

An Analysis on Alimony and Maintenance Under Hindu Law

SARABJIT THAKUR¹, SHAMBHAVI NAND², SHALINI MAJUMDER³, SANIA ALI⁴, SAMBITA DEBNATH⁵, RUPSA ROY⁶
^{1, 2, 3}*Sister Nivedita University*

I. INTRODUCTION

Alimony and maintenance under Hindu law constitute essential legal safeguards designed to protect the financial interests of spouses and dependents during and after the dissolution of marriage. Rooted in traditional Hindu societal norms, the legal framework has evolved through statutes such as the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, and the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956, to ensure periodic or lump-sum financial support to the economically weaker spouse or dependent family members. These provisions recognize the husband's personal obligation to maintain his wife from the time of marriage and extend this duty to cover interim maintenance during matrimonial litigation (Section 24, Hindu Marriage Act) as well as permanent alimony post-divorce or judicial separation (Section 25, Hindu Marriage Act). The Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act further broadens this responsibility, encompassing maintenance for children, widowed daughter-in-law, and aged or infirm parents, thus emphasizing social welfare and family protection beyond the marital bond.

II. OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of alimony and maintenance provisions under Hindu law is to ensure financial protection and support for the spouse and dependents who are unable to maintain themselves, particularly after marital breakdown or during legal proceedings. Given that marriage is considered a lifelong bond entailing mutual duties and responsibilities, these provisions safeguard the economically weaker party—often the wife—against destitution by mandating the financially stronger spouse to provide regular or lump-sum monetary assistance. This legal framework aims to uphold the claimant's standard of living, dignity, and well-being, preventing hardship caused by loss of

economic support due to separation, divorce, or other familial contingencies.

Another crucial objective is to promote social justice and family welfare by broadly extending maintenance rights within the Hindu family structure. Besides protecting the rights of spouses, the law under the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act extends financial support to children, widowed daughters-in-law, and elderly parents, recognizing the joint family system's obligations. This comprehensive approach fosters family stability and social security, while courts maintain flexibility to balance the parties' financial capacities and needs, ensuring equitable justice based on individual circumstances. Thus, the objective encompasses both individual protection and broader societal interest in maintaining harmony and support within family units.

III. LEGAL FRAMEWORKS IN MARRIAGE

Governing Statutes:

- Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 (HMA)
- Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956 (HAMA)

Maintenance During Marriage and Litigation:

- Section 24, HMA: Provides for maintenance pendente lite (interim maintenance) during matrimonial proceedings.

Permanent Maintenance and Alimony:

- Section 25, HMA: Grants courts power to award permanent alimony and maintenance upon divorce or judicial separation, either as lump sum or periodic payments.

Maintenance Beyond Spouses:

- HAMA Sections 18-20: Extend maintenance rights to children, widowed daughter-in-law, aged parents, and infirm dependents.

Criteria for Granting Maintenance:

- Financial capacity of the party liable to pay.
- Reasonable needs and standard of living of the claimant.
- Number and status of dependents.
- Conduct of the parties (including cruelty or desertion).

Scope of Maintenance:

- Covers food, clothing, shelter, education, medical expenses, and litigation costs.

Judicial Discretion:

- Courts have broad discretion to determine quantum and duration.
- Maintenance can be altered if circumstances materially change.

Obligations:

- Maintenance is a continuing obligation as long as the claimant cannot maintain themselves.

Social Context:

- Recognizes joint family system and social welfare obligations embedded in Hindu law.

IV. NATURE AND CALCULATION OF MAINTENANCE

Nature of Maintenance:

- Maintenance under Hindu law is a legal obligation imposed on one spouse (usually the husband) to provide financial support to the other spouse (usually the wife) or other dependents who cannot maintain themselves.
- It aims to ensure the claimant's basic needs are met, covering food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education, and other essential expenses.
- Maintenance can be interim (pendente lite) during the pendency of matrimonial proceedings or permanent, awarded after divorce, judicial separation, or during the subsistence of marriage in certain circumstances.

- It recognizes the dependency relationship and seeks to prevent the claimant from falling into destitution due to separation or inability to earn.
- The obligation is continuous and subsists until the claimant is able to maintain themselves or if legally terminated (e.g., remarriage of wife).

