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Legal Principles Governing Convictions Based on Circumstantial Evidence

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ABSTRACT

The constitutionality of convictions based on circumstantial evidence has always been under scrutiny and yet several convictions are based on circumstantial evidence. This makes a reader wonder regarding the legality of such convictions and the principles governing them. For a lawful conviction based on circumstantial evidence, it must be based on corroborated circumstantial evidence which forms a complete and unbroken chain of evidence. The circumstantial evidence must be consistent only with the hypothesis of guilt of the accused and must not support the hypothesis of his innocence. The principles governing such convictions has been developed through various precedents evolved through judicial interpretation of cases. The aim of convictions based on circumstantial evidence is not to infringe the right to fair trial guaranteed to the accused under the Constitution of India, but it is to deliver justice to the victim when the guilt of the accused is well established. Our judiciary has made sure to balance the rights of the accused and the plaintiff in such cases.

This research paper delves into the intricate realm of convictions based on circumstantial evidence, examining the legal complexities, challenges, and implications associated with such cases. The study scrutinizes the reliability and limitations of circumstantial evidence, considering its potential impact on the justice system. The paper reviews landmark legal cases to illustrate the nuances of convictions relying on circumstantial evidence emphasizing the significance of establishing a cogent chain of events, while addressing the inherent vulnerability to misinterpretation and miscarriages of justice.

Keywords: *Circumstantial evidence, conviction, justice, hypothesis, precedents.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Circumstantial evidence is used to corroborate direct evidence by proving chain of events establishing guilt of the accused. Circumstantial evidence is not direct evidence, but it shades light on the chain of events that lead to the commission of the offence. Circumstantial evidence establishes guilt or innocence through the help of reasoning. Although circumstantial evidence cannot be the sole ground for conviction but can be used as a guide for further investigation

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except under special circumstances when certain necessary conditions are fulfilled. In civil cases, circumstantial evidence is used to establish or deny liability. Circumstantial evidences are indirect evidence. Circumstantial evidence attempts to prove the facts in issue by proving other facts and instances as to its existence. Circumstantial evidence establishes the series of facts which are so closely connected to the facts in issue that it leads to satisfactory conclusions as to its cause and effects. The Supreme Court has established that it must be reminded that where the evidence is circumstantial in nature, the circumstances through which the conclusion of guilt is to be drawn must be fully established, and all the facts so established should be consistent only with the hypothesis of the guilt of the accused. The circumstances should be of a conclusive nature and tendency and they should exclude every hypothesis but the one proposed to be proved. There must be a complete chain of evidence as not to leave any reasonable ground for a conclusion consistent with the innocence of the accused and it must be such as to show that within all human probability the act must have been done by the accused.²

This research paper delves into the intricate realm of convictions based on circumstantial evidence, examining the legal complexities, challenges, and implications associated with such cases. The study scrutinizes the reliability and limitations of circumstantial evidence, considering its potential impact on the justice system. The paper reviews landmark legal cases to illustrate the nuances of convictions relying on circumstantial evidence emphasizing the significance of establishing a cogent chain of events, while addressing the inherent vulnerability to misinterpretation and miscarriages of justice.

(A) Significance of circumstantial evidence in criminal trials

Circumstantial evidence plays a crucial role in establishing the guilt of the accused in legal proceedings. While direct evidence directly proves a fact, circumstantial evidence relies on inference and the logical connection between presented facts to establish guilt.³

It involves establishing a chain of events or facts that leads to the reasonable conclusion of guilt.⁴ In many cases, direct evidence may be unavailable or insufficient to prove guilt. Circumstantial evidence becomes essential in such situations as it provides a basis for making reasonable inferences about the accused's involvement in the alleged crime. Circumstantial evidence often gains strength through the cumulative effect of multiple circumstances.⁵ While each individual piece of evidence may not be conclusive, the combined weight of various

² Hanumant v. The State Of Madhya Pradesh AIR 1952 SC 343 SCC OnLine

³ Musheer Khan @ Badshah Khan & Anr v. State Of M.P 2010 NO.1180 OF 2005 SCC OnLine

⁴ Batuk Lal, *The Law of Evidence*, Central Law Agency, 24th Edition (2023).

