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FAMILY LAW

Supreme Court Upholds Natural Guardian’s Rights in Child Custody Over Grandparents’ Claims

AUTHOR Nidhi Singh

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Introduction

The role of grandparents in the upbringing of children has been a cornerstone of traditional Indian family structures. However, in modern times, legal disputes over child custody have often placed grandparents in a precarious position. The recent Supreme Court ruling in the case of Vivek Kumar Chaturvedi & Anr. Versus State of U.P. & Ors.[1] has clarified the legal standing of grandparents in custody disputes, reaffirming that their claim is not stronger than that of the natural guardian, typically the father.

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Background of the Case

The case involved a father who sought custody of his child after the mother's death. The child had lived with the father for nearly 10 years until the mother's demise, after which the child was placed with the maternal grandparents. The High Court had initially denied the father custody, citing the child's comfort with the grandparents and the father's remarriage. The father then appealed to the Supreme Court, seeking the custody of the child.

Supreme Court's Ruling

The Supreme Court, in a landmark judgment, overturned the High Court's decision. The bench of Justices BR Gavai and K Vinod Chandran observed that the maternal grandparents could not have a better claim than the father, who is the natural guardian. The court emphasized the father's right as the natural guardian and highlighted that there were no allegations of abuse or neglect against him. The father was well-employed and educated, and there was no evidence to suggest that he was unfit to care for his child.

The Supreme Court stated "We cannot but observe that the learned Single Judge has not endeavoured to elicit the child's attitude towards his father. Admittedly, the child, after his birth, was with his parents for about 10 years till the death of his mother. He was separated from the father in 2021 and has been living with his grandparents, who cannot have a better claim than the father, who is the natural guardian".

There is no allegation of any matrimonial dispute when the mother of the child was alive nor a complaint of abuse perpetrated against the wife or son. The father, the natural guardian is well employed and educated and there is nothing standing against his legal rights; as a natural guardian, and legitimate desire to have the custody of his child. The Supreme Court pointed that the welfare of the child, in the facts and circumstances of this case, would be best served if custody is given to the father. The Supreme Court upheld that the welfare of child is of the utmost importance.

In the judgment passed in **Gautam Kumar Das vs NCT of Delhi[2]** and another, the court emphasized the need of the minor to be with the natural guardian, especially when the mother is no more. However, as the child did not have father's company for over 3 years and it is important for the child to complete his academic year of 7^{th} standard in a school near the residence of grandparent. Hence, the custody of the child shall remain with the grandfather till 30.04.2025 and during the continuation of custody with grand-parent, the father shall have visiting rights. Post handing over the custody to the father, grandparents shall also have visiting rights. Re-marriage of father cannot be a bar on the rightful custody of the child.

The Supreme Court's ruling emphasizes on the priority given to the rights of a natural guardian, as long as it is in the best interest of the child. The Court carefully weighed the father's rights against the child's immediate stability and emotional well-being, enabling a seamless transfer of custody.

Legal Framework Governing Custody and Guardianship

In India, child custody disputes are primarily governed by personal laws and the Guardians and Wards Act, 1890. The primary consideration in all custody disputes is the welfare of the child. The Supreme Court's ruling aligns with this principle, emphasizing that while grandparents can be central to a child's life, their claim to custody cannot supersede that of the natural guardian.

Implications of the Ruling

This ruling has significant implications for future custody disputes involving grandparents. It reaffirms the legal precedence given to natural guardians in custody matters. However, it also acknowledges the importance of maintaining the grandparent-grandchild relationship by allowing visitation rights to the grandparents.

Conclusion

The Supreme Court's decision in Vivek Kumar Chaturvedi & Anr. Versus State of U.P. & Ors. provides clarity on the legal standing of grandparents in custody disputes. While it upholds the rights of natural guardians, it also recognizes the importance of grandparents in a child's life. This balance ensures that the welfare of the child remains the paramount consideration in all custody matters.

For further details write to: contact@indialaw.in

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[1] 2025 INSC 159

[2] (2024) 10 SCC 588