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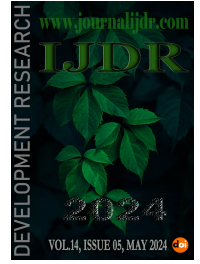
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## THE IMPACT OF LEGAL AID ON LEGAL EMPOWERMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION IN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

The nexus of the fundamentals of legal aid, legal empowerment, and the promotion of human rights is a vast area of research that evaluates people's experiences and aims to give freedom to those who have been treated unjustly.<sup>3</sup> Legal empowerment techniques are increasingly considered a key instrument to combat inequalities in society, exclusion, and human rights violations. Legal empowerment interventions, encompassed by legal literacy and community paralegals, are highly effective in increasing individuals' agency and legal knowledge. They, in turn, allow their access to justice and, in the end, result in positive outcomes such as obtaining legal remedies and the consequent efficient conflict solutions.<sup>4</sup> Legal protection could come with the addition of legal aid which improves the court system's knowledge by judges. Although this does not ensure the trust in judicial institutions and the realisation of one's rights.<sup>5</sup> In fragile and post-conflict contexts, as well as in the situations of displacement for prolonged periods, legal empowerment provides the aid for the agencies of justice, builds up the accountability of authorities, and contributes to the durable solutions for the displaced people.<sup>6</sup> It is a fact that free legal aid is a part of human rights essential for preserving equal access to justice in the guarantees of human rights. There is no doubt that free legal aid will play an important role in the state-obligations to uphold human rights.<sup>7</sup> The independence of the judiciary and the availability of effective legal institutions are two key aspects of protecting human rights, even when the wealth suffers the existence of extralegal variables.<sup>8</sup> Through legal empowerment projects people may gain knowledge of their rights, become financially independent and get rid of all forms of oppression, including women who are the ones, who have the biggest share in societies prosperity.<sup>9</sup> By uniting the legal empowerment with the social accountability strategies both is efficiently used to struggle for redress and fight against the injustices associated with providing basic services, therefore illustrating a collaborative framework or approach to community and institution involvement.<sup>10</sup> Thus, these elements of legal assistance and empowerment are certainly fundamental for strengthening human rights protection and access to justice, especially for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of society. These approaches not only give representatives equal footing to navigate the legal system but also apply to societal transformation issues and improve accountability.<sup>11</sup> The effect legal help has is that it brings more people in the system and ensures that more court proceedings have procedural justice, but more trust is needed in judicial institutions. Nevertheless, legal empowerment will lead to more intense and effective results as a standing mechanism with accountability.

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## INTRODUCTION

Legal aid in corrupt terms of is the solution which leads to the rendering the legal assistance, advise, and representation to a people who cannot be afford to pay for legal services or are not capable of realizing the rights.<sup>12</sup> The principle guarantees that impecunious persons, professionals involved in jurisdiction, and other population members do not treat inequality in law-related spheres on the basis of their socio-economic positions.<sup>13</sup> Legal aid serves as a key element in

the maintenance of the foundations of justice and equality by providing opportune instances when all individuals without exception can defend their rights and interests during a legal process. It should benoted that even though there is a high value placed on this, there is however a wide gap between what is required and what is available internationally (ECAST, 2019). U.N. Justice World Project posits that 5.1 billion people do not have a descent judicial background and true fairness in the justice system. This is a symptom of the manifestation of the urgency of the legal aid provision to level the playing field, such that the court of justice remains open for everyone.<sup>14</sup> Legal

