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Avinash Kumar



Avinash Kumar has completed his Ph.D. in International Investment Law from the Dept. of Law & Governance, Central University of South Bihar. His research work is on "International Investment Agreement and State's right to regulate Foreign Investment." He qualified UGC-NET and has been selected for the prestigious ICSSR Doctoral Fellowship. He is an alumnus of the Faculty of Law, University of Delhi. Formerly he has been elected as Students Union President of Law Centre-1, University of Delhi. Moreover, he completed his LL.M. from the University of Delhi (2014-16), dissertation on "Cross-border Merger & Acquisition"; LL.B. from the University of Delhi (2011-14), and B.A. (Hons.) from Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi. He has also obtained P.G. Diploma in IPR from the Indian Society of International Law, New Delhi. He has qualified UGC – NET examination and has been awarded ICSSR – Doctoral Fellowship. He has published six-plus articles and presented 9 plus papers in national and international seminars/conferences. He participated in several workshops on research methodology and teaching and learning.

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JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORMS: BALANCING BETWEEN REHABILITATION AND SOCIETAL SAFETY

AUTHORED BY - TUSHAR GAJANAN RAUT
Designation-LLM Student (Savitribai Phule Pune University)

Abstract

Juvenile justice has always been a contested field of law, reflecting the tension between two seemingly opposing objectives: the rehabilitation of young offenders and the protection of society from crime. Unlike traditional criminal law that emphasizes retribution and deterrence, juvenile justice frameworks across the globe recognize the distinct developmental stage of children and aim to reform rather than punish. Yet, when juveniles commit heinous crimes, societies grapple with the dilemma of whether rehabilitation alone is sufficient or whether punitive measures are essential for ensuring societal safety.

This paper critically examines the evolution, objectives, and approaches of juvenile justice systems, with particular reference to India and comparative insights from the United States, Europe, and the Scandinavian model. It explores the philosophical underpinnings of rehabilitation, the emerging trend of punitive approaches including the “adult crime, adult time” philosophy, and the balance between child rights and victims’ justice. Through an analysis of legislation, judicial precedents, criminological theories, and international human rights frameworks, the paper argues for a hybrid model that integrates rehabilitation with proportionate punishment to achieve both individual reform and societal protection. The discussion highlights the strengths and limitations of each approach, empirical data on recidivism, and policy implications for future juvenile justice reforms.

Ultimately, the study concludes that a rights-based yet pragmatic juvenile justice system, rooted in restorative justice and guided by constitutional morality, is necessary to ensure long-term safety, justice, and social harmony.

Keywords

Juvenile Justice ,Rehabilitation vs. Punishment ,Restorative Justice ,Societal Safety, Juvenile Justice Act, 2015 Comparative Juvenile Law, Child Rights, Criminal Justice Reform

1. Introduction

The administration of juvenile justice remains one of the most delicate responsibilities of any criminal justice system. Unlike adult offenders, children are often considered victims of their environment, circumstances, and socio-economic deprivation. The law, therefore, adopts a differentiated approach towards them. While the welfare and best interests of the child are foundational principles, a parallel concern emerges when juveniles commit heinous crimes, such as sexual assault or murder, where society demands deterrence and justice for victims. This duality between rehabilitation and societal safety lies at the core of modern juvenile justice debates.

India has witnessed a significant transformation in its juvenile justice system, particularly following the Nirbhaya case (2012)¹, where one of the perpetrators was a juvenile. The case intensified public outrage and raised questions about whether existing frameworks of juvenile justice prioritized reform over accountability, potentially at the cost of public safety. Consequently, the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015² introduced provisions permitting juveniles aged 16–18 to be tried as adults for heinous offences.

This paper seeks to analyze whether the shift towards punitive measures compromises the rehabilitative ideals of juvenile law, and how different jurisdictions reconcile these tensions. By engaging with criminological theories, case law, legislative frameworks, and international human rights instruments, the paper aims to present a balanced perspective and propose a model that is both child-centric and victim-sensitive.

