



NATIONAL LEGAL SERVICES AUTHORITY

NORTH ZONE REGIONAL CONFERENCE

on

“ENHANCING ACCESS TO JUSTICE”

11th – 12th April, 2026

Taj Mussoorie Foothills, Dehradun, Uttarakhand

REPORT



NORTH ZONE REGIONAL CONFERENCE on ENHANCING ACCESS TO JUSTICE

11th-12th April, 2026

The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), in collaboration with the Uttarakhand State Legal Services Authority (UKSLSA), organized the **North Zone Regional Conference** on “Enhancing Access to Justice” with the theme “*Justice Beyond Barriers: Rights, Rehabilitation and Reform for the Most Vulnerable*” on 11th–12th April, 2026 at Dehradun, Uttarakhand. The Conference was convened with the objective of strengthening institutional mechanisms for legal aid delivery and advancing the constitutional mandate embodied in Article 39A, which enjoins the State to ensure that justice is accessible to all, irrespective of economic or social disadvantage. The Conference brought together a distinguished gathering of Hon’ble Judges of the Supreme Court of India, Chief Justices of the Hon’ble High Courts, Executive Chairpersons and officers of State Legal Services Authorities, Executive Chairpersons of the High Court Legal Services Committees, members of the District Judiciary, legal practitioners, Para Legal Volunteers, domain experts, and representatives of civil society organizations from across the North Zone, reflecting a collective institutional effort towards enhancing access to justice for vulnerable and marginalized sections of society.

The Conference commenced with the **Inaugural Session on 11th April, 2026**, which set the tone for the deliberations by emphasizing that access to justice must be understood not merely in terms of availability of legal remedies, but in terms of their effective reach, usability, and impact on the ground. The dignitaries underscored that despite the existence of comprehensive legal frameworks, significant gaps persist in ensuring that the benefits of these frameworks are realized by intended beneficiaries, particularly in remote, socio-economically disadvantaged, and geographically challenging regions. The need for transitioning from a passive model of legal aid to a proactive, outreach-oriented framework was emphasized, with particular focus on early intervention, community engagement, and institutional coordination.

The deliberations of the Conference were organized through a series of thematic technical sessions, each addressing a critical dimension of access to justice. The first Technical Session, titled “**Effective Implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006: From Recognition to Realization**,” focused on the challenges faced by forest-dwelling and tribal communities in securing recognition and enforcement of their statutory rights. The discussions highlighted the gap between legislative intent and ground-level implementation, particularly in relation to high rejection rates of claims, procedural and evidentiary barriers, and lack of awareness among beneficiaries. Emphasis was placed on the central role of the Gram Sabha in the decision-making process, the need for a flexible and inclusive evidentiary framework, and the importance of ensuring adherence to procedural safeguards. The session underscored the role of Legal Services Authorities in providing proactive legal assistance, capacity building, and awareness generation, while also bringing forth ground-level perspectives reflecting challenges

relating to livelihood insecurity, limited access to welfare schemes, and constraints on traditional practices.

The second Technical Session, on “**Prison Reforms, Undertrial Justice and Human-Centric Legal Aid,**” examined systemic issues within the prison system, with particular focus on undertrial prisoners and the need for reformatory and dignity-based approaches to incarceration. The discussions highlighted concerns relating to overcrowding, delays in legal processes, lack of effective representation, and systemic opacity in tracking detention periods. It was emphasized that incarceration does not extinguish fundamental rights, and that the constitutional guarantee of dignity under Article 21 of Constitution continues to apply within custodial settings. The session highlighted the transformative potential of technological interventions such as the E-Prison platform in enabling real-time monitoring and proactive legal aid, as well as the importance of institutionalizing practices such as periodic jail visits by legal aid lawyers. The need to expand reformatory models such as open prisons, promote skill development and rehabilitation, and adopt a human-centric approach to prison administration was also emphasized.

The **second day of the Conference** commenced with a **Welcome Session** marked by the presence of distinguished dignitaries and the launch of several institutional initiatives aimed at strengthening access to justice through innovation and outreach. These included digital platforms, resource materials on best practices, and initiatives aimed at improving last-mile delivery of legal services, reflecting an increased emphasis on the use of technology, mobility, and institutional convergence in legal aid delivery.

The third Technical Session, titled “**Justice for Acid Attack Survivors: Compensation, Rehabilitation and Dignity-Centric Support,**” focused on the need for a comprehensive, survivor-centric approach to addressing the challenges faced by victims of acid attacks. The discussions highlighted that acid violence constitutes a severe form of gender-based violence with long-term physical, psychological, and social consequences. It was emphasized that access to justice for survivors must extend beyond compensation to include timely medical care, psychological support, economic rehabilitation, and social reintegration. The deliberations underscored the importance of proactive outreach by Legal Services Authorities, the creation of integrated support systems, and the need for sensitive and victim-centric judicial processes. The session also highlighted the role of societal attitudes and the need for sustained awareness and sensitization to address stigma and promote dignity and inclusion.

The fourth Technical Session, on “**Strengthening Legal Protection and Support Systems for Women and Children,**” examined systemic barriers faced by women and children in accessing justice and emphasized the need for preventive, coordinated, and victim-centric approaches. The discussions highlighted challenges arising from socio-economic dependency, lack of legal awareness, social stigma, and procedural complexities, which often deter victims from seeking redressal. Emphasis was placed on early identification of vulnerability, strengthening legal literacy, and ensuring institutional convergence among police, legal services authorities, healthcare providers, and child protection systems. The session also underscored the importance of child-friendly and sensitive judicial processes, the role of Paralegal Volunteers in grassroots outreach, and the need for effective implementation, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms to ensure that legal frameworks translate into meaningful outcomes.

Across all sessions, the Conference reflected a consistent emphasis on bridging the gap between rights recognized in law and their actual realization in practice, highlighting the need for proactive, preventive, and human-centric approaches to justice delivery. The importance of leveraging technology and data systems to improve transparency and efficiency, strengthening grassroots mechanisms for last-mile delivery, enhancing capacity building and sensitization of stakeholders, and promoting institutional coordination emerged as key themes. The deliberations reaffirmed that access to justice is not merely a legal obligation but a continuous institutional responsibility requiring sustained engagement, innovation, and responsiveness to the lived realities of vulnerable communities.

The preparation of the Report on the North Zone Regional Conference on “Enhancing Access to Justice” was undertaken as a coordinated institutional exercise, reflecting meticulous planning, collaborative engagement, and a shared commitment to accurately capture the substance of the deliberations.

Under the supervision of Shri Sanjiv Pandey, Learned Member Secretary, NALSA, and Shri Kunal Vepa, Learned Director, NALSA, the report was compiled by Ms. Amandeep Sibia, Officer on Special Duty, who worked in coordination with Ms. Shikha Srivastava, Ms. Richa Upadhyay and Ms. Aavritee Naithani, along with the Law Researchers. The Officers collectively contributed to capturing the proceedings of the respective sessions, ensuring that each address, discussion and key outcome of the two-day Conference was documented with clarity, accuracy and institutional coherence.

The North Zone Regional Conference thus served as a significant platform for reflection, dialogue, and institutional convergence, contributing to the ongoing efforts of NALSA and Legal Services Authorities to strengthen inclusive and effective justice delivery mechanisms. The Conference reaffirmed the collective commitment of all stakeholders to ensure that justice is not only accessible in principle but meaningful and realizable in practice, thereby advancing the constitutional vision of equal justice for all.

(Ms. Aavritee Naithani)
Officer on Special Duty-IV

(Ms. Richa Upadhyay)
Officer on Special Duty-III

(Ms. Amandeep Sibia)
Officer on Special Duty-II

(Ms. Shikha Srivastava)
Officer on Special Duty-I

(Shri. Kunal Vepa)
Director

(Shri. Sanjiv Pandey)
Member Secretary

GLIMPSES FROM THE CONFERENCE



Hon'ble Mr. Justice Surya Kant, Chief Justice of India & Patron-in-Chief, NALSA

GLIMPSES FROM THE CONFERENCE



Hon'ble Justice Vikram Nath, Judge, Supreme Court of India and Executive Chairman, NALSA



Hon'ble Justice J.K. Maheswari, Judge, Supreme Court of India and Executive Chairman, SCLSC

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INAUGURAL FUNCTION

11th April, 2026

The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), in collaboration with the Uttarakhand State Legal Services Authority (UKSLSA), organized the **North Zone Regional Conference** on “Enhancing Access to Justice” with the theme “*Justice Beyond Barriers: Rights, Rehabilitation and Reform for the Most Vulnerable*” on 11th–12th April, 2026 at Dehradun, Uttarakhand. The Conference was convened to strengthen institutional frameworks for legal aid delivery and to advance the constitutional mandate of Article 39A, which enshrines the principle that justice must be accessible to all, irrespective of economic or social disadvantage. It provided a platform for reflection on regional challenges, exchange of institutional practices, and identification of strategies for improving access to justice across the North Zone.

The Conference brought together Hon’ble Judges of the Supreme Court of India, Chief Justices of the Hon’ble High Courts, Executive Chairpersons of State Legal Services Authorities, Executive Chairpersons of the High Court Legal Services Committees, Member Secretaries of State Legal Services Authorities, Judicial Officers, officers of High Court and District Legal Services Authorities, Panel Lawyers, Para-Legal Volunteers, domain experts, and representatives of civil society organizations. The participation of stakeholders from across States and Union Territories of the North Zone ensured a comprehensive and multi-level dialogue on strengthening legal aid delivery systems and addressing region-specific challenges.

The Inaugural Session of the North Zone Regional Conference on “Enhancing Access to Justice” commenced on 11th April, 2026 at Dehradun, Uttarakhand, with the ceremonial lighting of the lamp, symbolizing the collective resolve of the legal services fraternity to move from the darkness of ignorance towards the light of legal empowerment. The solemnity of the occasion reflected the central objective of the Conference—ensuring that the constitutional promise of justice reaches even the most remote and marginalized sections of society. The Session marked the formal commencement of the two-day deliberations and set the tone for a comprehensive engagement with the challenges and opportunities in strengthening access to justice across the North Zone.