empowerment is defined as empowering the individual and the community to be familiar with, utilize, and engage in legal mechanisms that safeguard their rights. It covers among others equipping individuals with legal information, education and resources that enable them to access vital services and maneuver the legal systems confidently.<sup>15</sup> The principle of legal empowerment of the core focuses on participation, equality, responsibility, and justice. Legal empowerment is a leading strategy to protect fundamental freedoms through empowering people to identify their rights well and then claim them anytime. Through sharing of knowledge and skills essential for navigating the legal systems, legal power enables people to directly criticize injustices, punish wrongdoers and achieve system reforms.<sup>16</sup> Legal aid plays a crucial role in strengthening legal literacy and consequently, the individuals' will to have access to legal services irrespective of wellbeing. It ensures that the groups of people who are minorities or deprived have an equal access to justice, hence an equality before the law thus the justice for all. As a result, legal aid is an important tool for the protection of personal rights and resolving different legal matters such as criminal cases, divorces, or connection issues.<sup>17</sup> To demonstrate this, suppose the rights to a fair trial Jane of legal aid organization makes sure that individuals who are incapable of the court system get the services of competent legal representation in order to avoid miscarriages of justice.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, legal help agency tries protecting those important fundamental rights, including labor rights, property rights and access to vital services. E.g. ensuring equal opportunities in the workplace where there is a case of discrimination or if a tenant has to file an eviction case, legal aid provides an individual with the needed and rightful representation to fight violation of their rights.<sup>19</sup> In India, the role of legal aid has been deemed a basic right as stipulated under article 39A of the Constitution which provides that the State must guarantee free legal assistance to help guarantee that justice is met.<sup>20</sup> The Legal Services Authorities Act (LSA) 1987 was formed which governs the establishment of national and state legal services authorities and district legal services authorities, with the mandate of providing free legal services and promoting access to justice. The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) and State Legal Services Authorities (SLSAs) ensure that the legal aid is implemented in the grass-root level across India. Therefore, there is a proper mechanism to enforce the constitutionally obligated provisions of legal aid. The authorities administer legal assistance through constituting legal aid clinics, lok adalat (people's courts) and other legal awareness programs.<sup>21</sup> Legal aid schemes in India not only include the components that address structural problems but also gender-based violence, the lack of social justice, and the availability of essential services.<sup>22</sup>

**Legal Aid and Access to Justice:** Legal assistance is especially important for the disadvantaged groups who may not always afford to have legal advocates, which they need to avail for them to be able to maneuver the legal system and preserve their rights.<sup>23</sup> The oppressed communities, lower income people, minorities, women, persons with disabilities, and others who have been restricted from seeking the needed legal help, mostly face a systemic protocol that supplants legal help.<sup>24</sup> The legal aid services have the holy task of effecting the bridge between this access gap and help the members of the society who cannot afford a private attorney through their free or at a low cost legal representation. Such Legal aid institutions are specially mandated to render help and support to the specific marginalized Communities in for example immigrants, refugees and victims of domestic violence.<sup>25</sup> While supplying culturally responsive and linguistically diverse components, the legal aid endeavors to make certain that the individuals from various cultural backgrounds can be served with adequate legal representation which is fit to their particular needs and circumstances. As well as that, legal aid programs tend to consult non-governmental organizations and advocacy groups so as to provide outreach to disadvantaged citizens and render comprehensive support services. This system is an integral part of problem solving because it deals with not only the social, economic, and systemic factors but also provides means for addressing the root causes that create legal inequalities and impediments to justice for particular groups of people.<sup>26</sup> Along with extending direct legal representation, legal aid efforts are also conducting programs that

would not only clear up the obstructions but also provide people with legal assistance.<sup>27</sup> These barriers can consist of being unaware of their legal rights and assistance, inaccessibility of outlying areas, language problems, and the inability to have finances for legal services. Legal aid is not available equally among members of the society due to obvious reasons such as low income and limited legal knowledge.<sup>28</sup> Legal organization provide many ways so as to make the service accessible which could be via clinics employment, telephone helpline, or online platform. It could also be transportation assistance offered to clients attending court hearings or meetings.<sup>29</sup> In addition to providing direct services, the legal aid organizations also work towards addressing the systemic problems that impede justice for all.<sup>30</sup> The advocacy efforts include efforts to amend any discriminatory laws or policies, ensure enough funding for the legal aid services, and fill up the knowledge and awareness of legal rights.<sup>31</sup> Legal aid groups function as conduits to increase the welfare and fairness by supporting legislative reforms and various legal reforms.<sup>32</sup> Beyond the fact of providing representation to individuals, legal aid advocates for communities' knowledge and understanding of the law by disseminating it to communities through public education initiatives.<sup>33</sup> The target of these initiatives is to provide citizens with legal knowledge in the form of their rights and responsibilities and the services and legal resources available; furthermore, the community is expected to be proactive in dealing with the legal system.<sup>34</sup> Legal aid organizations serve as a bridge between the educational campaigns and social welfare programs by giving outreach meetings, workshops where legal information is spread and legal knowledge is promoted among the communities that are vulnerable.<sup>35</sup> Through educating people about their rights and legal process, legal aid provides them with the knowledge they need to speak behalf of themselves, prevent the legal issues before they get worse and makes the informed decisions now and in future.<sup>36</sup> In addition, these legal aid programs work together with schools, colleges, and other educational institutions so that legal education gets integrated into the programs and the culture of awareness towards the law is promoted from an early stage. Through legal education and awareness, legal aid assists in moving a society towards greater legal literacy, which can theoretically enable such a society to navigated the multiple complexities of the legal system.<sup>37</sup> Conclusively legal aid serves to facilitation justice by giving legal assistance, remove obstacle to legal services, and enrich the perception of law and education. The aim of legal aid is to improve the situation of the marginalized people as well as to create a system of law that is equal for all, by redressing the imbalances existing within it, and by arming everybody with the right to pursue his own justice.<sup>38</sup>