2. Historical Evolution of Juvenile Justice

1. Early Treatment of Juveniles

Historically, children were treated as miniature adults in criminal justice systems. English common law presumed that children above the age of seven were capable of forming criminal intent. Similar trends were visible in colonial India, where no distinction existed between adult and juvenile offenders in the early stages of legal development.³

¹ Mukesh v. State (NCT of Delhi), (2017) 6 SCC 1 (India)

² The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, No. 2, Acts of Parliament, 2016 (India)

³ William Blackstone, Commentaries on the Laws of England 22 (1765)

2. Emergence of Juvenile Systems

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw a shift towards specialized treatment of juveniles, influenced by the welfare model that recognized childhood as a distinct phase of development. In India, the first legislation specifically addressing juvenile delinquency was the Apprentices Act, 1850⁴, followed by the Reformatory Schools Act, 1897.⁵ Later, the Children Act, 1960 and the Juvenile Justice Act, 1986 sought to provide a uniform framework.

3. Contemporary Reforms in India

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000 was enacted to align Indian law with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). However, post-2012 public pressure led to the 2015 Act, which introduced the possibility of adult trials for juveniles in heinous offences. This reform reflects a global trend of balancing rehabilitative ideals with punitive demands.

3. Philosophical and Theoretical Foundations

1. Retributive vs. Rehabilitative Justice

The retributive model emphasizes punishment proportional to the crime, prioritizing deterrence and societal safety. In contrast, the rehabilitative model views crime as a product of social deprivation and psychological immaturity, advocating reform.⁶

Criminological Perspectives

- Labeling Theory (Becker) suggests that branding juveniles as criminals perpetuates delinquency.⁷
- Strain Theory (Merton) attributes juvenile crime to socio-economic inequality.⁸
- Developmental Psychology highlights that adolescents lack full cognitive maturity, supporting rehabilitative approaches.⁹

2. Restorative Justice

Restorative justice shifts focus from punishment to repairing harm through dialogue, victim-offender mediation, and community reintegration. It aligns with juvenile justice principles that

⁴ The Apprentices Act, 1850, Act No. 19, Acts of Parliament, 1850 (India)

⁵ The Reformatory Schools Act, 1897, Act No. 8, Acts of Parliament, 1897 (India)

⁶ Herbert L. Packer, *The Limits of the Criminal Sanction* 9-13, 19-23 (1968)

⁷ Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* 9 (1963)

⁸ K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* 132-52 (1949)

⁹ Elizabeth S. Scott & Laurence Steinberg, **Rethinking Juvenile Justice** 21-65 (2008)

emphasize education, counseling, and social support.

4. The Indian Juvenile Justice Framework

The Juvenile Justice Act, 2015 constitutes the backbone of India's juvenile justice system.

1. Key Provisions

- Defines juveniles as individuals below 18 years of age.
- Permits 16–18-year-olds accused of heinous crimes to be tried as adults after assessment by the Juvenile Justice Board (JJB).
- Establishes Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) for children in need of care and protection.
- Encourages rehabilitation through adoption, foster care, and aftercare programs.¹⁰

2. Judicial Approach

Indian courts have oscillated between strict accountability and child-centric welfare:

- **Salil Bali v. Union of India (2013)**: Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Juvenile Justice Act, 2000.¹¹
- **Dr. Subramanian Swamy v. Raju (2014)**: Court refused to lower the juvenile age from 18 to 16.¹²
- Post-2015 amendments, courts continue to balance rehabilitation with victim justice.

5. Comparative Perspectives

1. United States

The U.S. follows a more punitive philosophy, often trying juveniles as adults in serious offences. The “adult crime, adult time” doctrine is prominent, though criticized for high recidivism rates and failure to rehabilitate.¹³

2. Europe

European countries adopt a welfare and rights-based model, emphasizing reintegration. The

¹⁰ Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, No. 2, Acts of Parliament, 2016 (India)

¹¹ Salil Bali v. Union of India, (2013) 7 SCC 705 (India)

¹² Dr. Subramanian Swamy v. Raju, Thr. Member, Juvenile Justice Board, (2014) 8 SCC 390 (India)

¹³ Miller v. Alabama, 567 U.S. 460, 470 (2012)

UK, however, has stricter measures compared to Scandinavian nations.¹⁴

3. Scandinavian Model

Norway, Sweden, and Finland prioritize restorative mechanisms, counseling, and strong community support. These countries report among the lowest juvenile crime recidivism rates globally, illustrating the effectiveness of rehabilitative approaches.¹⁵

6. Rehabilitation vs. Punitive Approaches

The debate between rehabilitation and punitive justice lies at the heart of juvenile justice reforms across jurisdictions. Both approaches stem from different theoretical foundations and societal expectations. On one hand, rehabilitation emphasizes the notion that children are still developing, impressionable, and capable of transformation; on the other, punitive approaches reflect the public's demand for deterrence, retribution, and victim justice. The task of law is to strike a delicate balance between these seemingly conflicting objectives.¹⁶

1. The Case for Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation is grounded in the principle that children are not miniature adults; their mental, emotional, and psychological maturity is still in progress. Neuroscientific studies show that the prefrontal cortex the region responsible for impulse control and decision-making continues developing well into the early twenties. Therefore, young offenders often lack full cognitive ability to understand long-term consequences of their actions.

