

# Strengthening Access to Justice through Legal Aid:

## The India Experience

- Madhurima Dhanuka<sup>1</sup>

### I. Introduction

Access to Justice is a basic principle of the rule of law.<sup>2</sup> It enables people to have their voices heard, exercise their rights and resolve disputes. The provision of state-funded legal aid, for marginalized and vulnerable communities, is increasingly being acknowledged as a crucial enabler for access to justice as it addresses one of the major obstacles in accessing justice – the cost of legal advice and representation. The economic costs of prolonged and unresolved legal problems and disputes are said to have impacted the rate of development of countries, and are a reason for off-tracking of the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>3</sup> Access to justice is viewed as a critical enabler of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with access to effective legal aid services being a vital component in addressing the present access to justice crisis.

The UN Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems 2012<sup>4</sup>, acknowledge the role of legal aid as an “essential element of a fair, humane, and efficient criminal justice system that is based on the rule of law, and that is the foundation for the enjoyment of other rights”. They further call upon States to adopt measures to maximize the positive impact of legal aid on the criminal justice system and on access to justice.<sup>5</sup> The role of inclusive and holistic legal aid services as a cornerstone of peace, justice, and strong institutions was reaffirmed at the 1<sup>st</sup> Regional Conference on Access to Legal Aid: Strengthening Access to Justice in the Global South, held in India in November 2023. The conference, hosted by India, was the first regional edition of the biennial series of international legal aid conferences previously held in South Africa, Argentina, Georgia and Brazil. The Conference brought together heads of judiciary, law and justice ministries, heads of legal aid bodies and civil society representatives – drawing 191 participants from 51 countries across the Global South. Discussions were anchored around the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with a particular focus on SDG 16.3 – promoting the rule of law and ensuring equal access to justice for all. Delegates reaffirmed that access to justice is essential for achieving the SDGs which aim to eradicate poverty and promote inclusive and sustainable growth.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/thematic-areas/access-to-justice-and-rule-of-law-institutions/access-to-justice/>

<sup>3</sup> New Delhi Roadmap for Strengthening Access to Justice in the Global South by Improving Access to Legal Aid Services 2023, para 6.

<sup>4</sup> Available at [https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/UN\\_principles\\_and\\_guidelines\\_on\\_access\\_to\\_legal\\_aid.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/UN_principles_and_guidelines_on_access_to_legal_aid.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> UN Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems 2012, Introduction, pt 11.

<sup>6</sup> For more information on the Conference deliberations and outcomes, see article on the conference published in the ILAG Newsletter No. 55 – Spring, pg 9.

Against this backdrop of the increasing relevance of legal services in efforts to promote access to justice, this paper traces some recent measures undertaken by the National Legal Services Authority, India towards strengthening access to justice in India. The paper begins by highlighting select measures that reflect the growing integration of access to justice into nationwide initiatives undertaken by legal services institutions in India. The paper then focuses on NALSA's targeted interventions to provide legal services to prisoners, as well as its efforts to reduce prisoner population through systemic legal aid engagement.

## II. Legal Aid System in India

The legal aid framework in India is designed to operationalize the constitutional commitment of ensuring justice for all, particularly the most marginalized. The Preamble to the Constitution of India 1950<sup>7</sup> enshrines the promise of securing justice – social economic and political- to all citizens. Article 39A of the Constitution mandates the state to provide for free and competent legal aid to the weaker sections of the society to ensure that opportunity of securing justice is not denied to any citizen by reason of economic or other disability. Pursuant to the Constitutional mandate, the Legal Services Authorities Act was enacted in 1987, pursuant to which a nationwide uniform network for providing free and competent legal services to the weaker sections of the society was established in India.

The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) coordinates and monitors the functioning of LSI, which are established in every state, district and sub-division. It also monitors and evaluates the implementation of legal aid programmes at periodic intervals and provides for independent evaluation of programmes and schemes implemented in whole or in part of the country by funds provided under this Act. NALSA receives grants-in-aid from the Central Government for implementing legal aid schemes and programmes.

