



INTERNATIONAL LAW  
JOURNAL

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**WHITE BLACK  
LEGAL LAW  
JOURNAL  
ISSN: 2581-  
8503**

*Peer - Reviewed & Refereed Journal*

The Law Journal strives to provide a platform for discussion of International as well as National Developments in the Field of Law.

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WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal providededicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

W H I T E   B L A C K  
L E G A L

# **LEGAL AID: IS IT MERELY A PAPER TIGER?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research paper provides an in-depth analysis of the effectiveness of legal aid in India, questioning whether it serves as a genuine instrument for justice or remains merely a paper tiger—an impressive concept on paper but largely ineffective in reality. Although India's Constitution and legislative frameworks guarantee free legal assistance to marginalized and economically disadvantaged groups, significant barriers continue to obstruct the realization of these rights. The study traces the historical evolution of legal aid in India, emphasizing key provisions of the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, and examining the roles of pivotal institutions such as the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA). It investigates systemic challenges that undermine the delivery of legal aid, including insufficient funding, low awareness among potential beneficiaries, and bureaucratic inefficiencies. Through qualitative analysis of case studies and empirical data, the paper evaluates the disparity between the theoretical promise of free legal aid and its practical implementation. Furthermore, it compares India's legal aid system with those of other countries, identifying best practices that could enhance its effectiveness.

**KEYWORDS:** Legal aid, India, Access to justice, Marginalized groups, Legal Services Authorities Act, National Legal Services Authority (NALSA)

## **INTRODUCTION**

The overarching principle of justice, which extends across social, economic, and political spheres, is unequivocally stated in the Preamble of the Constitution, serving as the bedrock of our constitutional framework. This underscores the critical significance of social justice as a fundamental pillar of our societal and political ethos. Justice, indeed, shines as a guiding light within our social and political philosophy.

The concept of Legal Aid, based on the understanding that some individuals in every society may struggle to navigate the legal system effectively, has long been regarded as indispensable. It is therefore crucial for both the justice system and society as a whole to offer voluntary legal assistance to such individuals.

While the concept of Legal Aid initially emerged gradually, it gained significant traction in 1919 with the publication of Reginald Heber Smith's seminal work, "Justice and the Poor." Smith's innovative idea of "collective social responsibility" underscored the legal profession's duty to provide avenues for marginalized populations to access justice.

This article critically examines the persistent deficiencies in our society's provision of Legal Aid to the underprivileged. The inability to access legal counsel or representation is tantamount to a denial of legal protection. Despite the existence of numerous laws aimed at protecting disadvantaged individuals, they often remain ineffective, existing only on paper and failing to produce the intended outcomes. The socio-cultural implications of this issue in India are eloquently captured in the poignant verses from Nehru's autobiography, resonating with the struggles endured by generations of marginalized individuals.

The Social Backdrop of the problem in India is projected in the lines of poetry quoted in Nehru's Autobiography<sup>1</sup>–

*“Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans,  
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,  
The emptiness of ages on his face,  
And on his back the burden of the world.”*

Legal Aid from the morning Centuries ago, the onsets of equal justice under the law were marked by the necrology in the 40th paragraph of Magna Carta<sup>2</sup> “To no bone will we vend, To no bone will we deny Or delay right or Justice ” therefore, on the green meadows of Runnymede was sown the indigenous seed of legal aid in the ultramodern world which has ago travelled to all the mainlands as part of civilised justice. The International concern for mortal rights set up expression, after the First World War in covenants of League of Nations and further in the United Nations. Though Right to Legal Aid doesn't expressly mention in the protestation of Human Rights, the conventions which followed specifically incorporated the conception of Legal Rights. Lord Denning while observing that Legal aid is a system of government backing for those who can not go to pay for advice, backing

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<sup>1</sup> Allied Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1962 Edn., p. 439

<sup>2</sup><https://www.history.com/news/magna-carta-influence-us-constitution-bill-of-rights>



and representation said – The topmost revolution in the law since the post-Second World War has been the elaboration of the system for Legal Aid. In the U.S.A. the bar took action in evolving Legal Aid as a Fundamental Right. In *Powell v. Alabama*<sup>3</sup>, Justice Sutherland held that in a capital case where the defendant was made unfit to employ a counsel, it's the duty of the court, whether requested or not, to assign counsel for him as a necessary needful of the ' due process ' clause. In Canada, the Ontario Legal Aid Plan, 1967 which was on the basis of the Legal Aid and Advice Act of 1949 handed a comprehensive service to the Public.