- **Psychological Basis:** Rehabilitation acknowledges immaturity, peer pressure, poverty, and abuse as major factors influencing juvenile delinquency. Addressing these root causes through counseling, education, and social support can prevent future crimes.
- **Restorative Justice:** Rehabilitation favors restorative mechanisms such as victim-offender mediation, community service, and reintegration programs. These approaches repair harm while ensuring accountability without destroying the juvenile's future.

¹⁴ Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012, [2012] O.J. (L 315/57)

¹⁵ Torbjørn Skardhamar & Larissa Sjöberg, Why Do Crime Rates Fall? A Case Study of Norway, 17 Eur. J. Criminology 1, 12-15 (2020)

¹⁶ Barry C. Feld, The Evolution of the Juvenile Court: Race, Politics, and the Criminalizing of Juvenile Justice (2017)

- **Empirical Evidence:** Countries such as Norway and Sweden, which emphasize rehabilitation through community-based correctional measures, report recidivism rates as low as 20%, compared to over 60% in punitive systems like the U.S.¹⁷

Advantages of Rehabilitation

- **Reduces Recidivism** – Rehabilitated juveniles are less likely to reoffend.
- **Protects the Child’s Future** – By avoiding stigmatization and criminal labeling, juveniles retain opportunities for education and employment.
- **Complies with International Human Rights** – Instruments like the UNCRC (1989) and the Beijing Rules (1985) emphasize reformatory rather than punitive treatment.¹⁸
- **Community Reintegration** – Rehabilitation fosters acceptance of the offender back into society, which is essential for long-term safety.

2. The Case for Punitive Measures

While rehabilitation remains the preferred global model, public opinion and certain criminological schools support punitive measures, especially in cases involving heinous crimes.

- **Deterrence and Victim Justice:** Punishment satisfies victims’ demands for justice and reassures society that crime has consequences. In high-profile cases such as the Nirbhaya gang rape (2012)¹⁹, public outrage over the release of a juvenile convict catalyzed amendments in India’s law, allowing juveniles aged 16–18 to be tried as adults for heinous offences.²⁰
- **Retributive Justice:** Rooted in the idea that punishment must be proportionate to the crime, this approach holds that serious crimes must not go unpunished, regardless of the offender’s age.²¹
- **Societal Safety:** Juveniles who commit violent crimes may pose a continued threat to society if merely rehabilitated. Punitive incarceration is viewed as a protective mechanism.

¹⁷ Torbjørn Skardhamar & Larissa Sjöberg, Why Do Crime Rates Fall? A Case Study of Norway, 17 Eur. J. Criminology 1, 12-15 (2020)

¹⁸ U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child art. 40, Nov. 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3

¹⁹ Mukesh v. State (NCT of Delhi), (2017) 6 SCC 1 (India)

²⁰ Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, § 15, No. 2, Acts of Parliament, 2016 (India)

²¹ Immanuel Kant, The Metaphysics of Morals 140-141 (Mary Gregor trans., Cambridge Univ. Press 1996) (1797)

Advantages of Punitive Measures

- **Deterrence** – Fear of stricter punishment may discourage juveniles from committing serious crimes.
- **Victim Satisfaction** – Punitive action restores confidence in the justice system.
- **Public Safety** – Isolating dangerous offenders prevents further harm.

Limitations of Punitive Measures

- **High Recidivism Rates:** Studies in the U.S. show that juveniles tried as adults and incarcerated in adult prisons are 34% more likely to reoffend compared to those processed in juvenile courts.²²
- **Psychological Harm:** Exposure to hardened criminals in adult prisons often worsens delinquent behavior.²³
- **Violation of Child Rights:** Trying juveniles as adults contradicts international conventions such as the UNCRC.
- **Stigmatization:** Labeling juveniles as criminals reduces chances of rehabilitation and reintegration.

