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FORENSIC BALLISTICS IN CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS: ASSESSING THE RISK OF WRONGFUL CONVICTIONS AND MISCARRIAGES OF JUSTICE

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Abstract

Forensic ballistics has consistently held a significant role in criminal investigations that involve firearms. Ballistic evidence is generally viewed by courts and law enforcement agencies as an extremely reliable type of scientific evidence capable of linking a firearm to a particular bullet or cartridge case recovered from a crime scene. This type of evidence is often key to the prosecution of murder, terrorism, organized crime, armed robbery, and other crimes involving firearms. But increased scrutiny by scientific organizations, legal scholars, and advocates for criminal justice reform has cast serious doubt on the reliability, validity, and evidentiary certainty of forensic ballistic identification. While ballistic evidence is often presented as objective and scientific, the identification of firearms is largely a function of the subjective interpretation of forensic examiners. Questions about examiner bias, methodological limitations, lack of standardization and absence of universally accepted error rates have reignited discussions of the role of forensic ballistics in wrongful convictions and miscarriages of justice.

This article critically examines the scientific principles of forensic ballistics, evidentiary significance of firearm identification and the circumstances under which ballistic evidence may lead to wrongful convictions. The article explores the legal treatment of ballistic evidence in India and other comparative jurisdictions, critically analyses the major criticisms of firearm identification techniques and evaluates the potential perils of excessive reliance on forensic expertise. It also investigates the new reforms to enhance scientific rigor, transparency and accountability in forensic investigation. The study concludes that forensic ballistics is an important investigative tool but its limitations must be recognized to prevent miscarriages of justice and to maintain the integrity of criminal adjudication.

Keywords: Forensic Ballistics, Wrongful Convictions, Firearm Identification, Expert Evidence, Criminal Investigation, Miscarriages of Justice, Forensic Science.

“The history of wrongful convictions teaches us that certainty is not the same as truth.”

— Brandon L. Garrett

Introduction

The evolution of forensic science has profoundly altered the methods used in the investigation and prosecution of criminal offenses.

Contemporary criminal justice systems increasingly rely on scientific evidence to ascertain factual accuracy, identify offenders, reconstruct crime scenes, and achieve convictions.¹⁴⁶⁵ Among the various disciplines within forensic science, forensic ballistics holds a particularly crucial role due to its involvement in the investigation of firearm-related crimes. Ballistic evidence is often viewed as highly

¹⁴⁶⁵ B.R. Sharma, *Forensic Science in Criminal Investigation and Trials* 1-5 (Universal Law Publishing Co., New Delhi, 5th edn., 2015).

compelling because it seemingly provides objective scientific proof that connects a suspect's weapon to a criminal act.¹⁴⁶⁶

The significance of forensic ballistics has markedly increased in recent decades, driven by a rise in incidents of firearm violence, terrorism, organized crime, and transnational arms trafficking. Investigators routinely depend on ballistic examinations to ascertain the type of firearm utilized, reconstruct shooting events, determine firing distances, identify shooters, and link multiple crimes involving the same weapon.¹⁴⁶⁷ Courts frequently consider such evidence to be highly probative, as it is derived from specialized scientific analyses performed by trained professionals. Despite its broad acceptance, forensic ballistic identification has increasingly come under scrutiny in both scientific and legal contexts. Scholars have raised concerns about whether firearm identification possesses the same degree of scientific certainty that is often ascribed to it in criminal cases. In contrast to DNA profiling, which is based on statistically quantifiable methods, firearm identification primarily relies on visual comparisons made by human examiners. This process often necessitates that experts assess whether microscopic markings on bullets and cartridge cases are sufficiently similar to conclude that they originated from a specific firearm.¹⁴⁶⁸

The process is subjective and has been criticized on the grounds of reliability, reproducibility and bias of the examiner. Scientific reviews in different jurisdictions have pointed out the lack of universally accepted standards for firearm comparisons.¹⁴⁶⁹ Wrongful conviction cases have also shown that forensic testimony, including ballistic evidence, can lead to miscarriages of justice when proffered with undue certainty. These concerns are particularly relevant in

jurisdictions where courts are highly dependent on expert testimony and where the growth of forensic infrastructure is uneven. Ballistic evidence is often critical in criminal prosecutions in India. Offences involving firearms under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 and the Arms Act, 1959 are generally bolstered by forensic science laboratory reports from the state forensic laboratories.¹⁴⁷⁰ Courts routinely depend upon expert opinions as per the rules relating to expert evidence.¹⁴⁷¹ However, there has been relatively little academic attention to the reliability of ballistic evidence in the Indian criminal justice system and the potential for wrongful convictions. The present article attempts to fill this gap by critically examining the scientific basis of forensic ballistics, discussing contemporary critiques of firearm identification techniques, judicial attitudes to ballistic evidence, and the risks of wrongful conviction due to over-reliance on forensic expertise.

Forensic Ballistics and the Evolution of Scientific Criminal Investigation

The establishment of forensic ballistics as a distinct field of forensic science is one of the most important milestones in the history of criminal investigation. The field developed out of the larger scientific movement to apply the tenets of observation, experimentation and empirical analysis to the detection and prosecution of crime. Before modern forensic techniques were developed, most criminal cases were investigated on the strength of confessions, eye-witness accounts and circumstantial evidence. While these types of evidence are still important in criminal justice systems, they have been historically subject to human error, coercion, memory distortion and deliberate fabrication. The quest for more reliable methods of establishing factual truth led investigators and legal institutions to adopt scientific methods that

¹⁴⁶⁶ M.K. Badiye, "Forensic Ballistics: A Tool in Crime Investigation," 35(2) *Journal of Indian Academy of Forensic Medicine* 177 (2013).

¹⁴⁶⁷ S.K. Verma & A. Kumar, "Role of Firearm Examination in Criminal Investigation," 42(1) *Indian Police Journal* 55 (2015).

