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PLEA OF ALIBI AND IT'S RELEVANCE IN CRIMINAL TRIALS

Vaibhav Sharma¹and Ruchika Chaurasia²

I. ABSTRACT

The Plea of Alibi is a fundamental aspect of criminal law, it serves as a defence mechanism against the wrongful convictions. This research paper explores the relevance of the plea of alibi in criminal trials. It examines the historical context, legal implications, evidentiary standards, and practical challenges associated with this defence strategy, particularly in establishing reasonable doubt and serving as a corroborative defence through the collection of supporting evidence and witness testimonies.

This paper delves into the legal standards and procedures governing the admissibility of alibi evidence, including jurisdiction-specific rules and disclosure obligations. It addresses the challenges and limitations encountered when asserting an alibi defence, including the prosecution's ability to challenge the alibi and the necessity of establishing the credibility of alibi witnesses. Moreover, this research examines landmark cases where the plea of alibi played a prominent role, along with the legal precedents that have shaped the understanding and evaluation of alibi evidence. It highlights the influential appellate decisions that have influenced the acceptance and assessment of alibi pleas.

This research article seeks to present a thorough analysis of the plea of alibi and its importance in criminal trials in India. The legal context of the plea, its evidence requirements, and its importance in ensuring a fair and just trial are all covered in this article. The study also examines case laws and practical difficulties with using of alibi as a defence. It also emphasises the value of the plea of alibi in defending the rights of the accused and upholding the integrity of Indian justice system.

¹ 3rd Year, BA LL. B, Delhi Metropolitan Education, GGSIPU, New Delhi.

² 3rd Year, BA LL. B, Delhi Metropolitan Education, GGSIPU, New Delhi.

II. KEYWORDS:

Plea of alibi, reasonable doubt, corroborative defence, legal standards,

III. INTRODUCTION

The word 'Alibi' is a Latin term which literally means 'somewhere else'. The word 'alibi' nor the plea of alibi is defined anywhere in the Indian Penal Code or Indian Evidence Act, yet it's a key component for the defence against the false accusations by the prosecution. When an accused person asserts the plea of alibi, he/she is trying to persuade the court that he/she was not there when the crime was committed since he/she was someplace else at the same time. Black's Law Dictionary defines alibi as "a term used to express that mode of defence to a criminal prosecution, where the party accused, in order to prove that he could not have committed the crime with which he is charged, offers evidence to show that he was in another place at the time; this is termed setting up an alibi."

Sections dealing with Plea of Alibi

Section 11 of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872: "When facts not otherwise relevant become relevant: facts not otherwise relevant are relevant (i) if they are inconsistent with any fact in issue or relevant fact, (ii) if by themselves or in connection with other facts they make the existence or non-existence of any fact in issue or relevant fact highly probable or improbable."³

Section 103 of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872: According to this, "The burden of proof as to any particular fact lies on that person who wishes the Court to believe in its existence, unless it is provided by any law that the proof of that fact shall lie on any particular person."⁴

³ The India Evidence Act, 1972 (Act of 1972), s. 11.

⁴ The Indian Evidence Act, 1972 (Act of 1972), s.103.

A. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND EVOLUTION IN INDIA

The evolution of legal principles surrounding the plea of alibi in India can be traced through landmark judgments and the interpretation of relevant laws. Over the years, Indian courts have recognized the significance of the alibi defence in ensuring a fair trial and protecting the rights of the accused. The burden of proving an alibi rest on the accused. Initially, Indian courts adopted a strict standard of proof, requiring the accused to prove the alibi beyond a reasonable doubt. However, the Supreme Court of India, in the case of *Ramakrishnan vs. State of Kerala (2007)*, held that the accused is not required to prove the alibi beyond a reasonable doubt. Instead, it is sufficient if the alibi raises a reasonable doubt in the prosecution's case.

