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**REIMAGINING JUSTICE: “LEVERAGING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY,
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, AND MULTILINGUALISM TO DEMOCRATISE
LEGAL AID”**

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ABSTRACT

In India, there is a fundamental commitment to access to justice based on the principles of dignity, equality and fairness founded in the constitution. The main institutional means of realisation of this promise is referred to as legal aid, despite which, the old systems of the model of legal assistance are still subject to structural, linguistic, and procedural constraints. This paper discusses the current issues that face the provision of legal aid in India and how it is possible to use digitalisation, artificial intelligence, and multilingual legal interfaces to make access to justice democratic. By examining the current legal aid system, the technological solutions under development, and the ethical issues that are linked to AI-powered legal assistance, the article identifies the potential of the possible change, as well as the risk aspects of technology-enabled legal aid. The Tele-Law Scheme case study, virtual court hearings in the case of undertrial prisoners, and the case study of the LabourLine helpline show how a digital solution integrated in an institution can increase access and procedural fairness. The article states that technology should serve to support human judgment and not to replace it, but be an ethical and positively controlled instrument. It finishes by proposing a mixed, State-based model of legal assistance that combines a focus on technological advancement with human controls and language inclusiveness to achieve the constitutional dream of equal and consequential access to justice.

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian Constitutional understanding of justice has very deep foundations on the philosophy of dignity in human nature and the intrinsic equal value of all human beings. Such is the conception that Rabindranath Tagore expressed in *Gitanjali*, where he envisioned a nation “*where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; where knowledge is free... into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.*”³ This aspiration was later given a legal form by the framers of the Indian Constitution who devoted nearly three years to craft a document grounded in liberty, equality, and justice.⁴

The meeting of these ethical and constitutional paradigms is based on the recognition of the fact that the progression is not merely measured by economic growth or institutional power, but rather measurements ought to be made in terms of the valour of every of these lives, especially those people who exist on the edges of the modern society. As an overall principle of constitutional justice, justice is founded on the assumption that access to legal redress will be both equal and substantively significant. Without such access, rights solely represent a theoretical promise but not an actual fact.

This principle has been affirmed in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, and has been varied judicially to include the right to a fair trial and free legal aid, particularly when the parties lack the ability or legal knowledge to hire an attorney.⁵ In its turn, legal aid has become a corrective measure that is supposed to address structural imbalances in the justice system though it has been stressed despite constitutional approval by the Article 39A and numerous judicial decisions that legal aid is a State initiative, not a charitable one.⁶

As the world increasingly becomes digitalised, as the field of artificial intelligence is growing larger, and the linguistic variety is at an unparalleled level, the classic descriptions of legal assistance have faced both formidable limitations and the promise of change.

³ Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* (1910).

⁴ B. Shiva Rao, *The Framing of India's Constitution: Select Documents vol. I* (1966).

⁵ *Hussainara Khatoon v. State of Bihar*, (1980) 1 SCC 81 (India).

⁶ *India Constitution Art. 39A*.

CURRENT SITUATION OF LEGAL AID IN INDIA

The structure of legal aid in India is legally strong, however working out disproportionately. The constitutional mandate of Article 39A is that the opportunities to access justice should not be denied on the basis of economic or other disabilities.⁷ This is institutionally implemented by the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, providing a nationwide framework with NALSA in the lead, State and District and Taluk Legal Services Authorities taking the last mile delivery role.⁸

There is a discernible policy initiative to professionalise criminal legal aid at the policy level. NALSA has also changed the ad hoc approach to assigning lawyers with Legal Aid Defence Counsel System (LADCS), which represents an expansion of institutional presence within the criminal legal aid field and is being converted into more quantifiable performance standards that merely paper-based reporting.⁹

Nonetheless, the reality of the demand side is still sharp. India has a strongly propagated undertrial crisis, and as far as quality of legal aid is concerned, it seems according to widely reported estimates there are around three-fourths prisoners who are under trial, indicating that consistent fears as unequal lawyer participation, insufficient interaction with clients, insufficient observation of results, and inadequate legal understanding among the target beneficiaries have been associated.¹⁰

Digitalisation is gradually transforming delivery with the help of helplines and online access to information, including multilingual and technology accessible legal aid to help, such as NALSA 15100 toll-free helpline and web-based information.¹¹ But digital legal aid is limited by digital divide and language barriers, so multilingual and technologically facilitated legal aid is not a luxury, but an urgent development.