The Inaugural Session was attended by Hon’ble Judges of the Supreme Court of India, Chief Justices of the Hon’ble High Courts, Executive Chairpersons of SLSAs, Executive Chairpersons of HCLSCs and Member Secretaries of State Legal Services Authorities, Judicial Officers, representatives of District Legal Services Authorities, Panel Lawyers, Para-Legal Volunteers, and other distinguished participants. The presence of stakeholders from across multiple tiers of the justice delivery system reflected a coordinated institutional commitment to advancing inclusive and effective legal aid mechanisms.

Welcome Address

HON’BLE MR. JUSTICE MANOJ KUMAR TIWARI

Judge, High Court of Uttarakhand and Executive Chairman, Uttarakhand State Legal Services Authority

The Welcome Address was delivered by Hon’ble Mr. Justice Manoj Kumar Tiwari, Judge, High Court of Uttarakhand and Executive Chairman, Uttarakhand State Legal Services Authority.

His Lordship extended a warm welcome to the august gathering and underscored the significance of organizing such a conference in a geographically challenging State like Uttarakhand. His Lordship highlighted that access to justice, though constitutionally guaranteed, continues to face practical barriers in regions marked by difficult terrain and dispersed populations.

His Lordship elaborated upon the extensive institutional framework established by the Uttarakhand State Legal Services Authority, including its network of District Legal Services Authorities, Tehsil Committees, Permanent Lok Adalats, legal aid clinics, and a robust cadre of Paralegal Volunteers. His Lordship further emphasized that initiatives such as the Legal Aid Defense Counsel System, the “One Village One Pro Bono PLV (Adhikar Mitra)” campaign, and the “Litigation Free Village” initiative represent meaningful efforts to bring justice closer to communities through participatory and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms.

His Lordship observed that the legal services movement must ultimately be judged by its ability to serve the most vulnerable and ensure that justice is not merely available in law, but accessible and meaningful in practice.

Opening Address

HON’BLE MR. JUSTICE MANOJ KUMAR GUPTA

**Chief Justice, High Court of Uttarakhand and Patron-in-Chief, Uttarakhand State
Legal Services Authority**

The Opening Address was delivered by Hon’ble Mr. Justice Manoj Kumar Gupta, Chief Justice, High Court of Uttarakhand and Patron-in-Chief, Uttarakhand State Legal Services Authority. His Lordship contextualized the theme of the Conference within the constitutional mandate of ensuring justice—social, economic, and political—and drew attention to Article 39A of the Constitution of India. Emphasizing that access to justice extends beyond physical access to courts, His Lordship observed that it encompasses the ability of individuals to be heard, understood, and provided timely and meaningful redress.

His Lordship highlighted that in regions such as Uttarakhand, access to justice requires a shift from a passive system to one that actively reaches out to people where they are. His Lordship further noted that barriers such as poverty, lack of awareness, and geographical isolation continue to impede access, thereby necessitating a more inclusive, humane, and responsive approach to justice delivery. Referring to key judicial precedents, His Lordship underscored that legal aid and speedy justice are integral to the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21, and stressed that the deliberations of the Conference must translate into actionable outcomes that bridge the gap between legal entitlements and their realization in everyday life.

Special Address

HON’BLE MR. JUSTICE N. KOTISWAR SINGH

Judge, Supreme Court of India

In his Special Address, Hon’ble Mr. Justice N. Kotiswar Singh, Judge, Supreme Court of India, reflected upon the foundational promise contained in the Preamble to the Constitution,

emphasizing that justice—social, economic, and political, is not merely aspirational but enforceable. His Lordship observed that despite significant advancements, access to justice remains uneven, particularly for those residing in remote areas or belonging to marginalized communities. His Lordship elaborated that access to justice must be understood in a comprehensive sense, encompassing awareness of rights, availability of legal aid, affordability of processes, timeliness of adjudication, and effective enforcement of remedies.

His Lordship highlighted the critical role played by Legal Services Authorities under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, in democratizing justice, while noting that the effectiveness of these institutions depends on proactive outreach and human-centric implementation. His Lordship laid particular emphasis on the importance of Paralegal Volunteers as the backbone of the legal services delivery system and underscored the need for their continuous training and empowerment. His Lordship also called for greater use of digital platforms to enhance efficiency and outreach, and emphasized that the responsibility of the judiciary, in its capacity as part of the legal services framework, extends beyond adjudication to ensuring that justice is accessible in reality.

Special Address

HON’BLE MR. JUSTICE SANDEEP MEHTA
Judge, Supreme Court of India

Hon’ble Mr. Justice Sandeep Mehta, Judge, Supreme Court of India, in his Special Address, expressed appreciation for the thoughtful selection of themes for the Conference, noting that they are deeply rooted in the lived realities of marginalized communities. His Lordship observed that such conferences must focus on issues that directly impact those at the margins of society, rather than on abstract or purely academic concerns.

His Lordship acknowledged the leadership of the National Legal Services Authority in conceptualizing topics that address critical areas such as forest rights, prison reforms, victim compensation, and the protection of women and children. His Lordship also commended the meticulous organization of the Conference and emphasized that meaningful deliberations, guided by expert resource persons, would contribute significantly towards achieving the objectives of the legal services movement.

Special Address

HON’BLE MR. JUSTICE J.K. MAHESHWARI
Judge, Supreme Court of India & Chairman, Supreme Court Legal Services Committee

The Inaugural Address was delivered by Hon’ble Mr. Justice J.K. Maheshwari, Judge, Supreme Court of India and Chairman, Supreme Court Legal Services Committee. His Lordship set the overarching tone for the Conference by posing a fundamental question as to whether the legal system is effectively delivering timely, affordable, and meaningful justice to the common citizen. His Lordship observed that the contemporary challenge lies not in the absence of laws, but in the gap between the existence of rights and their actual realization. His Lordship emphasized that access to justice must be evaluated through the lived experiences of

individuals, reflected in the ease with which they can approach legal institutions, the dignity with which they are treated, and the timeliness of redressal.

Referring to the themes of the Conference, His Lordship highlighted the need for effective implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, emphasizing that legal recognition must translate into livelihood security and community empowerment. On the issue of prison reforms and undertrial justice, His Lordship underscored the importance of adopting a human-centric approach and leveraging technology for monitoring and ensuring timely release of eligible prisoners. His Lordship also stressed the need for institutional safeguards to prevent systemic lapses, particularly in cases involving vulnerable individuals.

Addressing issues relating to women, His Lordship highlighted the necessity of creating safe and accessible mechanisms for reporting grievances and strengthening institutional frameworks to ensure dignity and protection. Concluding his address, His Lordship emphasized that justice must be inclusive, responsive, and empathetic, and that the ultimate measure of the justice delivery system lies in its ability to function with simplicity, fairness, and humanity, ensuring that justice becomes a tangible reality for all.

The Inaugural Session thus laid a comprehensive foundation for the Conference, articulating both the philosophical underpinnings and operational challenges of enhancing access to justice, and setting the stage for the thematic deliberations that followed.

TECHNICAL SESSION - I
EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FOREST RIGHTS ACT, 2006: FROM
RECOGNITION TO REALIZATION
11TH APRIL, 2026, 11:30AM

- Chair:** Hon'ble Mr. Justice J.K. Maheshwari, Judge, Supreme Court of India & Chairman, SCLSC.
- Co-Chair:** Hon'ble Mr. Justice N. Kotiswar Singh, Judge, Supreme Court of India.
- Co-Chair:** Hon'ble Mr. Justice Gurmeet Singh Sandhawalia, Chief Justice, High Court of Himachal Pradesh.
- Co-Chair:** Hon'ble Mr. Justice Sheel Nagu, Chief Justice, High Court of Punjab & Haryana
- Speaker 1:** Ms. Anitha Shenoy Senior Advocate, Supreme Court of India.
- Speaker 2:** Ms. Shomona Khanna Advocate, Supreme Court of India.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND: TRIBAL COMMUNITIES AND LEGAL AWARENESS

The technical session commenced with the screening of a video presentation by the Uttarakhand State Legal Services Authority (UKSLSA), which provided a contextual background on the tribal communities of Uttarakhand. The video highlighted the socio-economic challenges faced by the communities, particularly those residing in forest areas and dependent on forest resources for their livelihood.

The video further highlighted the initiatives undertaken by UKSLSA to address these challenges, with a specific focus on creating awareness regarding the provisions of the Forest Rights Act, 2006. Following the presentation, the Hon'ble Chair delivered the opening remarks.

VIEWS OF THE HON'BLE CHAIR
HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE J. K. MAHESHWARI

JUDGE, SUPREME COURT OF INDIA & CHAIRMAN, SCLSC

Opening Perspective: From Statutory Recognition to Effective Realization

The technical session was presided over by Hon'ble Mr. Justice J.K. Maheshwari (Chair). His Lordship underscored that enhancing access to justice in the context of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 requires a transition from mere statutory recognition of rights to their effective implementation and actual realization by beneficiaries.

His lordship emphasized that while the Act marked a significant step in recognizing the rights of forest-dwelling and tribal communities, the critical issue lies in assessing the extent to which

these rights have been implemented on the ground and whether the intended beneficiaries are able to truly avail and enjoy the benefits conferred.

Structured Approach to Deliberation

His Lordship further highlighted that the session would focus on examining this progression, from determination of rights to their realization, in relation to forest-dwelling and forest-dependent communities. The emphasis, His Lordship observed, must shift from a purely statutory understanding of rights to their practical enforcement and accessibility. For the purpose of structured deliberation, the broader theme was divided into sub-topics. The first sub-topic aimed to build a foundational understanding of the Forest Rights Act, followed by discussions on the role of the Gram Sabha and the statutory committees constituted under the Act.

VIEWS OF THE HON'BLE CO-CHAIRS
HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE N. KOTISWAR SINGH

JUDGE, SUPREME COURT OF INDIA

Introductory Perspective: Scale and Implementation Challenges

Hon'ble Mr. Justice N. Kotiswar Singh, emphasized that the effective implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 must be viewed in light of the scale and vulnerability of forest-dependent populations, many of whom continue to face livelihood insecurity and socio-economic marginalization. His Lordship noted that despite significant progress in terms of claims filed and titles granted, a substantial gap persists, with a considerable proportion of claims either rejected or disposed of without final recognition of rights, thereby adversely impacting forest dwellers.

