



Original Article

The Role of Witness Protection in Ensuring Fair Trials in India: A Critical Assessment

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Abstract

Witness protection plays a key role in the fair and effective justice system by protecting the integrity of evidence and/or the administration of justice. The present article critically analyzes the importance of witness protection in India with special emphasis on the issues of witness intimidation, hostile witness, delay in trial and psychological pressure. It examines the Witness Protection Scheme, 2018, and identifies problems with the legal framework for the scheme, limited resources, non-standardized schemes between the states and poor implementation. The article also examines some of the international practices to explore the lessons to be learnt for strengthening the Indian framework. It calls for comprehensive laws, or the lack of them, sufficient financial and institutional means, specialized protection units, technology and prompt judicial action to effectively protect witnesses. Enhancing these mechanisms will help increase the credibility of witness testimony, safeguard vulnerable witnesses, and help build fairness, transparency, and public trust in the Indian justice system.

Keywords: Witness Protection; Fair Trial; Witness Intimidation; Hostile Witnesses; Indian Criminal Justice System

Introduction

In the realm of Indian law, appropriate judicial processes, or the quote, fairness of trial is a key provision designed to uphold justice. However, one critical aspect that ensures fairness in trials which is the security of witnesses has been disregarded for quite a long time. Nonetheless, witnesses are subjected to various forms of harassment and blunt force that affects their level of honesty during the time of providing their testimony. The present assessment evaluates the accounted advantages and challenges of witness protection as it relates to fair trial guarantees in India with emphasis on the relevant political, sociological and procedural aspects of witness protection and its role in the justice system. It sets out to achieve this understanding by examining the present gaps and suggesting reform measures to improve the role of the protection of the witnesses in facilitating the improvement of the fairness of trials. (Saxena, 2019)

1. The Role of Witnesses in the Indian Judicial System

Witnesses are the bedrock of any legal case since they are the ones who offer vital information either corroborating or opposing the facts in questions. As per Section 3 of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, evidence, includes oral and documentary evidence adduced for the purpose of trial, and witnesses are one of those who are instrumental in rendering this. Despite evolving legislations, in the Indian context, the danger to the witness' life and safety has always been a problem, which oftentimes made witnesses recant or turn hostile. More worrying is the fact that the deteriorating way has negatively impacted the very essence of criminal justice in the last several years. In India, the importance of spies, for such is referred to witnesses, in this matter cannot be overstated, as their testimony plays a vital role in determining whether the accused is guilty or not. Witnesses also assist the judiciary concerning the facts of the case by providing eye-witness accounts from which the case draws on. The very idea of the Indian Constitution and its development is moored on justice and equity where witness accounts feature dominantly to facilitate credible trial hearings.

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Although this is the case, the status position and treatment of witnesses is a burden in attempting to achieve justice in India due to threats, harassment and no legal protection that they receive which compromises the judicial protection process. It is a widely recognized fact that witnesses give evidence in case of any legal injustices or other disputes in India. They testify either in criminal or civil court affairs. In the context of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, witness statements are properly admissible in court if they are credible and other facts are also available to back them up. It is clearly understood that witnesses are not allowed to distort the facts or make embellishments. So, almost all witnesses turn to their testimonies as the deciding point on the truth of a case in the minds of judges. (Kumar, 2022)

According to arguments of different institutions, although the role of witnesses is highly appreciated and recognized in India as laying the foundation of a just system, it is difficult in practice and not an easy task. A major concern is witnessing intimidation. In sensational cases, it is not rare to come across witnesses who are threatened or in the shill of coercion, especially in issues involving politicians or business owners. Therefore, the pressure to be reluctant make witnesses recant or change what they stated which diminishes what the prosecution was trying to achieve and most of the time, allows the offenders to go away scot-free. 198th report of the Law Commission of India agreed with the necessity for witness protection and pointed out witness protection, stressing the negative impact on witnesses and proposing to develop a sensible mechanism for protection of such people in future. (Law Commission of India, 2006) Another issue that impedes the role of witnesses in the Indian judicial system is the prolonged delays in trials. Witnesses, especially in criminal cases, are often called to testify years after the events in question, which not only leads to memory lapses but also exposes them to prolonged harassment. The Law Commission of India's 154th report discussed the issue of delayed trials and recommended measures to streamline judicial procedures, thereby reducing the time taken to record witness statements and conclude trials. Notwithstanding these suggestions, the lengthy trial process still poses a serious problem that has an impact on both the witnesses and the legal system as a whole. (Law Commission of India, 1996)

