



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# THE ROLE OF LEGAL AID IN ADVANCING HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA IN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

The confluence of legal aid, human rights, and social justice has been growing in significance in the age of the internet, particularly in the guise of social media influence. Social media has functioned as an influential human rights force with increasing voices, outlining key law problems, and accelerating public discourse. Legal aid organizations can spread legal facts in timely ways, push for policy reforms, and respond to human rights violations in real time through the platforms of social media like Facebook, whatsapp, X, and Instagram. In India, legal aid has been an important instrument in the provision of access to justice for marginalized groups. Legal aid organizations now have a new powerful platform to advance human rights and social justice. Social media campaigns have also enabled these organizations to put governments on the accountability track, generate public opinion for legal changes, and enable citizens to demand justice. This abstract discusses how social media has aided legal aid work towards social justice promotion, more so in the provision of public education, development of online communities for advocacy, and enabling citizens to stand up for justice. This paper, through examples and case studies, highlights the employment of digital means to bridge the access deficit to legal services, install a culture of social justice, and promote human rights in India.

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## INTRODUCTION

Legal aid is a valuable tool to promote human rights and social justice, especially in a nation like India where there are deep-seated socio-economic disparities. Legal aid has transformed the way legal aid is delivered with greater accessibility for marginalized and under-represented groups through social media. India, being a populous country with a complicated legal system, has always faced challenges in ensuring equal access to justice. With the primary goal of providing free legal aid to the most vulnerable segments of society, the Legal Services Authorities Act of 1987 institutionalized the Indian legal aid system; nonetheless, access to justice continues to be a problem. Legal aid in India is intended to make legal services available to every citizen, independent of economic means. It is aimed mainly at weaker sections including women, children, Dalits, tribals, economically weaker sections, and marginalized minorities. The government has established several legal aid schemes to deliver free representation in courts, but the implementation is hindered by underfunding, administrative delays, and ignorance among the very people who need it most. The major challenges in delivering legal aid are: Most people, especially those living in rural and remote locations, do not know that legal aid services are available. Physical legal aid offices can be too far away for individuals who reside in rural areas, and it becomes hard to reach legal aid. Legal aid organizations can be under-staffed and over-worked, leading to poor representation. Social media websites have quickly emerged as strong instruments of advocacy and education. They offer a platform to reach out to masses at low costs, and hence they are a strong vehicle for social change, particularly in a

nation like India. In legal aid, social media breaks down most of the historical barriers to access by: social media can be employed to raise awareness of human rights, legal protections, and social justice concerns. X and Instagram can be used to give voice to marginalized groups, highlighting injustices that would otherwise go unreported. Numerous organizations and advocates are leveraging social media to post accessible and comprehensible legal information. Sites such as YouTube, Twitter threads, and Facebook posts dissect intricate legal ideas into manageable, easy-to-grasp morsels, which is vital for making the law more accessible to the public. Social media has also enabled online consultations. Legal experts, non-governmental organizations, and human rights agencies provide free legal advice through live sessions, webinars, and question-and-answer sessions. Through these forums, people can connect with legal experts without the need to travel long distances to consult them face-to-face. Social media offers a space for mobilization in groups. Hashtags like #MeToo, #JusticeForJayarajAndFenix, or #SaveAadhaar have raised social injustices and human rights abuses to public awareness, precipitating legal actions, protests, and petitions. Social media facilitate the rapid mobilization of popular support for causes of legal and social justice. Social media platforms also provide a platform for human rights activists to interact directly with policy-makers, create public pressure, and impact legal reforms. For instance, social media campaigns such as #RightToProtest<sup>1</sup> and #JusticeForNirbhaya<sup>2</sup> had major contributions to make towards shaping the conversation regarding women's safety laws and laws regarding public protest.