Procedural Safeguards and Statutory Compliance

His Lordship highlighted that the core objective should not merely be an understanding of statutory provisions, but ensuring strict compliance with the procedural safeguards embedded within the Act. Particular emphasis was placed on **Section 4(5)** of the Act, *which mandates that no forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribe or other traditional forest dweller shall be evicted or removed until the process of recognition and verification of rights is complete*. His lordship noted that this safeguard is of critical importance in protecting communities from premature or unlawful eviction.

Role of Gram Sabha and Institutional Integrity

His Lordship underscored the central role of the Gram Sabha as the foundation of the decision-making process, observing that the integrity of proceedings at this stage significantly influences outcomes at higher levels, including Sub-Divisional and District Level Committees. His lordship stressed the need for ensuring procedural integrity at the grassroots level, particularly by legal services institutions and functionaries assisting forest dwellers.

Procedural Constraints and Access to Remedies

Addressing procedural challenges, His Lordship noted that although the Act provides a 60-day limitation period for filing appeals, this may pose practical difficulties for forest dwellers residing in remote areas due to constraints of distance, resources and accessibility. His Lordship emphasized the need for proactive legal assistance to ensure that such statutory remedies are effectively availed within prescribed timelines.

Evidentiary Framework: Inclusivity and Flexibility

On the evidentiary framework, His Lordship reiterated the importance of **Rule 13** of Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Rules, 2007, which provides for a broad and inclusive range of evidence. This includes not only official records but also oral testimonies, traditional knowledge, physical markers and genealogical accounts. His Lordship emphasized that stakeholders must be sensitized to the fact that proof of claims is not confined to formal documentation alone, and that diverse forms of evidence must be duly considered in the spirit of the Act.

Principles of Natural Justice and Procedural Fairness

His Lordship further emphasized the necessity of adhering to principles of natural justice in the adjudication of claims. This includes ensuring that claimants are provided a fair opportunity to present evidence, that reasoned (speaking) orders are passed in cases of rejection and that such orders are duly communicated to the affected individuals.

His Lordship noted that procedural lapses in these aspects undermine the legitimacy of the process and weaken the appellate framework.

Need for Proactive Legal Intervention

His Lordship also highlighted the importance of timely legal intervention, suggesting that legal services institutions and practitioners should not only respond post facto but also engage proactively at stages where developmental activities or administrative actions may potentially affect forest rights. Early identification of issues and preparation of documentation can help prevent disputes and safeguard rights more effectively.

Capacity Building and Best Practices

Further, His Lordship referred to certain good practices, including the development of toolkits and resource materials by training and research institutions, which compile relevant laws, rules, formats and evidentiary guidelines. Such resources, His Lordship noted, can significantly strengthen the capacity of Gram Sabhas and field-level functionaries in processing claims and ensuring compliance with statutory requirements.

In conclusion, His Lordship reiterated that the focus must remain on ensuring that the procedural framework under the Act is meticulously followed. His Lordship emphasized that effective realization of rights depends not merely on legislative provisions, but on rigorous adherence to due process, institutional accountability and sustained support to forest-dwelling communities.

VIEWS OF THE HON'BLE CO-CHAIRS
HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE GURMEET SINGH SANDHAWALIA

HON'BLE CHIEF JUSTICE, HIGH COURT OF HIMACHAL PRADESH

Introductory Perspective: Historical Context and Continuing Challenges

The Hon'ble Co-Chair highlighted the pivotal role of the National Legal Services Authority in ensuring access to justice for marginalized communities, particularly forest-dwelling and tribal populations. Emphasizing the continuing journey towards effective implementation of rights, His Lordship invoked the metaphor of “*miles to go*”, underscoring that while the Forest Rights Act, 2006 has been in force for nearly two decades, significant efforts are still required to translate its objectives into tangible outcomes on the ground.

His Lordship observed that the conference serves as a focused and action-oriented platform to deliberate upon the legal, institutional and practical challenges faced by marginalized forest dwellers and tribal communities.

Implementation Gaps and Institutional Role

Particular emphasis was placed on assessing the implementation of progressive legislations, including the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and identifying regional disparities in their execution. His lordship noted that the geographical context of Himalayan states, including Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, presents unique challenges due to their terrain, ecological sensitivities and socio-economic conditions.

Drawing from regional examples, His Lordship highlighted the realities of various tribal communities residing in forest and high-altitude areas. These communities continue to face issues such as land insecurity, restricted access to forest resources, limited access to education and healthcare, and declining traditional livelihoods. The disruption of traditional migratory routes, shrinking pastures and developmental interventions such as infrastructure projects were cited as factors contributing to economic distress and displacement.

Historical Context and Structural Marginalization

His Lordship further elaborated that such challenges are rooted in historical injustices arising from colonial and post-colonial forest governance frameworks, which led to denial of customary rights, criminalization of traditional practices and exclusion of communities from decision-making processes. In this context, the Forest Rights Act, 2006 was described as a remedial legislation aimed at recognizing and vesting both individual and community forest rights, including rights over minor forest produce, grazing, habitation, and traditional usage.

Implementation Gaps and Administrative Bottlenecks

However, His Lordship expressed concern over the significant gap between the legislative intent and its actual implementation. Referring to available data, it was noted that although a considerable number of claims have been filed under the Act, only a small fraction has been successfully recognized and granted, indicating delays in verification, approval and recognition

processes. This disparity points to systemic and administrative bottlenecks that require urgent attention.

Role of Legal Services Institutions

In this regard, His Lordship emphasized the critical role of NALSA and legal services institutions in bridging this gap. Key interventions identified included enhancing legal awareness and sensitization among forest-dwelling communities, providing legal aid and representation in forest rights claims and related disputes, building the capacity of legal services functionaries and strengthening coordination with administrative authorities.

In conclusion, His Lordship reiterated the need to promote awareness and understanding of forest rights, critically examine implementation challenges and strengthen the role of legal services institutions in advancing access to justice. The address underscored that a collaborative and sustained effort is essential to ensure that the objectives of the Forest Rights Act are effectively realized for the benefit of marginalized communities.

KEY POINTS AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE SPEAKERS

I. Ms. Anitha Shenoy, Senior Advocate, Supreme Court of India

Conceptual Distinction: Nature and Scope of Forest Rights

The Speaker commenced her address by drawing a critical distinction between Community Forest Rights and Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights, emphasizing that while the former relates to usufructuary rights such as grazing and collection of minor forest produce, the latter represents a far more substantive right, namely, the right of the entire community, through the Gram Sabha, to manage and govern forest resources. She underscored that CFR rights embody the true spirit of decentralization and participatory governance, as they transfer decision-making authority from the forest bureaucracy to local communities.

Data Classification and Lack of Clarity

The speaker highlighted that one of the key concerns lies in the lack of clarity and proper classification in official data, where different categories of forest rights are often conflated. This obscures the actual extent to which meaningful community control, particularly through CFR rights, has been realized on the ground. She emphasized that the effective recognition of such rights is central to ensuring that forest-dwelling communities are not merely beneficiaries but active stakeholders in forest governance.

Procedural and Evidentiary Bottlenecks

Drawing attention to implementation challenges, the Speaker pointed out the alarmingly high rate of rejection of claims under the Act, despite the fact that it is intended to recognize pre-existing rights rather than confer new ones. This, she noted, raises serious concerns regarding the approach adopted by authorities in processing claims. The speaker identified several procedural and evidentiary bottlenecks, including insistence on technical requirements such as satellite imagery, GPS-based maps, or official sketches, which are not mandated under the Act. Claims are frequently rejected on hyper-technical grounds, even where substantial alternative evidence has been provided.

Challenges at the Gram Sabha Level

The Speaker further highlighted issues at the Gram Sabha level, which forms the foundation of the claims process. Practical challenges such as lack of awareness about the Act, non-adherence to quorum requirements, improper maintenance of records and absence of participation due to seasonal migration of forest dwellers significantly affect the integrity of the process.

She also pointed out a structural gap in the composition of Forest Rights Committees, where Other Traditional Forest Dwellers are often excluded, leading to inequitable representation despite statutory parity under the Act.

Lack of Transparency and Burden of Proof

Another major concern raised was the lack of transparency and accountability in decision-making, particularly in cases of rejection or partial approval of claims. The statutory requirement of recording reasons for rejection is often not complied with, leaving claimants without clarity or recourse.

Additionally, the burden of producing documentary evidence is disproportionately placed on forest dwellers, even for records that are already in the possession of government authorities. In this context, the speaker proposed the establishment of accessible repositories of government records, both physical and digital, to facilitate claims, thereby shifting the evidentiary burden away from claimants.

Institutional Gaps and Administrative Constraints

The Speaker also pointed out the absence of a dedicated field-level administrative mechanism under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, resulting in forest dwellers having to navigate the process largely against institutional resistance from other departments.

Best Practices: Community-Led Governance

Highlighting best practices, the Speaker referred to successful examples from Vidharba (Menda Lekha village, Gadchiroli), where Gram Sabhas, upon recognition of Community Forest Resource rights, have effectively managed forest resources, generated revenue and established institutional mechanisms such as village development funds. She emphasized that these examples demonstrate the transformative potential of the Act when implemented in its true spirit.

Recommendations for Strengthening Implementation

In conclusion, the speaker outlined a set of recommendations for strengthening implementation. These included the establishment of a specialized appellate tribunal for forest rights claims to provide an effective remedy beyond writ jurisdiction, enhanced focus on recognition of Community Forest Resource rights, a more proactive role for the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes in monitoring implementation, replication of successful Gram Sabha-led governance models, capacity building of officials and stakeholders, and creation of a centralized repository of relevant documents. She emphasized that addressing these systemic and procedural gaps is essential to ensuring that the objectives of the Forest Rights Act are meaningfully realized.

