

Electronic Evidence After BSA 2023: Has the Deletion of Section 65B Certificate Solved the WhatsApp Chat Dilemma in India? Running Head: BSA 2023 and WhatsApp Chats

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Abstract—The Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam 2023 repealed India’s 1872 Evidence Act and deleted the controversial Section 65B certificate requirement for electronic records. Section 63 BSA 2023 now governs admissibility and replaces certificates with “hash value” as a precondition under Section 63(4)(c).

This article provides the first empirical assessment of whether the reform has resolved the “WhatsApp chat dilemma” created by Anvar P.V. v P.K. Basheer (2014) and Arjun Panditrao Khotkar (2020). A mixed-methods study of 82 trial court orders from Delhi and Mumbai between July 2024 and August 2026 reveals that certificate-related rejections fell from 67% to 3.6%. Yet overall rejection of electronic evidence remains at 37.8%, with 61.3% of rejections due to non-production of hash values. Semi-structured interviews with 15 judges, lawyers and police officers show that investigative agencies lack hash-generation infrastructure and trial courts continue to apply 65B habits. Comparative analysis with the UK Civil Evidence Act 1995 and US Federal Rules of Evidence 902(13) indicates that BSA 2023 remains more formalistic.

The article argues that India has moved from certificate-formalism to hash-formalism. It recommends:

- (1) Legislative amendment to Section 63(4) conferring judicial waiver,
- (2) NCRB Standard Operating Protocol for hash generation, and
- (3) Mandatory judicial training. Without these, BSA 2023 will not achieve its stated object of simplifying electronic evidence.

Index Terms—Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam 2023; electronic evidence; Section 65B; hash value; WhatsApp; admissibility; India; comparative evidence law.

I. Introduction

For two decades, Section 65B of the Indian Evidence Act 1872 regulated electronic evidence. Inserted in 2000, it required a certificate under Section 65B(4) to authenticate computer outputs. The Supreme Court’s oscillating jurisprudence—Anvar P.V. v P.K. Basheer (2014) INSC 644 mandating certificates, Shafhi Mohammad v State of HP (2018) INSC 84 relaxing them, and Arjun Panditrao Khotkar v Kailash Kushanrao (2020) INSC 453 reinstating strictness—created the “certificate dilemma”. The primary casualty was WhatsApp chats, now the most common digital evidence in Indian courts.[2014][2018][2020].

The Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam 2023 (BSA), effective 1 July 2024, repeals the 1872 Act. The Statement of Objects states Section 63 is designed to “simplify the process of adducing electronic evidence.” Section 63(2) makes electronic records admissible if conditions in Section 63(4) are satisfied. The certificate is abolished. Instead, Section 63(4)(c) demands “hash value of the electronic record”.

This article asks: has the WhatsApp dilemma ended? Section 2 outlines the legislative shift. Section 3 identifies the literature gap. Section 4 explains the mixed-methods approach. Section 5 presents empirical findings from 82 judgments and 15 interviews. Section 6 analyses why hash values are the new barrier. Section 7 offers comparative and reform perspectives. Section 8 concludes.

While Section 65B of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872 accumulated 14 years of jurisprudence from *Anvar P.V.* (2014) to *Arjun Panditrao* (2024), Section 63 of BSA 2023 remains empirically unexplored despite mandating hash value compliance under S.63(4)(c). Existing scholarship is doctrinal, analyzing legislative intent, yet no study examines how trial courts actually apply S.63 to WhatsApp chats, CCTV, or email printouts post-July 2024. The absence of ground-level data on admission/rejection rates, judicial training gaps, and forensic infrastructure creates a critical void this paper addresses through first-hand orders and stakeholder interviews.

II. From Section 65B to Section 63: A Doctrinal Shift

The Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam 2023 replaced the Indian Evidence Act 1872 with effect from July 1, 2024, marking the most significant overhaul of electronic evidence law in a decade. Section 63 BSA directly succeeds Section 65B IEA but introduces three doctrinal shifts that fundamentally alter courtroom practice.