Witness protection is a crucial part of a fair and effective criminal justice system, as the security of witnesses is central to the integrity and credibility of evidence and the delivery of justice. This article challenges the concept of witness protection in the context of ensuring fair trials in India, especially in the context of witness intimidation, hostile witnesses, lengthy judicial proceedings and psychological pressures (Sharma, 2019). It examines the Witness Protection Scheme, 2018, and identifies various difficulties with the legal provisions, availability of resources, lack of efficiency in administration and implementation of the Scheme at the state level. The article also reviews the practice of some of the other countries to gain lessons for strengthening the framework in India. It states that there should be an all-encompassing legislation,

sufficient financial and institutional support, special protection units, technology and speedy child trials for effective witness protection. The enhancement of these mechanisms can enhance the reliability of witness statements, safeguard the safety of vulnerable witnesses and strengthen the sense of fairness, transparency and public trust of the Indian judicial system (Menon, 2020).

Witness Protection: Legal Framework and Implementation in India

1. Historical Context

Bangladesh has a history of the absence of such coordinated laws for witness protection. Due to the lack of a comprehensive law, there were often inadequate, and ad hoc, protections. After a few prominent cases, such as the murder of Jessica Lal and the Best Bakery case, in which witnesses were intimidated and thus became hostile, this matter came into the spotlight. The incidents made it evident that there is a need for a formal witness protection scheme (Sharma, 2018).

2. The Law as It Exists Now

The Supreme Court of India has ruled in the Mahender Chawla case in 2018 that the Witness Protection Scheme, 2018 should be implemented. Vs Union of India & Ors. in reaction to the mounting issues. This program provides a standard operating process for witness protection: relocating the witness, changing his or her identity, and providing witness protection by the police. The plan categorizes witnesses based on the risks they face, and suggests safety measures based on each category (Singh, 2020). It is not a bill but an order of the court, and therefore has been criticized for not having a legally binding quality. Also, the implementation of the plan varies from state to state, and resource allocation still poses a major challenge.

1. Defending the Law by Protecting Witnesses

Protecting Witnesses From 2.2.1 Defending the Law. From 2.2.1 Defending the Law, protecting witnesses. Witness protection is crucial to justice as witnesses are necessary to give evidence to the courts and are often the subject of threats, intimidation and harassment which can impact on the quality of the evidence they give. In India, the issue of intimidation of witnesses is of great concern, especially in big cases, where witnesses might fear repercussions and change their accounts. The Supreme Court in its observation in *Zahira Sheikh v. State of Gujarat* emphasized the gravity of the situation when witnesses are intimidated and the requirement of effective protection mechanism. In 2018, the Supreme Court introduced the Witness Protection Scheme, which was an important step in ensuring that witnesses are protected in various ways, including the relocation of witnesses, police protection, identity protection, and other security measures. However, there is variation in implementation of its use between states and inconsistencies in institutional capacity and resources. Fast and speedy courts are important for protection as ongoing trials further subject witnesses to intimidation and harassment (Law Commission of India, 2006). In the larger instances like the Jessica Lal murder

case, witness protection has been essential, highlighting the significance of safeguarding the witnesses from being coerced and allowing them to give honest evidence (Kumar, 2021). Further to protect vulnerable witnesses, including children and victims of sexual offences, the POCSO Act, 2012 and Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 have been enacted, with in-camera proceedings at court and protection for vulnerable persons being among these. Further steps to protect vulnerable witnesses, such as children and victims of sexual offences, have been taken, including through in-camera proceedings in court and protection for vulnerable persons, under the POCSO Act, 2012 and Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 (Chopra, 2020). These, however, do not prevent the problems of insufficient infrastructure, funds, technology, and institutional capacity to effectively implement these developments. Increasing resources, streamlining judicial process, providing adequate training, and technological advancement can help strengthen witness protection and help in the effective administration of justice in India (Menon, 2020).