<sup>1</sup>#Right To Protest

<sup>2</sup>#Justice For Nirbhaya

The contribution of legal aid in promoting human rights and social justice via social media in India is an emerging and important field. The growing use of social media in India offers a platform that is easily accessible to promote social justice causes, share legal information, and give voice to marginalized communities. Legal aid groups are using these websites to advance human rights and increase social justice by the following methods: Social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are being employed by legal aid groups to make people aware of and bring attention to human rights abuses throughout the nation. Through disseminating legal rights information, citizens are in a better position to comprehend their rights and are aware of where to obtain legal assistance when it is needed. The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA)<sup>3</sup> and different non-government organizations (NGOs) utilize social media to initiate campaigns on topics like gender equality, disability rights, education access, poverty eradication, and environmental justice. The campaigns educate people about their rights and the available mechanisms for legal assistance. Access to legal advice using social media avails dissemination of legal literacy in masse, mainly in remote and rural settings where traditional access to law is unavailable. Online pages and campaigns over social media channels offer handy links to material available for study like videos, papers, and information graphics for enhancing the populace's understanding of the law in the context of rights. Resources such as iPleaders<sup>4</sup> and ministry portals of the Ministry of Law and Justice, India, are offering easy-to-reach legal information, and it becomes easy for ordinary individuals to understand how the law operates and how they can utilize the same in pursuing rights. Advisory legal advice, counselling, and services are being provided through social media platforms by lawyers and legal aid societies. Legal aid organizations employ platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, or even live sessions through Instagram or Twitter to provide free consultation to deserving individuals. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some legal aid societies in India began offering online legal aid through Zoom and WhatsApp for consultations regarding labour rights, domestic violence, and contract dispute.

Social networking is a way of campaigning for legal reforms and justice. Online petitions, viral campaigns, and online activism by legal aid organizations are employed to campaign for amendments in laws dealing with marginalized people, such as discrimination laws, caste violence legislation, gender violence legislation, and refugee rights legislations. They also demand increased funding, policy support, and legal process simplification so that more individuals can be provided with access to justice. This can be in the form of calls for intervention by the government to ensure that individuals in need of legal aid are able to access the same without much trouble, particularly for marginalized sections like women, children, poor workers, and indigenous people. Social media movements like #JusticeForAll draw the public's eye towards the necessity of legal aid services for economically distressed people and struggle for more investment in legal aid services across the country. The online mobilization in the anti-CAA protests (Citizenship Amendment Act) used social media to mobilize protests, post legal information for protesters, and disseminate legal aid information regarding what rights a person had in the protests. Social media gives legal aid organizations a platform through which they can advocate for women's rights and gender justice. Social media helps legal aid organizations provide relief to marginalized groups such as Dalits, Adivasis, migrants, refugees, and the LGBTQIA+ community. The Right to Information (RTI) campaign has been aided on social media, where activists and legal aid organizations utilize the media to inform the public on how to make RTI petitions and utilize the law to advocate for transparency in government procedures. In India, legal aid institutions are increasingly utilizing social media as an effective vehicle for promoting human rights and achieving social justice. Social media also allows them to network, collaborate, and connect, such that legal aid reaches its destination where it is needed, without geographical or socio-economic gaps.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of human rights, legal aid, and social justice significantly contributes to the establishment of an equitable society. In India, given the disparity in access to justice is abysmal, legal aid services have a fundamental role to support the weaker sectors, promote human rights, and achieve social justice. Social media has, in recent years, emerged as a powerful tool to complement legal aid schemes by creating awareness, mobilizing individuals, and spreading information. Legal assistance in India is the delivery of free legal aid to people who cannot afford to pay for the services of legal professionals. The Indian judicial system recognizes the right to justice as a constitutional right, incorporated under Articles 14, 21, and 39A of the Indian Constitution. To bridge the gap between the legal system and economically poor and disadvantaged sections of society, legal aid is required. While India's justice system has an egalitarian ideology, it is primarily stalled by its slow court procedures, high charges, and lack of legal advice, especially for the poor and disadvantaged. Legal aid, as per Choudhury (2018)<sup>5</sup>, is a method of gaining access to such basic rights, which make them not abstractions but actual rights to be realized by legal recourse. Legal aid has been the central approach to ensuring human rights violations in India, particularly among marginalized and vulnerable sections. The Indian judicial system is plagued by procedural delays and intricacy in accessing legal aid. Mishra (2019)<sup>6</sup> further adds that bureaucratic inefficiencies and slow court procedures can weaken the efficacy of legal aid and limit access to justice on a timely basis to the deserving individuals. Moreover, there is general ignorance regarding legal aid facilities among the poor and weaker sections of society, which again limits access to justice. Sharma (2018)<sup>7</sup> discusses how caste-based discrimination and patriarchal thought tend to mean women and Dalits being excluded from gaining access to justice. Legal aid has also been significant in advancing environmental justice, as it was the case in the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. Rao (2019)<sup>8</sup> emphasizes the contribution of legal aid in ensuring that gender-based violence victims received legal assistance to confront perpetrators and access justice. Legal aid has also played an important role in promoting environmental justice, as was evident in the Bhopal Gas Tragedy case. As per a research work by Bhagwati and Desai (2012)<sup>9</sup>, legal aid makes it possible for victims of human rights abuses to have access to judicial protection and remedies. For instance, legal aid facilities have played a significant role in establishing justice for victims of violence based on caste, gender discrimination, and abuse of labour rights. Legal aid has also played a crucial role in speaking up for the rights of individuals with disabilities, providing them with access to education and employment. Kumar's (2015)<sup>10</sup> study identifies the ways in which legal aid organizations have championed the rights of people with disabilities, highlighting instances of discrimination and denial of accessibility. Various legal aid organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in India utilize social media as a tool for advocacy, often carrying out online campaigns to educate people about their legal rights. For example, AIDWA (All India Democratic Women's Association) has utilized social media to initiate campaigns based on women's rights and legal aid services. Social media has been shown to be an effective means of exposing human rights abuses, as quoted by Roy (2017)<sup>11</sup>. Social media campaigns such as #MeToo and #Justice

