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# **“BALANCING SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE AND PROCEDURAL FAIRNESS IN CRIMINAL ADJUDICATION: A CASE COMMENT ON MAHARASHTRA VS. SAJJAD MUGAL”**

AUTHORED BY - ASST. PROF. ABHIJIT MAHADEO CHAVAN

Case Comment on “*The State of Maharashtra vs. Sajjad Ahmed Abdul Aziz  
Mugal @ Pathan,*” Criminal Appeal No. 678/2014

The State of Maharashtra ... Appellant

Vs. Sajjad Ahmed Abdul Aziz Mugal @ Pathan ... Respondent

Criminal Appeal No. 678 of 2014

Bombay High Court, Criminal Appellate Jurisdiction

Judgment pronounced on 10th November 2025 by Hon’ble Justices A.S. Gadkari and Dr. Neela  
Gokhale

## **1. Abstract**

This case comment critically examines the landmark judgment of the Bombay High Court in *The State of Maharashtra v. Sajjad Ahmed Abdul Aziz Mugal<sup>1</sup>*, a high-profile criminal appeal involving the brutal murder of Pallavi Purkayastha, a young corporate lawyer, by her building’s security guard. The article delves into the intricate factual matrix wherein the accused was implicated primarily through circumstantial evidence and forensic links such as DNA matching, blood-stained articles, and possession of the murder weapon recovered at his instance. The legal discourse navigates issues surrounding the admissibility and weight of extrajudicial confessions, the sufficiency of circumstantial evidence satisfying the “chain of circumstances” doctrine, and the procedural integrity of investigation including evidence custody and delayed FIR registration. It also highlights the court’s reasoning in upholding life imprisonment while rejecting the State’s plea for capital punishment, underscoring the judicial

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1. 79 pages Judgment of Bombay High Court on criminal appeal no. 678/2014 of “*The State of Maharashtra v. Sajjad Ahmed Abdul Aziz Mugal*” dated on 10<sup>th</sup> of November, 2025

application of the “rarest of rare” doctrine in sentencing. The critical analysis explores the balancing act performed by the court between scientific evidence and procedural safeguards, emphasizing jurisprudential trends in Indian criminal law. Furthermore, the article offers original observations on the implications for forensic practices and police investigation reforms, advocating for stronger procedural adherence and technological upgrades like CCTV utilization. Ultimately, this judgment is situated as a precedent-setting case reaffirming the high standard needed in circumstantial evidence- based criminal convictions, while illustrating the judiciary’s nuanced approach to proportional sentencing in cases of grievous offense.

**KEYWORDS:** Circumstantial Evidence, Extrajudicial Confession, Forensic DNA Analysis, Life Imprisonment, Procedural Fairness

### **1.1. Introduction:**

The appeal in “*The State of Maharashtra v. Sajjad Ahmed Abdul Aziz Mugal @Pathan*”<sup>2</sup> confronts a grave criminal case implicating the Respondent, Sajjad, in the brutal murder of Pallavi Purkayastha, a young advocate residing in Mumbai. The case centres on circumstantial evidence bolstered by forensic reports, witness testimonies, and extrajudicial confessions. Given the severity of the charges under Sections 302 (murder), 354 (outraging the modesty of a woman), and 449 (criminal trespass) of the Indian Penal Code along with provisions of the Bombay Police Act, the court's judgment offers valuable insights into evidentiary standards in criminal proceedings grounded on circumstantial proofs and procedural propriety.

### **1.2. Facts of the Case:**

On the night of 8th August 2012, Pallavi, a practicing legal manager, was alone in her rented flat in Bhakti Park, Wadala, due to her fiancé Avik's absence. The flat experienced intermittent power failures. Sajjad, a security guard of the building, was called by Pallavi to relay distress signals to the electrician due to no electricity and assist in restoration. Sajjad's presence at the flat at around 1:30 a.m. was witnessed by a neighbour. The following day, Pallavi was found murdered in her flat, having sustained 17 stab wounds.

Investigations revealed Sajjad's connection: blood-stained clothes, a knife (identified as the

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<sup>2</sup> *Sentence on Rapist Guard Deferred*, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/sentence-on-rapist-guard-deferred/cid/162233> (last visited Nov. 11, 2025).

murder weapon), keys to Pallavi's flat, and hair found at the crime scene bearing Sajjad's DNA were recovered. Sajjad was also found with injuries consistent with a scuffle. Crucially, extrajudicial confessions were reported where Sajjad allegedly admitted guilt to certain witnesses, seeking money to flee. The police registered FIR, and subsequent forensic tests solidified the chain of evidence.

### **1.3. Legal Issues:**

1. Whether the circumstantial evidence and forensic reports sufficiently established Sajjad's guilt beyond reasonable doubt?
2. Whether the extrajudicial confessions admissible and credible to support conviction?
3. Was the investigation compliant with procedural safeguards, especially regarding seizure, chain of custody, and recording evidence?
4. What is the appropriate punishment considering the evidence and trial court findings?
5. Whether charge framing was legally proper under the Indian Penal Code and procedural rules, and if additional charges such as attempt to rape should have been considered?