¹⁴⁶⁸ S. Vij, "Scientific Examination of Firearms and Ballistics Evidence," 14(1) *Indian Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology* 119 (2020).

¹⁴⁶⁹ *Strengthening Forensic Science in the United States: A Path Forward* (National Research Council, National Academies Press, 2009), available at:

<https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/12589/strengthening-forensic-science-in-the-united-states-a-path-forward>.

¹⁴⁷⁰ Directorate of Forensic Science Services, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, *Forensic Ballistics and Firearms Examination Manual* (2021), available at: <https://dfs.nic.in>

¹⁴⁷¹ *State of H.P. v. Mast Ram*, (2004) 8 SCC 660.

were able to analyse physical traces left behind in the commission of offenses.¹⁴⁷²

The story of forensic ballistics is best understood in the context of larger historical change. Firearms have been used in criminal activity for centuries, but the scientific examination of firearms and ammunition was comparatively late in coming. In the nineteenth century changes in the manufacturing of firearms led to the production of weapons with increasingly sophisticated mechanical features. The introduction of rifled barrels greatly improved the accuracy of firearms by imparting a stabilising spin to bullets as they travelled through the barrel. This process left unique markings on projectiles and formed the basis upon which modern firearm identification would be built.¹⁴⁷³ As firearms became more technologically advanced, investigators began to realise that bullets and cartridge cases could provide valuable information with regards to the weapon from which they had been discharged.

Forensic ballistics became an official science in the early 1900s. One of the most important developments was the comparison microscope, which made it possible to look at two bullets or cartridge cases at the same time under magnification. This changed the face of firearm identification by allowing investigators to compare microscopic markings that were made during firing. Over time, forensic scientists developed the theory that each gun leaves its own unique markings on the ammunition components, which made it possible to identify a particular weapon used in a crime.¹⁴⁷⁴ The growing acceptance of this theory helped to bring ballistic evidence into criminal investigations and trials in many jurisdictions. The development of forensic ballistics was closely linked to the professionalization of law enforcement agencies and the development of forensic laboratories. The value of scientific methods as a means of fighting crime, especially

homicide, armed robbery and organized criminal activity, was more and more acknowledged. Firearms identification acquired significance by virtue of the fact that it appeared to offer an objective means of connecting suspects with criminal acts. Ballistic evidence was considered to be based on physical traces that existed outside human perception and memory, unlike eyewitness testimony. This perception added to the credibility of forensic ballistics, and helped it to become widely accepted in criminal justice systems.¹⁴⁷⁵

The development of forensic ballistics therefore illustrates the potential and limitations of scientific criminal investigation. The discipline has revolutionised the investigation of firearm related crimes, and has played an important role in the pursuit of justice. At the same time, its history highlights the importance of balancing scientific progress with rigorous scientific validation. As forensic ballistics continues to develop through technological innovation and scientific research, its future efficacy will depend on the ability of investigators, scientists and legal institutions to identify best practices whilst recognising its limitations. Such an approach is particularly relevant to the extent to which forensic science can be used as a tool for truth and justice or alternatively, as a source of error in the criminal process.¹⁴⁷⁶

Scientific Basis and Limitations of Firearm Identification

The scientific basis of forensic ballistics is that firearms leave microscopic markings on bullets and cartridge cases in the process of firing. These markings are due to the interaction of the various mechanical parts of the firearm, including the barrel, firing pin, breech face, extractor and ejector. The classical theory of firearm identification is that each firearm has unique microscopic imperfections that are imparted during manufacture and through wear

¹⁴⁷² B.R. Sharma, *supra* note 1, at 7–12.

¹⁴⁷³ M.K. Badiye & S.B. Kapoor, “Forensic Ballistics and Firearm Identification: An Overview,” 34(4) *Journal of the Indian Academy of Forensic Medicine* 369 (2012).

¹⁴⁷⁴ S.K. Verma, “Role of Firearm Identification in Criminal Investigation,” 41(2) *Indian Police Journal* 41 (2014).

¹⁴⁷⁵ Directorate of Forensic Science Services, *supra* note 6.

¹⁴⁷⁶ N. Krishan, “Modern Challenges in Forensic Ballistics and Criminal Justice Administration,” 36(1) *Journal of Indian Academy of Forensic Medicine* 24 (2014).

and tear. When a bullet is fired it travels down the barrel and these imperfections leave striations on the surface of the bullet. The cartridge case also receives characteristic impressions from the various components of the firearm. Forensic examiners then compare these marks to marks on bullets and cartridge cases recovered from test firings of a suspected weapon to determine if they were fired from the same firearm.¹⁴⁷⁷

For much of the twentieth century, courts and law enforcement agencies widely accepted the proposition that firearm identification could reliably establish a connection between a specific weapon and a particular crime.¹⁴⁷⁸ The comparison microscope became the main tool used in ballistic examinations, allowing experts to see and compare microscopic features simultaneously. Examiners could – with training and experience – recognize similarities and differences in markings, and make conclusions about whether a match existed. This approach was an important factor in the increasing significance of forensic ballistics in criminal investigations and court cases.

While firearm identification has been accepted for many years, it has recently been subjected to more scientific scrutiny. A primary concern is the subjective nature of the comparison process. DNA profiling is based on statistical calculations and measurable probabilities, whereas firearm identification has often relied on the examiner's judgment as to whether the observed similarities are sufficient to support an identification.¹⁴⁷⁹ There is no universally agreed numerical threshold for when a match should be declared. Therefore, conclusions may vary according to the experience, interpretation and approach to decision-making of individual examiners.¹⁴⁸⁰

Another key limitation relates to the lack of comprehensive statistical validation. Although firearm examiners often testify that bullets or cartridge cases were fired from a particular weapon, the discipline has struggled historically to quantify the probability of error associated with such conclusions.