Pre-British India had rehearsed “indigenous monarchy” and the days of the Hindu and Muslim autocrats had witnessed a simpleminded methodology of allocating Justice to the poor, inexpensively and incontinently. In short, Justice for the citizens – high and low- has been an Indian creed for a long ago. In India moment, Legal Aid has Indigenous status, popular alleviation, and socio-legal individuality.

## **PROVISIONS FOR LEGAL AID IN INDIA**

### **THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIA**

The Fundamental entitlement set out in Article 14 of the Indian constitution, of every person to equality before law and equal protection of laws is the touchstone of the right to equality in our society. It states that every person is equal in the eyes of the law and there shall be no discrimination. Further, it also provides for the concept of equality of opportunities and special treatment for the backward section of society. Article 22 confers every person arrested, 'to consult and to be defended by a legal practitioner of his choice. Both of these Articles set out a path for free legal aid.<sup>4</sup> It is now firmly established, as a result of the court's decision in the *Hussainara Khatoon case*<sup>5</sup>, that the right to free legal services is undeniably a crucial component of a reasonable, fair, and just procedure for individuals accused of an offence, and it must be considered implicit in the guarantee provided by Article 21. This is a Constitutional Right of Every person who is unable to engage a lawyer and secure legal services on account of reasons of poverty.

Another question of relevance with respect to legal aid is – what should be the qualification of a lawyer to be employed for defence of the poor person. For reducing the expenditure on legal aid if a junior lawyer is engaged will this be upheld? In *K. Pahadiya v. State of Bihar*<sup>6</sup>, the question

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<sup>3</sup> 287 US 45

<sup>4</sup> The Constitution of India, 1949

<sup>5</sup> (1981) 1 SCC 98

<sup>6</sup> (1981) 2 SCC 671: AIR 1981 SC 939

was considered and the court directed that the prisoners should be provided legal services of a 'fairly competent lawyer' since legal aid in a criminal case has been declared to be a fundamental right implicit in Article 21 of the Constitution.

The Indian Constitution's Articles 38 and 39A are notable. According to Article 38(1) of the constitution, the state must safeguard and protect the social order, including justice, and Article 39-A of the constitution mandates that it must specifically provide free legal aid through appropriate legislation or programs to ensure that no citizen is denied the opportunity to pursue justice. Article 41 also makes it obligatory on the state to make effective provision within its economic capacity for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance and Article 46 directs that the state shall "promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections and in particular the SCs and STs and shall protect them from social injustice. Regarding payment of fees to a lawyer for free legal service, the Supreme Court in *Maharashtra v. M.P. Vashi*<sup>7</sup>, while interpreting Article 39-A of the Constitution held that in a fit case the court can direct the ruling politicians to carry out the Directive Principles of the State Policy even though these are stated to be non-justiciable in a court of law. Further, where there is inaction or slow action by the politicians and administrative officers, the judiciary must intervene. The politicians cannot plead paucity of funds against such directions. In the said case the Apex Court clubbed Legal Aid with Legal Education and directed the state to revamp and restructure the deteriorating standards in legal education. The court felt the need of a vast number of persons trained in law and order to afford free legal aid. The absence of reasonable facilities, infrastructure, competent teachers and staff in Law Colleges would adversely affect the standard of legal education and could affect the 'quality' in providing free legal aid. The quality should on no account suffer in giving free legal aid; if it's not, the free legal aid will only be a force, make-believe, illusory, or meaningless ritual. The Supreme Court, in this case, directed the State to provide grant-in-aid to recognized law colleges so as to enable them to function effectively and in a meaningful manner and turn out sufficient number of well-trained or properly equipped law graduates.

That in turn will enable the State to provide free legal aid and ensure that opportunities for securing justice are not denied to any citizen on account of any disability. These aspects necessarily flow from Articles 21 and 39-A of the Constitution.

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<sup>7</sup> (1955) 5 SCC 730.

## **PROVISIONS UNDER C.P.C & CR.PC**

The amendments to the CPC, Order 33, Rule 18, and the Cr.PC, 1973, Section 304, empowered the High Courts to establish legal aid schemes for cases within each State, with the advice and consent of the respective State Government. Furthermore, the addition of Article 39-A to the Constitution provided a mechanism for the judiciary to promote social justice. Article 39-A mandates that "The State shall ensure that the operation of the legal system promotes justice on the basis of equal opportunity and shall, in particular, provide free legal aid through suitable legislation, schemes, or any other means to ensure that opportunities for securing justice are not denied to any citizen due to economic or other disabilities."