In Indian criminal trials, corroboration of the alibi is not legally required. The courts have held that corroboration is a matter of prudence and not a legal necessity. The Supreme Court, in the case of *Sirajul Haq vs. State of Madhya Pradesh (1995)*, observed that corroboration may be required if the court finds the alibi evidence weak or unreliable. The Indian legal system acknowledges that an accused may face challenges in gathering evidence and producing witnesses to support an alibi defence. The Supreme Court, in the case of *State of Maharashtra vs. Sukhdev Singh (1992)*, held that non-production of witnesses in an alibi defence does not necessarily weaken the defence if the circumstances justify their absence. The credibility of alibi witnesses plays a vital role in establishing the alibi defence. Indian courts have emphasized that the quality of evidence, reliability of witnesses, and their proximity to the accused are crucial factors in determining the credibility of the alibi. The court may scrutinize the credibility of witnesses through cross-examination and other relevant evidence.⁵

Expert opinion can be crucial in establishing an alibi defence. In certain cases, scientific or technical evidence may be used to support the alibi. The courts have recognized the admissibility and relevance of expert testimony in determining the veracity of the alibi

⁵ Deepti Josephine Arul & Arun Kumar N.R., "Alibi as One of the Best Forms of Evidence to Prove the Innocence of the Accused" 1 *Indian Journal of Integrated Research in Law* 6 (2015).

evidence. However, the reliability and credibility of such expert evidence are subject to judicial scrutiny. Landmark judgments in Indian criminal law have contributed to the evolution of legal principles regarding the plea of alibi. Some notable cases include *Basdev vs. State of Pepsu* (1956), *State of Rajasthan vs. Kishore* (1992), and *S. Jaganathan vs. State of Kerala* (2015). These cases have provided important guidance on the burden of proof, corroboration requirements, and the evaluation of alibi evidence.

IV. UNDERSTANDING THE PLEA OF ALIBI

The plea of alibi is a defence strategy used in criminal trials where the accused asserts that they were not present at the scene of the alleged crime during the time it occurred. Essentially, the accused claims to have been elsewhere, providing an alibi for their absence from the scene. The purpose of the alibi defence is to create reasonable doubt in the minds of the jury or judge by challenging the prosecution's version of events and presenting evidence that contradicts the allegations.

A. Key elements of a valid plea of alibi:

1. Time and place of the alleged crime:

To establish an alibi defence, the accused must provide specific details regarding the time and place of the alleged crime. This includes the exact date, time of day, and location where the offense is said to have taken place. The accused needs to demonstrate that they could not have been present at the crime scene due to their presence elsewhere at the same time.

2. Presence of the accused elsewhere during the crime:

The second element of a valid plea of alibi requires the accused to present evidence proving that they were at a different location when the alleged crime occurred. This evidence may include testimonies from witnesses, such as friends, family members, or co-workers, who can verify the accused's presence at the claimed location during the relevant period. Additionally, documentary evidence like receipts, surveillance footage, phone records, or any other relevant records can be used to support the alibi.

It's important to note that a successful alibi defence is not solely dependent on the accused's own testimony but rather on corroborating evidence that substantiates the claim of being elsewhere. The evidence should establish that it was physically impossible for the accused to have committed the crime based on their presence at a different location.⁶

By presenting a strong and valid plea of alibi, the defence aims to create reasonable doubt in the minds of the fact-finder, such as the jury or judge, regarding the accused's guilt. However, it is the prosecution's responsibility to investigate and challenge the alibi by examining the evidence and attempting to refute it.

B. Essentials of Plea of Alibi

The following is a list of some requirements for an alibi claim:

1. A legally actionable offence should have been claimed.
2. To employ the plea of alibi as a defence, the individual must be accused with the offence.
3. This is a defence argument where the defendant claims that he/she was not there when the offence was committed and can prove of being at somewhere else;
 - The defence must demonstrate that it was impossible for the accused to be physically present or available at the crime scene at the time the offence was committed.
 - Evidence should be presented to support the accused's plead that he or she was absent from the crime scene.
4. The plea of alibi shall be used as a defence at the earliest

C. Relevance of Alibi In Criminal Trials

⁶ James L.J. and Grove L.J. in R v. White [1910].