Calculation of Maintenance:

- Courts consider multiple factors while determining the quantum and duration of maintenance:
- Income, assets, and liabilities of the spouse liable to pay maintenance.
- Financial needs, reasonable expenses, and standard of living enjoyed during the marriage by the claimant.
- Number of dependents and their needs.
- Conduct of the parties, including instances of cruelty, desertion, or neglect. The claimant's capacity to earn or maintain themselves.
- Special needs such as medical treatment, education of children, or upkeep of a home.
- Maintenance may be granted as monthly periodic payments or as a lump sum amount, with courts exercising discretion based on the circumstances.
- The aim is to balance the payer's ability to pay with the claimant's right to live with dignity and comfort.
- Courts can modify or rescind maintenance orders if there is a material change in circumstances.

V. DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ALIMONY AND MAINTENANCE

The terms are sometimes used interchangeably but have specific differences:

Feature	Alimony	Maintenance
Timing	Usually one-time, post-divorce	Ongoing payments (monthly)
Purpose	Final settlement for future support	Continuous support for daily
Legal Basis	Section 25 HMA (Permanent)	Sections 18, 19, 20 HAMA, Section 24,
Scope	Spouse only	Spouse, children, parents, other

VI. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Eligibility Criteria for Alimony and Maintenance under Hindu Law:

- Spouse: The primary claimant is usually the wife, though the husband can also claim maintenance in certain cases, such as under Section 24 of the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, if he cannot maintain himself.
- Marriage Status: The claimant must be legally married under Hindu law; maintenance can be claimed during marriage, separation, or after divorce (subject to conditions).
- Inability to Maintain: The claimant must demonstrate inability to maintain themselves due to lack of income, incapacity, or lack of sufficient resources.
- Conduct of Parties: The claimant's right to maintenance may be affected by their conduct, such as adultery or cruelty. The spouse seeking maintenance should not have deserted the other without reasonable cause.
- Nature of Marriage: Maintenance applies to legally valid Hindu marriages; however, courts have extended certain maintenance rights even to parties in void or voidable marriages in recent judgments.
- Dependency: The claimant should be dependent, either financially or otherwise, on the spouse from whom maintenance is sought.
- Other Dependents: Under the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, children, widowed daughters-in-law, aged parents, and infirm dependents are also eligible for maintenance.
- No Remarriage: For wives, entitlement to maintenance ceases upon remarriage unless special circumstances are shown.

VII. TYPES OF ALIMONY

Alimony under Hindu law is categorized into several types to address the varying financial needs of spouses during and after marital dissolution. Interim or temporary alimony is provided during the pendency of matrimonial proceedings, ensuring that the financially

weaker spouse receives necessary support while the case is under adjudication. Permanent alimony, granted after the final decree of divorce or judicial separation, aims to provide sustained financial assistance, which may be awarded either as a lump sum or as periodic payments. Lump sum alimony offers a one-time settlement that conclusively resolves maintenance claims, whereas periodic alimony provides regular payments to maintain the claimant's living standards over time. Additionally, permanent maintenance under the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956 extends lifelong financial support to wives, children, and other dependents, ensuring continued welfare unless the claimant can sustain themselves or remarries. These varied forms underscore the judicial flexibility to tailor financial relief according to the specific circumstances and needs of the parties involved, reflecting the law's broader objective of protecting vulnerable spouses and dependents within the Hindu familial framework.

VIII. ALIMONY CALCULATION METHODS

1. Income and Assets of the Paying Spouse: The primary consideration is the income, property, and overall financial capacity of the spouse liable to pay alimony. This ensures that the award is within their means without causing undue hardship.
2. Needs and Lifestyle of the Claimant: Courts assess the claimant's reasonable needs, including food, clothing, residence, medical care, education (in case of children), and the standard of living enjoyed during the marriage to maintain consistency.
3. Duration of Marriage and Age: Longer marriages and older claimants who may find it difficult to be self-sufficient often attract higher or lifelong alimony awards.
4. Conduct of Both Parties: Adverse conduct, such as cruelty or desertion, may influence the quantum of alimony, with courts often providing relief to the innocent spouse.
5. Other Dependents: Responsibility towards children and other dependents also affects the maintenance amount.
6. Interim vs Permanent Alimony: Interim alimony tends to be modest, ensuring subsistence during litigation, while permanent alimony may be more substantial considering the long-term needs.