- Section 304 in The Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973

Legal aid to the accused at State expense in certain cases<sup>8</sup>.

- The amendments in the CPC, Order 33, Rule 18
- Power of Government to provide for free legal services to indigent persons.<sup>9</sup>

## **LEGAL SERVICES AUTHORITIES ACT, 1987**

The Legal Services Authorities Act of 1987 was enacted to establish statutory legal services authorities at the national, state, and district levels. This Act, amended by the Legal Services Authorities Amendment Act of 1994, came into effect on November 9, 1995. Its purpose is to provide free and competent legal services to the weaker sections of society, thereby fulfilling the objectives outlined in the Preamble of ensuring social, economic, and political justice. The Act aims to eliminate economic barriers that prevent certain segments of society from accessing justice.

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<sup>8</sup> Section 304 of CrPC, 1973 (1) Where, in a trial before the Court of Session, the accused is not represented by a pleader, and where it appears to the Court that the accused has not sufficient means to engage a pleader, the Court shall assign a pleader for his defence at the expense of the State.

(2) The High Court may, with the previous approval of the State Government, make rules providing for-

(a) the mode of selecting pleaders for defence under sub-section (1);

(b) the facilities to be allowed to such pleaders by the Courts;

(c) the fees payable to such pleaders by the Government, and generally, for carrying out the purposes of sub-section

The State Government may, by notification, direct that, as from such date as may be specified in the notification, the provisions of sub-sections (1) and (2) shall apply in relation to any class of trials before other Courts in the State as they apply in relation to trials before Courts of Session.

<sup>9</sup> (1) Subject to the provisions of this Order, the Central or State Government may make such supplementary provisions as it thinks fit for providing free legal services to those who have been permitted to sue as indigent persons.

(2) The High Court may, with previous approval of the State Government, make rules for carrying out the supplementary provisions made by the Central or State Government for providing free legal services to indigent persons referred to in sub-rule (1), and such rules may include the nature and extent of such legal services, the conditions under which they may be made available, the matters in respect of which, and the agencies through which, such services may be rendered.

To provide free legal aid, the government, through a resolution dated September 26, 1980, established the Committee for Implementing Legal Aid Schemes (CILAS) under the chairmanship of Justice P.N. Bhagwati. CILAS was tasked with monitoring and implementing uniform legal aid programs across all states and union territories. It developed a model legal aid scheme applicable nationwide, leading to the creation of several legal aid and advice boards in various states and union territories.

For the poor and disadvantaged, navigating the judicial system can be unaffordable and challenging. Legal aid serves as a socially motivated mediator between the law and the common man. The conflict between law and poverty can lead to disorder. Issues like slow justice, expensive court services, complex legislation, and the mystique of legal language alienate ordinary people from the legal process. Legal aid plays a crucial social role in bridging this gap. In the case of *R.D. Saxena v. B.P. Sharma*<sup>10</sup>, it was acknowledged that the legal profession in India has a social duty to guide the public through their conduct and actions, providing support to the poor, uneducated, and exploited masses.

The term legal services is defined as:

“Legal Services” includes the rendering of any service in the conduct of any case or other legal proceeding before any Court or other authority or tribunal and the giving of advice on any legal matter”<sup>11</sup>

The Legal Services Authorities Act of 1987 established the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) to oversee and assess the legal services provided under the Act. In 1995, Justice A.S. Anand of the Supreme Court was appointed as the organization's executive chairman. To ensure the effectiveness of legal aid cells, specific measures were implemented. The Central Authority undertook several actions, including resolving cases through Lok Adalats, promoting legal aid programs for the general public, providing legal counsel to incarcerated victims, and recognizing non-governmental organizations to enhance legal advocacy.

Each state has a State Legal Services Authority and a High Court Legal Services Committee. District Legal Services Authorities and Taluka Legal Services Committees have been established in various districts and talukas to provide free legal services and conduct Lok Adalats. The Taluka Legal Services Committees are led by Taluka Judicial Officers, while the State Legal Services Authorities are supervised by the Chief Justices of the respective High Courts. Additionally, the Supreme Court

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<sup>10</sup> (2000) 7 SCC 264.

<sup>11</sup> Section 2(c) of the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987

Legal Services Committee was created to manage the legal services program of the Supreme Court of India.

Under the free legal aid program, court fees, processing fees, and other legal procedure-related costs are covered, along with providing a free attorney for court representation. The program also includes the preparation of appeals, paper books, printing, translation of documents, and the provision of certified copies of orders and other legal documents.