The plea of alibi holds significant relevance in Indian criminal trials for several reasons. Its importance lies in ensuring a fair and just trial, protecting the rights of the accused, and maintaining the integrity of the criminal justice system.⁷ The following points highlight the relevance of the alibi defence in Indian criminal trials:

- a) The primary purpose of an alibi defence is to establish the innocence of the accused by providing evidence that they were not present at the location of the crime when it occurred. By presenting a credible alibi, the accused can challenge the prosecution's case and introduce reasonable doubt regarding their involvement in the crime.⁸
- b) The alibi defence can effectively counter the prosecution's evidence, including eyewitness testimony, circumstantial evidence, or forensic evidence. It provides an opportunity for the accused to present evidence and witnesses who can vouch for their absence from the scene of the crime during the relevant time period.
- c) A strong alibi defence can challenge the prosecution's timeline of events. By proving that the accused was elsewhere at the time of the crime, it undermines the prosecution's narrative and raises questions about the accuracy and reliability of their case.
- d) The alibi defence is crucial in protecting the rights of the accused, such as the right to a fair trial, the presumption of innocence, and the right to present a defence. It ensures that the accused has an opportunity to challenge the allegations against them and present evidence supporting their innocence.
- e) The alibi defence enables the accused to cross-examine prosecution witnesses and challenge their credibility. Inconsistent testimonies or contradictions with the alibi evidence can significantly weaken the prosecution's case and strengthen the defence's position.

⁷ Surya Prakash Sinha, 'Plea of Alibi in Criminal Cases: An Analysis' 9(2) SC Advocate 54, (2018).

⁸ Ajay Kumar Singh, 'Relevance of Plea of Alibi in Criminal Trials: An Overview' 8(1) *Journal of Indian Law Institute* 79 (2016).

- f) By raising an alibi defence, the accused shifts the burden of proof to the prosecution. It requires the prosecution to disprove the alibi and establish the accused's presence at the crime scene beyond a reasonable doubt. This places a higher evidentiary burden on the prosecution and safeguards against wrongful convictions.
- g) The alibi defence receives judicial scrutiny, ensuring a fair evaluation of the evidence presented by both the prosecution and the defence. The court examines the reliability and credibility of the alibi evidence, the corroboration, and the overall strength of the defence's case, contributing to a fair and impartial trial.⁹
- h) The alibi defence serves as a safeguard against wrongful convictions and potential miscarriages of justice. It offers an opportunity for the accused to present evidence that can exonerate them, preventing the wrongful conviction of innocent individuals.

V. THE ROLE OF ALIBI IN CRIMINAL TRIALS

A. Establishing reasonable doubt

In criminal trials, the plea of alibi plays a critical role in establishing reasonable doubt, which is the level of uncertainty required for an accused person to be acquitted. By presenting an alibi, the defence aims to challenge the prosecution's version of events and create doubt about the accused's presence at the scene of the alleged crime.

Burden of proof on the prosecution:

The burden of proof in a criminal trial rest on the prosecution. They are responsible for presenting evidence that convinces the fact-finder (jury or judge) beyond a reasonable doubt of the accused's guilt. This means that the prosecution must provide compelling evidence that leaves little room for doubt about the accused's involvement in the crime.¹⁰

⁹ Rekha Saxena, 'The Plea of Alibi: An Analysis of Judicial Approach' 10(1) *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 92, (2017).

¹⁰ Harsimran Kaur and Saurabh Mittal, 'The Evidentiary Value of Plea of Alibi in Criminal Trials' (2019) 11(3) *The Indian Journal of Criminology and Criminalistics* 46 (2019).

Alibi as a defence strategy to create doubt:

The plea of alibi is a defence strategy used to introduce an alternative narrative that raises doubt about the accused's presence at the scene of the alleged crime. It aims to demonstrate that the accused was in a different location when the offense occurred, making it impossible for them to have committed the crime.