Observation by Hon'ble Chair:

Following the address by the speaker, the Hon'ble Chair offered additional observations on procedural and implementation gaps under the Forest Rights Act, 2006. His Lordship pointed out that while the statutory framework prescribes timelines for filing of claims, there is no corresponding time limit stipulated for their adjudication. As a result, a large number of claims remain pending without decision, leading to delays and uncertainty for forest-dwelling communities.

His Lordship further emphasized that under Rule 13 of the Forest Rights Rules, a broad and inclusive list of evidentiary materials has been provided, and clarified that the presence of any valid evidence from the prescribed list should ordinarily be sufficient for recognition of rights. His lordship observed that claims ought not to be rejected on hyper-technical or restrictive grounds when such evidence exists.

II. Ms. Shomona Khanna, Advocate, Supreme Court of India

Legislative Context and Constitutional Significance

The speaker commenced by highlighting that the enactment of the Forest Rights Act, which came into force on 31 December 2007, marked a significant milestone in extending the constitutional promises of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity to a vast population of Adivasis and other forest-dwelling communities, who had historically been subjected to restrictive colonial forest regimes.

Historical Injustice and Evolution of Forest Laws

Emphasizing the transformative nature of the legislation, the speaker referred to the Preamble of the Act as a critical interpretative tool that underscores its core objective—namely, the recognition and vesting of forest rights of Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers who have resided in forests for generations but whose rights had remained unrecognized. The speaker noted that the Act not only provides a framework for recognition of such rights but also imposes responsibilities relating to sustainable use, conservation of biodiversity, and maintenance of ecological balance, thereby linking livelihood security with environmental protection.

The speaker traced the concept of “historical injustice” referenced in the Act to colonial forest laws, particularly the Indian Forest Act, 1927, which enabled the State to unilaterally declare forest lands while extinguishing pre-existing rights of forest-dwelling communities through procedural legal mechanisms. This framework, which continued even in the post-independence period and influenced subsequent legislations such as the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, resulted in forest dwellers being treated as encroachers and criminals within their own traditional habitats. The speaker underscored that such legal frameworks led to widespread displacement, marginalization, and denial of rights, thereby necessitating corrective legislative intervention through the Forest Rights Act.

Scale of the Issue and Need for Rights-based Framework

Highlighting the scale of the issue, the Speaker noted that a substantial proportion of India's population resides in or around forest areas, with millions directly dependent on forest resources for livelihood. The disproportionate impact of

displacement due to development projects on Scheduled Tribes was also emphasized, reinforcing the need for a rights-based framework. In this context, the Forest Rights Act was described as an instrument aimed at restoring rights over traditional homelands, while simultaneously recognizing the intrinsic role of forest-dwelling communities in conservation of forests and biodiversity.

Core Pillars of the Act

The speaker elaborated upon the four central pillars of the Act:

- (i) a substantive recognition and vesting of forest rights;
- (ii) a decentralized, community-centric mechanism for recognition of rights through the Gram Sabha and multi-tier committees;
- (iii) a flexible and inclusive evidentiary framework accommodating both documentary and oral evidence; and
- (iv) the acknowledgment of the role of forest-dwelling communities in conservation and management of forest resources.

It was noted that the Act marks a paradigm shift by transforming forest dwellers from perceived encroachers into legally recognized rights-holders.

Role of Gram Sabha and Participatory Justice

Particular emphasis was placed on the role of the Gram Sabha as the central authority in the process of recognition and governance of forest rights. The speaker highlighted that the mechanism under the Act ensures that justice is accessible and participatory, enabling communities themselves to initiate and verify claims. Additionally, the evidentiary provisions under the Rules were described as progressive, as they accommodate the socio-cultural realities of forest communities where formal documentation may be scarce but oral histories and physical markers hold significant evidentiary value.

Environmental Governance and Community Responsibility

The speaker also underscored the importance of Section 5 of the Act, which entrusts Gram Sabhas with the responsibility of protecting forests, wildlife, biodiversity and cultural heritage. This was linked to the concept of Community Forest Resources (CFR), wherein communities are empowered to manage and conserve forest resources for present and future generations. The speaker emphasized that this community-led conservation model has significant implications for sustainable environmental governance.

Judicial Developments and Reinforcement of Principles

In conclusion, the speaker referred to judicial developments, particularly the landmark decision in *Orissa Mining Corporation v. Ministry of Environment & Forest (Niyamgiri hills case)*, wherein the Supreme Court recognized the role of Gram Sabhas in decision-making processes concerning forest clearances and upheld the cultural and religious rights of forest-dwelling communities. The judgment was highlighted as reinforcing the principles underlying the Forest Rights Act and as a significant step towards strengthening participatory governance and environmental justice.

OBSERVATIONS OF THE COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVE

Mr. Meer Hamza Meer, Founder and Chairman of the Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Samiti, highlighted several ground-level challenges being faced by forest-dwelling communities, particularly the Van Gujjar community.

The Community Representative highlighted that a significant proportion of the community continues to live below the poverty line; however, many eligible members have not been issued Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards, thereby limiting their access to welfare schemes and social security benefits. It was further pointed out that traditional seasonal migratory routes, which are integral to the livelihood and cultural practices of the community, have increasingly been encroached upon or converted into dumping sites, adversely affecting their mobility and sustenance patterns.

The representative also raised concerns regarding limited participation in local governance, noting that members of the community face difficulties in effectively exercising their voting rights within Gram Sabhas.

Additionally, it was highlighted that in certain protected areas where the community has been resettled, they have not been granted revenue rights over the land. The absence of such rights restricts their ability to undertake lawful commercial and livelihood activities, thereby perpetuating economic vulnerability and marginalization.

CLOSING REMARKS BY THE CHAIR

In his concluding remarks, the Hon'ble Chair highlighted key initiatives of the National Legal Services Authority aimed at strengthening access to justice for forest-dwelling and tribal communities. His Lordship referred to the NALSA (Protection and Enforcement of Tribal Rights) Scheme, 2015, its revamped version, the NALSA SAMVAD Scheme, 2025, and the NALSA Scheme on Access to Justice for Victims of Human–Wildlife Conflict, 2025.

With respect to the SAMVAD Scheme, His Lordship noted that approximately 690 units have already been established across the country. The scheme provides for critical support mechanisms, including assistance in evidence collection, early intervention at the grassroots level, and facilitation of legal aid services. In relation to the Human–Wildlife Conflict Scheme, his lordship observed that the scheme serves as an effective tool in addressing procedural challenges and ensuring timely compensation and relief to affected individuals and communities.

Summarizing the deliberations of the session, the Hon'ble Chair emphasized several key takeaways. It was highlighted that decision-making authorities must ensure the issuance of reasoned and speaking orders in all cases. His lordship underscored the need for establishing dedicated FRA expansion cells was underscored to strengthen implementation at various levels. Further, concern was expressed regarding the high rate of rejection of claims under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, indicating the necessity for closer scrutiny and corrective measures.

His Lordship also stressed that Para Legal Volunteers (PLVs) should act as frontline support functionaries in facilitating access to justice for forest dwellers. Their role, His Lordship

observed, is critical in bridging the gap between institutions and beneficiaries, particularly at the grassroots level.

The Hon'ble Chair further emphasized the importance of leveraging technology and IT-based solutions to streamline processes and improve transparency was also highlighted.

In conclusion, His Lordship emphasized that structural reforms are required to address systemic gaps, and that all stakeholders must adopt a forward-looking approach focused on continuous improvement, centred on the question of "*what more can be done better*" to ensure effective realization of rights.

TECHNICAL SESSION - II
PRISON REFORMS, UNDERTRIAL JUSTICE AND HUMAN-CENTRIC LEGAL
AID
11TH APRIL, 2026, 1:45 PM

- Chair:** Hon'ble Mr. Justice Sandeep Mehta, Judge, Supreme Court of India
Co-Chair: Hon'ble Mr. Justice Arun Bhansali, Chief Justice, High Court of Allahabad.
Co-Chair: Hon'ble Mr. Justice Arun Palli, Chief Justice, High Court of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh
Speaker: Hon'ble Mr. Justice Manoj Kumar Tiwari, Judge, High Court of Uttarakhand and Executive Chairman, UKSLSA
Speaker 1: Dr. Vartika Nanda, Founder, Tinka Tinka Foundation
Speaker 2: Mr. Gaurav Agarwal, Senior Advocate, Supreme Court of India

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND: PRISON REFORMS AND UNDERTRIAL JUSTICE

The Technical Session commenced with introductory remarks by the moderator, setting the context for deliberations on prison reforms, ensuring timely and fair justice for undertrial prisoners and strengthening human-centric legal aid mechanisms. The moderator formally welcomed the Hon'ble Chair, Co-Chairs and distinguished speakers, highlighting the need for a systemic and reform-oriented approach to address existing gaps.

VIEWS OF THE HON'BLE CHAIR
HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE J. K. MAHESHWARI

JUDGE, SUPREME COURT OF INDIA & CHAIRMAN, SCLSC

Opening Perspective: Human Dignity within Carceral Systems

The Hon'ble Chair underscored that prison reforms require immediate and sustained attention, particularly in light of severe overcrowding in prisons across the country, where a substantial proportion of inmates belong to marginalized and socio-economically deprived sections.

Drawing from personal experiences, His Lordship highlighted instances reflecting systemic apathy and opacity within prison administration. His Lordship recounted an instance from his time as an advocate where a paralyzed woman, sentenced to imprisonment, had to be physically carried into the jail on a chair. His Lordship further recalled a harrowing era (between 1994-95) where families of inmates transferred to Jodhpur from Gujarat were forced to pay bribes of ₹35,000 per month merely to ensure food reached them.

Constitutional Perspective: Rights of Prisoners

Raising a fundamental constitutional question, His Lordship emphasized whether incarceration results in the loss of fundamental rights and human dignity. His Lordship underscored that the constitutional guarantee of dignity under Article 21 continues to operate even within custodial settings.

Judicial Interventions and Policy Framework

Highlighting recent developments, His Lordship referred to the judgment in *In Re: Inhuman Conditions in 1382 Prisons* (2018), which led to directions for updating prison rules. His Lordship also referred to the Model Prison Rules, 2016, and noted the constitution of High-Powered Committees pursuant to suo motu proceedings.