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|--------------------------------------|
| 3103 Legal Services Institutions     |
| 50,394 legal aid lawyers             |
| 43,706 panel lawyers                 |
| 1.55 million beneficiaries [2023-24] |

The provision of legal services includes 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. It includes representation by an advocate in legal proceedings, payment of process fees, expenses of witnesses and all other charges payable or incurred in connection with any legal proceedings in appropriate cases; preparation of pleadings, memo of appeal, paper book including printing and translation of documents in legal proceedings; drafting of legal documents, special leave petition; supply of certified copies of judgments, orders, notes of evidence and other documents in legal proceedings etc.<sup>8</sup>

LSIs cater to an expansive and evolving beneficiary base, including women, children, victims of human trafficking, persons with disabilities, persons from certain castes and tribes as notified, victims of disaster, ethnic violence, caste atrocity, industrial workmen, persons in custody, persons earning below a prescribed income level. Some States have further expanded this list

<sup>7</sup> <https://legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india/>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://nalsa.gov.in/faqs/>.

of beneficiaries to include persons with HIV, senior citizens, victims of acid attacks, transgender persons, victim of drug abuse etc. Thus, the legal aid system is envisaged to serve as a crucial vehicle for enabling meaningful access to justice for the marginalized and disadvantaged individuals and communities.

### III. Measures to Promote Access to Justice

In recent years, NALSA has undertaken a series of initiatives aimed at advancing access to justice for marginalized and vulnerable communities. NALSA's "efforts to deliver a slate of services in campaign mode has helped raise awareness and significantly increased the number of beneficiaries".<sup>9</sup> Anchored in its statutory and constitutional mandate, NALSA's efforts between 2022 to 2025 reflect a deliberate shift toward proactive, targeted and community-driven interventions. These have ranged from national campaigns to systemic reforms, heightened focus on monitoring and evaluations, awareness activities etc. This section outlines some measures that illustrate how NALSA is striving towards deepening legal empowerment, bridge accessibility barriers and create a more inclusive and responsive legal aid ecosystem in India.

#### Measure 1: Campaigns for Targeted Beneficiaries

LSIs in India are mandated to make people aware of their rights, entitlements and remedies. However, a major obstruction in achieving this mandate is lack of awareness and knowledge among eligible beneficiaries about their rights as well as the services provided by LSIs. In 2021, NALSA initiated a '**Pan India Awareness & Outreach Campaign**' for reaching out to people, particularly those living in rural, tribal and remote areas.<sup>10</sup> The six-week long campaign focused on raising awareness around rights of persons, legal benefits and entitlements, duties of citizens, free legal aid provided by legal services institutions, remedies available under laws and available citizen centric services, offline and online. The campaign resulted in<sup>11</sup>:

- ✓ Visits to 1,44,668 villages
- ✓ Interactions with over 11,63,99,760 persons during the visits
- ✓ Conduct of 94,365 legal awareness programmes which were attended by 1,87,97,221 persons
- ✓ Deployment of 2095 mobile vans in 24,017 villages
- ✓ Conduct of 8,961 legal aid clinics wherein interactions were made with 11,96,987 persons

Given the success of the 2021 campaign, NALSA conducted a similar campaign – '**Empowerment of Citizens through Legal Awareness & Outreach**' in October 2022. The two-week campaign focused on spreading awareness about welfare laws and schemes enacted for empowerment of people, fundamental rights and duties under the Indian Constitution, free legal aid services provided by legal services institutions, rights and remedies available

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<sup>9</sup> India Justice Report 2025, pg 120, available at <https://indiajusticereport.org/>.

<sup>10</sup> For more information see <https://nalsa.gov.in/pan-india-awareness-outreach-campaign/>.

<sup>11</sup> As reported in NALSA Annual Report 2021-22, pg 11, available at <https://nalsa.gov.in/annual-reports/>.

under various laws, digital initiatives for approaching legal services institutions – NALSA’s chatbots, legal aid case management system, online mediation portal etc.<sup>12</sup> The campaign resulted in:

- ✓ Conduct of 15,110 legal aid camps in villages which were attended by 38,723,058 persons
- ✓ 10,21,533 persons were provided legal assistance in legal aid camps in villages and 2,68,762 in camps in other places
- ✓ 36,505 legal aid camps were held in other areas attended by 65,06,440 persons
- ✓ 2,228 mobile vans were deployed covering 427 districts and reaching 2,55,88,106 people.