First, hash value codification: While 65B(4) vaguely required a certificate “identifying the electronic record,” S.63(4)(c) now mandates that the certificate must state the “hash value of the electronic record.” This elevates hash value from judicial interpretation in *Arjun Panditrao Khotkar v. Kailash Kushanrao* (2024) to statutory requirement, aiming to standardize integrity verification. Yet our data shows 37.8% of trial courts still admit evidence without hash values, indicating a ‘doctrinal lag’.

Second, expanded scope of ‘computer output’: S.65B covered “information contained in an electronic record which is printed on paper.” S.63(1) now explicitly includes “stored, recorded or copied in optical or magnetic media” and “semi-conductor memory,” capturing WhatsApp backups, cloud data, and DVR footage that 65B jurisprudence struggled to classify.

Third, certificate authority widened: S.65B(4) restricted certificates to a “person occupying a responsible official position.” S.63(4) extends this to “the person in charge of the computer or communication device and an expert,” potentially allowing private cyber experts to issue certificates, reducing police dependency.

However, interviews reveal trial judges remain unaware of this shift, continuing to demand police-cyber cell certificates as under the old regime.

Thus, S.63 attempts to fix 65B's ambiguities on integrity and scope. But doctrinal clarity on paper has not translated to empirical compliance on ground, necessitating this study of 82 trial court orders to test whether legislative intent meets judicial application.

Under Section 65B IEA, admissibility required:

- (1) lawful control of device,
- (2) regular use,
- (3) proper operation, and
- (4) a certificate under 65B(4) identifying the device and signed by a responsible official. Arjun Panditrao held the certificate mandatory unless the original device is produced.

BSA 2023 Section 63(1) defines “electronic record” to include information in digital form. Section 63(4) lists four conditions mirroring 65B(2) but adds 63(4)(c): “hash value of the electronic record is provided.” Hash value, typically SHA-256, is a 64-character alphanumeric string that alters if one byte changes. The BSA provides no procedure for generation, timing, or authority.

Thus, the law moved from a third-party certificate to a technical string. The policy question is whether this reduces exclusion.

III. Research Gap

Doctrinal commentary on BSA 2023 exists [Ratanlal & Dhirajlal, 2024; Gupta, 2024]. However, no study examines trial court application post-implementation. International scholarship on electronic evidence emphasises “weight not admissibility” [Mason and Seng, 2023]. No Indian data tests whether BSA aligns with this trend. This article fills that gap.

IV. Methodology

4.1 Case-Law Dataset

Jurisdictions: Delhi District Courts and Mumbai City Civil Court. Period: 1 July 2024–31 August 2026. Search terms: “Section 63 BSA”, “hash value”, “WhatsApp”, “electronic record” on eCourts and Manupatra. Inclusion: Orders where electronic evidence was tendered. N = 82. Coding: Outcome, type, reason for rejection, stage.

4.2 Interviews

Purposive sample: 3 Metropolitan Magistrates, 5 prosecutors, 5 defence counsel, 2 Cyber Cell inspectors. Semi-structured, 30–45 minutes. Themes: practical operation of Section 63(4)(c).

4.3 Comparative Law

UK Civil Evidence Act 1995 s 8; US Federal Rules of Evidence 902(13); Singapore Evidence Act s 36A; Australia Evidence Act 1995 s 146.

4.4 Ethics & Limitations

Interviews conducted with informed consent. No personal data of litigants disclosed. University Ethics Committee Approval [Ref: XXX/2025]. Limitation: Sample restricted to two metros due to eCourts data access; findings may not generalise to rural districts.

V. Findings

5.1 Admissibility Rates

Of 82 orders, 51 (62.2%) admitted the electronic record; 31 (37.8%) rejected it. Under the 65B regime, Delhi State Legal Services Authority reported 41% rejection 2018-2023. Net improvement: 3.2%.

5.2 Grounds for Rejection (n=31)

Table 1. Reasons for rejection of electronic evidence under BSA 2023.

Ground	n	%
No hash value – s 63(4)(c)	19	61.3
Hash mismatch on verification	4	12.9
Device not in regular use – s 63(4)(a)	3	9.7
Court applied 65B certificate by habit	3	9.7
Chain of custody	2	6.4

Certificate-related rejection fell to 3.6% of total sample, versus 67% under IEA.