<sup>5</sup>Choudhury, P. (2018). "Human Rights and Legal Aid in India: A Critical Analysis." *Journal of Human Rights and Development*, 22(4), 102-118.

<sup>6</sup>Mishra, R. (2019). "Challenges in the Legal Aid System in India." *Indian Law Review*, 18(2), 45-60.

<sup>7</sup>Sharma, A. (2018). "The Intersection of Legal Aid and Caste-based Discrimination." *Journal of Social Justice and Law*, 12(4), 200-214.

<sup>8</sup>Rao, S. (2019). "Gender Justice and Legal Aid: The Role of Legal Services in the Fight Against Sexual Harassment." *Journal of Gender and Law*, 28(3), 142-156.

<sup>9</sup>Bhagwati, P. N., & Desai, M. (2012). *Access to Justice and Legal Aid in India*. Indian Law Journal, 22(1), 15-27.

<sup>10</sup>Kumar, A. (2015). *Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Legal Aid in India*. Disability Law Review, 5(2), 50-67.

<sup>11</sup>Roy, S. (2017). *The Role of Social Media in Human Rights Advocacy in India*. South Asian Studies, 12(1), 77-89.

<sup>3</sup>The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA)

<sup>4</sup>iPleaders (2022). Legal Literacy Programs

For Jyoti Singh did not only stir public consciousness but also compelled the government into action. Social media makes individuals mobilize and circulate information with lightning speed, and that is what causes unparalleled social and political upheavals. Chakraborty (2019)<sup>12</sup> explains the ways through which institutions like The Legal Aid Society and HRLN (Human Rights Law Network) are leveraging social media by uploading legal documents, holding advice sessions, and highlighting the worth of legal assistance to underprivileged groups. Sharma and Bansal (2020)<sup>13</sup> argue that social media has democratized legal aid in India, making citizens able to approach lawyers and legal experts for consultation in real-time. Singh (2021)<sup>14</sup> finds that sites like Ketto and Milaap, where crowd funding occurs, have been exploited by legal aid agencies to obtain money for litigants unable to afford attorneys' fees so that more citizens can have access to justice. Srinivasan (2018)<sup>15</sup> also points out the difficulties of dealing with misinformation, which can complicate legal procedures and reduce the efficacy of legal aid. This digital divide can also mean that social media cannot be as efficient in reaching every section of society, particularly the most marginalized ones. Ravi and Pandey (2020)<sup>16</sup> believe that a hybrid approach that merges the conventional legal aid with digital outreach is needed so that no one is left behind.