To qualify for free legal assistance, a person must meet certain criteria: being a woman, child, member of the SC/ST, industrial worker, victim of violence, mass disaster, flood, drought, earthquake, disabled person, person in custody, or having an annual income of less than Rs. 50,000, or being a victim of human trafficking. Legal aid is granted if the relevant Authority determines that the individual has a prima facie case to prosecute or defend, as outlined in Section 12 of the Act. An income affidavit may suffice to qualify a person for legal services unless the Authority has reasons to question it.

### **HOW CAN ONE AVAIL THE LEGAL AID SERVICES?**

A person seeking free legal services can apply to the appropriate authority or committee by submitting an application. This application can be made orally, in writing, or by using the forms provided by the authorities and should include a brief explanation of the need for legal aid. Additionally, a person can apply for legal aid by filling out the Legal Aid Application form available online on the NALSA website and attaching the necessary documents. This application can be submitted at any Legal Services Institution in the country.

### **ANALYSIS OF THE FREE LEGAL AID SYSTEM IN INDIA**

National Legal Services Authority - Statistical Snapshot 2021: According to the National Legal Services Authority 2021 Report, Legal Services Institutions (LSIs) are operational at the national (1), state (37), district (673), and sub-divisional (2,351) levels, with Taluk Legal Services Committees receiving a total grant of Rs 145 crores. The report indicates there are 33,556 panel lawyers with over 10 years of experience and 44,704 Para Legal Volunteers. Additionally, 19,510 (73%) legal aid criminal cases are pending in High Courts and 115,536 (75%) are pending in District Courts.

Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI): A report revealed that India's per capita lawyer ratio is better than that of most countries worldwide. With approximately 1.8 million lawyers, there is one lawyer for every 736 people in India. However, the report also highlighted that there are only 61,593 panel lawyers, equating to one legal aid lawyer for every 18,609 people or five legal aid lawyers per 100,000 people. Additionally, 22.6% of beneficiaries indicated that they would not opt for free legal aid services a second time.

National Law University, Delhi (NLUD) Report: Most individuals eligible for the free legal aid program consider using the service only when they cannot afford a private attorney. Groundbreaking pan-India research by National Law University, Delhi (NLUD) has found that many people lack confidence in the services provided by legal aid counsel (LAC) under the free legal aid program due to various reasons. Despite the services being completely free, the majority of potential beneficiaries are hesitant to use them. These findings are detailed in the research report titled "Quality of Legal Representation: An Empirical Analysis of Free Legal Aid Services in India."

#### Key Findings of the Report –

- Approximately 75% of recipients stated they chose free legal aid because they lacked the funds and resources to hire a private attorney. If they had the financial means, they would not have applied for legal aid services.
- 22.6% of beneficiaries indicated that they would not opt for free legal aid services again.
- 60% of women who were aware of free legal aid services chose to hire a private attorney because it allowed them more control over their legal counsel and they had concerns about the quality of services provided by the legal aid system.
- 56% of Legal Aid Counsel (LAC) spend an average of 1 to 10 hours per week on legal aid cases, whereas around 58% of LACs spend an average of 20 hours or more per week on private cases.
- Approximately 33% of judicial officers reported receiving complaints about LACs demanding money from beneficiaries.

- A majority of judicial officers (52%) rated the overall skill set of private legal practitioners as fairly good, while they rated the skill set of LACs as moderately low.
- The trust deficit among beneficiaries towards panel lawyers is difficult to overcome. Many beneficiaries are illiterate and lack knowledge of court procedures, leading to frustration after several court dates. As a result, they become reluctant to attend court.

The India Justice Report 2019 : The report assesses the capacity of four key aspects of the justice system—the police, the prison system, the judiciary, and legal aid—in each state, based on their own declared benchmarks. It notes that since 1995, only 15 million people have benefited from legal aid services in a country where over 80% of the 1.25 billion population is eligible for legal aid. The report highlights that lawyers are not adequately trained to provide satisfactory solutions, and resources such as finances and human resources are not utilized effectively.