To establish an alibi, the defence presents evidence that supports the accused's claim of being elsewhere during the relevant time period. This evidence can include testimonies from witnesses, surveillance footage, financial records, phone records, or any other documentation that substantiates the alibi. Witness testimonies play a crucial role in the alibi defence. The defence may present witnesses who can testify that they saw the accused at the alibi location during the time of the crime. These witnesses should have a credible relationship with the accused and provide specific details about their interactions, activities, or any other relevant information that supports the alibi claim.¹¹

In addition to witness testimonies, documentary evidence further strengthens the alibi defence. This evidence can include receipts, travel itineraries, hotel records, surveillance footage, or any other relevant documents that provide concrete proof of the accused's presence at the alibi location. The effectiveness of the alibi defence depends on the quality and credibility of the evidence presented. The defence must ensure that the evidence is reliable, consistent, and can withstand scrutiny from the prosecution. Any inconsistencies or weaknesses in the alibi evidence can be exploited by the prosecution to challenge its validity.

By casting doubt on the prosecution's case through the alibi defence, the defence aims to create reasonable doubt in the minds of the fact-finder. If the defence successfully raises reasonable doubt about the accused's presence at the crime scene and provides a credible alternative explanation for their whereabouts, it may result in an acquittal. It is important

¹¹ Alok Kumar Srivastava, 'Relevance of Plea of Alibi: A Judicial Approach' (2016) 3(2) *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies* 27 (2016).

to note that an alibi defence alone may not guarantee an acquittal.¹² The defence must effectively present the evidence, challenge the prosecution's case, and demonstrate that the alibi is the most plausible explanation. The strength of the alibi defence lies in its ability to create doubt and shift the burden of proof back to the prosecution.

B. Alibi as a corroborative defence

The plea of alibi serves as a crucial corroborative defence in criminal trials, where the accused presents evidence to support their claim of being elsewhere during the commission of the alleged crime. This evidence plays a significant role in strengthening the alibi defence and creating reasonable doubt in the minds of the fact-finder.

Gathering supporting evidence:

To establish a strong alibi defence, the accused and their legal team must gather compelling supporting evidence that convincingly demonstrates their absence from the scene of the crime. This evidence should establish that it was physically impossible for the accused to have committed the offense due to their presence at a different location.

The supporting evidence may include a variety of elements, such as witness testimonies, documentary evidence, and physical evidence:

- a. **Witness testimonies:** Witnesses who can provide first-hand knowledge of the accused's presence at the claimed location during the relevant time period are crucial in corroborating the alibi defence. These witnesses may include friends, family members, co-workers, or other individuals who can testify to the accused's whereabouts. Their testimonies should be consistent, credible, and offer specific details regarding the accused's presence at the alibi location. Multiple witnesses who can independently verify the alibi further strengthen its credibility.
- b. **Documentary evidence:** Documentary evidence serves as tangible proof to support the accused's claim of being at a specific location during the time of the alleged crime.

¹² Pankaj Kumar, 'Relevance of Plea of Alibi in Criminal Trials: A Critical Analysis' (2017) 19(1) *Journal of Legal Studies* 134 (2017).

This evidence can include receipts, travel itineraries, hotel records, bank statements, phone records, credit card transactions, or any other relevant documents. For example, a receipt from a restaurant or store, timestamped photographs or videos, or travel documents showing the accused's presence at a different location during the crime can all serve as compelling documentary evidence. It is important to ensure that the documentary evidence is authentic, properly dated, and relevant to the alibi defence.¹³

- c. Physical evidence: In some cases, physical evidence can also support the alibi defence. This may include surveillance footage from the alibi location, DNA evidence, fingerprints, or any other material evidence that demonstrates the accused's presence at the claimed location during the relevant time. Physical evidence can be particularly persuasive in corroborating the alibi when it directly contradicts the prosecution's version of events or supports the accused's claim of innocence.

Witness testimonies and documentary evidence:

Witness testimonies and documentary evidence serve as the pillars of the alibi defence, working together to provide a strong corroborative defence. Witness testimonies play a crucial role in validating the alibi defence by offering first-hand accounts of the accused's presence at the alibi location during the alleged crime. The credibility and consistency of these witnesses' testimonies are of utmost importance. They should be able to provide specific details about the accused's activities, interactions, or any other relevant information that confirms the alibi. Independent witnesses who have no personal interest in the case and can provide unbiased testimonies are particularly valuable.

