure equitable rights for illegitimate children, fostering their integration into society as equal citizens.

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[10] Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, No. 43, Acts of Parliament, 2005 (India).

[32] INDIA CONST. art. 44.

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[14] D. Velusamy v. D. Patchaiammal, (2010) 10 SCC 469 : AIR 2011 SC 479.

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[18] Jehangir v. Dinaz, AIR 1990 Bom 226.

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[22] M. A. Quereshi v. B. N. Tandon, (1984) 3 SCC 382.

[23] Mary v. Joseph, (1995) 1 KLT 101.

[24] Nandlal Wasudeo Badwaik v. Lata Nandlal Badwaik, (2014) 2 SCC 576 : AIR 2014 SC 932.

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[32] INDIA CONST. art. 44.

[33] United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Nov. 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3.