The report states, “The lack of optimal financial management and well-trained human resources, poor training of legal aid lawyers on their duties and responsibilities, inadequate performance monitoring, and the absence of mechanisms to gauge customer satisfaction hamper the functioning of LSIs to a great extent. A bigger concern has been ensuring the quality of services provided, which is directly linked to the training, documenting, reporting, and monitoring of legal aid providers. Monitoring and mentoring committees either don’t exist or, if they do, their functioning is sub-par.” The key observations regarding the current legal aid system in India include the following:

- **Inconsistent organisational procedures** - The establishment of DLSAs in all of the judicial districts of states like Tripura, West Bengal, Telangana, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, and Uttar Pradesh is still pending. It is also important to note that, in terms of full-time secretaries, there were 603 sanctioned posts for DLSAs, a notable deficiency of 61, as opposed to the 664 DLSAs. The real number of full-time secretaries was 525, which is 139 fewer than the number of DLSAs. The lack of full-term secretaries in smaller jurisdictions like Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, which clearly demonstrates organisational and structural differences with regard to DLSAs, was another finding of the study.
- **Uneven Distribution of Paralegals:** The report highlights the crucial role of paralegals in bridging the gap between legal services institutions (LSIs) and the public. As of 2019, there were 63,759 panel attorneys and 69,290 paralegal volunteers (PLVs) working with LSIs nationwide.

However, for PLVs to be effective, they need proper training, oversight, and adequate reimbursement. The report points out that less than 10 PLVs per 100,000 people is the average in 22 of the 36 states and union territories.

- **Insufficient Women Representatives:** The study emphasizes the importance of gender diversity for broader outreach. It notes that having a significant number of women panel lawyers and PLVs is essential for reaching underserved populations who face socio-cultural barriers in seeking legal advice. Among panel lawyers, only 18% are women. Kerala has the highest percentage (40%) among major states, followed by Karnataka (30%) and Maharashtra (27%). Conversely, less than 10% of panel lawyers in Rajasthan, Odisha, and Uttar Pradesh are women. Among smaller states, Meghalaya has the highest representation (54%) while Arunachal Pradesh has the lowest (15%).

- **Problematic Budget Utilization:** LSIs are funded by the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) and state budgets. The report highlights that, according to 2017–2018 data, several states had minimal or no funding allocated for LSIs. For instance, Jharkhand and Assam had no state funding, while Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, and Tripura received less than 20% of their funding from state governments. Positively, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh received over 80% of their funding from state governments. However, fund utilization was also an issue. In 2017–2018, only five states used more than 90% of their allocated NALSA funds, with Rajasthan (98%) and Chhattisgarh (97%) leading. On the other hand, UTs like Daman and Diu, and Dadra and Nagar Haveli used only 4% of their allocated funds, followed closely by Lakshadweep (7%). Overall, only 16 states and Union Territories spent more than half of their total legal assistance budget.

- **Lok Adalats – Sharing the court's workload:** According to the study's findings on Lok Adalat efficacy, "Across the nation, Lok Adalats resolved 7.85 million cases in 2017–2018. 5.92 million of these cases were resolved by National Lok Adalats (run by NALSA), of which 2.82 million (or 48%) were in the pre-litigation stage. The Lok Adalats held by SLSAs resolved an additional 1.93 million cases, of which 0.98 million (or 51% of them) were in the pre-litigation stage. Of the 18 big and mid-sized states, West Bengal had the highest percentage of cases resolved at the pre-litigation stage.

- **Infrastructure, a limited area:** The paper highlights that infrastructure is a crucial



prerequisite for providing effective legal aid services. Legal assistance clinics must be developed in places where persons encounter "geographical, socioeconomic, and other barriers," according to the NALSA (Legal Services Clinics) Regulations, 2011.

According to statistics in the report, there were 14,161 clinics overall spread throughout almost 597,000 localities. 42 communities were served by one legal aid clinic on average as of 2017. "Amongst the large states, Gujarat has the most jail legal services clinics—48 clinics in 27 jails; Punjab has 32 clinics in 26 jails; Chhattisgarh has 34 in 30 prisons. Kerala, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh have less than half the number of clinics required. Jharkhand, Odisha, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal do much better with clinics nearly matching the number of jails. "The study further states that the coverage of clinics to villages is quite poor making it unable to provide easily accessible legal assistance to every deserving person. The report also highlights the importance of awareness of the law. "The use of the legal aid machinery to spread legal awareness about the Constitution, rights and legal relationships between individual and the State, and individuals inter se is particularly desirable and valuable".