⁵ Director General, Border v. Iboton Singh (Kh) 2007 (1) GLT 903 SCC OnLine

circumstances can form a compelling case against the accused. Circumstantial evidence can serve as valuable corroboration for direct evidence. When direct evidence is present, the inclusion of circumstantial evidence can reinforce the overall case and provide additional support for the prosecution's argument.

Each circumstance, when considered together, contributes to building a coherent narrative that supports the guilt of the accused. Circumstantial evidence can include scientific and forensic evidence, such as DNA analysis or ballistics reports. These types of evidence, even though circumstantial, can carry significant weight in establishing a connection between the accused and the crime. Circumstantial evidence often relies on common sense and logical inference. It involves presenting facts that, when viewed collectively, lead to a conclusion that is consistent with the guilt of the accused.

There are conditions that must be satisfied in order to convict an accused on the basis of circumstantial evidence. The chain of evidence must collectively prove the guilt of the accused.⁶ The Supreme Court held through a series of judgement that there can be conviction solely on the basis of circumstantial evidence if it establishes the guilt of the accused beyond reasonable doubt, observing that the cumulative effect of the circumstances must be such as to negate the innocence of the accused and prove the offence beyond any reasonable doubt.⁷

(B) Characteristics of circumstantial evidence

Circumstantial evidence is a form of evidence that indirectly suggests the likelihood of a fact or event without directly proving it. Unlike direct evidence, which involves direct observation or testimony about the fact in question, circumstantial evidence relies on inferences to establish a conclusion. Here are some characteristics of circumstantial evidence:

- **Indirect Nature:** Circumstantial evidence is indirect in nature. It does not directly prove the fact in question but relies on connecting circumstances to infer the existence of that fact.
- **Inference and Deduction:** The strength of circumstantial evidence lies in the ability to infer or deduce facts based on the circumstances presented. It involves drawing conclusions from the available evidence rather than relying on explicit statements or direct observations.⁸

⁶ Anadi Tiwari, In case of circumstantial evidence, chain has to be complete in all respects to indicate guilt of accused: Supreme Court, Bar and Bench, (2023).

⁷ Press Trust of India, Conviction only if circumstantial evidence beyond doubt: SC, India Today, (2008).

⁸ Musheer Khan @ Badshah Khan & Anr v. State Of M.P 2010 NO.1180 OF 2005 SCC OnLine

- **Completeness and Interconnectedness:** Circumstantial evidence often involves a chain or series of interconnected circumstances. For it to be effective, the chain must be complete and each circumstance must be consistent with the others, leading to a logical conclusion.⁹
- **Corroboration:** Circumstantial evidence is often used to corroborate or support other evidence,¹⁰ such as witness testimony. It can reinforce the credibility of direct evidence or provide additional support for the overall case.
- **Exclusion of Alternative Hypotheses¹¹:** A key characteristic of strong circumstantial evidence is its ability to exclude reasonable alternative hypotheses. It should make other explanations less likely, thereby strengthening the inference it supports.
- **Probabilistic Nature:** Circumstantial evidence often involves probabilities rather than certainties. The strength of the inference is based on the likelihood of the circumstances occurring in a certain way.
- **Common Experience:** Circumstantial evidence may rely on common human experience and knowledge.¹² Courts often consider whether the circumstances are consistent with general patterns of behavior and whether they make sense in the given context.
- **Subject to Interpretation:** The interpretation of circumstantial evidence can be subjective, and different individuals may draw different inferences from the same set of circumstances. This subjectivity emphasizes the importance of careful analysis and judicial discretion.
- **Admissibility:** Circumstantial evidence is admissible in legal proceedings, and its weight and relevance are determined by the court. The court assesses whether the circumstantial evidence meets the standards of admissibility and reliability.

