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# Tele-Law and Access to Justice — Bridging India's Legal Aid Gap Through Technology

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## ▼ On this Page

- [Tele-Law and Access to Justice — Bridging India's Legal Aid Gap Through Technology](#)

- 01 [Constitutional Foundation — Article 39A](#)
- 02 [The DISHA Scheme — An Umbrella...](#)
- 03 [Tele-Law Programme — Evolution and Impact](#)
- 04 [Nyaya Setu — AI-Powered Legal Assistance](#)
- 05 [India's Legal Aid Gap — The...](#)
- 06 [Global Comparison — Legal Aid Models](#)
- 07 [Significance of the National Consultation 2026](#)

## Tele-Law and Access to Justice — Bridging India's Legal Aid Gap Through Technology

The Department of Justice, Ministry of Law and Justice, is organising the **Tele-Law National Consultation 2026** on **March 29, 2026** at Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi, with Vice-President **C.P. Radhakrishnan** as Chief Guest and Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Law and Justice **Arjun Ram Meghwal** as Guest of Honour — marking a landmark policy dialogue on technology-enabled access to justice under the DISHA scheme.

The Consultation comes at a critical juncture when India's judiciary faces an unprecedented backlog of over **5.5 crore pending cases** across all court levels, and **76% of India's prison population** comprises undertrial prisoners awaiting trial. The event will launch the **“Voice of Beneficiaries” Booklet 2025-26**, the **Nyaya Setu AI-powered chatbot mascot**, a **White Paper on Tele-Law services**, and **legal awareness comic books** developed with National Law University, Delhi.

## CONSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATION — ARTICLE 39A

### Equal Justice and Free Legal Aid

**Article 39A** of the Indian Constitution is a **Directive Principle of State Policy (DPSP)** inserted by the **Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976**. It directs the State to ensure that the operation of the legal system promotes justice on a basis of **equal opportunity**, and mandates the provision of **free legal aid** through suitable legislation or schemes so that no citizen is denied justice by reason of economic or other disabilities.

Article 39A is not merely aspirational. The Supreme Court, in **Hussainara Khatoon v. State of Bihar (1979)**, read it with **Article 21 (Right to Life and Personal Liberty)** to hold that **free legal aid is a fundamental right** of every accused person who cannot afford a lawyer. This landmark ruling transformed a DPSP into an enforceable constitutional obligation.

### Legislative Implementation

The constitutional mandate of Article 39A was operationalised through the **Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987**, which was enacted on **November 9, 1987** but came into force only on **November 9, 1995**. The Act established a tiered institutional framework for delivering free legal services across the country.

INSTITUTION	ESTABLISHED UNDER	SCOPE
<b>NALSA</b> (National Legal Services Authority)	Section 3, LSA Act 1987	National policy, fund allocation, Lok Adalats
<b>SCLSC</b> (Supreme Court Legal Services Committee)	Section 3A	Legal services at SC level
<b>HCLSC</b> (High Court Legal Services Committees)	Section 8A	Legal services at HC level
<b>SLSA</b> (State Legal Services Authorities)	Section 6	State-level implementation
<b>DLSA</b> (District Legal Services Authorities)	Section 9	District-level legal aid delivery
<b>TLSC</b> (Taluk Legal Services Committees)	Section 11A	Taluk/sub-district level

The **Chief Justice of India** serves as the Patron-in-Chief of NALSA, and the **second senior-most judge of the Supreme Court** is the Executive Chairman. As of 2025, NALSA operates through **38 High Court Legal Services Committees, 37 State Legal Services Authorities, 715 District Legal Services Authorities, and 2,475 Taluk Legal Services Committees**.

## THE DISHA SCHEME — AN UMBRELLA FRAMEWORK

### Design and Objectives

The **Designing Innovative Solutions for Holistic Access to Justice (DISHA)** scheme is a **Central Sector Scheme** launched in **2021** by the Department of Justice for a five-year period (**2021-2026**) with a total outlay of **Rs 250 crore**. DISHA serves as the umbrella framework for multiple technology-driven legal aid programmes aimed at bridging the access-to-justice gap for marginalised and rural populations.

### Component Programmes Under DISHA

COMPONENT	PURPOSE	KEY METRIC
<b>Tele-Law: Reaching the Unreached</b>	Pre-litigation legal advice via video/tele-conferencing at CSCs	1.03 crore+ consultations delivered
<b>Nyaya Bandhu</b>	Pro-bono legal services by registered volunteer lawyers	Connects citizens with free lawyers
<b>Nyaya Mitra</b>	Assists undertrials who have served half their maximum sentence	Facilitates release of eligible prisoners
<b>Legal Literacy and Legal Awareness Programme</b>	Pan-India awareness campaigns across all States/UTs (2021-2026)	Targets first-generation legal awareness

By **February 2025**, the DISHA scheme through its various programmes had reached approximately **2.10 crore beneficiaries** across the country. The government initiated a **third-party audit** of the DISHA scheme in mid-2025 ahead of its 2026 completion deadline to assess impact, identify gaps, and inform the design of a successor programme.