⁷ *Indian Constitution Article 39A.*

⁸ *Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, No. 39 of 1987, INDIA CODE.*

⁹ *Nat'l Legal Servs. Auth. (NALSA), Annual Reports (listing annual reports and "Legal Aid for All" compilation).*

¹⁰ *Nat'l Legal Servs. Auth. (NALSA), Annual Reports (listing annual reports and "Legal Aid for All" compilation).*

¹¹ *Nat'l Legal Servs. Auth. (NALSA), Homepage (listing NALSA helpline "15100" and services).*

CHALLENGES IN LEGAL AID DELIVERY:

Despite the well-defined constitutional and statutory framework, the delivery of legal aid in India still has major structural, institutional and socio-economic issues. Among the most significant problems is the disparity in the availability and effectiveness. Like on legal aid services, though they are formally available, the quality of representation is not always certain. Panel lawyers are often overworked, undercompensated and not closely supervised and this impacts on quality of legal service offered to the beneficiaries.¹² The absence of rigorous performance evaluation mechanisms further weakens accountability within the system.

A persistent challenge which has remained is ignorance of law to the intended beneficiaries. Much of the population, especially in the rural and marginalised population, has not realised their right to free legal assistance or knows the never-ending stages of litigation which curtails its preventative and remedial power.¹³ Low levels of literacy and social stigma linked with accessing legal institutions exacerbate this situation.

The undertrial prisoner crisis highlights another critical failure in legal aid delivery. A substantial proportion of prison inmates remain incarcerated due to delayed trials and ineffective legal representation at the initial stages of arrest and remand. The requirement by the State to offer legal assistance in preliminary stages of criminal proceedings has undergone judicial pronouncements several times, and the practice on the ground is still randomized.¹⁴ Delays in the appointment of lawyers and absence of frequent contact between the lawyer and the client of a criminal case denies fair trials.

These problems are further aggravated by institutional problems. Among the problems afflicting legal Services Authorities across levels is lack of resources, staffing, and coordination between central, state and district organizations.¹⁵ Though some attempts have been made in recent times like the Legal Aid Defence Counsel System, these are yet to be fully extended across states.

¹² *Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, No. 39 of 1987, INDIA CODE; see also Nat'l Legal Servs. Auth. (NALSA), Annual Report (discussing panel lawyer engagement and remuneration).*

¹³ *Law Commission of India, 245th Report on Arrears and Backlog: Creating Additional Judicial (Wo)manpower (2014).*

¹⁴ *Hussainara Khatoon v. State of Bihar, (1980) 1 SCC 81 (India); Khatri v. State of Bihar, (1981) 1 SCC 627 (India).*

¹⁵ *Nat'l Legal Servs. Auth. (NALSA), Legal Aid Defence Counsel Scheme, 2022.*

Additionally, technological and linguistic barriers pose emerging challenges. The slow process of legal help and court services going digital will slowly leave behind the groups of people who lack access to digital technology will have the opportunity to develop the necessary skills to have access to it, and natural failure of speak a common language will lead to artificial default.¹⁶

DIGITALISATION OF LEGAL AID

The concept of digitalisation has become a decisive means in reshaping the process of legal assistance and access to the rule of law. The adoption of electronic means in the justice system including e-courts, online-filing applications, and electronic hearings has greatly enhanced efficiencies in the process and minimized the distances between the courts and the offenders. In case of legal aid organisations, there is a potential of accessing beneficiaries that were initially locked out by distance, cost, and mobility issues by encouraging collaborations with digitalisation.

The digital-legal assistance services allow citizens to learn more about laws, submit applications for assistance, and be informed about the case progress and access it remotely. These platforms make the use of physical legal aid centres less important and early access to legal procedures. The Supreme Court of India E-Courts Mission Mode Project is certainly a giant step towards adopting the use of technology in delivering the judicial administration system in order to enhance transparency, speediness, and accessibility.¹⁷

Moreover, the idea of legal awareness can be also promoted with the use of digitalisation that promotes legal awareness via mobile applications, websites, and helplines. These tools enable the individuals by increasing their knowledge on legal rights and legal remedies to preventive justice. An example of reaching out and becoming responsive through technology is in the case of the 15100 free legal services helpline under NALSA organization.¹⁸

However, the advantages of digitalisation are unevenly distributed. The digital divide which is a lack of internet access, digital devices, and digital literacy hinders successful use of digital legal aid services. Thus, the restructuring of justice according to digitalisation should

¹⁶ U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, *Handbook on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems* (2016).