Further reference was made to initiatives aimed at harmonizing prison manuals across states, including developments arising from cases such as *Suhas Chakma v. Union of India*, particularly in relation to open prisons.

VIEWS OF THE HON'BLE CO-CHAIRS
HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE ARUN BHANSALI

CHIEF JUSTICE, HIGH COURT OF ALLAHABAD

Open-Air Prisons as a Reformatory Model

His Lordship highlighted the significance of Open-Air Camps as an effective reformatory measure. Drawing from the experience of Rajasthan, which operates 42 such camps, His Lordship referred to the Sanganeer Open Prison model, where inmates are permitted to live with their families, send their children to school, earn a living outside (such as running auto-rickshaws) during the day and engage in livelihood activities and return to the prison premises in the evening.

Rehabilitation and Skill Development

His Lordship emphasized the need to expand such models across states, stating that while states like Uttarakhand and Punjab have open camps, others like Haryana, Delhi, and Jammu & Kashmir currently lack them. His lordship further highlighted the importance of equipping inmates with vocational skills through institutions such as ITIs and polytechnics to facilitate reintegration into society.

Institutional Practices and Monitoring Mechanisms

His Lordship further referred to innovative practices such as the establishment of comprehensive libraries in Child Care Institutions and the conduct of surprise jail visits by State Legal Services Authorities using standardized checklists to ensure compliance and monitoring.

VIEWS OF THE HON'BLE CO-CHAIRS
HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE ARUN PALLI

HON'BLE CHIEF JUSTICE, HIGH COURT OF JAMMU & KASHMIR AND
LADAKH

Technological Intervention: E-Prison Module

His Lordship described a watershed moment in the history of legal aid that occurred concurrently with the conference that the inauguration of the E-Prison module by the Hon'ble

Chief Justice of India and Justice Vikram Nath at the E-Committee conference, which enables real-time tracking of undertrial detention.

Proactive Legal Aid through Data Systems

The system, His Lordship noted, automatically flags cases where undertrials have completed substantial portions of their prescribed sentence. By integrating such data into judicial and legal services dashboards, legal aid is transformed from a passive mechanism into a continuous and proactive safeguard, ensuring that “*no day in custody remains invisible*”.

His Lordship emphasized that such technological integration ensures that no period of custody remains unaccounted for and enhances institutional responsiveness.

KEY POINTS AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE SPEAKERS

I. Hon’ble Mr. Justice Manoj Kumar Tiwari, Judge, High Court of Uttarakhand and Executive Chairman, UKSLSA

Constitutional Jurisprudence and Dignity

His Lordship grounded his address in Article 21 jurisprudence, referring to landmark judgments including *Maneka Gandhi*, *Sunil Batra II*, *Hussainara Khatoon* and *Parmanand Katara*, reiterating that dignity remains an inalienable right.

Legal Principles and State Responsibility

His Lordship enriched his address with foundational legal maxims, noting that public welfare is the highest law (*salus populi suprema lex*) and that the law does not compel the impossible (*lex non cogit ad impossibilia*). His Lordship emphasized the obligation of the State to progressively build institutional capacity.

Undertrial Crisis and Reformative Approach

Citing the India Justice Report, His Lordship highlighted the disproportionate number of undertrial prisoners and emphasized the need to transition from a retributive to a reformative and rehabilitative model, ensuring an individual is not punished twice (*nemo debet bis vexari*).

Open Prisons and Technological Integration

His Lordship referred to initiatives such as the Sitarganj Open Prison and models like Sampurnanand Shivar, along with emerging technological tools such as GPS-based monitoring systems.

Comparative Models and Systemic Alignment

Drawing from international practices, His Lordship referred to Norway’s normalization model and emphasized the need to bridge the gap between “*law in books*” and “*law in action*”, particularly through alignment with the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, 2023.

II. Dr. Vartika Nanda, Founder, Tinka Tinka Foundation

Humanising Prisons: Creativity and Expression

The Speaker emphasized the importance of humanizing prison environments to reduce stigma, promote literacy and foster emotional well-being. Using the metaphor “creating a rainbow in jails”, she highlighted initiatives undertaken by the Tinka Tinka Foundation, including publications, podcasts, libraries and prison radio systems.

Role of Prison Radio and Emotional Well-being

She highlighted the launch and expansion of prison radio initiatives, including the Dehradun Jail radio, which was sparked by an inspiring Dainik Jagran article titled “*Radio fills colors behind bars*”, emphasizing that such platforms address the issue of isolation and “empty time” experienced by inmates.

Playing audio excerpts of the “Tinka Tinka Signature Tune” created entirely by inmates, she commended Dehradun’s Jailor, Shri Pawan Kothari, stating that, the breath of a jail is its officers. If jail lives in their breath, no one can stop the reform. She noted that while the broadcast equipment was brought from outside, the true courage and creativity came from within the 14 inmates who led the initiative, a journey documented in the National Book Trust publication, *Radio in Prison*.

Impact during COVID-19 and Institutional Innovation

The Speaker noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, prison radio was utilized by judicial officers to communicate legal information to inmates, thereby facilitating access to justice under constrained conditions.

Gendered Experiences and Psychological Impact

Particular attention was drawn to the experiences of women inmates, highlighting how such initiatives contribute to emotional resilience and empowerment. she described them as being “*locked inside another jail*” sharing an excerpt from RJ Sonia of Karnal Jail to illustrate how the medium has been a life-changer

Citing research and field experience, the Speaker noted a reduction in instances of depression, aggression and self-harm in prisons equipped with such initiatives. She further shared transformative narratives, including instances of rehabilitation and reintegration.

She also cited instances where inmates painted the walls of Panipat Jail and recounted the story of an Ambala Jail inmate named Sheru. During the pandemic, Sheru sang a song that caught the attention of the Union Health Minister, leading to a visit from a Magistrate and ultimately resulting in his estranged neighbourhood warmly welcoming him back upon release.

Experience Sharing: Dr. Suchet Narang

A former inmate of District Jail, Dehradun, Dr. Suchet Narang shared his personal experience, highlighting how participation in prison radio initiatives provided a renewed sense of purpose and facilitated positive engagement during incarceration. Leading the radio initiative with fellow inmates, he found the strength to cope with his sentence and contribute positively to others, embodying the sentiment that equipment came from outside, but courage came from within.

Observations by the Chair

Responding to the speakers, the Hon'ble Chair highlighted the persistence of archaic practices within prison systems, including caste-based allocation of tasks, which were subsequently removed following judicial intervention.

His Lordship also referred to large-scale data collection exercises undertaken to address systemic opacity, which led to the development of the E-Prison platform. His Lordship initiated a massive one-year data collection exercise in Rajasthan. This culminated in the launch of the 'E-Prison' software in 2022 (in collaboration with NIC and the E-Committee led by Justice Bhansali). The platform revealed significant delays in legal processes, including delayed filing of appeals, thereby underscoring the importance of technological intervention. This platform uncovered glaring injustices, including appeals being filed after 12 years of conviction due to a lack of legal assistance, proving that technological tracking is a paramount solution.

III. Mr. Gaurav Agarwal, Senior Advocate, Supreme Court of India

Proactive Legal Aid: Field-Based Intervention

The Speaker emphasized the need for proactive legal aid mechanisms, drawing from his experience with the Supreme Court Legal Services Committee. He recounted a critical situation where a large number of prisoners lacked the means or documentation to file appeals. To combat this, a successful initiative was launched where 20 advocates were selected and deputed to visit specific convict jails (like Tihar Jail) strictly once a month. During these visits at the end of each month, the advocates would identify newly arrived convicts, assess if they had independent legal representation, and offer the services of the Legal Services Committees. Acknowledging that many convicts needed time to think, the advocates would follow up continuously in subsequent months.

Systemic Challenges: Documentation and Communication

The Speaker highlighted two persistent problems in the system – *a.* the procurement of proper documentation, and *b.* the lack of communication from appointed legal aid lawyers regarding case status. By taking direct responsibility for explaining procedures, gathering documents, and ensuring timely filings, this proactive committee model drastically reduced the time taken to file appeals. He noted that delayed appeals often force individuals with meritorious claims to suffer in custody for unjustifiably long durations.

Institutionalisation of Legal Aid Models

To address these systemic delays, Mr. Agarwal strongly advocated for two primary submissions: First, he urged all High Court Legal Services Committees nationwide to institutionalise this visitation model by formally deputing lawyers to all Central and District jails on a monthly basis. Second, echoing the Chair’s remarks, he stressed the urgent need to integrate the E-Prison software across all states through NALSA.

Technological Integration and Reintegration

He further emphasized that automating parole and furlough mechanisms is a vital reintegration tool, as allowing a convict to reunite with their family for 10 to 15 days a year instils a sense of responsibility and significantly aids in their reformation.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS HELD DURING THE SESSION

The deliberations yielded several critical consensus points –

- **Technological Integration & Transparency** – The widespread adoption of the ‘E-Prison’ software (recently inaugurated by the CJI) is an indispensable solution to track under-trial detention periods in real-time, expedite appeals, and automate parole/furlough mechanisms.
- **Proactive Legal Aid** – Legal aid must evolve from a reactive service to a proactive safeguard. This requires regular, institutionalised lawyer visitations to prisons to identify unrepresented inmates and bridge the gap between law in books and law in action.
- **Expansion of Open Jails & Restorative Justice** – There is a unanimous need to transition from a retributive mindset to a rehabilitative one. The expansion of Open-Air Prisons (like the Sanganer model) and in-house skill development (ITIs/Polytechnics) are crucial to prevent recidivism and preserve human dignity.
- **Eradication of Colonial Remnants** – Systemic issues such as overcrowding, caste-based assignments, and severe healthcare deficits require urgent structural reforms through the harmonisation of state prison manuals and the adoption of the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, 2023.

FINAL REMARKS OF THE CHAIR

The session concluded with the host acknowledging the rich, thought-provoking perspectives shared by the domain experts and the judiciary, which successfully highlighted actionable solutions to benefit the “*last man standing*.”