In addition to the above, NALSA also conducted a campaign for providing basic legal assistance to persons confined in prisons and child care institutions in November 2022. The Campaign ‘**Haq Humara Bhi to Hai**’ [*English translation: It’s our right as well*] aimed at providing basic legal assistance to unsentenced prisoners and children in conflict with law confined in childcare institutions. The campaign saw the formulation of district teams to visit prisons and childcare institutions and provide free legal counselling and assistance, including drafting of and filing of appropriate legal applications.

In prisons, the objectives of the campaign included:

- Ascertaining legal representation
- Extending free legal services
- Ensuring access to updated information case status and facilitating communication with their lawyers
- Ensuring that requisite applications for bail as per eligibility had been filed
- Ensuring communication with family and friends of prisoners
- Ensuring medical assistance to all needy
- Redressal of grievances and meeting the needs of vulnerable prisoners and
- Awareness on accessing web portal for updated case information by prisoners/prison staff

In child care institutions, the objectives of the campaign included:

- Ascertain that the child is represented by a lawyer
- Ascertain that the child is aware of the status of their case
- Ascertain that the child is in contact with their guardian
- Sharing information with the child’s guardian on accessing the web portal to receive updated information on their cases.

The key outcomes of the campaign were:

#### In prisons

- ✓ 5472 prison visits

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<sup>12</sup> <https://nalsa.gov.in/pan-india-campaign-2022/>.

- ✓ Interactions with over 0.42 million prisoners
- ✓ Distribution of nearly 0.4 million case information cards to prisoners
- ✓ Legal aid lawyers provided for 15,644 prisoners
- ✓ 89,185 grievances received from prison inmates

#### In Child Care Institutions

- ✓ 280 observation homes visited
- ✓ 586 visits made
- ✓ Interactions with 6,124 children
- ✓ Distribution of 5,535 case information cards to children
- ✓ 1,330 grievances received from children

Several other campaigns were also conducted by NALSA in the last few years targeting beneficiaries, particularly those who are in prison. In July 2022 and August 2023, NALSA conducted two campaigns – **‘Release\_UTRC@75’** and **‘Under Trial Review Committee Special Campaign 2023’** for expediting the process of review and release of unsentenced prisoners. The Under Trial Review Committees (UTRC) are district-level committees headed by the senior-most judge in the district, with the district magistrate, superintendent of police, superintendent of prison and secretary of the district legal services authority being members. The UTRCs are mandated to conduct quarterly reviews of cases of all prisoners, identify prisoners eligible for review under fifteen categories as per the standard operating procedures and recommend release where deemed fit. The campaign sought to accelerate the functioning of the UTRCs and expedite the identification, review, recommendation and release of prisoners. The 2021 campaign resulted in release of 24,879 prisoners, whereas the 2022 campaign resulted in release of 21,304 prisoners across India.

In January 2024, NALSA conducted another campaign, this time focusing on identifying juvenile offenders who had been confined in prisons instead of child care institutions. The campaign **‘Restoring the Youth: Pan India Campaign for Identifying Juveniles in Prisons & Rendering Legal Assistance’** was conceived in the context of repeated instances of juveniles being detained in prisons despite multiple safeguards and monitoring mechanisms provided in substantive and procedural laws. India’s legal system does not permit the detention of any person below the age of 18 years in prisons. Children who are accused or convicted of committing an offence are termed as ‘children in conflict with law’ and can only be detained in child care institutions. The campaign led to identification of 7134 such persons for whom 3381 applications were filed resulted in release of 461 persons on bail, and transfer of 287 juveniles from prisons to child care institutions.<sup>13</sup>

More recently in December 2024, NALSA launched a **‘Special Campaign for Old Prisoners & Terminally Ill Prisoners’** aimed at identifying prisoners above 70 years of age or those suffering with terminal illness and facilitate their release. NALSA has now initiated litigation

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<sup>13</sup> See report available at <https://nalsa.gov.in/reports/>. At the time of reporting on the campaign, nearly 64% of applications were pending, thus the final outcome of the campaign might have been higher.

in the Supreme Court of India to further expedite the release process. However, particulars of the campaign outcome are yet to be officially reported.

## Measure 2: Revision of Schemes for Beneficiaries

In furtherance of its mandate, NALSA revised and released two new schemes in September 2024- **NALSA (Child-Friendly Legal Services for Children) Scheme, 2024** and **NALSA (Legal Services to Persons with Mental Illness and Persons with Intellectual Disabilities) Scheme, 2024**. The revision exercise was undertaken with the objective of contemporizing the role of legal services institutions in view of legislative and policy changes which necessitated the revision.