¹⁷ Supreme Court of India, *E-Courts Mission Mode Project*.

¹⁸ Nat'l Legal Servs. Auth. (NALSA), *Legal Services Helpline (15100)*.

be focused on accessibility, easiness, and supplementation with the offline legal assistance systems.

ROLE OF MULTILINGUAL CHATBOTS

Multilingual chatbots are becoming a critical tool in reimagining legal aid delivery, especially in multilingual culture, like India. Language is one of the most endangering obstacles towards access to justice. The legal information, procedures and remedies are usually shared either in English or the few official languages and this locks out a big proportion of the population. The multilingual chatbots fill this void by allowing people to read about the law and obtain initial help in their language which increases understanding of the bots involvement levels.

In the context of legal aid, multilingual chatbots are able to do a few of the core roles. They can provide basic legal information, explain rights and remedies, guide users through procedural steps, and assist in identifying the appropriate legal assistance service or court. These chatbots can be used 24-hour around the clock as they facilitate immediate access since they reduce reliance on the physical legal aid centres and ensure early-stage legal intervention by the time of criminal and welfare related issues.¹⁹

With Artificial Intelligence, these chatbots can comprehend the inputs of natural languages and reply in different languages and according to the context. Chatbots can also be used to overcome language barriers even when they are combined with translation systems without requiring immediate human intervention. This applies specifically to rural communities, migrants, and linguistic minorities whose reasons otherwise be described as unwilling to address formal legal institutions. The Law Commission of India on many occasions has emphasised that linguistic barriers undermine effective access to justice, reinforcing the need for language-inclusive legal mechanisms.²⁰

However, multilingual chatbots must be used cautiously. They are well-suited when it comes to preliminary advice, rather than giving professional legal opinions. Concerns related to accuracy, contextual misunderstanding, and data privacy imply clear regulation and human supervision.²¹ When designed ethically and inclusively, multilingual chatbots have great

¹⁹ U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, *Handbook on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems* 3–5 (2016).

²⁰ Law Commission of India, **216th Report on Non-Official Languages in Courts** ¶¶ 1.4–1.7 (2008).

²¹ Harry Surden, *Artificial Intelligence and Law: An Overview*, 35 *GA. ST. U. L. REV.* 1305, 1318–22 (2019).

potential in democratizing the legal aid provision as the initial touch point with the justice system becomes friendly, readable and non-intimidating.

ETHICAL CONCERNS

The introduction of the digital, artificial intelligence, and multilingual resources into legal assistance systems brings about quite numerous ethical issues, which need to be approached thoroughly to avoid the fact that technological growth will serve to compromise the very principles of justice. Although it can be expected that these tools will ensure efficiency and increased access, their application to law aid where beneficiaries are regularly vulnerable requires increased ethical consideration.

One of the major problems being algorithmic bias is one of the main issues. The training of AI systems is based on the available datasets, which can be associated with the inequalities of the past or discrimination. Unattended, these biases can be propagated or multiplied in automatic advice about law, to the detriment of some communities. With regard to legal assistance, biased performance might misinform users about their rights or remedy, further supporting the systemic injustice.²² Ensuring fairness requires transparent algorithm design, regular audits, and diverse training data.

Another major ethical issue is data confidentiality and privacy. The information provided during legal aid may be sensitive personal data such as information about criminal cases, conflicts within the family or socio-economic status. The computerisation of legal assistance and utilising AI-powered solutions amplify the threat of data breach and unauthorized access, on personal data as well as the misuse of personal information. This requires well-developed data protection systems and aware systems to protect the dignity and autonomy of recipients of legal aid.²³

A further concern is associated with excessive dependence on automated systems. Multilingual chatbots and AI tools can be used effectively to deliver initial information, but they lack the contextual judgement, empathy, and ethical reasoning inherent in human legal professionals. Beneficiaries run the risk of accepting automated responses as conclusive legal

²² Harry Surden, *Artificial Intelligence and Law: An Overview*, 35 *GA. ST. U. L. REV.* 1305, 1318–22 (2019).