### **1.4. Arguments from Both Sides:**

#### **1.4.1. Appellant (Sajjad Mugal) side,**

- The defence contended that the case was wholly circumstantial, lacking a complete chain of reliable evidence to conclusively prove guilt.
- Sajjad's presence at the flat was admitted, but explanation for his exit and involvement was missing; other security guards were also on duty.
- The extrajudicial confessions were unreliable and questionable in motive and timing; the witnesses themselves were argued to be untrustworthy or influenced.
- Procedural lapses in the investigation were highlighted, such as failure to secure wax seals on key exhibits, delayed FIR registration, and suspicious handling of evidence including recovery statements.
- The defence challenged the DNA evidence chain of custody, injuries on Sajjad claimed not to be contemporaneous with the crime, and called into question the failure of CCTV surveillance.
- The sentencing was illegal, with life imprisonment awarded as "imprisonment for remainder of natural life," alleged to be beyond the trial court's jurisdiction.

#### 1.4.2. Respondent (State of Maharashtra),

- The prosecution presented a strong chain of circumstantial evidence: Sajjad was last seen with the deceased; multiple witnesses confirmed his presence; forensic evidence linked Sajjad to the crime scene through DNA on hair, blood-stained knife, and clothes.
- The extrajudicial confessions to the security supervisor and a neighbouring resident were credible, supported by call data records.
- Absconding after the crime, failure to explain injuries compatible with a scuffle, possession of keys to the flat, and recovery of the murder weapon from a place known to Sajjad reinforced guilt.
- Procedural conduct of the investigation was satisfactorily explained, including reasons for minor delays and handling of forensic samples.
- The prosecution opposed reduction of sentence and demanded enhanced punishment due to the heinous nature of the crime.

#### 1.5. Critical Analysis of Judgment:

- The Bombay High Court upheld the trial court's conviction based on the solid foundation of circumstantial evidence satisfying the classical "chain of circumstances" doctrine as laid in "*Sharad Birdhichand Sarda v. State of Maharashtra (AIR 1984 SC 1622)*". The court emphasized that all incriminating circumstances, individually and cumulatively, must be incompatible with any reasonable hypothesis of innocence.
- The judgment meticulously traced each item of evidence: the last seen theory was bolstered by multiple witnesses; DNA reports were thoroughly examined, and the recovery of incriminating objects under Section 27 of the Evidence Act was deemed lawful despite some procedural imperfections.
- Regarding extrajudicial confessions, the court found the testimonies of PW-10 and PW-19 to be consistent and convincing. Importantly, the court viewed delays in police action as non-prejudicial in the absence of any direct evidence of manipulation or mala fide intent by investigating officers.
- The defence's challenges to the sufficiency of evidence and procedural irregularities were addressed with legal citations emphasizing the principles of appreciation of circumstantial evidence and procedural safeguards. The court, however, rejected the defence's attempt to alter sentencing beyond the range prescribed by law.

- One point of judicial restraint was evident in the refusal to invoke Section 464 of Cr.P.C. for attempting to frame charges that were not originally put forward, maintaining procedural propriety and ensuring the accused's right to a fair trial.

### 1.6. Legal Impact:

- This case reinforces crucial principles in Indian criminal jurisprudence concerning circumstantial evidence: the necessity of an unbroken chain and compatibility with innocence, as laid down in Supreme Court precedents such as “*Sharad Birdhichand Sarda vs. State of Maharashtra, 1984 AIR 1622, 1985 SCR (1) 88*”<sup>3</sup>. It also highlights the admissibility and credibility of extrajudicial confessions when corroborated by forensic evidence and witness testimony.
- The judgment illustrates the judiciary's approach to procedural lapses in investigations, signalling that minor non-compliance (e.g., absence of wax sealing) will not vitiate evidence unless linked to mala fide actions or loss of evidentiary integrity.
- Furthermore, the case serves as a precedent regarding the boundaries of trial courts while sentencing and the inadvisability of courts framing additional charges post-trial without proper procedure.

### 1.7. Findings and Observations:

1. The judgment demonstrates the judiciary's balanced approach of upholding conviction in serious crimes while scrutinizing procedural fairness, fostering confidence in criminal justice processes.
2. The meticulous examination of forensic evidence, especially DNA matching hair found on the victim's body and at the crime scene, reflects the crucial role of science in modern adjudication. However, investigation lapses like non-functional CCTV and delayed FIR highlight areas for policing reforms and stricter evidence collection protocols.
3. The role of extrajudicial confessions, often viewed with suspicion, was reinforced here by multiple corroborative factors, underscoring the need for clear guidelines on recording and using such evidence.

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<sup>3</sup> *Sharad Birdhi Chand Sarda vs State of Maharashtra on 17 July, 1984*, <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1505859/> (last visited Nov. 11, 2025).

4. The judicial restraint concerning charges beyond those initially framed safeguards accused rights but may warrant procedural reform to apply Section 464 of Cr.P.C. more liberally in future cases to address interconnected offenses.
5. The legal community must note the importance of the last-seen theory and the burden on accused persons to reasonably explain presence at the crime scene specifically for custodial or residential crimes.

## 1.8. Conclusion:

The Bombay High Court's upholding of the conviction in "*The State of Maharashtra v. Sajjad Ahmed Abdul Aziz Mugal*" clarifies the application of circumstantial evidence in Indian criminal law and the rigorous standards needed to prove guilt beyond reasonable doubt. The judgment confirms that forensic evidence, combined with credible witness testimonies and confessions, create a compelling narrative that courts can rely upon while being vigilant about procedural regularity.

This case underscores the balance between the pursuit of substantive justice and adherence to procedural safeguards that underpin a fair trial, reinforcing principles vital to upholding the rule of law in criminal jurisprudence.

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