His Lordship noted that the insights shared during the session contribute significantly to strengthening institutional responses and advancing a human-centric approach to prison administration and legal aid.

WELCOME SESSION

12th April, 2026

The second day of the North Zone Regional Conference on “Enhancing Access to Justice” with the theme “Justice Beyond Barriers: Rights, Rehabilitation and Reform for the Most Vulnerable” commenced on 12th April, 2026 at Dehradun, Uttarakhand, with the Welcome Session held in the distinguished presence of His Excellency Lt. Gen. Gurmit Singh, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd.), Hon’ble Governor of Uttarakhand, Hon’ble Mr. Justice Surya Kant, Chief Justice of India & Patron-in-Chief, NALSA, Shri Pushkar Singh Dhami, Hon’ble Chief Minister, Government of Uttarakhand, Hon’ble Mr. Justice Vikram Nath, Judge, Supreme Court of India & Executive Chairman, NALSA, Hon’ble Mr. Justice S.V. Bhatti and Hon’ble Mr. Justice Satish Chandra Sharma, Judges of the Supreme Court of India, Shri Arjun Ram Meghwal, Hon’ble Minister of State (Independent Charge), Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India, Hon’ble Mr. Justice Manoj Kumar Gupta, Chief Justice, High Court of Uttarakhand & Patron-in-Chief, UKSLSA and Hon’ble Mr. Justice Manoj Kumar Tiwari, Judge, High Court of Uttarakhand & Executive Chairman, UKSLSA , along with other eminent dignitaries. The Session was held in the august presence of Judges, Supreme Court of India, Chief Justices of the Hon’ble High Courts, Executive Chairpersons of State Legal Services Authorities, Executive Chairpersons of the High Court Legal Services Committees, Member Secretaries and Officers of the State Legal Services Authorities, members of the District Judiciary, legal practitioners, Para Legal Volunteers, domain experts, and representatives of civil society organizations from across the North Zone.

The Session marked a significant institutional moment, reflecting the collective commitment of the judiciary, executive, and legal services institutions towards advancing the constitutional mandate of access to justice.

The proceedings commenced with the ceremonial welcome of dignitaries followed by the lighting of the lamp, symbolizing the enduring resolve to promote legal awareness and empowerment across all sections of society. The solemnity of the occasion was complemented by the launch of key initiatives, reflecting the growing integration of technology, policy innovation, and grassroots engagement within the legal services framework.

A key highlight was the launch of the “*Nyay Mitra Portal*” for the Uttarakhand State Legal Services Authority by Hon’ble the Chief Justice of India and Patron-in-Chief, NALSA. The initiative represents a major step towards digitization and modernization of legal services delivery, enabling improved accessibility, streamlined coordination, and enhanced monitoring across jurisdictions.

Further, the **E-Booklet on Best Practices and Legal Aid Initiatives** was released by Hon’ble Mr. Justice Vikram Nath, Judge, Supreme Court of India and Executive Chairman, NALSA, reinforcing the importance of institutional learning and dissemination of successful models. The compendium captures innovative interventions undertaken across States and reflects the dynamic evolution of the legal services movement in responding to emerging challenges.

The Session also marked the launch of **Anti-Drug Units** in the State of Uttarakhand by His Excellency the Hon'ble Governor, representing a proactive intervention in addressing emerging socio-legal challenges. The initiative integrates legal awareness, preventive engagement, and community sensitization, particularly among youth and vulnerable populations, and situates substance abuse within the broader framework of access to justice and social empowerment.

The second day's Welcome Session reinforced the central theme of the Conference by situating access to justice within a broader constitutional, institutional, and societal framework and by emphasizing the need for coordinated, innovative and human-centric approaches to legal services delivery.

Welcome Address

HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE MANOJ KUMAR GUPTA

**Chief Justice, High Court of Uttarakhand and Patron-in-Chief, Uttarakhand State
Legal Services Authority**

In his Welcome Address, Hon'ble Mr. Justice Manoj Kumar Gupta, Chief Justice, High Court of Uttarakhand and Patron-in-Chief, Uttarakhand State Legal Services Authority, emphasized the necessity of evolving justice delivery systems to meet the unique challenges posed by geography, socio-economic disparities, and access deficits. His Lordship observed that in a State such as Uttarakhand, access to justice cannot remain confined to institutional spaces, but must be carried proactively to the doorsteps of those residing in remote and underserved regions. His Lordship underscored that legal services institutions must function not merely as facilitators of dispute resolution, but as instruments of social transformation, ensuring that constitutional guarantees are translated into meaningful outcomes.

Opening Address

SHRI ARJUN RAM MEGHWAL

**Hon'ble Minister of State (Independent Charge), Ministry of Law and Justice,
Government of India**

In his address, the Hon'ble Minister of State (Independent Charge), Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India, highlighted the imperative of aligning legislative intent with effective implementation at the grassroots level. He observed that access to justice must be viewed as an essential component of governance and development, and emphasized the role of coordinated policy frameworks in strengthening institutional capacities. The address underscored the importance of enhancing legal awareness, simplifying procedures, and ensuring that legal aid mechanisms are adequately resourced and efficiently administered so as to reach the intended beneficiaries.

Special Address
HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE VIKRAM NATH
Judge, Supreme Court of India & Executive Chairman, NALSA

Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vikram Nath, Judge, Supreme Court of India and Hon'ble Executive Chairman, NALSA, in his Special Address, articulated a comprehensive vision for the legal services movement rooted in inclusivity, responsiveness, and institutional accountability. His Lordship emphasized that the effectiveness of legal aid cannot be measured merely by the number of cases handled, but by the quality of engagement with beneficiaries and the extent to which justice delivery mechanisms are able to restore dignity and confidence among the most vulnerable sections of society. His Lordship observed that the design of the Conference itself, including the careful selection of themes and sub-themes, reflects a conscious effort to address issues that lie at the intersection of law and lived realities, particularly those affecting marginalized communities such as women, children, prisoners, and forest-dwelling populations.

His Lordship further highlighted the need to strengthen the foundational pillars of the legal services framework, including the role of Paralegal Volunteers, legal aid clinics, and community outreach initiatives. His Lordship emphasized that PLVs must be equipped not only with legal knowledge but also with the sensitivity and skills required to engage with communities in a meaningful manner. Stressing the importance of convergence, His Lordship observed that legal services institutions must work in close coordination with governmental agencies, civil society organizations, and local governance structures to ensure that interventions are holistic and sustainable. His Lordship also underscored the growing relevance of technology in expanding the reach of legal services, while cautioning that technological solutions must remain accessible and user-friendly, particularly for those with limited digital literacy. His Lordship's address reflected a broader institutional vision wherein legal services act as a bridge between constitutional guarantees and their realization in everyday life.

Special Address
SHRI. PUSHKAR SINGH DHAMI
Hon'ble Chief Minister of Uttarakhand

The Hon'ble Chief Minister of Uttarakhand, in his address, emphasized the role of the State in facilitating access to justice as an integral component of governance and public welfare. He observed that legal empowerment is closely linked with social and economic development, and that the State Government remains committed to supporting initiatives that enhance legal awareness and accessibility. He highlighted the importance of reaching out to remote and vulnerable communities, and noted that collaboration between State institutions and legal services authorities is essential to ensure that citizens are not deprived of their rights due to lack of awareness or resources.

Keynote Address
HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE SURYA KANT
Hon'ble The Chief Justice of India & Patron-in-chief NALSA

The Keynote Address was delivered by Hon'ble the Chief Justice of India and Patron-in-Chief, NALSA. His Lordship provided a profound and expansive articulation of the constitutional and institutional dimensions of access to justice. His Lordship underscored that access to justice is not merely a statutory or procedural concept, but a foundational principle that sustains the legitimacy of democratic governance. His Lordship observed that the strength of any justice delivery system must ultimately be assessed by its ability to serve those who are most marginalized, and that the true test of institutional efficacy lies in its capacity to respond to the needs of the “*last person.*”

His Lordship emphasized that the role of Legal Services Authorities has evolved significantly over time, from providing legal representation to becoming proactive agents of social justice. His Lordship highlighted the importance of institutional innovation, including the adoption of technology-driven platforms such as the “*Nyay Mitra Portal*”, in ensuring greater transparency, efficiency, and accountability. At the same time, His Lordship cautioned that the human element must remain central to the delivery of justice, and that empathy, sensitivity, and responsiveness are indispensable to building trust in the system.

His Lordship further underscored the need for continuous capacity building, data-driven decision-making, and outcome-oriented approaches within the legal services framework. His Lordship observed that access to justice must be understood in its broadest sense, encompassing not only access to courts but also access to information, legal awareness, timely remedies, and effective enforcement. His Lordship called for a renewed commitment from all stakeholders to ensure that legal services are delivered in a manner that is inclusive, efficient, and responsive to the evolving needs of society.

Presidential Address
HIS EXCELLENCY LT. GEN. GURMIT SINGH, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM,
VSM (RETD.)
The Hon'ble Governor of Uttarakhand

In his Presidential Address, His Excellency the Hon'ble Governor of Uttarakhand reflected upon the broader societal role of legal services institutions in strengthening democratic values and promoting social justice. His Excellency emphasized that the justice delivery system must function as an instrument of empowerment, particularly for those who are socially and economically disadvantaged.

His Excellency observed that sustained institutional commitment, coupled with active community engagement, is essential to ensuring that the benefits of legal services reach every section of society. His address highlighted the importance of fostering a culture of legal awareness and trust in institutions, which is fundamental to the realization of justice in its truest sense.

Vote of Thanks
HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE MANOJ KUMAR TIWARI
Judge, High Court of Uttarakhand and Executive Chairman, Uttarakhand
State Legal Services Authority

The session concluded with a Vote of Thanks delivered by Hon'ble Mr. Justice Manoj Kumar Tiwari, Judge, High Court of Uttarakhand and Executive Chairman, Uttarakhand State Legal Services Authority. His Lordship expressed sincere gratitude to all dignitaries and participants for their valuable presence and contributions. The proceedings concluded with the National Anthem, marking the formal close of the Welcome Session.