²³ European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ), *European Ethical Charter on the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Judicial Systems* 7–10 (2018).

advice, leading to adverse legal consequences. Clear disclaimers, human oversight, and referral mechanisms are necessary to prevent such outcomes.²⁴

Lastly, there are ethical deployment problems that entail issues of accountability and transparency that have to be addressed. In case AI tools are involved in creating the outcome of legal aid, it should be apparent who is responsible in case of mistakes or damage—developers, institutions, or the State. Ethical governance systems should have effective measures in place that technology is not used as a replacement of human accountability but complement it. Reinventing justice therefore involves the introduction of ethical considerations at each phase of integration within the technology.

CASE STUDIES:

A. Tele-Law Scheme

Perhaps the most successful attempt to democratise legal advice through technology has been the Tele-Law Scheme, which was launched by the Department of Justice in conjunction with the National Legal Services Authority.²⁵ The scheme, which connects rural and marginalised citizens with panel lawyers via video-conferencing at Common Service Centres, has significantly reduced barriers to legal assistance arising from geographical and financial constraints.²⁶

According to official data, millions of beneficiaries have received legal consultations through the Tele-Law scheme since its inception, a significant proportion of whom belong to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women, and other economically disadvantaged groups.²⁷ The model is based on the use of para-legal volunteers who are responsible for case registration and follow-ups, thereby ensuring accessibility even for digitally illiterate users.²⁸ Tele-Law demonstrates how technology, when institutionalised within the legal aid

²⁴ U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, *Handbook on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems 25–28 (2016)*.

²⁵ Ministry of Law & Justice, Government of India, *Tele-Law: Mainstreaming Legal Aid Through Common Service Centres*, Press Information Bureau (June 30, 2017).

²⁶ Department of Justice, Government of India, *Tele-Law Scheme Overview*.

²⁷ National Legal Services Authority, *Annual Report 2022–23*, at 148–52 (2023).

²⁸ Department of Justice, *Tele-Law Statistics Dashboard*, Government of India.

framework, can strengthen the constitutional obligation of the State under Article 39A by providing early legal intervention and preventive justice at scale.²⁹

B. Virtual Courts and Video-Conferencing with Undertrial Prisoners

The implementation of video-conferencing by courts to hear matters involving incarcerated individuals highlights the transformative potential of digital justice for undertrial prisoners. The initiative undertaken by the Delhi High Court, which enabled prisoners to participate virtually in appellate proceedings, ensured timely hearings, reduced logistical delays, and enhanced procedural fairness.³⁰ In several instances, prisoners were able to directly interact with judges, raise concerns regarding ineffective legal representation, and seek appropriate remedies.³¹ This digital intervention not only expedited the disposal of long-pending cases but also upheld the fundamental right to a fair trial under Article 21 of the Constitution.³² By reducing reliance on the physical production of prisoners and addressing lawyer absenteeism, virtual hearings have emerged as a crucial safeguard against prolonged incarceration resulting from systemic inefficiencies.³³

C. LabourLine Helpline: Legal Aid to Migrant Workers

The LabourLine helpline, operated by the Aajeevika Bureau, provides a compelling illustration of how tele-based legal assistance can address the vulnerabilities faced by migrant and informal-sector workers.³⁴ Through a toll-free, multilingual helpline, migrant workers receive legal counselling, assistance in recovering unpaid wages and compensation, and support in resolving employment-related disputes.³⁵ The helpline has handled tens of thousands of grievances, successfully resolving a substantial number of cases and facilitating significant monetary recoveries for workers.³⁶ LabourLine's effectiveness lies in its simplicity and accessibility, enabling migrants often excluded from formal legal institutions due to mobility, language, and documentation barriers to assert their rights. This model

²⁹ Manubhai Ratilal Patel v. State of Gujarat, (2013) 1 SCC 314.

³⁰ Ritika Chopra, *How Delhi High Court uses Video-Conferencing to Give Prisoners a Voice*, *Indian Express* (Aug. 21 2022).

³¹ Supreme Court Observer, *Justice Mukta Gupta's Virtual Hearings for Prisoners*.