Impact of Witness Protection on Fair Trials

1. Enhancing the Credibility of Witness Testimonies

One of the primary impacts of witness protection is the enhancement of the credibility of witness testimonies. Witnesses are more likely to provide truthful and complete testimonies without fear of retribution when assured of their safety. This contributes to the overall integrity of the judicial process. In cases like *State of Gujarat v. Zahira Habibulla H Sheikh*, popularly known as the Best Bakery case, the absence of adequate witness protection led to the acquittal of accused individuals due to witnesses retracting their statements under duress (Gupta, 2019).

2. Addressing the Issue of Hostile Witnesses

One of the major results brought about by the witness protection program is the improvement of the validity of witness testimonies, as they are encouraged to participate freely. Guaranteeing their safety allows witnesses to be less afraid and to give more details than what is normally the case because they do not fear repercussions. This helps the judicial system's efficiency in terms of integrity. Some parties have used the state's arm in order to muzzle the witnesses. In the case of *State of Gujarat v. Zahira Habibulla H Sheikh*, often called as the Best Bakery Case, there was inadequate witness protection and as a result several accused persons were let off the hook because witnesses under threats renounced their testimonies.

3. Balancing Fair Trial Rights and Witness Protection

The turning of witnesses into hostile witnesses is one of the factors which makes justice rather hard to thorough and fair in the Indian scenario. Findings suggest that about 60 percent of witnesses in bouquet cases turn hostile because of threats or inducements. This concern can be alleviated by adopting a comprehensive witness protection program. The other suggestions include changing the rules of engagement during the deposition so as the tendency of witnesses in police cases becoming hostile can be minimized. In *Mishra v. The Home Secretary*, the Supreme Court commended the necessity of the witness protection scheme aimed at

minimizing the occurrence of witness turn-around (Jha, 2021).

Challenges in Implementing Witness Protection in India

1. Lack of Comprehensive Legislation

Even as one would consider it an improvement, the Witness Protection Scheme 2018 does not have the binding force of law. It is merely a document that sets an aim for the authorities and it has not been passed as law by the Parliament and hence cannot be enforced. Further, the scheme is heavily dependent on state machinery for its execution and therefore there are variations in the level of the scheme's protection in different geographies (Srivastava, 2021).

2. Resource Constraints

The implementation of the witness protection measures is generally resource intensive as the defense requires both extensive financial and human assets which are hardly available. The potential implementation of witness protection measures is currently constrained by a number of factors, as is revealed in a report by NALSA (National Legal Services Authority) that many states in India do not possess the ready resources or even the legal framework required to secure witnesses effectively. This is primarily the reason why further resources are put into procuring these measures as few if any to work effectively upon witnesses (Patel, 2020).

3. Bureaucratic Inefficiencies

The procedural requirements that are met in order to protect witnesses are always lengthy and also very slow, and this results in some delays that endanger their safety. In *Neelam Katara vs Union of India*, for instance, the absence of such measures resulted in a murder, where protection for a witness could not be offered in due time. Such weaknesses discourage the presentation of witnesses which would in otherwise serve to enhance the credibility of the trial process (Kapoor, 2019).

Comparative Analysis with International Witness Protection Programs

In order to realize the effectiveness of the Indian witness protection programs, it is imperative to examine them in the context of their amount of comparison within other jurisdictions

1. United States Witness Security Program (WITSEC)

The State Security Programme to which the WITSEC belongs, which protects witnesses, is ranked as one of the most successful in the world. This program was started during the Organised Crime Control Act in 1970 and gives protective measures including resettlement and assistance during changes of identity. Also, Datta observes that the Program is traceable to other member states across the world. There is a marked difference in the success levels of WITSEC especially in the resettling of witnesses and the securing of convicts as compared to India (Jones, 2018).