## TELE-LAW PROGRAMME — EVOLUTION AND IMPACT

### Genesis and Expansion

The **Tele-Law programme** was launched on **June 6, 2017** by then Union Law Minister **Ravi Shankar Prasad**. It began as a pilot in **1,800 Common Service Centres (CSCs)** across **11 states** — Bihar (500 CSCs), Uttar Pradesh (500 CSCs), all eight North-Eastern states, and Jammu and Kashmir (800 CSCs). The programme connects citizens in rural and semi-urban areas with **panel lawyers** through **video/tele-conferencing** facilities available at gram panchayat-level CSCs, operated by **Village Level Entrepreneurs (VLEs)**.

The service expanded dramatically under DISHA. **Tele-Law 2.0** was launched in **2022-23** to upgrade the programme with a dedicated mobile application, a toll-free helpline (**14454**), and integration with the UMANG platform.

MILESTONE	YEAR	ACHIEVEMENT
Tele-Law pilot launch	June 2017	1,800 CSCs in 11 states
4 lakh beneficiaries	October 2020	Crossed during COVID-19 pandemic
9 lakh beneficiaries	July 2021	369% growth in one year
Tele-Law 2.0 launch	2022-23	Mobile app + toll-free number 14454
50 lakh beneficiaries	August 2023	Halfway to 1 crore target
1.03 crore consultations	November 2024	Target achieved ahead of deadline
2.5 lakh Gram Panchayats	2024-25	Operational in 785 districts, 36 States/UTs

### How Tele-Law Works

A citizen visits the nearest **Common Service Centre** at the gram panchayat level and registers their legal query with the **Para-Legal Volunteer (PLV)** or VLE. The PLV schedules a **video or telephone consultation** with a panel lawyer. The lawyer provides **pre-litigation advice** — guidance on legal rights, options, and remedies — helping the citizen understand whether formal litigation is necessary, what documents are needed, or whether alternative dispute resolution mechanisms like **Lok Adalats** can resolve the issue.

The service is **free of cost** for all citizens, with no income ceiling or eligibility restriction. This is a significant departure from NALSA’s legal aid framework under Section 12 of the LSA Act 1987, which restricts free legal aid to specific categories (SC/ST, women, children, disabled, industrial workmen, victims of trafficking, etc.).

## NYAYA SETU — AI-POWERED LEGAL ASSISTANCE

### Launch and Features

The **Nyaya Setu** (meaning “Justice Bridge”) AI-powered chatbot was launched by the Ministry of Law and Justice on **January 1, 2026**, integrated directly into **WhatsApp**. Citizens can access the service by saving the official number **7217711814** and initiating a chat. After a simple verification process, the chatbot guides users through a structured menu of legal topics.

### Scope of Legal Guidance

Nyaya Setu provides AI-powered preliminary legal information across a wide range of matters:

- **Family and matrimonial issues** — divorce, child custody, maintenance, domestic violence protections
- **Property and tenancy disputes** — lease agreements, eviction, inheritance, land records
- **Criminal law basics** — FIR filing, bail procedures, rights of the accused

- **Corporate and commercial law** — company registration, GST queries, labour disputes
- **Consumer protection** — filing complaints, e-commerce disputes, deficiency of service

### Integration with Legal Aid Ecosystem

Nyaya Setu is not a standalone tool. It is integrated with **Tele-Law** and **Nyaya Bandhu** (the pro-bono lawyer network). If the AI determines that a query requires professional legal intervention, it facilitates a connection with a **panel of pro-bono or registered lawyers** for a deeper consultation. This seamless handoff from AI triage to human legal counsel represents a significant innovation in India’s legal aid delivery model.

## INDIA’S LEGAL AID GAP — THE NUMBERS

### Judicial Backlog

India’s judiciary faces a staggering backlog that directly undermines the promise of Article 39A. As of early 2026, approximately **5.58 crore (55.8 million) cases** are pending across all courts — with **85% of these (approximately 4.9 crore)** concentrated in district courts alone.

COURT LEVEL	PENDING CASES (APPROX.)	KEY CHALLENGE
<b>Supreme Court</b>	~80,000	Constitutional matters delayed years
<b>High Courts</b>	~60 lakh (6 million)	Writ petitions, appeals pending 5+ years
<b>District Courts</b>	~4.9 crore (49 million)	85% of all pendency; 1.72 crore cases pending 5+ years
<b>Total</b>	~5.58 crore (55.8 million)	Estimated cost to GDP: over 2%

The average judge in India handles over **2,200 cases**, and India’s total judiciary budget for 2026-27 is approximately **\$540 million**, representing roughly **0.08% of the national budget**. The judge-to-population ratio remains critically low — India has approximately **21 judges per million population**, compared to **50 per million in the UK** and **107 per million in the USA**.