II. EVOLUTION OF LEGAL PRINCIPLES THROUGH LEGAL INTERPRETATION

The use of circumstantial evidence in legal proceedings has evolved over time, and in India, this evolution is reflected in various legal principles established through case laws. Circumstantial evidence refers to indirect evidence that implies a fact but does not directly prove it. Following is the evolution of legal principles influencing the use of circumstantial

⁹ Anadi Tiwari, In case of circumstantial evidence, chain has to be complete in all respects to indicate guilt of accused: Supreme Court, Bar and Bench, (2023).

¹⁰ Syed Samsudeen v. State 2012 CrI.R.C.No.1130 of 2009 SCC OnLine

¹¹ Batuk Lal, *The Law of Evidence*, Central Law Agency, 24th Edition (2023).

¹² *Black's Law Dictionary*, 11th ed.

evidence in India, along with some relevant case laws:

A landmark judgement of Madhya Pradesh High Court emphasized the importance of a complete chain of circumstances. If any link in the chain is missing or weak, the court may not rely on circumstantial evidence. The court must be satisfied that the circumstances point to the guilt of the accused beyond a reasonable doubt.¹³ It has also been established that the circumstances must negate every hypothesis except guilt. The Supreme Court has established that before relying on circumstantial evidence, the court must ensure that the chain of circumstances is complete and that the evidence excludes every hypothesis except that of guilt. This principle is crucial in circumstantial evidence cases.¹⁴ The Supreme Court has also clarified that while the standard of proof in a criminal trial is the same, whether the evidence is direct or circumstantial, the nature of circumstantial evidence is such that each piece of evidence must be consistent with the guilt of the accused.¹⁵ It is also important to establish motive and conduct of the accused through circumstantial evidence while trying to establish the guilt of the accused. The court has highlighted that in cases based on circumstantial evidence, the prosecution must establish a clear motive, opportunity, and conduct of the accused that is consistent with their guilt.¹⁶ Through various judgements, High Courts have emphasized the importance of scientific and forensic evidence in corroborating circumstantial evidence. The use of modern forensic techniques has become significant in establishing the guilt of the accused.¹⁷

Conviction on the basis of circumstantial evidence can lead to false conviction of the accused and may result in gross injustice. Time and again the Supreme Court has reiterated that in circumstantial evidence cases, the prosecution must prove the guilt of the accused beyond a reasonable doubt. The court emphasized the need for caution and care in evaluating circumstantial evidence.¹⁸

The evolution of legal principles regarding circumstantial evidence in India reflects a balance between protecting the rights of the accused and ensuring justice through a thorough examination of the evidence. Courts have continually refined the standards for accepting circumstantial evidence, emphasizing the need for completeness of chain of events, consistency, and the exclusion of reasonable alternative hypotheses.

¹³ Hanumant Govind Nargundkar v. State of Madhya Pradesh AIR 1952 SC 343 SCC OnLine

¹⁴ Sharad Birdhichand Sarda v. State of Maharashtra AIR 1984 SC 1622, 1985 SCC OnLine

¹⁵ C. Chenga Reddy v. State of A.P. AIR 1996 SC 1257, 1996 SCC OnLine

¹⁶ Baijnath v. State of Madhya Pradesh AIR 1966 SC 220 SCC OnLine

¹⁷ State of U.P. v. Dr. Ravindra Prakash Mittal AIR 1992 SC 2100, 1992 SCC OnLine

¹⁸ Raj Kumar Singh v. State of Rajasthan 2013 931-932 of 2009 SCC OnLine

III. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

(A) Relevance of Circumstantial Evidence in light of Section 6 of Indian Evidence Act, 1872:

Section 6 of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, pertains to the relevance of facts that are connected with or related to a fact in issue or a relevant fact. While Section 6 does not explicitly mention circumstantial evidence, it can be applied to present circumstantial evidence in the Court. Circumstantial evidence is considered relevant under Section 6 if it is connected with or related to the fact in issue. In criminal cases, the fact in issue is often the guilt or innocence of the accused. Circumstantial evidence can be relevant to corroborate direct evidence or other facts presented in a case.¹⁹ If the circumstantial evidence supports or strengthens the case, it becomes relevant to the determination of the fact in issue. Section 6 relevance is applicable to circumstantial evidence when it helps complete the chain of circumstances leading to the fact in issue. The court may consider the cumulative effect of circumstantial evidence in establishing guilt or innocence. Circumstantial evidence is relevant when it helps exclude reasonable alternative hypotheses.²⁰ If the evidence makes other explanations less probable and supports the inference of guilt, it becomes relevant to the fact in issue. In some cases, the court may presume certain facts based on common sense and reasoning. These presumptions, as per Section 6, can contribute to the relevance of circumstantial evidence. The court may draw inferences based on circumstantial evidence as long as the principles of relevance and admissibility are satisfied.

(B) Presumption as to Certain Offenses in light of Section 114:

Section 114 of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, deals with the concept of presumptions as to certain offenses. Section 114 provides that the court may presume the existence of certain facts. Section 114 is often used in conjunction with other sections of the Evidence Act. It is important to note that presumptions are not conclusive proof, and they can be rebutted by evidence to the contrary. For example, one specific presumption mentioned in Section 114 is the presumption that the accused is the author of the crime when found in possession of stolen property. By virtue of Section 114 of the Evidence Act, the court can use to draw logical inferences, but the ultimate determination of guilt or innocence relies on the entire body of evidence presented during the trial.

¹⁹ Syed Samsudeen v. State 2012 Cr.L.R.C.No.1130 of 2009 SCC OnLine

²⁰ Batuk Lal, *The Law of Evidence*, Central Law Agency, 24th Edition (2023).

IV. CHALLENGES IN CONVICTIONS BASED ON CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

(A) Burden of Proof:

In legal systems, the burden of proof refers to the obligation placed on one party to prove a particular fact or issue. In criminal cases, the prosecution typically bears the burden of proving the guilt of the accused beyond a reasonable doubt. When convictions are based on circumstantial evidence, the prosecution must still meet this high standard.

The prosecution is responsible for presenting evidence that establishes a prima facie case against the accused. In cases relying on circumstantial evidence, the prosecution must demonstrate that the circumstances collectively point to the guilt of the accused.²¹ The standard of proof in criminal cases, including those based on circumstantial evidence, is "beyond a reasonable doubt." This is a high standard that requires the trier of fact to be firmly convinced of the accused's guilt. In circumstantial evidence cases, the prosecution must present a complete chain of circumstances, leaving no reasonable doubt about the guilt of the accused. Each link in the chain must be established convincingly. The prosecution must show that the circumstantial evidence excludes any reasonable hypotheses consistent with innocence.²² If there are possible alternative explanations for the circumstances, the accused should benefit from the doubt. Courts are generally cautious and careful when evaluating circumstantial evidence. Judges often instruct juries to carefully consider each piece of evidence and the overall case before reaching a verdict. The burden of proof remains with the prosecution throughout the trial. The defendant has the right to be provided with the copies of all the documents and evidence that the prosecution is relying upon and prepare the defence. The accused is entitled to bail as a matter of right in bailable offence and the grant of bail is on Court's discretion in non-bailable offences. The prosecution's case may rely on reasoning and inference drawn from the circumstances presented. In such cases, the court evaluates the logical connection between the circumstances and the inference of guilt.