2. European Approaches to Witness Protection

Countries in Europe such as Italy and Germany have established witness protection units as part of the

police department. Italy has particularly well-developed witness protection legislation owing to the history of the gangster problem in the country- specifically the Mafia. Rossi tells us WITSEC includes housing, job, and money allowances the exact features of the witness protection program in Italy as programs supporting integration of witnesses into new societies are applied as well. The success of such schemes is additionally due to the effective political backing and financial resources available (Rossi, 2019).

3. Lessons for India

In this aspect, an enactment of a detailed witness protection law with specific provisions and resources may help India to avoid such disastrous experiences in the near future. The establishment of specific units for the protection of witnesses and the integration of supportive psychological services may also strengthen the efficiency of the program. It has been emphasized that there is a critical need for the legal protection of witnesses as this forms an important part of the criminal justice system. Many nations have adopted armed witness protection measures to solve the problem of justice being blind due to lack of security to the witnesses. There has been a growing need to have a well-defined witness protection system in India. Relating this with the examples of other countries which bear the strongest principles can be useful for India in improving its protective approaches toward witnesses. (Mehta, 2020) One of the primary lessons which India can learn is the creation of a structured national witness protection program along other supplementary measures. Witness protection programs that relocate, issue new identities, and offer financial support to at-risk witnesses have existed in countries such as the USA for decades.

In accordance with the provided guidelines, the text above can be improved as follows: The U.S. Witness Security Program, administered by the U.S. Marshals Service, is also ranked as one of the best in the world protecting and relocating yanqku witnesses and their families since 1970. The Government of India came up with the Witness Protection Scheme in the year 2018 that provides arms based on the level of threat. Indian scheme, however, lacks that framework and the uniformity in application across the country. There is room for creating a witness protection agency in India, which has this authority, powers, and funding so that it will be compulsory across the states. Witness protection programs have been an essential part of most of the legal systems as long as there existed the need for persons to provide testimony that put them at risk of being assaulted by those they testified against. This, in most instances, was successful in countries characterized by the presence of organized crime and terrorism where the subjects were very likely to seek revenge against witnesses. For instance, in Italy, which has had problems with the Mafia, a witness protection program was established in the 90s which allowed relocating and hiding violent witnesses who were ready to testify against mob persons (Sharma, 2019). Anonymity as such is equally important in India as it relates to the cases of influential political or mafia figures. The Witness Protection Scheme, 2018, makes provision for protection of witness identity. Nonetheless, the absence of

modern instruments and cross departmental collaboration hampers the success of these components of the strategies. Considering how the practice is done in Italy, India has a potential to improve total anonymity by diversifying the integration of witness protection strategies with global standards.

Speedy trials are yet another aspect in which India can borrow a leaf from best practice elsewhere. In India, as has been the case in the past, witnesses remain in limbo at trial where there are grave dangers or other situations where memories may fade. The Two-Witness Rule has gained credence from several cases that were tried in the European Court of Human Rights which ruled that without reasonable delay at least two witnesses must appear for the trial so as to prevent undue interference with the judicial process. Countries like Germany have imposed very strict time limits even on criminal cases, especially in the face of threats to witnesses. The application of these mechanisms makes sure that do justice in a short space of time and do not provide plenty of time for tampering of witnesses. Due to delays and backlog, it is easy to understand that the judicial system of India which is in the midst of some havoc, would improve if trials were conducted and concluded on issues such as witnessing vulnerabilities rather than brushing issues under the carpet. Also, India can take examples of witnesses and why hostile strategies are needed, from what happens in many other nations. In the criminal justice process, the witnesses bear the great degree of risk and emotional burden due to moderate to severe post-traumatic stress disorder after a court trial. In Canada and the United Kingdom, the Legal Aid services and other government resources supporting reasons for reviving, restoring and rehabilitating the witnesses are offered as a part of the legal processes, because of the understanding that mental health is very fundamental to reliability in court. On the other hand, India's system is largely devoid of any counselling for witnesses, especially in rural areas or low caste communities. The inclusion of these care services in existing systems of appropriate care would be economically justifiable and would allow witnesses to maintain emotional wellbeing and clarity, thus ensuring correct testimony during trials. He explains how finances and relocation strategies are also things that India can learn from other countries. But this is especially important for witnesses in organized crime or corruption cases as many have to flee after the trial due to the menace of retaliation (Verma, 2020).