### Undertrial Crisis

The undertrial prisoner crisis is one of the most visible consequences of India’s legal aid deficit. According to the **India Justice Report 2025** and **NCRB Prison Statistics**:

- **76% of India’s prison population** (~4.39 lakh out of ~5.77 lakh prisoners) are **undertrials** — persons awaiting trial who have not been convicted
- This percentage has risen from **66% in 2012** to **76% in 2025**
- Over **11,448 undertrials** have spent **more than 5 years** in pre-trial detention — a number that has **tripled since 2012**

- **Uttar Pradesh** leads with approximately **1.10 lakh undertrials**, followed by **Bihar (60,000)** and **Maharashtra (34,000)**

The government's **Legal Aid Defence Counsel System (LADCS)**, implemented through NALSA since FY 2023-24, has made tangible progress: **2,76,476 undertrial prisoners** received legal representation in FY 2025-26 (up to December 2025), leading to the **release of 59,630 undertrials**. LADCS offices are now functional in **680 districts**.

### **Legal Aid Delivery Statistics**

In FY 2025-26, over **16.6 lakh persons** received free legal aid and advice across the country through NALSA's institutional network. While this represents significant progress, it remains a fraction of the estimated demand — with crores of citizens involved in pending litigation, the gap between legal aid supply and demand remains vast.

## **GLOBAL COMPARISON — LEGAL AID MODELS**

### **United Kingdom**

The **Legal Aid Agency (LAA)** administers legal aid in England and Wales. Before the **Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (LASPO) 2012**, the UK spent approximately **GBP 2 billion per year** on legal aid — a per capita spend of approximately **GBP 39 per person**, the highest in the world. Post-LASPO reforms reduced spending by **38% in real terms** between 2010-11 and 2015-16 (from GBP 2.6 billion to GBP 1.6 billion), removing many civil cases from legal aid scope.

### **United States**

The **Legal Services Corporation (LSC)**, established by Congress in **1974**, is the single largest funder of civil legal aid for low-income Americans. For **FY 2026**, Congress approved a **\$540 million appropriation** for LSC (a 3.6% cut from the FY 2025 level of \$560 million). LSC distributes over 94% of its funding as grants to **130 independent nonprofit legal aid organisations** serving approximately **6.4 million Americans** annually.

## Comparison Table

PARAMETER	INDIA (DISHA + NALSA)	UK (LEGAL AID AGENCY)	USA (LSC)
<b>Annual Budget</b>	~Rs 250 crore (5 years total)	~GBP 1.6 billion/year	~\$540 million/year
<b>Per Capita Spend</b>	~Rs 1.8 per person	~GBP 27 per person	~\$1.6 per person
<b>Beneficiaries/Year</b>	~16.6 lakh (legal aid) + 2.1 crore (DISHA total)	~1.5 million cases/year	~6.4 million/year
<b>Delivery Model</b>	CSC-based tele-law + NALSA courts	Solicitor firms + Legal Aid Agency	Nonprofit grantees
<b>AI/Tech Integration</b>	Nyaya Setu AI chatbot (2026)	Online portals	Limited

India’s per capita legal aid spending is among the lowest of any major democracy. While the DISHA scheme and Tele-Law programme have dramatically expanded reach through technology, the total outlay of Rs 250 crore over five years remains modest compared to the scale of unmet legal need.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NATIONAL CONSULTATION 2026

### Key Launches and Outcomes Expected

The Vigyan Bhawan consultation on March 29, 2026 is expected to serve as a platform for:

- **Launch of the “Voice of Beneficiaries” Booklet 2025-26** — documenting transformative impact stories from Tele-Law users across States
- **Unveiling of the Nyaya Setu AI chatbot mascot** — for broader public awareness campaigns
- **Release of a White Paper** consolidating expert recommendations on scaling Tele-Law services post-2026
- **Legal awareness comic books** developed in collaboration with **National Law University, Delhi** — targeting youth and first-time users with simplified legal concepts
- **Commemoration of 150 years of “Vande Mataram”** — a special cultural segment integrated into the proceedings

### Policy Significance

The Consultation is significant because the DISHA scheme’s original five-year term (2021-2026) is concluding. Deliberations at Vigyan Bhawan are expected to shape the design of the **successor scheme** — including questions of enhanced budgetary allocation, deeper AI integration, expansion of Nyaya Setu’s capabilities, and

convergence of Tele-Law with the **e-Courts Mission Mode Project** and the **National Judicial Data Grid (NJDG)**.