**Legal Aid: Empowering Individuals, Promoting Justice, and Protecting:** Legal Aid is the key part of equity in justice for everyone, as to declare that only rich or well-connected are entitled to the legal services is the violation of the principle of legal services. In India, legal aid is one of the most essential tools that can be used for strengthening individual and protect the fundamental principles of justice and human rights, which has direct relationship with social equality and justice.<sup>39</sup> The principle of legal aid is not alien to the Indian legal system; it harks back to Dharmashastra, where the king's duty to safeguard the essence of those who are incapable of defending themselves.<sup>40</sup> The legal aid movement of modern India emerged after the sphere of independence of India and acknowledged the necessity of free legal services to the illegal and oppressed sections of the community so that they can enjoy equal access to justice.<sup>41</sup> According to the 42nd constitutional amendment act of 26th January 1976 under Article 39A, it is the mandate of State to see that the functioning of legal system fairly promotes justice on the principle of equal opportunity and provides free legal aid so as to ensure that criminal justice system even for the citizens who are suffering from poverty is within the reach of all people.<sup>42</sup> The basic legal framework for legal aid in India, is primarily written in the Legal Services Authorities Act of 1987.<sup>43</sup> This Act aims at constitution of a nation-wide network that would offer inclined and reliable legal service to poorer sections of society. It does so by establishing varying kinds of authorities and committees at the national, state, district and taluk levels for proper and efficient discharge of the legal aids program.<sup>44</sup> The National Legal

Services Authority (NALSA) is the top most body of this hierarchy and takes complete control of it by formulating policies, principles, and guidelines for legal services across India.<sup>45</sup> The main objective of legal aid in India is to provide no person a chance to be excluded from the justice system by virtue of any physical or monetary handicap. There are beneficiaries such as individuals from the segment of the population from the socioeconomically weaker section, women, the people with disabilities, those who have been trafficked and those who have been affected by natural calamities.<sup>46</sup> Legal aid basically is a combination of many different services, including just having an advice, representation at the court, and a variety of programs that aim to educate and empower citizens.<sup>47</sup> Although India has experienced the successful introduction of a strong legal framework with respective bodies intended to provide access to justice through legal aid services, there are some challenges hindering effectiveness of legal aid in the country.<sup>48</sup> The issues which create a hindrance in its execution are the lack of awareness among the eligible groups, insufficient funding, the inadequacy of qualified lawyers willing to volunteer and bureaucratic red-tapes. In addition, it is necessary to provide more advanced training for volunteers who assist lawyers in legal aid to ensure the high-quality representation.<sup>49</sup> The Legal aid has a considerable influence upon making justice win and upholding human rights through India. It has made justice available and deliverable to millions of vulnerable people without any resources of their own.<sup>50</sup> Key judgments and case law have helped to settle individual petitions while also leading to a coherent system of social justice and equality.<sup>51</sup> Medical clinics are not the only means by which legal aid can help raise legal awareness among the population and assist them in fighting local injustice and oppression.<sup>52</sup> Legal aid in India forms an incomparable foundation of guaranteeing a fair trial opportunity to all groups of people which mostly are the poor and the disadvantaged.<sup>53</sup> It stands for the ideals of equality, social justice, and human rights, which ultimately aims to build a legal system that can be accessed easily quite deliberately by the entire population.<sup>54</sup> Although an appreciable progress has been achieved by provision of legal assistance, more persistence is needed to bear the challenges and to make sure legal aid fulfill the set purposes.<sup>55</sup> Implementing the rule of law compatibly with the human rights dimension and the democratisation is not an issue of law but primarily a matter of morality which urges to keep justice available, affordable and attainable for every person of India.<sup>56</sup>