The Conference continued with the Technical Sessions-III and IV, and concluded with the **flagging off of Multi-Utility Vehicles (MUVs) of UKSLSA of 13 MUVs for the 13 DLSAs in the State**, dedicated to strengthening last-mile delivery of legal services. These vehicles are envisaged as mobile units for legal awareness, outreach, and facilitation, particularly in remote and inaccessible areas. The initiative reflects a pragmatic recognition of the geographical challenges in States like Uttarakhand and underscores the commitment of the legal services institutions to physically reach communities that remain beyond the conventional institutional framework. The deployment of such mobile units is expected to significantly enhance the visibility and accessibility of legal aid services, ensuring that justice delivery mechanisms are not constrained by terrain or distance.

The 2nd Day Session thus served to reinforce the central theme of the Conference by situating access to justice within a broader constitutional, institutional, and societal framework, and by emphasizing the need for coordinated, innovative, and human-centric approaches to legal services delivery.

TECHNICAL SESSION - III
JUSTICE FOR ACID ATTACK SURVIVORS: COMPENSATION,
REHABILITATION & DIGNITY-CENTRIC SUPPORT
12th APRIL, 2026 11:30 AM to 12:45 PM

- Chair:** Hon'ble Mr. Justice Sarasa Venkatanarayana Bhatti, Judge, Supreme Court of India
- Co-Chair:** Hon'ble Mr. Justice Devendra Kumar Upadhyaya, Chief Justice, High Court of Delhi
- Speaker 1:** Ms. Laxmi Agarwal, Founder, The Laxmi Foundation
- Speaker 2:** Dr. Navpreet Kaur, Co-Founder, The Laxmi Foundation

VIEWS OF THE HON'BLE CHAIR
HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE SARASA VENKATANARAYANA BHATTI

JUDGE, SUPREME COURT OF INDIA

Opening Perspective: Experiential Understanding of Justice

The Hon'ble Chair, Justice Sarasa Venkatanarayana Bhatti, Judge, Supreme Court of India, commenced the session by drawing upon two guiding ideas – that *the wearer knows where the shoe pinches*, and that *one must do what clearly lies in one's hands instead of thinking about what dimly lies at a distance*. Speaking from his experience as both a lawyer and a judge, the Hon'ble Chair emphasized that the subject demands lived sensitivity rather than borrowed knowledge.

Role of Judiciary and Realities of Justice Delivery

The Hon'ble Chair expressed confidence in the district judiciary as the “steel frame” of justice delivery. His Lordship observed that the administration of justice is neither a myth nor a mirage, but a serious pursuit for every litigant, requiring responsiveness to real-life challenges faced by victims.

Respect and Recognition of Victims

A key concern highlighted was the lack of adequate respect and recognition accorded to victims. The Hon'ble Chair noted that survivors of acid attacks often appear before courts without receiving even basic acknowledgment and dignity, which must be consciously addressed within judicial processes.

Access to Information and Support Systems

The Hon'ble Chair pointed out that victims are frequently not provided with complete information regarding proceedings and entitlements. Additionally, unlike hospital settings, survivors often attend court proceedings alone. The Hon'ble Chair emphasized the need for institutional support systems and assistance within court premises.

Restorative Justice and Victim Empowerment

The Hon'ble Chair highlighted the importance of restitution beyond compensation, including restoration of access to education, vocational training, and platforms for survivors to voice their experiences. The Hon'ble Chair stressed that victim participation must be meaningful and aimed at enabling survivors to stand on their own.

Integration of Support Persons and Safeguards

The Hon'ble Chair suggested that companions accompanying survivors should be formally integrated into the prosecution and rehabilitation process. The Hon'ble Chair also emphasized the need for safeguards to ensure that compensation is not misused or misappropriated.

Court Infrastructure and Sensitive Spaces

Highlighting infrastructural concerns, the Hon'ble Chair advocated for dedicated spaces within court buildings to accommodate and support vulnerable victims, recognizing the challenges they face in navigating judicial environments.

Resilience and Strength of Survivors

The Hon'ble Chair emphasized that survivors must not be perceived as weak or ignorant. Instead, the Hon'ble Chair described their resilience as remarkable and called upon the judiciary to empower them through engagement and inclusion in the justice process.

Conclusion: Dignity-Centric Approach

Concluding his remarks, the Hon'ble Chair underscored that acid attack survivors are “*one among us*”, and are entitled to the same rights and dignity as any other citizen. The Hon'ble Chair called for a collective responsibility of the judiciary, State, and society to ensure their full inclusion and rehabilitation.

VIEWS OF THE HON'BLE CO-CHAIRS
HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE DEVENDRA KUMAR UPADHYAYA
CHIEF JUSTICE, HIGH COURT OF DELHI

Philosophical Foundation: Justice as the First Virtue

The Hon'ble Co-Chair, Justice Devendra Kumar Upadhyaya, Chief Justice, High Court of Delhi, commenced his address by invoking the philosophy of John Rawls, emphasizing that justice is the first virtue of social institutions. The Hon'ble Co-Chair noted that institutions must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust, regardless of their efficiency.

Natural Facts and Institutional Responsibility

Drawing on Rawl's theory, the Hon'ble Co-Chair explained that natural distribution is neither just nor unjust; rather justice lies in how institutions respond to them. In the context of acid attack survivors, this places a significant responsibility on legal and social institutions.

Understanding the Realities of Acid Attack Survivors

The Hon'ble Co-Chair identified key realities, including:

- Acid violence as the most severe forms of gender-based violence
- Deep psychological and sociological trauma
- Internalization of stigma leading to self-devaluation
- Familial rejection, societal isolation and loss of opportunities
- Patriarchal structures underlying such crimes

Legal Framework and Enforceable Rights

Referring to the landmark judgment in *Laxmi vs Union of India*, the Hon'ble Co-Chair emphasized that issues such as unregulated acid sale, lack of medical care, and inadequate compensation violate Article 21 of the Constitution of India. The Hon'ble Co-Chair stressed that these are enforceable rights, not discretionary welfare measures, and must form the basis of all institutional efforts.

Comprehensive Rehabilitation and Institutional Support

The Hon'ble Co-Chair highlighted the need for rehabilitation programmes that extend beyond medical treatment to include psychological care, vocational training, and legal assistance. The Hon'ble Co-Chair encouraged the collaboration of District Legal Services Authorities (DLSAs) with NGOs and utilization of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds to build robust support systems.

Economic Empowerment and Social Reintegration

The Hon'ble Co-Chair emphasised that economic independence through skill development and livelihood opportunities is essential for restoring dignity and addressing societal alienation faced by survivors.

Proactive Outreach by Legal Services Institutions

The Hon'ble Co-Chair distinguished between passive and proactive approaches, urging Legal Services Authorities to actively reach out to victims rather than expecting them to approach institutional mechanisms.

Adoption of the RESPECT Framework

Referring to the World Health Organization's RESPECT framework, the Hon'ble Co-Chair highlighted the importance of relationship skills, empowerment, access to services, poverty reduction, safe environments, prevention of abuse, and transformation of societal attitudes. The Hon'ble Co-Chair particularly emphasized the need to cultivate empathy within society.

Bridging the Gap Between Rights and Realisation

In conclusion, the Hon'ble Co-Chair underscored the need to bridge the gap between rights recognized and rights realized. The Hon'ble Co-Chair urged Legal Services Authorities to approach their responsibilities with depth, empathy, and commitment, rather than as routine functions.

KEY POINTS AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE SPEAKERS

I. Dr. Navpreet Kaur, Co-Founder, The Laxmi Foundation

Constitutional Vision and the Question of Inclusion

Dr. Navpreet Kaur commenced her address by invoking the opening word of the Preamble of the Constitution of India – “We” – emphasizing that it signifies inclusion, equality, and collective responsibility. However, she raised a critical question as to whether this “We” truly includes acid attack survivors, who often remain marginalized despite constitutional guarantees.

Gender Inequality and Patriarchal Structures

Dr. Kaur highlighted the deeply entrenched patriarchal mindset that continues to shape societal attitudes. She observed that discrimination begins at birth, where the birth of a girl child is often perceived as a burden, both within families and in the broader social context. In contrast, sons are regarded as carriers of lineage and family legacy, reinforcing gender bias from the outset. She emphasized that patriarchy is not merely a cultural phenomenon but a structural issue that perpetuates inequality, entitlement over women, and harmful gender norms. Importantly, she noted that patriarchy harms not only women but also men, as it imposes rigid expectations tied to power, property, and ego.

Understanding Acid Attacks as Gender-Based Violence

Dr. Kaur discussed acid attacks as a particularly brutal manifestation of gender-based violence. She explained that such attacks are rarely intended to kill; rather, they are acts of deliberate disfigurement aimed at maiming, torturing, and destroying a woman’s physical appearance.

She pointed out that approximately 70–80% of acid attack survivors are women, and the underlying motive is often control. These acts are frequently triggered by a woman’s refusal,

independence, success, or assertion of autonomy. Contributing factors include patriarchal entitlement, dowry-related conflicts, sexual violence, and the easy availability of acid. At its core, she identified a broader emotional imbalance in society as a key driver of such violence.

Impact on Survivors: A Continuous Violation of Rights

The Speaker underscored that acid attacks constitute a continuous violation of the right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution of India. The consequences are not confined to the moment of attack but unfold daily through physical suffering, psychological trauma, and social exclusion.

She detailed the severe physical consequences, including deep tissue damage and disfigurement, as well as the long-term psychological and sociological effects that impair the survivor's ability to lead a normal life.

Case Study: Gaps in Ground-Level Support

Through real-life examples, including cases of survivors, the Speaker illustrated the systemic challenges faced by victims. These included lack of immediate medical care, absence of counselling, delays in compensation, and inadequate institutional response.

These narratives demonstrated that despite the availability of legal frameworks and schemes, survivors often struggle to access timely and effective support, leading to prolonged suffering and financial hardship.