### **OBSTACLES**

- Legally, marginalized and underprivileged individuals have the right to free legal representation when needed, but often have to struggle to access it. The campaign for legal aid in India is currently fragmented, inconsistent, and disorganized, lacking any coordination. Equal access to and availability of legal justice are severely compromised, with significant gaps between established goals and achieved outcomes.
- According to a victim of domestic violence, "The lawyers they provide keep asking for money and don't even attend all court hearings."
- A lawyer in Mumbai who handles pro bono cases privately and through NGOs commented, "Legal aid work is largely neglected on the ground. From my experience, there seems to be little judicial and political will to effectively implement the Act."
- Locally, Taluka and District Legal Services Authorities offer legal aid. Attorneys with at least three years of experience can volunteer with these authorities for a minimum of two years. They receive a modest honorarium from the National Legal Aid Fund since they are not allowed to charge clients assigned to them by legal aid services. At the Bombay High Court, attorneys receive Rs 7,500 per case (typically resolved in about 10 sessions), while in smaller towns and lower courts,

fees range from Rs 1,500 to Rs 5,000 per case. However, the remuneration often proves inadequate, leading many attorneys to decline legal aid cases.

- Legal aid services are not widely offered by many attorneys.
- Police are required to inform complainants about legal aid, but in practice, they often fail to facilitate access to legal counsel.
- Many legal aid attorneys lack the specialized skills needed to effectively handle cases of domestic violence, despite the high demand for such services.
- Legal aid presents significant challenges for women, both in finding suitable attorneys and in pursuing cases effectively. Women often have to engage with multiple attorneys before finding one who will adequately represent their interests. Officials prefer to resolve civil matters, particularly those involving domestic violence and family disputes, through mediation and counseling.
- Simplifying the system and its procedures is crucial. Pro bono criminal cases, for example, provide attorneys with Rs 1,000 for each jail visit, but require administrative signatures and detailed reporting at the legal aid office, adding to the paperwork burden that many attorneys find daunting.
- Efforts to enlist more attorneys into the program continue, despite appeals to Bar associations to recruit more lawyers. As one official noted, "Our lawyers volunteer with us, so we cannot compel them, but we continually appeal to them to feel a sense of societal reciprocity."

### **MEASURES FOR EFFECTIVE LEGAL AID**

- The legal aid movement needs to initiate grassroots efforts aimed at addressing the challenges and issues faced by the underprivileged.
- Participation in this effort should involve not only practicing attorneys but also judges, the legal system, educators, senior law students, qualified social workers, and the general public.
- Collaborative efforts with NGOs should focus on enhancing legal awareness and educating people about their fundamental rights.
- There is a need to promote the expansion of ad hoc paralegal services in regions lacking adequate infrastructure, ensuring basic access to justice.
- Promote a culture and history of pro bono work among lawyers.
- Advocate for presenting comparative models of legal assistance to the government as part of reform efforts.
- Encourage the establishment of public defender and legal aid offices working in partnership with governments.

- Promote Lok Adalats as they expedite dispute resolution through counseling and dialogue, prioritizing swift justice with the consent of parties. They aim to alleviate court backlogs, addressing delays in legal proceedings and ensuring timely justice delivery. Effective implementation of this initiative by the state requires a bottom-up approach.

## CONCLUSION

Legal aid, often touted as a beacon of hope for the marginalized and underprivileged in accessing justice, stands at a critical juncture in its efficacy. Despite its noble intentions and legal frameworks, the reality on the ground paints a complex picture. The question persists: is legal aid merely a paper tiger?

The challenges are manifold. From inadequate funding and infrastructure to a lack of trained personnel, legal aid faces substantial hurdles in fulfilling its promise. Many who qualify for free legal assistance find themselves navigating a system fraught with delays, inefficiencies, and a shortage of skilled professionals. Reports of lawyers demanding money, skipping hearings, and a general apathy towards pro bono work further undermine its credibility.

Moreover, the reach of legal aid remains uneven across regions, exacerbating disparities in access to justice. In some areas, especially rural and remote regions, the absence of legal aid clinics and competent paralegals compounds these challenges. This disparity is compounded further by gender imbalances and socio-economic barriers that hinder women and vulnerable groups from accessing legal support.

Despite these obstacles, there are glimmers of hope. Initiatives promoting pro bono work, educational campaigns on legal rights, and the role of Lok Adalats in expediting case resolution demonstrate positive steps. However, these efforts need greater governmental support, sustainable funding models, and a systematic overhaul of the legal aid infrastructure to bridge the gap between intent and impact.

In conclusion, while legal aid holds immense potential to uphold the principles of justice and equality, its effectiveness hinges on transformative reforms and a renewed commitment to its core principles. Only through collaborative efforts, rigorous accountability, and inclusive policies can legal aid truly evolve from a symbolic gesture into a robust mechanism for delivering justice to all.