**Case Studies:** Hussainara Khatoon & Ors vs. Home Secretary, State of Bihar, 1979: In this landmark case, the Supreme Court underscored the right to free legal aid as an essential ingredient of "reasonable, fair, and just" procedure for any accused person who is unable to afford legal services. It highlighted the State's obligation to provide free legal aid to ensure that justice is not denied to any citizen by reason of economic or other disabilities.<sup>57</sup> Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh, 1986: Following this matter, the Supreme Court formulated the principle that the provision of legal processes during all court proceedings to lend a hand to people of low income groups is also a fundamental feature of human rights. The court explained that a scenario in which a defendant cannot access the services of a lawyer through their own means, whether it is due to poverty or unavailability of legal aid, the trial could not be considered as equitable.<sup>58</sup>

**Madhav Hayawadanrao Hoskot vs. State of Maharashtra, 1978:** Here the Supreme Court widened the horizon of the legal aid package encompassing not only the trial period but even the post-trial periods such as the appeal stage. There has been an attachment of a special impreserve with the legal aid being implied constitutional right under Article 21 of the constitution, who has made the process of court deals fairer. The Supreme Court claimed the due process element in a criminal defendant's appeal right is this available aid to them and representation.<sup>59</sup>

**State of Punjab & Ors, 1996:** Thus, the apex Court passed an order which stated that every state should establish Legal Aid Services to make sure that victims of offenses, particularly homicidal ones, get acceptable legal assistance. Providing a victim the right to claim

compensation is the biggest stride in acknowledging the victim's rights in the legal arena and fulfilling social justice.<sup>60</sup>

**The Role of Government and Non-Governmental Organizations:** At present, the provision of legal aid to the underprivileged and economically weaker sections of Indian society is the joint endeavor of both governmental institutions and the NGOs, within which each of them is carrying out huge responsibility. This alliance will play a key role in the law indoctrination and the overall legal aid management within the nation.

#### Government Institutions:

- **National Legal Services Authority (NALSA):** The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) which was set up under Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 at the national level aims to create national-level policy, guidelines, and schemes which will ensure availability of legal services across the country. It serves to communicate and cooperate with the state level authorities regarding the implementation and compliance of the directives meant to provide free legal aid.<sup>61</sup>
- **State Legal Services Authorities (SLSAs):** The states are liable to follow and implement NALSAs policies and schemes at the state level. They gather the community people and help them by conducting legal aid camps, awareness programs, provide free legal services to the poor.<sup>62</sup>
- **District Legal Services Authorities (DLSAs):** As the district level organization, DLSAs encompass a task of communicating the community from the direct point of contact. They have rendered themselves irreplaceable in organizing legal literacy camps, legal rules sessions, and mediation centers to resolve disputes at initial stage without the recourse to the court.<sup>63</sup>
- **Taluk Legal Services Committees (TLSCs):** The establishments of these committees allow for the legal services provision at the grass root level therefore, the people in the rural and remote areas have access to legal aid. They provide assistance with legal awareness and ensure that the well-being of people is the primary focus of their efforts.<sup>64</sup>

**Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs):** NGOs in cooperation with state services are the complement each other and between them they are able to do more than each of them alone – as they are reaching out to communities that often are not within the scope of state funded programs.

#### Their roles include:

1. **Legal Awareness:** The NGO conducts workshops, seminars, and community meetings for the public on their legal rights and on how to get legal aid and how to use it. They are the third party actors who play a crucial part enlightening people on their rights under an array of policies.<sup>65</sup>
2. **Legal Representation and Counseling:** By having a team of lawyers and legal advisers on hand, NGOs can provide pro bono legal advice to the poor and disadvantaged. They help individuals understand the legal system from the beginning which is the process of filing the case to bringing the case in the court.<sup>66</sup>
3. **Advocacy and Policy Intervention:** NGOs take part in advocacy similarly to that, meaning that laws and policies they influence can improve chances to get the justice for weak communities. They strive to overturn deficiencies and reforms of the legal system through such kind of nuts and bolts of practical experiences.<sup>67</sup>
4. **Support and Rehabilitation:** NGOs apart from providing free legal assistance give beneficiaries the room to access personal and social support through groups and social programs which help in dealing with crime and injustice. This differential technique of approach ensures the recovery of personalities and their readjustment in the society atmosphere.<sup>68</sup>

The co-operation of the government and the NGOs in the sector of legal aid is necessary for producing the inclusive legal system which is reachable by all, no matter who they are or their beliefs. While the government acts as the regulator, providing the infrastructure and funds, NGOs play the role of the executors who build on the framework, bring innovation, and reach the disadvantaged members of the society. This is an important partnership that helps to establish justice, universal human rights and the precepts of the rule of law in India so that no citizen finds access to justice barred because of a lack of money or social position.