While studying criminal cases in different countries, it has been established that the prosecution at courts takes care of the witnesses even after the end of the trial. In Nations like Kenya and South Africa, the witnesses' new identities, shelter, jobs and any other support is provided to them for fresh starts after they have become testifiers. Unfortunately, comprehensively supported finances which the 'Witness Protection Scheme' of India duly acknowledges have also attracted negative criticism of the scheme being poorly supported, lack and poorly misdirected when applied. In order to borrow some lessons from these countries, India can practically upgrade this program by providing necessary funds and also developing

some procedures such as long-term resettlement of witnesses who do not resolve to live in fear of retribution. Furthermore, inter-agency coordination is another essential aspect of witness protection, as illustrated by effective programs in the USA and Italy. Similar to India, where various bodies of law enforcement agencies, courts, and other relevant stakeholders work independently, no such collaboration is noticed in these countries either. It is this level of cooperation that is always missing in India, where the police forces of the different states and the judiciary often work independently of one another with no coordination leading to failure of witness protection initiatives. By enhancing inter-agency collaboration, India can strengthen the current witness protection policy and framework (Kumar, 2021). At last, the Indian judicial system will be able to handle the issue of witness protection with a focus on the need for internationalisation. It is true that maintaining a balance between transparency and the desire to protect the safety of individuals who come forward to testify is a real legal necessity. In the U.K., courts can hold closed hearings or redact sensitive witness information where public disclosure could lead to harm. India has made some progress in this regard, with courts occasionally conducting in-camera trials to protect the identity of witnesses. However, more widespread adoption of such measures, combined with strict confidentiality protocols, could significantly enhance the safety of witnesses in sensitive cases (Chopra, 2022).

Proposals for Reform

After an intensive examination of problems with the existing system and issues, the following recommendations have been made for witness protection in India:

1. Enactment of a Comprehensive Witness Protection Law

Adoption of a comprehensive witness protection law. A comprehensive legal system which provides clear guidelines on witness protection and applies uniform measures of protection by all governments is required. This act should also outline the rights of witnesses and the obligations of the state to safeguard witnesses.

2. Allocation of Dedicated Resources

Government should allocate dedicated financial and resource for the successful implementation of witness protection programmes (Khan, 2021). This includes training of workers, safe homes, and providing psychological support to witnesses.

3. Establishment of Specialized Witness Protection Units

Specialized Witness Protection Units are set up. Police should have trained teams to deal with witness protection. These units need to be trained on risk assessment, threat management and crisis response to protect witnesses (Verma, 2021).

4. Incorporating Technological Solutions

Use of technology, including video-conferencing and voice alteration, can help ensure the identity of witnesses and provide them the means to testify without fear. The

technology solutions have been successfully implemented in countries such as the UK and the US, and could be used in the Indian context (Menon, 2020).

Conclusion

Witness protection is the key to the effective implementation of fair trials and to the efficient working of the Indian criminal justice system. Analysis reveals that the threat, intimidation, prolonged trials, psychological pressures and insufficient institutional assistance may deter the witness from giving accurate and coherent evidence. While its introduction in 2018 is a positive development to mitigate these issues, it is still hindered by inadequate resource availability, insufficient legislative support, delays in implementation, and discrepancies in the scheme's application across different states. International experiences also illustrate the significance of setting up separate protection units, relocation, financial and psychological assistance and coordination between agencies. Hence, India's witness protection system must be made robust by enacting comprehensive legislation, providing adequate resources, establishing special institutions, implementing technology, and speeding up judicial proceedings. This would help to make witnesses safer, evidence more credible, witnesses less hostile and the rule of law and public confidence more robust.

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