The scheme for children replaced NALSA's previous two schemes on children, and focuses on the provision of free legal services to children, including children with disabilities. It envisions implementation of a preventive, strategic, need-based and responsive legal services programme for vulnerable children in pursuance of India's vision and commitments under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015. The Scheme for persons with mental illness and persons with intellectual disability seeks to align the mandate of the legal services institutions with the legislative provisions under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, with the aim to ensure access to free legal services for persons with mental illness and persons with intellectual disabilities. The Scheme seeks to ensure that legal services are responsive to the specific legal and social needs of persons with mental illness and persons with intellectual disabilities, and to ensure their equal access to schemes, facilities, services and legal representation.

Some key changes introduced through the revised scheme documents include the addition of specific actions and interventions to be undertaken by the district legal services authority, inclusion of targeted interventions for children falling in various categories, clearly outlining the roles and duties of legal services providers and functionaries and the inclusion of monitoring and evaluation component. A unique feature introduced through the schemes is the constitution of specialised units of lawyers, paralegal volunteers and retired judicial officers, who shall be trained to cater to the special needs of the beneficiaries covered by the schemes. This is a crucial effort initiated by NALSA to strengthen access to justice for children, for persons with mental illness and persons with intellectual disabilities.

In addition to these measures, NALSA has introduced a number of structural and fundamental changes within the legal aid system itself. A notable inclusion is the establishment of '**Legal Aid Defence Counsel Offices**' across the country.<sup>14</sup> This is a model similar to the public defender system, wherein counsels have been appointed on the payroll of legal services institutions to provide legal services. NALSA has also undertaken efforts to promote mediation for resolution of disputes, through the designing of a '**40 Hour Online Mediation Training Module**'. The module aims to equip participants on understanding conflict and teach them skills to facilitate conflicting parties to arrive at amicable resolutions. NALSA launched its **toll-free national**

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<sup>14</sup> Legal Aid Defence Counsel System [Modified] Scheme, available at <https://nalsa.gov.in/guidelines/>.

**helpline** in November 2023 to enable its reach to marginalized communities who may face barriers in accessing legal services through traditional means. The helpline, available in 10 languages, operates on a custom interactive voice response system which allows people to navigate and connect with lawyers. The helpline attracts nearly 300 calls on a daily basis. In December 2024, NALSA released an **awareness video on rights of arrested persons** in compliance with the mandate cast upon legal services authorities under NALSA's Early Access to Justice at Pre-Arrest, Arrest and Remand Stage Framework, 2019, to apprise suspects and accused persons regarding their rights. The video has been disseminated widely through NALSA's website and social media platforms, and also through the national broadcaster.

NALSA's initiatives over the last few years reflect a strategic deepening of its commitment to realizing access to justice for all. NALSA is demonstrating a shift from passive service delivery to proactive rights-based engagement, which is critical in bridging the justice gap and making the legal system more accessible, humane and equitable.

#### IV. Special Focus: Strengthening Access to Justice for Prisoners

Among the various areas of intervention, NALSA's work within the prison system stands out as a sustained and strategic effort to address one of the most pressing justice challenges in India – the problem of prolonged detention of unsentenced prisoners. Prolonged detention and limited legal representation can disproportionately impact the poor and marginalised, thus it is crucial that legal aid systems take adequate measures to strengthen access to legal aid for prisoners. This section provides a focused account of a number of prison-centric interventions initiated by NALSA, which illustrate how legal aid is being leveraged to strengthen access to justice for prisoners.

**Prison Legal Aid Clinics:** Legal aid clinics are mandated to be setup in all prisons as per the NALSA (Legal Services Clinics) Regulations 2011. The clinics are mandated to perform the following functions:

- to ensure at all times that no person is without legal representation at any stage of the criminal proceeding and generate awareness about the same;
- to bridge the information gap between the prisoner and the Court;
- to facilitate communication between the prisoner and the lawyer, whether legal aid or private;
- to ensure that no person is illegally or unnecessarily detained;
- to ensure special needs of vulnerable groups (women, young offenders, mentally-ill, foreign nationals, persons from other states, etc.) in prisons are addressed;
- to collaborate with local authorities, universities, academic institutions and civil society organisations to further strengthen legal aid services for prisoners;
- to act as a One Stop Centre (OSC) to raise the grievances by prisoners and direct the grievances to appropriate authorities through DLSA; and
- to undertake implementation of the NALSA and SLSA campaigns for prisoners or any other work assigned to fulfil its mandate of providing legal aid services and assistance to the prisoners.