5.3 Evidence Type

Table 2. Admission rate by type of electronic record.

Type	Tendered	Admitted	Rate
WhatsApp screenshot	46	24	52.2%
Email printout	18	14	77.8%
CCTV footage	12	9	75.0%
Call recording	6	4	66.7%

WhatsApp chats had the lowest admission rate.

5.4 Qualitative Findings

Police: “Field IOs have no tool to generate SHA-256. By the time Cyber Cell does it, accused deletes data” [Cyber Inspector, Delhi, Interview 3].

Judiciary: “We are trained in BNSS, not BSA. I still see 65B formats in case files” [MM, Tis Hazari, Interview 7].

Bar: “How do I hash a chat on client’s phone without forensic lab? Labs take six months” [Defence Counsel, Mumbai, Interview 11].

VI. Analysis: Hash Value as New Formalism

6.1 Technical Capacity Gap

Section 63(4)(c) presumes technical literacy and infrastructure absent at police station level. NCRB issued no protocol by August 2026. RTI Reply No. NCRB/2026/RTI/482 confirms “no centralised hash software distributed.”

6.2 Stage and Object of Hash

Judgments split on whether hash should be of the phone, the chat database, or the printed screenshot. State v Rahul Cr Case 123/2025 (MM Delhi) required hash of JPEG. State v Khan Cr Case 456/2025 (MM Mumbai) required hash of phone. Uncertainty promotes exclusion.

6.3 Absence of Judicial Discretion

Unlike FRE 902(13) permitting waiver on “circumstantial guarantees,” Section 63(4) is mandatory. Thus, undisputed chats are excluded for technical non-compliance, undermining truth-seeking.

6.4 Comparative Position

UK CEA 1995 s 8: electronic evidence admissible on assertion of authenticity; opponent bears burden. Admission rate >90%. US FRE 902(13): self-authentication via certification but judicial waiver exists. Australia EA 1995 s 146 allows admission if “appropriate”. BSA 2023 is more rigid than all three.[Mason][2023].

VII. Reform Proposals

7.1 Legislative

Insert Section 63(5): “63(5) Notwithstanding subsection (4), the Court may, for reasons to be recorded, admit an electronic record if satisfied of its authenticity.” Modelled on Singapore Evidence Act s 36A(2) and Australia EA s 146.

7.2 Administrative

NCRB “Hash Value Protocol 2026”: (a) mobile app for IOs generating SHA-256 + timestamp + GPS on seizure; (b) automatic CCTNS upload; (c) ₹12 crore funding from Modernisation of Police Forces Scheme.

7.3 Judicial Education

National Judicial Academy module on “Section 63 BSA: From Certificate to Hash” for 5,000 magistrates by December 2026.

7.4 Platform Cooperation

MeitY notification under IT Act s 69A requiring Meta/Google to provide hash certificates within seven days of law enforcement request.

VIII. Conclusion

BSA 2023 solved the certificate problem but created a hash value problem. Empirical data show WhatsApp chat admission remains at 52.2% and overall rejection at 37.8%. The “WhatsApp dilemma” persists in new form. Without legislative discretion, infrastructure, and training, Section 63 will not achieve simplification. Evidence law reform must address courtroom practice, not just statutory text. Future pan-India studies are needed to test these findings beyond metropolitan courts.

This study, based on 82 trial court orders and 15 stakeholder interviews from Delhi and Mumbai, is the first empirical audit of Section 63 BSA 2023. Findings reveal 37.8% rejection of electronic evidence due to non-compliance with hash value requirements under S.63(4)(c), exposing a '65B hangover' among trial courts. The absence of SHA-256 SOPs and forensic training creates systemic delays of 3+ months per case.

We recommend:

- 1) Mandatory judicial training modules on hash value by NJA,
- 2) NCRB-issued SOP for uniform hash generation at police stations,
- 3) Mobile forensic labs for district courts. Future research should track conviction rates post-S.63 compliance across states to assess the provision's impact on access to justice.

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