7. Lump Sum vs Periodic Payments: Some courts prefer lump sum payments as a clean break, while others order monthly installments for ongoing support.

IX. ENFORCEMENT MECHANISMS

The enforcement of alimony and maintenance orders under Hindu law is primarily facilitated through provisions in the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, and supplemented by procedural mechanisms under the B NSS (2023). If a spouse liable to pay maintenance fails to comply with the court's order, the aggrieved party can file an application for enforcement under Section 144 of the B NSS, which provides a summary and effective remedy for recovery of maintenance. Courts have the power to issue warrants for attachment of property, attachment of earnings, or even imprisonment of the defaulter for non-payment, ensuring that maintenance orders are not rendered ineffective.

Additionally, the Hindu Marriage Act allows for execution proceedings in civil courts for recovery of maintenance dues. The court may also impose fines or order stress on the respondent's assets to ensure compliance. The possibility of contempt of court proceedings acts as a deterrent against default. These enforcement mechanisms collectively ensure that maintenance orders have legal teeth, upholding the claimant's right to financial support and deterring defaulters through stringent judicial intervention, reflecting the law's commitment to protect vulnerable spouses and dependents under Hindu law.

X. JUDICIAL INTERPRETATIONS

Judicial Interpretations of Alimony and Maintenance under Hindu Law:

The judiciary has played a crucial role in shaping the scope and application of alimony and maintenance laws in India. Courts have consistently emphasized that maintenance is a fundamental right of the spouse or dependent, aimed at ensuring their dignity and basic sustenance. In landmark rulings, courts have clarified that maintenance includes not just food and clothing but also residence, medical expenses, education, and other essentials necessary for a dignified life. Judicial interpretations have also expanded the scope to consider modern social realities, such as live-in

relationships and remarriage, thereby recognizing the evolving nature of family structures.

Furthermore, courts have underscored that the amount of maintenance should be fair, considering both the claimant's needs and the payer's capacity, and should not cause undue hardship. Several judgments have stressed that maintenance is a continuing obligation and can be varied in case of change in circumstances. Judicial interpretation also underscores that the discretion to award or deny maintenance lies with the courts, which must adjudicate with fairness, equity, and sensitivity to individual facts. These interpretations have consistently aimed to uphold the constitutional mandate of equality and social justice, ensuring the law remains adaptable to changing societal norms.

XI. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IMPLICATION OF ALIMONY IN HINDU LAW

Alimony under Hindu law holds significant social and cultural implications, reflecting the traditional values and evolving dynamics of Indian society. Traditionally, Hindu society has viewed marriage as a lifelong commitment with inherent duties, especially the husband's responsibility to maintain and support the wife and family. Alimony laws institutionalize this duty, reinforcing social norms of financial provision and care within the marital relationship. By ensuring economic support to the financially weaker spouse, often the wife, alimony preserves her dignity and status in society, particularly in a cultural context where women have historically depended on male family members for financial sustenance. This legal protection acts as a counterbalance to social inequalities and helps prevent destitution, thereby promoting social stability within families.

Culturally, the concept of alimony also reflects shifting gender roles and rising awareness of women's rights in India. As women increasingly participate in education and employment, there is growing recognition of their right to fair financial treatment and protection against economic abandonment. However, societal attitudes towards alimony can be ambivalent, sometimes perceiving it as a punitive obligation on the husband or a challenge to traditional gender roles. The evolving jurisprudence and legal reforms strive to balance these social sensitivities by emphasizing equitable justice without eroding the cultural values of family solidarity and mutual responsibility.

Ultimately, alimony laws in Hindu law act as a crucial mechanism bridging traditional familial expectations with the demands of modern social justice and gender equality.

XII. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Comparative Analysis of Alimony and Maintenance under Hindu Law with Other Legal Systems

Alimony and maintenance provisions under Hindu law are distinct in their cultural context and legal framework but share certain fundamental objectives with other personal laws in India and international legal systems. Under Hindu law, maintenance primarily emphasizes the husband's obligation to provide for the financially weaker spouse and dependents, extending beyond the marital relationship to cover children, aged parents, and widowed daughters-in-law as per the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956. The Hindu legal framework embodies joint family values, reflecting an extended social responsibility to care for vulnerable family members.