It is noteworthy that even in cases in which circumstantial evidence can be the basis for a conviction if it completes the chain of events, the principles of fairness, due process, and the presumption of innocence still apply. The accused is presumed to be innocent until proven guilty. The prosecution must overcome the high threshold of proving guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, even when relying on circumstantial evidence. If the prosecution fails to meet this

²¹ State (N.C.T. Of Delhi) v. Navjot Sandhu@ Afsan Guru 2005 11 SCC 600 SCC OnLine

²² Batuk Lal, *The Law of Evidence*, Central Law Agency, 24th Edition (2023).

burden, the accused is entitled to an acquittal.²³

(B) Potential for Misinterpretation:

The use of circumstantial evidence in legal proceedings comes with certain challenges and the potential for misinterpretation. In cases relying on circumstantial evidence, there may be multiple possible inferences that can be drawn from the same set of circumstances. The challenge is to ensure that the chosen inference is the most reasonable and consistent with guilt. If the chain of circumstances is incomplete or if there are gaps in the evidence, misinterpretation becomes more likely. A failure to establish a complete and unbroken chain may lead to incorrect conclusions. Circumstantial evidence may lack direct corroboration, making it essential to ensure that each piece of evidence is individually strong and that the cumulative effect is convincing. Without proper corroboration, misinterpretation is more likely. One of the key principles in evaluating circumstantial evidence is the need to exclude reasonable alternative hypotheses. If the prosecution fails to do so, misinterpretation may occur.

V. CASE ANALYSIS

(A) Majendran Langeswaran v. State (NCT of Delhi) & Anr (1 July 2013)

Citation: 2013 SC 1300 OF 2009

Court: Supreme Court of India

Bench: P. Sathasivam, M.Y. Eqbal

Facts:

This case revolves around the murder of L. Shivaraman on a cargo ship, the Motor Vessel "Lok Prem," sailing from South Africa to Japan via Singapore. The accused, a crew member on the ship, was convicted under Section 302 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) for the alleged murder. The prosecution's version involves an altercation between the accused and the deceased, the accused's alleged confession to the crime, and the discovery of a blood-stained knife.

Issues:

1. The admissibility and reliability of the extra-judicial confession.
2. The sufficiency of circumstantial evidence
3. The proper handling of physical evidence such as the blood-stained knife.

Contentions of Both Sides:

²³ Additional District Magistrate v. Shivakant Shukla AIR 1976 SC 1207 SCC 521, 1976 SC 610 SCC OnLine

Petitioner: The Petitioner raised contentions regarding the lack of blood on the accused's clothes, the possibility of tampering with evidence, the absence of seizure of the accused's clothes, and the unreliability of the confession due to inconsistencies.

Respondent: The prosecution argued that the confession was legally maintainable, the circumstantial evidence formed a complete chain leading to the guilt of the accused, and the recovery of the blood-stained knife linked the accused to the crime.

Analysis of the Judgement:

The Court acknowledged the reliance on circumstantial evidence and emphasized that all circumstances must lead to the conclusion that the accused committed the crime. Inconsistencies and infirmities in the prosecution's version were identified. The Court noted the weaknesses in the extra-judicial confession, particularly the failure to reproduce exact words and material contradictions in witness statements.²⁴ The Court considered the confession legally maintainable but questioned its reliability. Concerns were raised about the handling of critical evidence, including the blood-stained knife. The court questioned the legitimacy of the fingerprints, given the possibility of the appellant being forced to hold the knife. The court highlighted the prosecution's failure to explore the connection of the second knife (Ex.2b) to the crime adequately. The doubts created by this circumstance were considered significant. The court criticized the cleaning of the crime scene, noting it as a vital piece of evidence that was not adequately considered. The lack of a site plan and the cleaning of the cabin raised questions about the integrity of the investigation.

The Court concluded that the guilt of the appellant was not fully established beyond all reasonable doubts. It emphasized that the circumstances were not conclusive, and the chain of events was incomplete. The presence of another blood-stained knife and inconsistencies in evidence led the court to set aside the judgments of the trial court and the High Court, directing the release of the appellant. The Court also highlighted lapses in the investigation and raised questions about the prosecution's failure to eliminate elements of suspicion.²⁵

This case underscores the importance of a meticulous examination of circumstantial evidence, the quality of confessions, and the integrity of the investigative process in ensuring a fair and just trial.