Scientific reliability is not only about being able to generate accurate results but also to quantify and communicate uncertainty.¹⁴⁸¹ The absence of universally accepted error rates has thus led to concerns amongst researchers and legal scholars as to whether claims of absolute certainty are scientifically justified. The possibility of cognitive bias is another challenge. Examiners who are exposed to information regarding suspects, confessions, or investigative theories may unconsciously interpret ambiguous evidence in a manner consistent with those expectations. Such influences are not unique to forensic ballistics but affect many forms of human decision-making. However, the potential importance of these issues highlights the need for safeguards such as blind verification procedures and independent review mechanisms.¹⁴⁸² These methodological issues do not make firearm identification useless or unreliable, but do demonstrate that ballistic evidence must be viewed as a valuable, but imperfect, forensic tool. A balanced approach must acknowledge the importance of forensic ballistics to investigations, as well as its scientific limitations. By accepting uncertainty and improving standardisation and strengthening empirical validation, forensic ballistics can continue to make an effective contribution to criminal investigations with the potential to reduce the risk of error and injustice.¹⁴⁸³

¹⁴⁷⁷ S.K. Verma & R.K. Sharma, "Firearm Identification and Ballistic Evidence in Criminal Investigation," 37(2) *Journal of the Indian Academy of Forensic Medicine* 182 (2015).

¹⁴⁷⁸ B.R. Sharma, *supra* note 1, at 412–425.

¹⁴⁷⁹ Adina Schwartz, "A Systemic Challenge to the Reliability and Admissibility of Firearms and Toolmark Identification," 6 *Columbia Science and Technology Law Review* 2 (2005).

¹⁴⁸⁰ M.K. Badiye & S. Kapoor, "Scientific Evaluation of Firearm Identification: Contemporary Issues and Challenges," 39(1) *Journal of the Indian Academy of Forensic Medicine* 56 (2017).

¹⁴⁸¹ *Forensic Science Assessments: A Quality and Gap Analysis—Firearms Examination* (President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, 2016), available

at

https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/PCAST/pcast_forensic_science_report_final.pdf (last visited Jun. 11, 2026).

¹⁴⁸² Itiel E. Dror & Greg Hampikian, "Subjectivity and Bias in Forensic DNA Mixture Interpretation," 51 *Science & Justice* 204 (2011); see also S. Vij, "Cognitive Bias in Forensic Examination and the Need for Blind Testing," 15(2) *Indian Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology* 314 (2021).

¹⁴⁸³ N. Krishan & P. Pathak, "Reliability, Validation and Future Directions in Forensic Ballistics," 41(3) *Journal of the Indian Academy of Forensic Medicine* 267 (2019).

Gunshot Residue Analysis and Its Implications for Wrongful Convictions

Gunshot residue analysis is an important part of firearm-related investigations and is often used to establish whether an individual has recently discharged a firearm or been in a shooting environment. When a firearm is fired, microscopic particles containing elements such as lead, barium and antimony can be deposited on the hands, clothing or surfaces in the vicinity of the weapon of persons present. The detection of these particles can provide investigators with important information about the circumstances of a shooting incident.¹⁴⁸⁴

Gunshot residue analysis, while possessing evidentiary value, is not without limitations that could impact its reliability. Contamination and secondary transfer are major concerns. Residue particles can be transferred from one person to another through physical contact or environmental exposure.¹⁴⁸⁵ The presence of gunshot residue therefore does not prove beyond a reasonable doubt that a person fired a weapon. Similarly, the absence of residue does not conclusively establish that an individual did not discharge a firearm, as particles may be removed by washing, movement or the passage of time.¹⁴⁸⁶

A great deal of caution is needed in the interpretation of gunshot residue evidence. Investigators and courts need to understand that residue analysis is often circumstantial and has to be considered in the light of all other evidence. There is a risk of wrongful convictions if residue findings are relied upon, particularly if alternative reasons for the presence or absence of particles are not examined thoroughly.¹⁴⁸⁷

Judicial decisions from different jurisdictions have highlighted the need for expert witnesses to

overcome the limitations of residue analysis in court presentations. Scientific conclusions should be communicated in a balanced manner that reflects their strengths and weaknesses. Recognition of uncertainty and avoidance of overstatement enable forensic experts to help courts to make informed decisions and to reduce the risk of miscarriages of justice.¹⁴⁸⁸ The problems with gunshot residue analysis exemplify the more general point that all types of forensic evidence must be interpreted carefully and critically evaluated.¹⁴⁸⁹

Forensic ballistics and miscarriages of justice: International experiences and lessons

The increasing use of forensic science in criminal investigations has been driven by the idea that scientific evidence can diminish uncertainty and improve the quality of judicial decisions. Forensic ballistics, in particular, has achieved a great deal of evidentiary importance because of its perceived ability to establish direct links between firearms, suspects and crime scenes. In many criminal prosecutions, ballistic evidence is used as an objective piece of evidence that can corroborate witness testimony, support circumstantial evidence and help the courts to determine guilt or innocence.¹⁴⁹⁰

But the rising profile of forensic science has also exposed an important paradox. Scientific evidence can prevent wrongful convictions, but it can also contribute to miscarriages of justice when its limitations are not appreciated, ignored or overstated. The history of wrongful convictions demonstrates that forensic evidence is not immune from error and that too much confidence in scientific testimony can sometimes have disastrous consequences for the administration of justice.¹⁴⁹¹

¹⁴⁸⁴ A.K. Srivastava & P. Singh, "Gunshot Residue Analysis in Forensic Investigations: Scientific Basis and Evidentiary Value," 16(1) *Indian Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology* 187 (2022).

¹⁴⁸⁵ Dalby, Butler & Birkett, "Analysis of Gunshot Residue and Associated Materials—A Review," 27 *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 924 (2010).