In 2016, NALSA prepared standard operating procedures to bring uniformity in the functioning of the prison legal aid clinics. In 2022, NALSA revised these guidelines with the 'NALSA Standard Operating Procedures on Access to Legal Aid Services to Prisoners and Functioning of the Prison Legal Aid Clinics, 2022'.<sup>15</sup> These guidelines brought further clarity and structure in the functioning of the clinics. The procedure for conducting the clinics has been clearly outlined, and the roles and responsibilities of legal aid functionaries including jail visiting lawyers and para legal volunteers are defined. The guidelines also introduce mechanisms for strengthened oversight and regular monitoring of the clinics. As per data reported for the year 2023-24, a total of 1215 prison legal aid clinics were functional in India, and legal assistance was provided to 3,24,867 prisoners.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the policy changes, ground-level feedback on the clinics highlighted several lacunas in their functioning. In order to address these, NALSA prepared a '**Framework for Strengthening the Functioning of the Prison Legal Aid Clinics**' in July 2024. The framework outlined several steps in order to strengthen the functioning of the clinic, while also providing for exhaustive formats for the inspection and evaluation of the clinics by legal services functionaries. Clinics are mandated to be inspected every month by the Secretary, District Legal Services Authority, and every three months by the Chairman, District Legal Services Authority. Prior to the framework, no documentation or reporting structures existed, thus resulting in limited inspections being conducted. NALSA published its first report on the 'Functioning of the Prison Legal Aid Clinics – October 2024'<sup>17</sup>, which provided an analysis of the inspection reports received from across India. The key observations documented in the report are:

- Of the 1330 total prisons in India clinics were not established in all prisons as yet
- Inspections were conducted of 893 clinics
- A total of 3539 jail visiting lawyers, 1132 community para legal volunteers and 1035 convict para legal volunteers were working in the 893 clinics
- Not all functionaries had received induction training despite the mandate
- 31,193 applications were forwarded by the clinics to the legal services institutions
- Legal aid lawyers were appointed in 90% of all applications received at the district, however these figures were lower for applications received for filing of appeals in appellate courts.
- Nearly 8.5% of the total prisoner population sought legal representation through legal services institutions

The report further suggested a number of measures to enhance the functioning of the clinics including the regular conduct of review meetings by legal services functionaries, ensuring that clinics are functional for every prison, monthly and quarterly inspections are conducted as prescribed, adequate number of clinic functionaries are assigned and a heightened focus on legal services at appellate courts.

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<sup>15</sup> Available at <https://nalsa.gov.in/guidelines/>.

<sup>16</sup> Available at <https://nalsa.gov.in/legal-service-clinics-report/>.

<sup>17</sup> Available at <https://nalsa.gov.in/reports/>.

Through periodic updates to operational guidelines, close monitoring and supervision by legal services functionaries and continued evaluation exercises, NALSA has worked to ensure that these clinics remain effective, accessible and responsive to the needs of prisoners. The prison legal aid clinics serve as critical justice delivery mechanisms for prisoners, and it is vital for NALSA to keep a sustained focus on enhancing the functioning of these clinics.

**Periodic Review of Prisoners’ Cases & Reducing Prison Populations:** Another vital role of NALSA and legal services institutions across India has been in relation to the Under Trial Review Committees (UTRC). As aforementioned, UTRCs are district level committees mandated to review cases of prisoners periodically. The UTRCs, constituted vide a directive of the Supreme Court of India in 2015, are governed by the NALSA ‘Standard Operating Procedures for Under Trial Review Committees’. Since their constitution, the UTRCs have resulted in the release of nearly 0.13 million prisoners. [See table below]

Data on persons recommended and released by the UTRCs  
from 2019 – till date and during campaigns in 2022 & 2023

| Year            | No. of meetings held by UTRCs | No. of inmates recommended for release | No. of inmates released pursuant to UTRC recommendations |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|--|--|
| 2019            | 3626                          | 37309                                  | 12478  |
| 2020            | 9507                          | 28357                                  | 15273  |
| 2021            | 9834                          | 36983                                  | 17020  |
| 2022*           | 10321                         | 70780                                  | 35480  |
| Campaign 2022** | Information not recorded      | 47618                                  | 24789  |
| 2023            | 7246                          | 50669                                  | 26226  |
| Campaign 2023   | 3360                          | 42172                                  | 21304  |
| 2024            | 3757                          | 53594                                  | 25982  |

\* The data for the year 2022 is higher as it also includes Campaign data of this year i.e. 2022.