Documentary evidence further strengthens the alibi defence by providing objective proof of the accused's presence at the claimed location. These documents can be used to establish a timeline of events, demonstrate travel or financial transactions, or verify the accused's activities during the relevant period. It is important to gather and present

¹³ Rajesh Kumar Pandey, 'Plea of Alibi in Criminal Trials: A Critical Appraisal' (2015) 7(2) *Journal of Juridical and Political Science* 88 (2015).

documentary evidence that is reliable, properly authenticated, and directly relevant to the alibi defence.¹⁴

The combined weight of credible witness testimonies and compelling documentary evidence enhances the credibility of the alibi defence and presents a strong challenge to the prosecution's case. By presenting a solid corroborative defence, the alibi aims to create reasonable doubt in the minds of the fact-finder, ultimately influencing the verdict in favour of the accused.

VI. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

i. Timing and notice requirements:

Different jurisdictions may have specific timing and notice requirements for the alibi defence. The accused must provide notice to the prosecution within a specified timeframe, indicating their intent to rely on an alibi defence. Meeting these requirements can be challenging, as it requires careful coordination and timely communication between the defence and the accused.

ii. Credibility of witnesses:

The credibility of alibi witnesses can be a significant challenge. The prosecution may vigorously cross-examine these witnesses to expose any biases, motives, or inconsistencies in their testimonies. Past relationships, personal connections, or potential bias towards the accused can be scrutinized, and the defence must ensure that their witnesses are prepared to withstand rigorous questioning and maintain their credibility.

iii. Availability and reliability of evidence:

The availability and reliability of evidence supporting the alibi can be crucial. Gathering concrete evidence, such as surveillance footage, financial records, or documented records of the accused's activities during the alleged crime, can be

¹⁴ Aditi Roy and Raj Kumar Meena, 'Evidentiary Value of Plea of Alibi in Criminal Proceedings' 14(2) Criminal Law Journal 174 (2019).

challenging. The defence must thoroughly investigate and ensure the authenticity and admissibility of the evidence, addressing any potential challenges raised by the prosecution.

iv. Rebuttal by the prosecution:

The prosecution will attempt to rebut the alibi defence by presenting evidence or arguments that contradict or undermine the alibi claim. This may involve presenting witnesses or evidence that place the accused at the crime scene or challenge the alibi timeline. The defence must be prepared to counter these challenges and present compelling arguments or evidence that discredit the prosecution's rebuttal.

v. Weaknesses in the alibi timeline:

The defence must carefully construct a coherent and consistent timeline of events to support the alibi defence. Any inconsistencies, gaps, or ambiguities in the alibi timeline can be exploited by the prosecution to undermine its credibility. It is crucial for the defence to meticulously investigate and address any potential weaknesses in the alibi timeline to strengthen their case.¹⁵

vi. Expert testimony and forensic evidence:

In cases involving complex forensic evidence, the prosecution may present expert witnesses to challenge the alibi defence. These experts can provide scientific analysis or interpretations of evidence that contradict the alibi claim. To counter this, the defence may need to consult their own experts to challenge the prosecution's forensic evidence or provide alternative interpretations.

vii. Jury bias and perception:

The success of the alibi defence can be influenced by the perceptions and biases of the jury. Jurors may have preconceived notions, unconscious biases, or personal

¹⁵ R.V. Kelkar, R.V. Kelkar's Criminal Procedure (Lexis Nexis 2019).

beliefs that can affect their evaluation of the alibi evidence. The defence must carefully consider the jury composition, address any potential biases through jury selection or during the trial, and present the alibi defence in a persuasive and compelling manner to overcome any biases or prejudices.

VII. CASE LAWS

1. **State of Rajasthan vs. Mahavir Alias Mahavir Prasad (1998)**¹⁶

In this case, the accused, Mahavir, was charged with committing murder. The prosecution presented eyewitness testimonies placing him at the scene of the crime. However, Mahavir asserted the plea of alibi, claiming that he was not present at the crime scene but rather at a different location during the time of the incident. The defence presented several witnesses and documentary evidence supporting the alibi claim. The court carefully examined the evidence and found the alibi to be credible and consistent, creating reasonable doubt about Mahavir's presence at the crime scene. Consequently, Mahavir was acquitted based on the reasonable doubt established by the alibi defence.