¹⁴⁸⁶ M.K. Badiye, "Forensic Significance and Limitations of Gunshot Residue Examination," 40(2) *Journal of the Indian Academy of Forensic Medicine* 173 (2018).

¹⁴⁸⁷ N. Krishan & R. Sharma, "Wrongful Convictions and Challenges in Interpreting Forensic Trace Evidence," 42(1) *Journal of the Indian Academy of Forensic Medicine* 58 (2020).

¹⁴⁸⁸ Directorate of Forensic Science Services, *supra* note 6.

¹⁴⁸⁹ S. Vij & A. Kumar, "Scientific Reliability, Expert Testimony and the Evaluation of Forensic Evidence in Criminal Trials," 15(4) *Indian Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology* 421 (2021).

¹⁴⁹⁰ M.K. Badiye, "Forensic Ballistics and Criminal Investigation: Evidentiary Significance and Challenges," 39(4) *Journal of the Indian Academy of Forensic Medicine* 389 (2017).

¹⁴⁹¹ Brandon L. Garrett, *supra* note 14, at 47–69.

The wrongful conviction of innocent persons represents one of the most serious errors that any criminal justice system can commit. They convict the innocent and free the guilty. The harm inflicted on the wrongfully convicted and their families is colossal. These mistakes erode public confidence in the legal system and pose fundamental questions about the fairness and accuracy of criminal adjudication. Studies in various jurisdictions have identified a number of causes of wrongful convictions, such as mistaken eyewitness identification, false confessions, prosecutorial misconduct, poor legal representation and unreliable forensic evidence. Of these factors, forensic science occupies a special role because scientific testimony is often regarded by courts as particularly persuasive and credible.

The role of forensic evidence in criminal trials is largely attributable to the perceived objectivity of such evidence. Judges and jurors are not necessarily scientifically educated and are likely to rely heavily on expert witnesses in their assessment of technical evidence. This can result in forensic evidence being unduly weighted compared to other evidence. When experts are confident and assured in their presentation of findings, fact-finders may believe that such findings have been validated by rigorous science. The problem is that the level of certainty expressed in court may be higher than the scientific bases of the methodology employed. Such situations can create an inadvertent role of forensic evidence in wrongful convictions by creating an illusion of infallibility.¹⁴⁹²

The broader history of forensic science offers many examples of disciplines that were once widely accepted but became the target of significant criticism, including microscopic hair comparison, bite-mark analysis, and comparative bullet lead analysis, all of which were accepted as reliable evidence for many years before scientific reviews identified serious

methodological defects. In some cases, individuals were convicted on the basis of forensic testimony that was subsequently discredited. These experiences have encouraged scholars and policymakers to re-examine other pattern-matching disciplines, including firearm identification, in order to determine whether similar concerns may exist.¹⁴⁹³

Although forensic ballistics has not experienced the same level of criticism as certain other forensic disciplines, questions regarding its reliability have become increasingly prominent. One reason for this scrutiny is that firearm identification relies heavily upon the interpretation of microscopic markings by human examiners. In contrast to DNA analysis, which is supported by a large body of statistical models, firearm identification often relies on qualitative assessments of the degree of similarity of patterns observed on bullets and cartridge cases. Critics argue that when experts testify that a particular bullet was fired from a particular weapon to the exclusion of all other weapons, such statements may express a degree of certainty that cannot be fully supported by empirical research. The risk is not necessarily that firearm identification is incapable of producing accurate results, but rather that the limitations and uncertainties inherent in the methodology may not always be adequately communicated to courts.

International debates concerning forensic ballistics have been influenced significantly by major scientific reviews conducted during the past two decades. These reviews emphasized the need for stronger empirical validation, greater methodological transparency, and more rigorous standards for forensic disciplines that rely upon pattern comparison. They pointed out the difference between showing two objects to be similar and establishing, beyond any doubt, that they came from the same source. Such observations have serious implications for

¹⁴⁹² P.C. Giannelli, *supra* note 17.

¹⁴⁹³ N. Krishan & A. Pathak, "Forensic Science Errors and Their Impact on Criminal Justice Administration," 41(1) *Journal of the Indian Academy of Forensic Medicine* 73 (2019).

firearm identification as they question long held assumptions about uniqueness and individualisation.¹⁴⁹⁴ Another important lesson from international experiences relates to the importance of cognitive bias in forensic examinations. Psychological research has shown that human decision making can be affected by contextual information, expectations and prior beliefs. Forensic examiners are not immune to such influences. If an analyst is aware of potential investigative theories, confessions by suspects, or other information about the case, there is the possibility that the analyst will unconsciously interpret equivocal evidence to fit those expectations. This is not to imply bad faith or misconduct, but to recognize the fact that human judgment is subject to subtle influences. Awareness of this problem has resulted in safeguards such as blind testing procedures, independent verification and best quality assurance measures.

The continuing controversy over forensic ballistics thus highlights a wider problem with the criminal justice systems of today. Scientific evidence can be a powerful weapon in the quest for the truth, but its usefulness is dependent on openness, accountability and empirical validation. The danger of false convictions in jurisdictions that have accepted forensic conclusions as unassailable facts is a sobering lesson. Courts must therefore assess ballistic evidence with an awareness of its advantages and its limitations. Such a balanced view is critical to the use of forensic science for the administration of justice, and not the unwitting production of miscarriages of justice.