**Future Directions and Recommendations:** India's legal aid future appears intriguing keeping in mind the possibility for major improvements that may eventually support the underprivileged to access legal aid services. Constructing on the initial structure, we now move on to the updates on legal services with focus directed to the equitable, creative and effective delivery of justice. Here are some future directions and recommendations for strengthening the legal aid system in India.

Here are some future directions and recommendations for strengthening the legal aid system in India:

#### *Technology Integration*

- a. **Digital Platforms:** Create and expand online mediums for legal aid services to help people in places lacking any nearby legal services have an easier time accessing them. One of the major areas is the provision of legal advice online, registration of cases through digital platforms, and court sessions via electronic means.
- b. **Legal Tech Solutions:** Take legal tech solutions development into account; AI-powered legal advice bots would be highly effective in informing the clients about the basics and simplifying a lawyer schedule.

#### *Capacity Building*

- a. **Training and Development:** Increase the levels of professional qualification among the lawyers to improve the quality of legal aid services. It covers issues like providing specialized training to the staff on evidency handling and apprehending complex cases pertaining to women and children or people with disabilities.
- b. **Volunteer Involvement:** Encourage voluntary participation of law school students and legal professionals in the provision of legal aid services. These people can gain professional recognition or reduce study load by the credit hours.

#### *Awareness and Outreach*

- a. **Community Engagement:** Engage more community involvement through legal literacy programs aimed at public outreach enlighten people their legal rights and access to legal aid assistance.
- b. **Targeted Campaigns:** State the legal awareness of the most risk-groups purpose including what rights for them are.

#### *Partnerships and Collaboration*

- a. **NGO and Private Sector Engagement:** Cultivate partnerships with charity organizations and the private sector in order to draw on the effects that these organizations can offer towards achieving legal aid.
- b. **International Collaboration:** Get inspired and involve in to the working of other prevailing human rights aid agencies across the globe, and adopt their way of operating which can be adjusted to the Indian human rights aid model to fit the context.

#### *Monitoring and Evaluation*

- a. **Impact Assessment:** Recently, launch the monitoring and

evaluation tools to judge the impact of legal aid programs and provide suggestions about enhancement of accountability.

- b. **Feedback Mechanisms:** Create feedback tools for beneficiaries where they could tell us what works and what does not work and how to improve our legal aid service based on their views on their experience.

#### **Policy and Legal Reform**

- a. **Legislative Amendments:** Legal Services Authorities should be amended under Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 to deal with the changing needs and other issues on the supply of legal aid.

#### *Specialized Services*

- a. **Focus on Marginalized Groups:** Build legal aid services which value diversity and inclusion by means of which, tribal groups, migrant workers, and the LGBTQ+ community can benefit from targeted services.
- b. **Dispute Resolution Mechanisms:** Consideration of diversification of alternative dispute resolutions as means of mediation and arbitration in providing legal aid should be well-thought-out as such fastens the resolution of issues and relieves the burden from the courts.

It is paramount that all these measures be availed through collaborative effort of all state actors such as the government officials and courts, the private sector, legal community, and from the civil society members. By participating in the collective initiatives, India has an opportunity to develop its legal aid system into more catering, effective and fair one. The legal aid system serves as justice to all.

## **CONCLUSION**

The legal aid system in India that has the central role in the country's justice system to guarantee basic justice to all citizens of the country in the process of imparting independence from the financial status. The Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, created a solid base for such type of services across the whole country, by embrace a comprehensive frame operating from the central level to the grassroots level. With the cooperation of the three major systems which include the NALSA, SLSAs, and DLSAs together with community-based TLSCs, many significant accomplishments have been attained in the journey of serving the needy and the economically poor members of the community. Throughout this time, the struggle for achieving unanimous access has been fought on, and there are several challenges that need to be confronted. As to the final remarks, "the previous steps and directions" offer us a pathway to thought-out improvements of efficiency, normalization rates, as well as the quality of the counsel we are able to provide to the population of our country. Through the applications of technology, creating capacity, developing the level of awareness, formulating partnerships, and keeping a regular but critical assessment of the impact of legal aid services, the state of India may get closer to achieving the directive of constitutional equality for all. Not only is the role of public and non-profit organizations, law communities, and society essential in this respect, but also this role cannot be underestimated. The future of legal aid in India contains the seed of introducing the totally just and unbiased justice system. Through incorporating changes denoted by dedication to further improvements also, India, through having a system which serves as a beacon of hope, fairness and justice, in particular, to those who are the most in need, the legal aid system within India.

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