²⁴ Majendran Langeswaran V. State (Nct Of Delhi) & Anr 2013 SC 1300 Of 2009 SCC Online

²⁵ Majendran Langeswaran V. State (Nct Of Delhi) & Anr 2013 SC 1300 Of 2009 SCC Online

(B) Hanumant v. The State of Madhya Pradesh (1952)**Citation: AIR 1952 SC 343****Court: Supreme Court of India****Bench: M C Mahajan, Das, Bhagwati**

Facts of the Case:

In the case of Hanumant, the accused, a police constable, was charged with the murder of a person. The prosecution's case was built on circumstantial evidence, primarily the recovery of the deceased's body from a well. The accused was alleged to have a personal grudge against the deceased.

Issues:

1. whether circumstantial evidence alone could be sufficient to establish the guilt of the accused.
2. The relevance and adequacy of the motive presented by the prosecution were under scrutiny.
3. The circumstances surrounding the recovery of the deceased's body from the well were central to the case.

Contentions of Both Sides:

Petitioner:

The Petitioner contested the circumstantial evidence, emphasizing the absence of any direct eyewitnesses to the crime. The Petitioner questioned the adequacy and relevance of the alleged motive, arguing that it was not a sufficient basis for the charges.

Respondent:

The Respondent argued that circumstantial evidence, including the recovery of the body, pointed conclusively to the guilt of the accused. A motive was presented, suggesting that the accused had a personal grudge against the deceased, providing a reason for the alleged murder.

Analysis of Judgement:

The Court emphasized that in cases relying on circumstantial evidence, the standard of proof must be such that the circumstances should point to the guilt of the accused beyond a reasonable doubt. The Court noted that while motive is a relevant consideration, its absence does not necessarily exonerate the accused. In this case, the court examined the alleged motive and its

connection to the crime. The Court also acknowledged the use of circumstantial evidence and stated that each circumstance must be established beyond doubt and collectively point towards the guilt of the accused. Furthermore, the Court examined the circumstances surrounding the recovery of the deceased's body from the well. It considered whether this fact, along with other circumstances, could be construed as evidence of the accused's involvement.

The Court referred to the principle that in cases based on circumstantial evidence, each circumstance must be clearly established, and the cumulative effect should lead to the only conclusion of guilt. The court highlighted the need for caution in relying on motives, emphasizing that the absence of a proven motive does not necessarily absolve the accused. The Court emphasized the importance of complete chain of events and exclusion of alternative hypotheses.

Therefore, the Court, after careful consideration of the circumstantial evidence presented by the prosecution, acquitted the accused. The judgment underscored the importance of establishing each circumstance beyond a reasonable doubt and cautioned against over-reliance on motives. This case remains a significant precedent in the evaluation of circumstantial evidence and the standard of proof required for conviction in such cases.

VI. CONCLUSION

Circumstantial evidence is an indirect form of evidence that proves a series of events establishing the guilt or innocence of the accused provided that the chain of circumstances is complete and unbroken, probability of any alternative hypothesis is negated and the guilt of the accused is proved beyond doubt. While dealing with circumstantial evidence, it is crucial to provide caution while drawing inferences in absence of direct evidence such as a witness testimony. The general use of circumstantial evidence is to corroborate the direct evidences presented in the Court. To reduce the risk of wrongful convictions resulting in miscarriage of justice, the legal system emphasizes the importance of thorough investigation, careful presentation of evidence, judicial instructions, and adherence to established legal principles. Courts play a crucial role in ensuring that circumstantial evidence is analyzed objectively, that alternative hypotheses are considered, and that the burden of proof is met beyond a reasonable doubt. Judges must exercise caution to minimize the risk of misinterpretation and uphold the principles of justice. It is also important to note that circumstantial evidence should not be the sole basis of conviction in absence of direct evidence to reduce the risk of wrongful convictions.