Judicial Approach on Ballistic Evidence in India and Comparative Jurisdictions

The admissibility and the evidential value of the ballistic evidence is ultimately determined by the judicial assessment of expert evidence. While forensic scientists conduct examinations and give opinions, it is the judiciary that decides the

weight to be given to such evidence in criminal trials. Therefore, judicial attitudes to forensic ballistics are critically important in determining its effectiveness in the criminal justice process. Generally, courts in all jurisdictions have accepted ballistic evidence as a relevant and useful form of expert evidence. However, the extent of judicial scrutiny applied to firearm identification evidence varies greatly, reflecting different perceptions of scientific reliability and evidentiary standards.¹⁴⁹⁵

In India, the Court regularly admits ballistic evidence in criminal trials for homicide, illegal possession of arms, terrorist activities, encounter deaths and other firearm related offences. Courts often rely on the reports prepared by forensic science laboratories to determine whether the bullets or cartridge cases recovered from the crime scenes were fired from a particular weapon. It is a consistent judicial view that the importance of expert evidence cannot be undermined in cases where specialised scientific knowledge is required.¹⁴⁹⁶ At the same time Indian courts have consistently held that expert opinions are advisory in nature and cannot be treated as conclusive proof of guilt.¹⁴⁹⁷ It is the general view of the judiciary that convictions should not be based on expert testimony alone but must be corroborated with other evidence available on record.

This careful attitude is consistent with a significant tenet of criminal jurisprudence. Expert witnesses assist courts in understanding technical issues but they do not usurp the judicial role of weighing facts and determining credibility. Thus, ballistic reports are usually considered together with witness evidence, documentary evidence, motive, recovery of weapons and other circumstances of the offence. Courts have shown a willingness to scrutinize forensic findings critically and not accept them at face value where inconsistencies or doubts arise.¹⁴⁹⁸

¹⁴⁹⁴ *Supra* note 5; *supra* note 25.

¹⁴⁹⁵ Avtar Singh, "Expert Evidence and Criminal Adjudication: Judicial Evaluation of Scientific Testimony," 62(3) *Journal of the Indian Law Institute* 341 (2020).

¹⁴⁹⁶ *S. Gopal Reddy v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, (1996) 4 SCC 596.

¹⁴⁹⁷ *State of H.P. v. Jai Lal*, (1999) 7 SCC 280.

¹⁴⁹⁸ K. Chockalingam & S. Srinivasan, "Forensic Science Evidence and Criminal Justice Administration in India," 45(2) *Indian Journal of Criminology* 113 (2017).

On the other hand, the experience of Western jurisdictions, notably the United States, has given rise to a broad-ranging debate on the admissibility of firearm identification testimony. American courts traditionally accepted firearm identification evidence with relatively limited scrutiny, often allowing experts to express highly definitive conclusions concerning the source of bullets and cartridge cases. However, scientific reviews and legal challenges during the past two decades have prompted greater judicial examination of the empirical foundations of firearm identification. Questions of error rates, methodological consistency and the extent to which experts might claim certainty have increasingly pervaded judicial discourse.¹⁴⁹⁹

Courts in the United Kingdom have also recognised the value of ballistic evidence but with an increasing emphasis on careful evaluation of expert testimony. Judicial practice has more and more reflected broader concerns about forensic reliability and the need to guarantee that scientific findings are based on appropriate standards of methodology. This development points to an increasing recognition that forensic evidence should be subject to the same skepticism as other categories of proof presented in criminal cases.¹⁵⁰⁰

The comparative experience of different jurisdictions demonstrates that the future credibility of forensic ballistics is not simply a matter of scientific development but of responsible judicial supervision. Courts have a crucial role to play in the prevention of miscarriages of justice, since they ensure that forensic evidence is not presented over-enthusiastically or in a misleading manner. By recognizing the strengths and limitations of firearm identification, the courts can assist in preserving an appropriate balance between scientific expertise and the basic principles of

fairness that underlie criminal adjudication. In this regard, the judicial treatment of ballistic evidence continues to provide an important protection against the risk of wrongful conviction.¹⁵⁰¹

Challenges and Reforms in Forensic Ballistics

❖ Cognitive Bias and Subjectivity in Firearms Identification

One of the major challenges in forensic ballistics is the potential for cognitive bias to influence the decision-making process of forensic examiners. Firearm identification is often presented as a scientific procedure based upon the comparison of microscopic markings found on bullets and cartridge cases. However, the interpretation of these markings frequently depends upon human judgment.¹⁵⁰² Examiners are required to determine whether the similarities observed between two samples are sufficient to justify an identification, exclusion, or inconclusive result. There is no standard quantitative threshold for such determinations and professional judgment is part of the examination process.¹⁵⁰³ The possibility of bias arises where forensic analysts have access to contextual information about the case under investigation. Knowledge of a suspect's criminal history, a confession, eyewitness accounts, or the expectations of the investigators might subconsciously influence the examiner's interpretation of ambiguous evidence. These influences are rarely intentional and occur despite the examiner's commitment to scientific objectivity. Nevertheless, they create the risk that conclusions may be shaped by factors unrelated to the physical evidence itself. The recognition of cognitive bias has therefore become a major focus of contemporary forensic science reform efforts.¹⁵⁰⁴

¹⁴⁹⁹ *United States v. Green*, 405 F. Supp. 2d 104 (D. Mass. 2005); *United States v. Glynn*, 578 F. Supp. 2d 567 (S.D.N.Y. 2008).

¹⁵⁰⁰ Gary Edmond, "Forensic Science Evidence and the Limits of Judicial Evaluation," 58 *Criminal Law Review* 65 (2015).

¹⁵⁰¹ S. K. Verma & R. K. Gupta, "Judicial Scrutiny of Forensic Evidence and the Prevention of Wrongful Convictions," 17(3) *Indian Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology* 244 (2023).

¹⁵⁰² Itiel E. Dror, "Cognitive and Human Factors in Expert Decision Making: Six Fallacies and the Eight Sources of Bias," 92 *Analytical Chemistry* 7998 (2020).

¹⁵⁰³ M.K. Badiye, "Firearm Identification and the Problem of Examiner Subjectivity," 41(2) *Journal of the Indian Academy of Forensic Medicine* 161 (2019).