3. Balancing Rehabilitation and Punishment

The challenge lies in reconciling child rights with victim justice. Pure rehabilitation risks being perceived as leniency, while strict punitive measures undermine the very rationale of juvenile justice. A hybrid approach may offer a balanced solution:

- **Graduated Responses:** Minor offences should attract rehabilitative measures, while heinous offences could justify stricter scrutiny and limited punitive action.
- **Judicial Assessment:** The Juvenile Justice Act, 2015 empowers Juvenile Justice Boards to assess the “mental and physical capacity to commit an offence” before deciding whether a juvenile aged 16–18 should be tried as an adult. This ensures individualized justice.
- **Restorative + Retributive Elements:** Integrating victim-offender dialogues alongside proportionate punishment can ensure that both victims and offenders are heard.

²² Richard E. Redding, *The Effects of Adjudicating and Sentencing Juveniles as Adults*, 7 *Youth Violence & Juv. Just.* 19, 24 (2009)

²³ Craig Haney, *The Psychological Impact of Incarceration: Implications for Post-Prison Adjustment*, in *Prisoners Once Removed: The Impact of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families, and Communities* 33-66 (Jeremy Travis & Michelle Waul eds., 2003)

7. International Human Rights Framework

The global approach to juvenile justice is profoundly shaped by a network of international human rights instruments that collectively establish a child-centric, rehabilitative ideal. These frameworks posit that children, by virtue of their ongoing development, are entitled to special protections and that their interaction with the justice system must prioritize their reintegration into society. The core principles emanating from these instruments include the primacy of the child's best interests, the necessity of diversion from formal judicial proceedings, and the absolute avoidance of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

1. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989

As the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history, the UNCRC sets the foundational standard. Article 37 explicitly prohibits life imprisonment without the possibility of release and capital punishment for offences committed by persons below eighteen. It mandates that the detention of a child shall be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period. Crucially, Article 40 establishes the right of every child accused of breaking the law to be treated in a manner that promotes the child's sense of dignity and worth, reinforces respect for human rights, and facilitates the child's reintegration into society. This provision inherently favors restorative and rehabilitative measures over purely punitive ones.²⁴

2. The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice ("The Beijing Rules"), 1985

The Beijing Rules provide granular guidance on the administration of juvenile justice. They emphasize the principle of proportionality, not only in the context of the offence but also considering the circumstances of the juvenile. A key innovation is the concept of "diversion," encouraging states to deal with juvenile offenders without resorting to formal trial or institutionalization, thereby avoiding the stigmatizing effects of judicial proceedings. The rules also stress the importance of privacy at all stages to protect juveniles from undue harm and publicity.²⁵

3. The United Nations Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency ("The Riyadh Guidelines"), 1990

²⁴ U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child art. 37, 40, Nov. 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3.

²⁵ U.N. Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice ("The Beijing Rules"), G.A. Res. 40/33, Annex, rules 5, 11, 8, 21, U.N. Doc A/RES/40/33 (Nov. 29, 1985)

Focusing on the pre-delinquency stage, the Riyadh Guidelines shift the focus from punishment to prevention. They advocate for community-based supports and services that mitigate the socio-economic factors leading to delinquency, such as poverty, lack of education, and family breakdown. The guidelines underscore that juvenile justice policy should be embedded within a broader framework of social policy that supports children and families.²⁶

4. The United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty ("The Havana Rules"), 1990

This instrument sets out conditions for the protection of juveniles in custody. It insists that deprivation of liberty must be a last resort, and when it occurs, the environment must be care-oriented rather than punitive. The rules mandate separation from adult offenders, access to education, vocational training, and recreation, and the provision of medical and psychological care. The ultimate goal is to prepare juveniles for their return to society.²⁷

8. Policy Challenges and Reforms in India

Despite a progressive legislative framework, the operationalization of juvenile justice in India is hampered by systemic inadequacies and deep-seated socio-legal challenges. Bridging the gap between the law's intent and its ground-level implementation remains the most significant hurdle to achieving a system that is both just and effective.

1. Systemic and Infrastructural Deficiencies

A critical challenge is the severe lack of infrastructure and human resources. Many Juvenile Justice Boards (JJBs) and Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) operate with insufficient members, inadequate training, and overwhelming caseloads. This leads to perfunctory assessments and delays in justice.²⁸ Observation homes and special homes, intended for rehabilitation, are often plagued by overcrowding, poor sanitation, and a lack of basic amenities. The shortage of trained counselors, psychologists, and social workers means that individualized care and rehabilitation plans, a cornerstone of the juvenile justice philosophy, remain largely theoretical.