³² *Hussainara Khatoon v. State of Bihar*, (1980) 1 SCC 81 (India)

³³ Delhi High Court, *Annual Report 2021–22*, at 63–67 (2022).

³⁴ Aajeevika Bureau, *Annual Impact Report 2023-24*, at 12-18 2024.

³⁵ International Labour Organization, *Access to Justice for Migrant Workers in India* (2021).

³⁶ Aajeevika Bureau, *LabourLine Programme Data*.

underscores the importance of community-focused digital platforms in extending legal aid beyond conventional court-centric systems.³⁷

INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

Restructuring Legal aid in India requires not only the simultaneous implementation of all of these measures but also the application of technology-intensive, disseminated, and responsible models at a scale. One of the innovations that are most important is the development of integrated digital legal aid platforms which serve as one entry point to beneficiaries. These platforms have the potential to consolidate the process of screening eligibility, booking appointments, uploading documents, tracking cases as well as referrals to the human legal aid providers, therefore alleviating fragmentation and long delays in service delivery.³⁸

A second innovation involves the responsible use of artificial intelligence for triage and early intervention. AI devices may help law aid authorities by ranking the cases based on predetermined risk factors just in time, on the one hand, with the lengthening of pre-trial arrest, an imminent eviction, or domestic violence. This allows the human resources limited to be used where intervention is mostly required and informational inquiries routinely dealt with using automated systems under human oversight.³⁹ Notably, AI cannot be used as a replacement of judicial ruling, but rather, it should serve as a decision-support tool.

Another solution is a multilingual digital interface. Chatbots and legal aid portals in local languages can significantly increase the rates of language minorities' access to the law. Legal aid services can help in ensuring that people are more aware of their rights and procedures by using AI-based translation tools combined with simplified legal content so that they will speak the language that they understand, and make meaningful access to justice stronger.⁴⁰

Moreover, accountability in legal aid institutions can be enhanced with the help of data oriented systems of monitoring and evaluation. The case outcomes, lawyer engagement, and response time are examples of digital dashboards to trace the systematic gaps and act as a

³⁷ National Human Rights Commission, *Report on the Rights of Migrant Workers* ¶¶ 4.2–4.4 (2019).

³⁸ *Nat'l Legal Servs. Auth. (NALSA), Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 & Annual Reports (discussing digital access and institutional delivery mechanisms)*.

³⁹ Harry Surden, *Artificial Intelligence and Law: An Overview*, 35 *GA. ST. U. L. REV.* 1305, 1315–22 (2019).

⁴⁰ *Law Commission of India, 216th Report on Non-Official Languages in Courts* ¶¶ 1.4–1.7 (2008).

source of policy change. This transparency puts the delivery of legal aid in line with the performance based governance instead of the number reporting.⁴¹

Lastly, digital legal literacy programs can be implemented to create capacity building; these programs will include mobile-based awareness campaigns and community-level training so that beneficiaries can access timely legal services. Combined, these innovations offer a package that includes structural inefficiencies, linguistic exclusion and the procedural delay, so that legal aid can become a truly democratizing mechanism in the justice system.

CONCLUSION

Reimagining justice in India has moved from an aspirational goal to a constitutional necessity. The assurances of equality before the law and a fair trial, enshrined under Articles 21 and 39A respectively, have little normative force while the ability to exercise those rights remains dependent upon poverty, geography, or language. The evidence examined in this report suggests that technology, when incorporated at an institutional level, can break down these decades-old barriers and make constitutional promises a lived reality.

Digital legal aid initiatives, virtual court access for incarcerated individuals, and community-based helplines have demonstrated that accessibility, swiftness, and understandability do not necessarily have to come at the cost of procedural fairness. Treating such interventions as supplementary rather than integral to the delivery of legal aid would amount to accepting structural exclusion as inevitable. Yet, for this technological expansion, ethical governance, human oversight, and linguistic inclusivity become necessary preconditions for preventing reproduction of systemic inequities.

Accordingly, a hybrid, State-led digital legal aid framework is not a reformist preference, but a constitutionally faithful way to a genuinely democratic justice system.

⁴¹ *U.N. Development Programme (UNDP), Legal Aid Service Provision: A Guide 18–22 (2014).*