¹⁵⁰⁴ S. Vij & R. Kumar, "Cognitive Bias in Forensic Science: Challenges and Reform Measures," 16(4) *Indian Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology* 356 (2022).

❖ Technological Advances and Automated Systems

Recent technological advances present promising opportunities for the reliability of forensic ballistics. Automated ballistic identification systems, digital imaging technologies and computer-aided comparison tools have improved the ability of investigators to analyse and compare ballistic evidence. Such systems can quickly search large databases of bullets and cartridge cases, identify potential matches and generate investigative leads that would be difficult to obtain through manual examination alone.¹⁵⁰⁵ The advent of artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies has also seen a rise in interest in the field of forensic ballistics. Research has been conducted on the use of automated algorithmic approaches to assist with the identification and comparison of microscopic markings. While not designed to entirely replace human expertise, these technologies may reduce subjectivity and increase consistency by providing objective analytical support. However, the implementation of such technologies requires rigorous validation and careful oversight to ensure reliability and transparency.¹⁵⁰⁶

❖ Strengthening Judicial and Institutional Safeguards

Addressing the risk of wrongful convictions requires reforms beyond the forensic laboratory. It is incumbent on courts to scrutinise expert evidence and to ensure that forensic conclusions are presented in an accurate manner. Experts should be clear about the limitations of their findings and avoid offering opinions in terms that imply certainty when scientific uncertainty exists.¹⁵⁰⁷ Greater training of judicial officers, prosecutors and defence lawyers in the strengths and limitations of forensic evidence is also recommended. Institutional reforms are just as important.

Independent accreditation of forensic laboratories, regular proficiency testing of examiners, blind verification procedures and stronger quality assurance mechanisms can go a long way towards bolstering the credibility of ballistic examinations. These reforms can promote transparency, accountability and scientific rigour, and can also help to bolster public confidence in forensic science, and reduce the chance that ballistic evidence will contribute to miscarriages of justice.¹⁵⁰⁸

The Future of Forensic Ballistics and the Pursuit of Justice

Forensic ballistics lies at the crossroads of scientific advancement, legal accountability, and the greater pursuit of justice. As forensic technologies become more and more central to criminal investigations, the demand for scientifically sound and reliable evidence is increasing. Modern criminal justice systems have moved past the era of acceptance of investigatory techniques that yield probable results; they demand forensic techniques that exhibit measurable reliability, clarity, and reproducibility. Forensic ballistics is at a time of both great promise and great challenges.¹⁵⁰⁹

One of the most promising developments is the increased application of advanced technologies in ballistic examinations. Digital microscopy, three-dimensional imaging, automated comparison systems, and artificial intelligence-assisted analytical tools have the potential to revolutionize the practice of traditional firearm identification. These innovations may help to reduce examiner subjectivity by providing more objective methods to evaluate similarities and differences between ballistic samples. Improved imaging technologies can also enhance documentation, allowing courts and independent experts to better review examination findings. As technological

¹⁵⁰⁵ Directorate of Forensic Science Services, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, *Modernization of Forensic Ballistics and Automated Identification Systems* (2022), available at <https://dfs.nic.in> (last visited Jun. 11, 2026).

¹⁵⁰⁶ N. Krishan & P. Sharma, “Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Technologies in Forensic Ballistics,” 18(1) *Indian Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology* 214 (2024).

¹⁵⁰⁷ *Supra* note 42.

¹⁵⁰⁸ K. Chockalingam, “Quality Assurance in Forensic Science Laboratories and the Prevention of Wrongful Convictions,” 46(1) *Indian Journal of Criminology* 27 (2021).

¹⁵⁰⁹ N. Krishan & S. Kumar, “Emerging Trends in Forensic Ballistics and Criminal Justice Administration,” 43(1) *Journal of the Indian Academy of Forensic Medicine* 31 (2021).

capabilities continue to increase, the discipline could evolve towards greater standardization and quantification, improving its scientific underpinnings.¹⁵¹⁰ But technology alone cannot solve all the problems affecting forensic ballistics. The reliability of forensic evidence is not only a matter of high-tech instrumentation, but also of the credibility of the institutions that generate and assess scientific findings. Forensic laboratories need to operate within frameworks that encourage independence, transparency and quality assurance. Concerns have been raised in many jurisdictions about laboratory backlogs, resource constraints, shortages of personnel and lack of adequate training opportunities. Addressing these structural challenges is essential if forensic science is to deliver on its promise as a reliable aid to criminal justice.¹⁵¹¹

The future of forensic ballistics in countries such as India is tied to wider efforts to reform the administration of criminal justice. Funding for forensic infrastructure, processes of accreditation, specialized training programs and the deployment of sophisticated technological tools can improve the quality and speed of ballistic examinations. Equally important is the formulation of legal regimes that promote rigorous assessment of expert evidence while recognizing its real investigative value. The demand for reliable forensic assistance is poised to rise substantially as firearm-related crimes become ever more complex.

Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Firearm Identification

The rapid development of artificial intelligence and machine learning techniques are starting to have an impact in many areas of forensic science, including firearm identification. Traditionally, ballistic analysis has relied on

human judgement and subjective assessment. Although expert examiners have a high level of skill and experience, concerns about reproducibility and cognitive bias have led scientists to look for technology-based methods that could increase the objectivity and reproducibility of the discipline.¹⁵¹²

Artificial intelligence systems can analyse digital images of bullets and cartridge cases, recognize microscopic patterns, and match evidence samples at a speed and accuracy that would be difficult to accomplish by manual examination alone.¹⁵¹³ Machine learning algorithms may help to identify complex patterns, reduce examiner workload and improve consistency of comparison results. Such technologies hold considerable potential for strengthening the scientific bases of firearm identification and reducing the possibility of human error.¹⁵¹⁴

These potential benefits are particularly relevant to the problem of wrongful convictions. Automated systems can help reduce subjective influences and enable greater standardization of analytical procedures. And advanced technologies can help in analysing large ballistic databases so investigators can more efficiently identify links between crimes and generate investigative leads.¹⁵¹⁵ However, the rise of artificial intelligence also raises significant legal and ethical issues. Algorithms are only as good as the data they are trained on and questions have been raised about transparency, accountability and the potential for technological bias.¹⁵¹⁶ Courts may struggle to assess evidence produced by complex computational processes that are not easily understood by legal professionals or jurors.