2. **Gurpreet Singh vs. State of Haryana (2002)**¹⁷

In the case, the accused, Gurpreet Singh, was charged with committing a robbery. Gurpreet asserted the plea of alibi, claiming that he was not present at the scene of the crime but rather at a different location at the time of the incident. The defence presented witnesses and documentary evidence supporting Gurpreet's alibi. However, the court found inconsistencies in the alibi evidence and noted that the witnesses lacked credibility. The prosecution presented strong evidence linking Gurpreet to the crime, including eyewitness testimonies and recovered stolen items. The court concluded that the alibi defence was not sufficiently established and relied on the prosecution's evidence to convict Gurpreet of the robbery charges.

¹⁶ 2 SCC 124 (1998).

¹⁷ 7 SCC 650 (2002).

3. **Darshan Singh vs. State of Punjab (2016)**¹⁸

In the case, the accused was convicted by the High Court and sentenced to life imprisonment with a fine for murder. The Supreme Court carefully examined the statements of defence witnesses and other evidence and concluded that the accused had taken a false plea of alibi. It was also determined that the alibi plea presented by the accused was inconsistent. The Supreme Court clarified that the plea of alibi is not one of the general exceptions in the Indian Penal Code but a rule of evidence under Section 11 of the Evidence Act. It emphasized that the defence must prove the alibi only after the prosecution has established its case against the accused. After scrutinizing all the evidence, the Supreme Court found no legal flaws in the appreciation of evidence and dismissed the appeal.

4. **Papp Tiwary vs. State of Jharkhand (2022)**¹⁹

The Supreme Court emphasized that the burden of establishing the plea of alibi rests on the accused. The court stated that the appellants in this case had failed to present any evidence that could establish their plea of alibi with reasonable probability. The court further highlighted that the plea of alibi must be proved with certainty to completely exclude the possibility of the accused's presence at the scene of the crime or in the house where the incident took place. The court's decision indicated that the appellants had not met this requirement, leading to the dismissal of their plea of alibi.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the plea of alibi holds significant importance in criminal trials as it provides an opportunity for the accused to present evidence demonstrating their absence from the scene of the alleged crime. Throughout this article, we have explored the various aspects of the plea of alibi, including its definition, historical background, and key elements. The plea of alibi serves a critical role in establishing reasonable doubt in criminal proceedings.

¹⁸ 10 SCC 214 (2016).

¹⁹ 4 SCC 567 (2022).

By shifting the burden of proof onto the prosecution, it creates an opportunity for the defence to challenge the prosecution's case and introduce doubt in the minds of the jury or judge. It can be a powerful defence strategy, particularly when supported by compelling evidence, witness testimonies, and documentary proof.

Alibi not only serves as a defence strategy but also functions as a corroborative defence. Gathering supporting evidence, such as surveillance footage, records, or credible witnesses, bolsters the credibility of the alibi and strengthens the defence's case. Challenging the prosecution's timeline and exposing weaknesses in witness identification can further weaken the prosecution's arguments and contribute to the establishment of reasonable doubt.

However, the plea of alibi is subject to legal standards and procedures. Admissibility of alibi evidence depends on jurisdiction-specific rules and requirements, and compliance with disclosure obligations is crucial. Challenges and limitations arise when the prosecution attempts to refute the alibi or when the defence struggles to establish the reliability of alibi witnesses. Landmark cases and legal precedents have shaped the understanding and evaluation of alibi evidence. Noteworthy appellate decisions have influenced the acceptance and assessment of alibi pleas, contributing to the development of legal standards and principles.

Despite its significance, the plea of alibi is not without controversies and criticisms. Challenges to the credibility of alibi evidence exist, including the possibility of fabrication or manipulation of alibis. Difficulties in verifying alibi claims add another layer of complexity to their assessment. Furthermore, there is a potential for abuse or misuse of the plea, leading to false alibis and the risk of wrongful acquittals. Instances of alibi fraud have highlighted the need for caution and thorough scrutiny in evaluating alibi evidence.