#### UPSC RELEVANCE

Article 39A, 42nd Amendment 1976, NALSA (established 1995), Legal Services Authorities Act 1987, DISHA scheme (2021-2026), Tele-Law (launched 2017), Nyaya Setu chatbot (January 2026), Section 12 of LSA Act, Hussainara Khatoon case (1979).

#### MAINS GS-II:

Right to free legal aid as a fundamental right under Article 21 read with Article 39A; role of NALSA; technology-driven governance (Tele-Law, Nyaya Setu); access to justice for marginalised communities; judicial reforms.

#### MAINS GS-IV:

Ethical obligation of the State to ensure equal justice; digital divide as a barrier to justice delivery.

## ★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

### ARTICLE 39A — CONSTITUTIONAL BASIS:

Inserted by the 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1976

Part of Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV)

Read with Article 21 in Hussainara Khatoon v. State of Bihar (1979) to make free legal aid a fundamental right

Operationalised through the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 (enforced November 9, 1995)

### NALSA — INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK:

Patron-in-Chief: Chief Justice of India

Executive Chairman: Second senior-most judge of the Supreme Court

First Executive Chairman: Justice K. Ramaswamy (1995)

Network: 38 HC Legal Services Committees + 37 SLSAs + 715 DLSAs + 2,475 TLSCs

November 9 every year: National Legal Services Day

FY 2025-26: Over 16.6 lakh persons received free legal aid

### DISHA SCHEME:

Full form: Designing Innovative Solutions for Holistic Access to Justice

Type: Central Sector Scheme

Duration: 2021-2026 (5 years)

Total Outlay: Rs 250 crore

Components: Tele-Law, Nyaya Bandhu, Nyaya Mitra, Legal Literacy Programme

Total beneficiaries (by Feb 2025): ~2.10 crore

### TELE-LAW PROGRAMME:

Launched: June 6, 2017 by Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad

Initial coverage: 1,800 CSCs in 11 states

Current coverage: 2,50,000 CSCs across 785 districts in 36 States/UTs

Consultations delivered: 1.03 crore+ (target achieved November 2024)

Delivery channels: CSC video-conferencing, Tele-Law Mobile App, Toll-free number 14454

Cost to citizen: Free (no income ceiling or eligibility restriction)

Tele-Law 2.0: Launched 2022-23 with mobile app + UMANG integration

#### **NYAYA SETU AI CHATBOT:**

Launched: January 1, 2026 by Ministry of Law and Justice

Platform: WhatsApp (number: 7217711814)

Meaning: “Justice Bridge”

Integration: Connected with Tele-Law and Nyaya Bandhu for human lawyer escalation

Coverage: Family law, property disputes, criminal law basics, consumer protection, corporate law

#### **INDIA’S JUDICIAL BACKLOG (2026):**

Total pending cases: ~5.58 crore (55.8 million)

District courts: ~4.9 crore (85% of total pendency)

High Courts: ~60 lakh

Supreme Court: ~80,000

Cases pending 5+ years: 1.72 crore

Judge-to-population ratio: ~21 per million (UK: 50; USA: 107)

Judiciary budget: ~0.08% of national budget

Estimated GDP cost of pendency: Over 2%

#### **UNDERTRIAL PRISONERS:**

Undertrials as % of prison population: 76% (2025), up from 66% in 2012

Total undertrials: ~4.39 lakh (out of ~5.77 lakh total prisoners)

Undertrials detained 5+ years: 11,448 (tripled since 2012)

Largest undertrial population: Uttar Pradesh (~1.10 lakh)

LADCS (Legal Aid Defence Counsel System): Functional in 680 districts; 59,630 undertrials released in FY 2025-26

#### **GLOBAL LEGAL AID COMPARISON:**

UK Legal Aid Agency: ~GBP 1.6 billion/year; GBP 27 per capita

US Legal Services Corporation (LSC): \$540 million (FY 2026); serves 6.4 million Americans

India DISHA: Rs 250 crore over 5 years; ~Rs 1.8 per capita

#### **OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:**

Section 12 of LSA Act 1987 lists eligible categories for free legal aid: SC/ST, women, children, disabled, industrial workmen, trafficking victims, persons in custody, those below income ceiling

Lok Adalats under Section 19 of LSA Act: Awards are final, binding, and non-appealable

e-Courts Mission Mode Project: Government initiative for ICT enablement of courts across India

National Judicial Data Grid (NJDG): Real-time database of pending cases across all courts (njdg.ecourts.gov.in)

LASPO Act 2012 (UK): Reduced UK legal aid spending by 38% in real terms (2010-16)

LSC (USA): Established 1974; 130 nonprofit grantees across all Congressional districts

Sources: [PIB](#), [Department of Justice](#), [NALSA](#), [Tele-Law Portal](#), [India Justice Report](#), [Bar and Bench](#)

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