## CASE STUDIES: IMPACT OF LEGAL AID ON HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION

Several such cases have taken place in the past where legal aid has proven to be instrumental in the vindication of human rights in India. Women across India began sharing their stories, emphasizing the necessity of a law to address sexual harassment. Women's rights organizations and legal practitioners offered free consultation services to victims through social media websites, where they were educated on the legal process and what their rights are when they were being harassed. Legal aid organizations used social media platforms to raise awareness about the case. The case shows how the use of social media facilitated the spread of information regarding legal proceedings and triggered both institutional and public support for women's rights. The Karamchari Union v. State of Haryana (2009)<sup>17</sup> is a common example where legal assistant was invoked to be employed to safeguard the Dalit labourers, who were sexually harassed and exploited by the employers. The Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan case (1997)<sup>18</sup> led to the formulation of the Vishaka Guidelines, which were later incorporated into India's Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013. Legal aid has allowed for the filing of Public Interest Litigation (PIL) that have promoted the cause of human rights in India. Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India (1984)<sup>19</sup>, which grappled with the question of bonded labour, illustrate how legal aid has become a force enabling human rights cause. Legal aid has been especially important for Dalits, Adivasis, and other marginalized communities. Legal aid programs have assisted in cases of caste-based discrimination, violence against women, and indigenous people's rights. Laxmi v. Union of India (2014)<sup>20</sup>, The victim teenager Laxmi was represented by legal aid. The Supreme Court of India issued a landmark verdict directing the government to enact a rule for sale of acid and compensation to the victims of acid attacks. The case made substantial changes in law making the right of survivors of acid attacks secure. National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India (2014)<sup>21</sup>, case The Supreme

Court recognized the rights of transgenders and gave them equal rights and social welfare schemes. The case gave strength to transgender individuals and gave them rights in the Constitution regarding education, employment, and healthcare and legal aid that gave them access to justice. Delhi Domestic Working Women's Forum v. Union of India (1995)<sup>22</sup>, Legal assistance was offered to numerous domestic workers that were abused and exploited. The court decision brought warranted examination of domestic workers' rights, who remain too frequently economically disconnected, towards enjoying greater safeguards and labour legislation changes. Shreya Singhal v. Union of India (2015)<sup>23</sup>, In this pathbreaking case, the Supreme Court of India declared unconstitutional Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, 2000. The judgment was specific to focus on the protection of online speech and highlighted the significance of legal aid in cyberspace to protect human rights. Mouthshut.com v. Union of India (2015)<sup>24</sup>, The matter was Mouthshut.com, a consumer review website, appealing against the validity of Section 66A of the I.T. Act. The Supreme Court's decision to strike down the Section 66A of the Information and Technology Act provision claimed to protect online speech and emphasized the need for law structures that serve social justice online. Such events highlight the compelling role of legal aid to further human rights and social justice through social media in India to ensure that legal mechanisms protect the rights of individuals within the evolving virtual world.

## CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

While social media holds tremendous promise, there are a few challenges that must be overcome: social media is a double-edged sword. Misinformation regarding legal proceedings and rights can go viral and harm individuals who use it as a source of information. Public discussion on legal issues via social media can reveal intimate personal information, causing invasions of privacy. Despite rising internet penetration, a large majority of the Indian population, and especially rural masses, lack guaranteed internet access. This digital gap restricts the use of legal aid through social media. As crucial as legal aid is, various obstacles discourage legal aid from being effective. Legal aid schemes are limited by funds, and therefore only a small number of potential beneficiaries can benefit from it. Long delays, overloaded legal aid lawyers, and administrative obstacles too frequently translate into delays that erode the quality of the legal services. Additionally, poor, and vulnerable subpopulations, such as women, racial minorities, refugees, and poor individuals, also frequently experience additional obstacles to access to legal aid.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To make legal aid systems better, there are some things that can be done. Increased funding and resources are needed, as well as the outreach of legal aid services to rural regions. Legal aid must be given priority by governments as a core component of ensuring human rights protection. Besides, innovative measures such as internet-based legal services, free legal assistance, and travelling legal clinics can ease some of the barriers to access. Legal training also needs to address social justice and human rights so that future lawyers are equipped to respond to these challenges. To ensure the maximum use of social media for human rights and social justice through legal aid, the following can be done: Legal professionals can be trained to make effective use of social media as a tool to provide legal aid and information. Coalitions between NGOs, legal aid centres, and social media sites can develop a stronger channel for providing legal assistance. To combat disinformation, there needs to be a system of regulation that will ensure the precision and reliability of the legal information provided. Digital literacy among marginalized communities and rural communities is the key to empowering such communities to benefit from legal assistance offered through social media.

<sup>12</sup>Chakraborty, A. (2019). *Legal Aid and Social Media Advocacy*. Journal of Legal Studies, 34(3), 45-63.

<sup>13</sup>Sharma, N., & Bansal, R. (2020). *The Digital Revolution in Legal Aid: A Case Study of India*. International Journal of Legal Aid, 7(4), 25-39.

<sup>14</sup>Singh, M. (2021). *Crowdsourcing Legal Aid in India Through Social Media*. Journal of Public Interest Law, 6(2), 81-96.

<sup>15</sup>Srinivasan, S. (2018). *Challenges of Legal Information on Social Media*. Journal of Indian Social Media Studies, 9(2), 34-46.

<sup>16</sup>Ravi, V., & Pandey, P. (2020). *Social Media and the Digital Divide in Legal Aid Access*. Indian Journal of Technology and Law, 11(4), 115-129.

<sup>17</sup>The Karamchari Union v. State of Haryana 2009 (2) S.C.C. 292

<sup>18</sup>Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan 1997 (6) SCC 241

<sup>19</sup>Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India (1984) 3 SCC 161

<sup>20</sup>Laxmi v. Union of India, (2014) 4 SCC 427.

<sup>21</sup>National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, (2014) 5 SCC 438.

<sup>22</sup>Delhi Domestic Working Women's Forum v. Union of India, AIR 1995 SC 1031.

<sup>23</sup>Shreya Singhal v. Union of India (2015) 5 SCC 1

<sup>24</sup>Mouthshut.com v. Union of India (2015) 7 SCC 51

## CONCLUSION

The intersection of legal aid and social media in India offers rich angles for the enhancement of social justice and human rights. Social media has facilitated legal aid organizations to educate, lobby, and mobilize the masses, thus enhancing access to justice. Misinformation, privacy, and the digital divide are some of the hurdles to be cleared to harness the potential of social media for promoting legal aid services. With the advancement of technology, the interplay between digital technologies and conventional legal aid systems will increasingly form an integral part of empowering human rights and social justice movements in India. The alliance between legal aid and human rights is instrumental in the realization of social justice. Legal aid is an essential vehicle for ensuring that people, particularly those who belong to marginalized communities, have access to justice and can defend their human rights. Social media has become a major instrument in the advancement of human rights and social justice in India. It plays a critical role in enabling marginalized communities' access to legal aid and pleading the cause of legal reform. Against all odds, the ability of social media in raising legal aid voices and impacting social change is tremendous. While online media platforms keep on upgrading, Indian legal aid can be moulded towards a better tomorrow using these channels by providing justice for everyone.

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