Internationally, maintenance law varies, with many jurisdictions emphasizing gender-neutral provisions, reflecting modern equality principles. Maintenance may be based on the concept of compensating economic disparities caused by marriage dissolution, with greater emphasis on self-sufficiency and rehabilitation, compared to the often custodial and protective nature under Hindu law. The Indian Hindu law's inclusion of extended family maintenance rights is relatively unique and reflects the cultural realities of Indian society.

Thus, while Hindu law reflects traditional familial structures and broad social obligations, other systems may focus more narrowly on the nuclear family or individual autonomy, with diverse enforcement and calculation methods. The comparative analysis highlights both the cultural specificity and universal objectives of maintenance laws: protecting vulnerable dependents and distributing financial responsibilities fairly after marital breakdown or family disruption.

XIII. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Alimony and maintenance laws under Hindu law face several pressing issues and challenges that affect their effective implementation and social impact. One foremost challenge is the lack of uniformity and clarity in the quantum of maintenance awarded, as courts have wide discretionary powers leading to inconsistent and sometimes unpredictable orders. This variability can create uncertainty for both claimants and respondents and may cause prolonged litigation. The

absence of detailed guidelines or standardized formulas for calculating maintenance amounts often results in subjective decisions, which some argue either undercompensate the claimant or impose undue financial burden on the payer.

Another significant issue is the enforcement of maintenance orders, with many claimants facing difficulties in recovering dues due to non-compliance by the obligor spouse. Despite legal mechanisms under the BNSS, 2023, enforcement remains weak due to procedural delays, lack of awareness, and social stigma attached to legal proceedings. Social attitudes and gender biases also pose challenges; while maintenance laws are designed to protect vulnerable spouses, they are sometimes perceived as tools for exploitation or as threats to traditional family roles, leading to resistance in enforcement or misuse allegations. Moreover, evolving family structures, such as live-in relationships and same-sex partnerships, present legal ambiguities given the current statutory framework primarily addresses heterosexual Hindu marriages. Addressing these challenges requires legal reforms, judicial sensitivity, and public awareness to ensure fair, timely, and effective maintenance relief that aligns with contemporary social realities.

XIV. UNDERSTANDING ALIMONY AND MAINTENANCE PROVISIONS

Alimony and maintenance are vital legal provisions designed to ensure the financial support and social security of spouses and dependents in Hindu law. These provisions recognize the lifelong obligations that arise from marriage and family relationships, aiming to provide economic stability to the weaker or vulnerable parties, particularly women, children, and the elderly. The legal framework established through statutes such as the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, and Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956, stipulates that maintenance may be awarded during matrimonial disputes and after divorce or separation, ensuring continuous support aligned with the claimant's needs and the payer's capacity.

The core objective of these provisions is to promote social justice by preventing destitution and ensuring that dependents can maintain a reasonable standard of living. Courts exercise discretion in determining the quantum and duration of alimony based on factors such as income, lifestyle, conduct, and needs of the parties involved. Different types of alimony include interim, permanent, lump sum, and periodic payments, tailored to the circumstances of each case. Enforcement mechanisms ensure compliance with

court orders, with legal procedures available for recovery of dues, though practical challenges such as delays and social biases often hamper effective enforcement. Overall, these provisions reflect the commitment of Hindu law to uphold dignity, fairness, and social stability within familial structures.

CONCLUSION

Alimony and maintenance provisions under Hindu law serve as crucial instruments for safeguarding the financial well-being and dignity of spouses and dependents against the backdrop of marital breakdown or familial vulnerability. Rooted in traditional Hindu social structures yet continuously evolving through legislative reforms and judicial interpretations, these provisions strike a balance between upholding familial obligations and advancing social justice. The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, and the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956, provide a comprehensive framework that addresses not only spouses but also other dependent family members, reflecting the joint family ethos prevalent in Indian society.

Despite their noble objectives and broad protective scope, issues such as judicial discretion variability, enforcement challenges, and changing social dynamics underscore the need for ongoing reforms and sensitization. Courts have been pivotal in expanding the scope and applicability of maintenance laws, ensuring that legal relief adapts to contemporary realities, including gender equality and diverse family forms. Ultimately, alimony and maintenance laws under Hindu law embody a commitment to justice, equity, and social welfare by ensuring that financial responsibility within familial relationships is recognized and honored, thereby fostering harmony and security in Indian society.

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