Artificial intelligence should be viewed as a tool to enhance human expertise. To ensure that technological innovations improve, rather than

¹⁵¹⁰ P. Sharma & A. Gupta, "Digital Imaging, Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Firearm Identification," 18(2) *Indian Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology* 287 (2024).

¹⁵¹¹ Directorate of Forensic Science Services, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, *Vision Document for Strengthening Forensic Infrastructure in India* (2023), available at <https://dfs.nic.in> (last visited Jun. 11, 2026).

¹⁵¹² N. Krishan & P. Sharma, *supra* note 54.

¹⁵¹³ Cedric Neumann, "Automatic Firearm Identification Systems and the Future of Ballistic Comparisons," 67 *Forensic Science International* 102 (2020).

¹⁵¹⁴ A. Gupta & S. Verma, "Machine Learning Applications in Firearm Identification and Ballistic Analysis," 19(2) *Indian Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology* 145 (2025).

¹⁵¹⁵ Directorate of Forensic Science Services, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, *Emerging Technologies in Forensic Ballistics* (2023), available at <https://dfs.nic.in> (last visited Jun. 11, 2026).

¹⁵¹⁶ NIST, *Artificial Intelligence and Forensic Science: Opportunities and Challenges* (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2022), available at <https://www.nist.gov> (last visited Jun. 11, 2026).

degrade, the quality of forensic evidence, rigorous validation, independent testing, and transparent reporting standards are essential. Used responsibly, artificial intelligence can transform forensic ballistics and contribute to a more accurate and just criminal justice system.¹⁵¹⁷

A. International Judicial Developments

Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, Inc. is one of the most influential decisions in the modern debate on forensic evidence. While the case involved no firearm identification, it set the modern standard for evaluating scientific evidence in United States federal courts. The Supreme Court stressed that trial judges must act as gatekeepers and ensure that expert testimony is scientifically reliable before it is presented to a jury. The principles established in “Daubert” later became central to challenges involving firearm and toolmark identification evidence because courts were required to examine whether such evidence was based on sufficient scientific validation.¹⁵¹⁸

Later cases dealing directly with firearm identification showed growing judicial concern about how far experts could go in expressing certainty. In **Gardner v. United States (2016)**, the District of Columbia Court of Appeals held that firearms examiners should not be allowed to testify to the effect that a bullet was fired from a particular weapon to the exclusion of all other weapons with absolute or 100 percent certainty. The court acknowledged the importance of firearms identification evidence but stressed the need for expert opinions to reflect the limitations of the methodology. The ruling is generally regarded as a watershed decision because it limited the exaggerated claims of certainty that had existed for many years with regard to ballistic testimony.¹⁵¹⁹

Another important case was **United States v. Hunt 2020**, which addressed challenges to the admissibility of firearm identification evidence using the Daubert standards. The evidence was admitted, but the case exhibited a growing judicial trend for forensic experts to demonstrate the reliability of their methodologies rather than relying on traditional acceptance within the forensic community. This case illustrates the evolving judicial perspective on the scientific evaluation of firearm identification evidence. These decisions have been shaped by wider scientific controversies that challenge whether firearm identification can reliably conclude that a specific bullet was fired from a specific firearm. Judicial discussions are increasingly acknowledging that ballistic evidence is valuable, but its conclusions need to be expressed with due caution and awareness of possible limitations. Scientific evaluations have also raised concerns about the underlying assumptions of uniqueness, statistical confidence, and error margins in firearm identification practices.¹⁵²⁰

B. Landmark Indian Decisions

Indian courts have a long history of handling ballistic evidence in a pragmatic way. Landmark Indian Decisions The judiciary has generally not treated the forensic reports as conclusive evidence but as corroborative evidence to be appreciated in light of the totality of circumstances.¹⁵²¹

A notable decision in this regard is the case of **“State of Himachal Pradesh v. Mast Ram”** wherein the Supreme Court considered the question of admissibility of ballistic reports under the provisions relating to expert evidence. The Court clarified that forensic reports transmitted through authorised officials of forensic laboratories are admissible and courts may rely

¹⁵¹⁷ S. Vij & R. Tyagi, “Artificial Intelligence, Forensic Reliability and the Prevention of Wrongful Convictions,” 18(3) *Indian Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology* 332 (2024).

¹⁵¹⁸ *Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, Inc.*, 509 U.S. 579 (1993); see also D.H. Kaye, David E. Bernstein & Jennifer L. Mnookin, *The New Wigmore: A Treatise on Evidence—Expert Evidence* 83–95 (Aspen Publishers, 3rd edn., 2020).

¹⁵¹⁹ *Gardner v. United States*, 140 A.3d 1172 (D.C. 2016); Gary Edmond, “Forensic Science Evidence and Judicial Gatekeeping after Daubert,” 44 *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 1219 (2017).

¹⁵²⁰ *United States v. Hunt*, 464 F. Supp. 3d 1252 (W.D. Okla. 2020); National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), *Scientific Foundation Reviews of Firearms and Toolmark Identification* (2022), available at <https://www.nist.gov> (last visited Jun. 11, 2026).