²⁶ U.N. Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (The Riyadh Guidelines), G.A. Res. 45/112, Annex, paras. 1, 5, 9, U.N. Doc A/RES/45/112 (Dec. 14, 1990)

²⁷ U.N. Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty, G.A. Res. 45/113, Annex, rules 1, 2, 17, 28, 38, 59, U.N. Doc A/RES/45/113 (Dec. 14, 1990)

²⁸ Centre for Child Rights, *India: Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 - A Brief Analysis* 4-5 (2016)

2. Inconsistent Application and Judicial Discretion

The discretionary power granted to JJBs to decide whether a juvenile aged 16-18 should be tried as an adult introduces a element of subjectivity and potential inconsistency. The assessment of "mental and physical capacity" lacks a standardized, scientific methodology, leading to decisions that may be influenced by the nature of the crime, media pressure, or the personal biases of Board members, rather than a pure assessment of the child's maturity and circumstances.²⁹

3. Societal Stigma and Reintegration Barriers

Perhaps the most formidable obstacle to rehabilitation is the pervasive social stigma attached to young offenders. Even after serving their sentence and undergoing reformatory processes, these individuals face immense discrimination in accessing education, employment, and housing. Communities are often reluctant to accept them, pushing them towards social isolation and, in some cases, back into criminal networks. This nullifies the rehabilitative work done within institutions and contributes to recidivism.³⁰

4. Tension between Populist Demands and Child Rights

The Indian juvenile justice system operates under constant pressure from media-driven public outrage, particularly in high-profile cases involving heinous crimes. This often creates a reactive policy environment where long-term, evidence-based child rights principles are compromised for short-term political expediency. The 2015 amendments, driven by public sentiment following the Nirbhaya case, exemplify this tension, raising questions about whether policy is being shaped by criminological evidence or popular demand for retribution.³¹

9. Conclusion

The juvenile justice system worldwide perpetually navigates the complex interplay between two fundamental imperatives: the rehabilitation of the young offender and the assurance of societal safety. This paper has argued that framing these objectives as a binary choice is a false dichotomy. The evolution of juvenile law, from treating children as "miniature adults" to recognizing their distinct developmental and psychological status, underscores a global

²⁹ Ved Kumari, *The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015: A Half-Hearted Attempt at Reform**, 5 NUJS L. Rev. 501, 514-15 (2012)

³⁰ Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* 31-39 (1963)

³¹ *Mukesh v. State (NCT of Delhi)*, (2017) 6 SCC 1, ¶ 12 (India)

consensus on the need for a specialized approach. However, as evidenced by reforms in India post-2012 and the persistent punitive trends in jurisdictions like the United States, the pressure for retribution in the face of heinous crimes remains a powerful force.

The analysis of criminological theories, from Labeling Theory to Strain Theory, reinforces that juvenile delinquency is often a symptom of broader socio-economic and psychological factors. Punitive responses, particularly the incarceration of juveniles in adult facilities, have been empirically demonstrated to exacerbate these issues, leading to higher recidivism and further social harm. In contrast, the Scandinavian model, with its unwavering commitment to restoration and reintegration, provides a compelling case for the long-term efficacy and humanity of a rehabilitative core.

The Indian Juvenile Justice Act of 2015 represents a pragmatic, if contentious, attempt to forge a hybrid model. By introducing the possibility of adult trials for 16-18-year-olds in heinous cases, it seeks to placate societal demands for accountability. Yet, its success hinges entirely on the robust and fair implementation of its safeguards, particularly the individualized assessment by the Juvenile Justice Board. The current challenges systemic infrastructural deficits, lack of trained personnel, and pervasive social stigma threaten to undermine the law's rehabilitative spirit.

Ultimately, the future of juvenile justice does not lie in a retreat to purely punitive measures but in the thoughtful integration of proportionate accountability within a fundamentally restorative framework. A truly effective system must be rights-based yet pragmatic, one that holds young offenders accountable for their actions without foreclosing their potential for reform. This requires a concerted effort to strengthen rehabilitation infrastructure, invest in community-based diversion and aftercare programs, and foster a societal culture that believes in redemption.

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