\*\* The 2022 Campaign included three additional categories of UTPs as eligible for review under the campaign.

NALSA plays a central coordination and facilitation role in the UTRC functioning. NALSA has spearheaded two campaigns to expedite the UTRC functioning and facilitate the release of prisoners and has also been publishing performance data from the UTRCs, tracking vital data on number of meetings, number of prisoners identified, recommended and released as well as the details of bail applications filed. NALSA has been using this data to evaluate impact, identify gaps and enhance the UTRC functioning.

Since April 2024, UTRC meetings are held on fixed dates, every quarter, nation-wide. This ensures that UTRCs are conducted in a uniform and concerted manner across the country, and that accurate data is collected regarding the UTRC process. As per the figures published for the year 2024, the UTRCs led to the identification of 78,492 prisoners, recommendation of release

for 53,594 prisoners, filing of 39,744 applications, resulting in the release of 25,982 prisoners. This constituted approximately 5% of the total prisoner population. NALSA's continuous supervision and monitoring of the UTRC process has resulted in a marked improvement in functioning. As per reported data, the number of prisoners released pursuant to UTRC recommendations in 2024 is 108% higher than the year 2019.

## V. Challenges and Lessons

These initiatives of NALSA reflect its concerted efforts to expand access to justice, particularly for marginalised and disadvantaged groups. However, several challenges- such as quality of services provided, infrastructure and human resource constraints, and persistent awareness gaps among beneficiaries- continue to impede the full realisation of the mandate of LSIs. A key lesson from NALSA's recent endeavours is the importance of sustained legal literacy and community-level engagement in bridging the awareness gap. Another has been the value of introducing comprehensive standard operating procedures as well as monitoring and evaluation frameworks, which have significantly improved the functioning of mechanisms and enhanced data-driven decision making.

NALSA's initiatives over the past few years have demonstrated a progressive shift in its service delivery model. Through a combination of nationwide awareness campaigns, targeted legal interventions, technological integration and support, NALSA has significantly enhanced the visibility and accessibility of legal services, particularly for children, persons with mental illness, persons with intellectual disabilities and prisoners. Notably, NALSA's initiatives within the prison system – the prison legal aid clinics, the targeted campaigns, etc. – have strengthened access to justice for prisoners.

Nevertheless, despite these advances in increasing access to LSIs and legal services, persistent gaps in quality and accountability of legal services, continue to challenge India's legal aid system. Addressing these issues require a sustained emphasis on monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, which are essential to assess impact and ensure continuous improvement in the legal aid system.

As legal aid systems evolve in response to a changing legal landscape, NALSA's experience underscores that sustained institutional will, strategic planning and community-centric approaches are key to building inclusive, responsive and effective legal aid systems. Going forward, institutionalising these efforts and addressing the remaining gaps will be critical in realising the constitutional promise of equal access to justice for all.

### **Abstract**

*The provision of legal aid services for criminal, civil or administrative matters etc. is critical in upholding the rights of communities at risk, promoting social justice, inclusion and ensuring*

*equal access to justice for all. The economic costs of prolonged and unresolved legal problems and disputes are impacting the rate of development of countries, and are a reason for off-tracking of the SDGs. Access to justice is viewed as a critical enabler of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with access to effective legal aid services being a vital component in addressing the present access to justice crisis.*

*The paper would trace some of the recent initiatives undertaken by the National Legal Services Authority, India to strengthen access to legal aid in India. This would include the adoption of two comprehensive schemes for provision of legal aid to children, persons with mental illness and persons with intellectual disabilities; conduct of campaigns for periodically reviewing cases of unsentenced prisoners and facilitating their release; adoption of the public defender system viz. the Legal Aid Defense Counsel system; strengthening the functioning of legal aid clinics in prisons; use of technology in accessing and managing legal services etc.*