¹⁵²¹ K.D. Gaur, *Textbook on the Indian Evidence Act* 462–468 (Universal Law Publishing Co., New Delhi, 8th edn., 2023).

on such reports.¹⁵²² The judgment enhanced the evidentiary value of ballistic reports with recognition of the institutional role of forensic science laboratories in criminal investigations. Another important judicial principle emerged from cases where the Supreme Court held that the absence of ballistic evidence does not necessarily dilute an otherwise credible prosecution case. In a recent judgment, the Court observed that non-recovery of the firearm or non-production of a ballistic report is not enough to discredit reliable eyewitness testimony.¹⁵²³ This approach indicates that Indian courts do not regard ballistic evidence as essential in every firearm-related prosecution and continue to emphasize the overall evaluation of evidence and not exclusive reliance upon forensic findings.¹⁵²⁴

Indian courts have always held that expert evidence is of a consultative nature. Forensic testimony may support the judges in understanding the technical issues but cannot replace the judicial assessment of facts. Therefore, convictions should be based on a combination of forensic, documentary, medical and testimonial evidence. This principle is an important protection against wrongful convictions based on faulty forensic evidence.¹⁵²⁵

Importance of Judicial Precedents

There is a common thread in the jurisprudence of international and Indian courts. A budding recognition of the significance and limitations of forensic ballistics is manifest. Judicial attitudes hitherto often tended towards an uncritical belief in expert testimony. The more recent pronouncements, however, reflect an enhanced willingness to scrutinize scientific validation, methodological reliability, and the possibility of error. This is especially applicable in wrongful conviction cases as it prompts courts to

approach ballistic evidence with a critical eye rather than taking it at face value.¹⁵²⁶

The landmark cases discussed above illustrate the enduring difficulty for legal systems in achieving the correct balance between scientific know-how and procedural fairness. As forensic ballistics continues to develop, judicial oversight will be essential in guaranteeing that scientific evidence supports the pursuit of accurate fact-finding while safeguarding the rights of the accused. By critically evaluating expert testimony and recognizing scientific uncertainty, courts can contribute to ensuring that ballistic evidence furthers the cause of justice, rather than leading to miscarriages of justice.¹⁵²⁷

Conclusion

Forensic ballistics has become one of the most influential and effective areas of forensic science in the modern criminal justice system. The discipline has significantly enhanced investigators' capacity to analyse firearm-related crimes, reconstruct shooting events, identify weapons involved in criminal activity and link suspects to crime scenes. From murder investigations and organised crime prosecutions to cases involving terrorism and illegal arms trafficking, ballistic evidence has become an integral part of modern criminal investigations. It is important because it is believed that scientific analysis provides objective and reliable information that can help courts to ascertain the truth. As such, ballistic evidence often plays a prominent role in criminal proceedings and can have a significant influence on judicial decision-making.

The growth of forensic ballistics has, however, increasingly generated important questions regarding reliability, scientific validity, and evidential certainty. As this article has illustrated, the task of identifying firearms is not a mechanical process resulting in infallible

¹⁵²² *Supra* note 7.

¹⁵²³ *Mukesh v. State (NCT of Delhi)*, (2017) 6 SCC 1; see also *Anwaruddin @ Anwar v. Shakoora*, (2025) 2 SCC 253.

¹⁵²⁴ S.K. Verma, "Forensic Evidence and Judicial Evaluation in Criminal Trials," 44(2) *Journal of the Indian Academy of Forensic Medicine* 118 (2022).

¹⁵²⁵ *Magan Bihari Lal v. State of Punjab*, (1977) 2 SCC 210; *State of H.P. v. Jai Lal*, (1999) 7 SCC 280.

¹⁵²⁶ Avtar Singh, "Scientific Evidence, Judicial Gatekeeping and Criminal Justice," 65(1) *Journal of the Indian Law Institute* 57 (2023).

¹⁵²⁷ R. Venkata Rao & P. Sharma, "Expert Testimony, Wrongful Convictions and the Future of Forensic Science in India," 19(1) *Indian Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology* 271 (2025).

conclusions. Rather, it needs trained experts to interpret microscopic markings and exercise professional judgment in comparing bullets and cartridge cases. While these examinations can produce useful investigative leads, they are not entirely free from subjective considerations. The absence of universal quantitative standards, ongoing disagreements concerning error rates, and concerns about cognitive bias all highlight the limitations inherent in ballistic evidence. Such limitations are especially important when forensic conclusions are used in criminal trials with a certainty that may go beyond what the science can support. Experience in several jurisdictions has shown that wrongful convictions can be made when courts overly rely on forensic testimony, without considering its limitations. Scientific evidence is extremely compelling, often seen as objective and authoritative. But the history of forensic science has shown that techniques once deemed reliable have subsequently been found to contain serious flaws. This fact requires a cautious approach to forensic ballistics that recognizes its strengths and weaknesses. The goal should not be to undermine the value of ballistic evidence but to ensure that it is used responsibly and interpreted properly.

The future of forensic ballistics depends on ongoing scientific research, technological innovation, and institutional reform. Advances in digital imaging, automated comparison systems, artificial intelligence, and ballistic databases have the potential to improve consistency and reduce subjectivity. At the same time, greater emphasis must be placed on empirical validation, independent oversight, accreditation, and quality assurance. Courts must continue to exercise meaningful scrutiny over expert testimony and ensure that scientific conclusions are communicated in a way that accurately reflects their degree of certainty. Equally important is the need for continuing education of legal practitioners, judges and forensic scientists about the changing nature of forensic evidence. The best test of the legitimacy of any criminal justice system is not its ability to

secure convictions, but its ability to secure justice, in a fair and accurate manner. Forensic ballistics can make a meaningful contribution to this end when its findings are based on sound scientific principles and assessed within a framework of transparency and accountability. Acknowledging uncertainty, improving methodological rigor and encouraging responsible use of expert evidence can help to reduce the risk of wrongful convictions while still maintaining the significant benefits that forensic ballistics can provide in the investigation and prosecution of crime. In this way, forensic ballistics can remain an effective instrument of justice, rather than an accidental cause of miscarriages of justice.

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