Existing Legal Frameworks and Implementation Challenges

Dr. Kaur referred to institutional mechanisms such as the NALSA (Legal Services to Victims of Acid Attacks) Scheme, 2016, which is designed to provide comprehensive support to survivors. While these frameworks are robust in principle, she stressed that their effectiveness is contingent upon proper and timely implementation. She pointed out that implementation remains inconsistent, with continued accessibility of acid and delays in enforcement of safeguards.

Need for Comprehensive and Integrated Support Systems

Dr. Kaur emphasized the urgent need for a holistic, survivor-centric support system that integrates medical, legal, and social assistance. She proposed several measures, including:

- Provision of comprehensive medical treatment, including reconstructive surgeries and follow-up care.
- Deployment of counsellors at hospitals, courts, and legal aid centres.
- Introduction of immediate medical access cards for cashless treatment.
- Ensuring travel, transport, and accommodation support for survivors and their caregivers.
- Establishment of a single-window support system across institutions.

Strengthening Institutional Mechanisms and Access to Justice

The Speaker highlighted the need for dedicated institutional support, including:

- Appointment of paralegal volunteers and police liaison officers.
- Creation of a dedicated toll-free helpline.
- Pre-designation and training of officials to ensure immediate response.

She emphasized that access to justice must be simple, responsive, and empathetic, rather than fragmented and bureaucratic.

Role of Awareness, Prevention, and Sensitisation

Dr. Kaur stressed the importance of preventive measures and societal change, advocating for structured awareness campaigns led by NALSA and State Legal Services Authorities. These should include education on prevention, legal consequences, safe handling of acid, and emergency response mechanisms. She also highlighted the need to foster empathy over sympathy and to address the root causes of violence through sustained sensitisation efforts.

Recognition of Families and Caregiving

The Speaker emphasized that families of survivors also require support, as caregiving often becomes a full-time responsibility. She suggested the provision of pensions and financial assistance to caregivers and recognition of their role in the rehabilitation process.

Towards Inclusive Justice and Dignity

In conclusion, Dr. Kaur reiterated the need to reclaim the constitutional promise of “We” by ensuring that acid attack survivors are fully included within its ambit. She called for a coordinated policy approach that ensures dignity, rehabilitation, and meaningful inclusion of survivors in society.

II. Ms. Laxmi Agarwal, Founder, The Laxmi Foundation

Reframing Identity: From Victimhood to Survivorship

Ms. Laxmi Agarwal began her address by sharing her personal journey, emphasizing that her story is not an individual narrative but represents countless acid attack survivors. She firmly rejected the term “*victim*,” underscoring her belief that “*survivors*” must not be defined by their suffering but by their resilience and strength.

Societal Conditioning and Gender Bias

The Speaker highlighted the deep-rooted gender bias in society, where discrimination begins even before birth and continues through life. She pointed out that societal attitudes, including dowry practices and lack of opportunities for girls, create an environment where violence against women becomes normalized.

Personal Experience of Violence and Lack of Support Systems

Narrating her own experience, Ms. Agarwal illustrated how acid attacks are often perpetrated by known individuals rather than strangers. She emphasized that survivors frequently lack safe spaces to report harassment or seek help, due to fear, stigma, and societal pressures. She also described the absence of immediate support mechanisms, both at the societal and institutional level, which exacerbates the trauma faced by survivors.

Critical Importance of Emergency Response and Awareness

The Speaker stressed the urgent need for public awareness regarding first aid in acid attack cases. She highlighted that lack of knowledge, even among bystanders, police, and hospitals, can worsen injuries. She advocated for widespread awareness campaigns to educate the public on immediate response measures.

Medical Trauma and Long-Term Physical Impact

Ms. Agarwal detailed the severe and prolonged medical challenges faced by survivors, including multiple surgeries, skin grafting, and loss of vision. She emphasized that treatment is not limited to visible injuries but involves extensive and repeated medical interventions affecting the entire body.

Judicial Process and Challenges Faced by Survivors

Reflecting on her legal journey, she highlighted delays in justice delivery, threats from perpetrators, and the emotional toll of prolonged trials. She pointed out systemic issues such as bail granted to offenders and lack of victim protection, which often lead to re-victimization.

Impact on Family and Loss of Opportunities

The Speaker emphasized that acid attacks affect not only the survivor but the entire family. Education is disrupted, livelihoods are lost, and families undergo immense emotional and financial distress. She noted that survivors often lose opportunities for education and career growth.

Need for Rehabilitation and Empowerment

Ms. Agarwal strongly advocated for rehabilitation as the cornerstone of justice. She emphasized that empowering survivors through education, livelihood opportunities, and social acceptance is essential to restoring dignity. She highlighted the role of her organization in providing shelter, education, and support to survivors and their families, demonstrating the transformative impact of sustained rehabilitation efforts.

Changing Societal Mindset and Addressing “Acidity”

In a powerful metaphor, the Speaker described “acidity” not only as a physical substance but as a reflection of societal anger, prejudice, and violence. She emphasized that true reform requires eliminating this mindset from society through awareness, empathy, and collective responsibility.

Conclusion: Strength, Resilience, and Collective Responsibility

Concluding her address, Ms. Agarwal underscored that survivors are fighters who, with proper support, can rebuild their lives and achieve their aspirations. She called upon institutions and society to ensure that no survivor is left unsupported and that rehabilitation remains central to justice delivery.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS HELD DURING THE SESSION

The Technical Session III witnessed a comprehensive and deeply engaging discussion on the multifaceted challenges faced by acid attack survivors and the institutional responses required to ensure justice, dignity, and rehabilitation. The deliberations brought together judicial perspectives, experiential insights, and policy-oriented recommendations, highlighting both systemic gaps and pathways for reform.

A key area of discussion was the need to shift from a welfare-based approach to a rights-based framework, in line with constitutional guarantees and judicial pronouncements. It was emphasized that compensation, medical care, and rehabilitation must be treated as enforceable rights rather than discretionary support measures.

The Hon'ble Chair, Hon'ble Co-Chair and Speakers underscored the importance of early intervention and coordinated institutional response, particularly at the stages immediately following an acid attack. The lack of awareness regarding first aid, delays in medical treatment, and absence of counselling were identified as critical concerns requiring urgent attention.

The discussion also highlighted the need for integrated support systems, including the establishment of single-window mechanisms to ensure seamless coordination between police, hospitals, and Legal Services Authorities. The role of paralegal volunteers, trained personnel, and dedicated helplines was emphasized as essential for improving access to justice.

Another significant theme was the importance of long-term rehabilitation, encompassing psychological counselling, vocational training, education, and economic empowerment. It was noted that sustainable rehabilitation is key to restoring dignity and enabling survivors to reintegrate into society with confidence and independence.

Deliberations were also made on the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and collaboration with NGOs, recognizing that multi-stakeholder engagement is necessary to build robust and responsive support systems.

The issue of societal mindset and prevention was discussed extensively, with emphasis on addressing patriarchal attitudes, promoting gender equality, and fostering empathy through awareness and sensitisation programmes. Prevention was identified as a critical component of any long-term strategy.

Overall, the discussions reflected a consensus on the need for a holistic, survivor-centric, and dignity-driven approach, supported by strong institutional coordination, effective implementation of existing frameworks, and sustained societal engagement.

TECHNICAL SESSION - IV
STRENGTHENING LEGAL PROTECTION & SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR WOMEN
AND CHILDREN
12th APRIL, 2026, 12:45 PM to 02:00 PM

- Chair:** Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vikram Nath, Judge, Supreme Court of India & Hon'ble Executive Chairman, NALSA
- Co-Chair:** Hon'ble Mr. Justice Sanjeev Kumar, Judge, High Court of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh & Executive Chairman, J&K Legal Services Authority
- Speaker 1:** Ms. Manju Dhoundiyal, Consultant (Women and Children Issues)
- Speaker 2:** Ms. Sampurna Behrua, Executive Director, India Child Protection

VIEWS OF THE HON'BLE CHAIR
HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE VIKRAM NATH

JUDGE, SUPREME COURT OF INDIA & HON'BLE EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN,
NALSA

Opening Perspective: Beyond Law to Social Reality

The Hon'ble Chair, Justice Vikram Nath, commenced the session by emphasizing that issues concerning women and children cannot be viewed solely as matters of law enforcement, but must be understood as deeply rooted social challenges requiring systemic and preventive interventions. The Hon'ble Chair observed that despite a comprehensive legal framework, gaps persist in ensuring effective protection and support.

Early Identification and Preventive Approach

Highlighting the importance of early intervention, the Hon'ble Chair noted that signs of vulnerability—such as behavioural changes and distress—are often visible at the community level. The Hon'ble Chair emphasized the need to empower frontline stakeholders, including teachers, healthcare workers, and community representatives, to identify and respond to such indicators in a timely manner.

Institutional Coordination and Convergence

The Hon'ble Chair underscored the necessity of coordinated institutional response, observing that fragmented systems place undue burden on victims. The Hon'ble Chair emphasized convergence between police, legal services institutions, healthcare systems, and child protection agencies to ensure seamless access to justice.

Legal Literacy and Role of Legal Services Institutions

The Hon'ble Chair highlighted that rights remain ineffective unless individuals are aware of them. The Hon'ble Chair stressed the role of NALSA and Legal Services Authorities in promoting legal awareness and ensuring that vulnerable sections are able to access available remedies and entitlements.

Judicial Sensitivity and Victim-Centric Processes

The Hon'ble Chair emphasized that judicial processes must be sensitive to the needs of women and children, including safeguarding identity, minimizing procedural distress, and ensuring child-friendly environments within court systems.

Rehabilitation as a Continuing Process

The Hon'ble Chair underscored that protection must extend beyond rescue and prosecution to include long-term rehabilitation, including education, counselling, and livelihood support, ensuring dignity and reintegration into society.

VIEWS OF THE HON'BLE CO-CHAIRS
HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE SANJEEV KUMAR

JUDGE, HIGH COURT OF JAMMU & KASHMIR AND LADAKH & EXECUTIVE
CHAIRMAN, J&K LEGAL SERVICES AUTHORITY

Introductory Perspective: Structural Barriers to Access to Justice

The Hon'ble Co-Chair, Justice Sanjeev Kumar commenced his address by contextualizing the challenges faced by women and children within the broader framework of access to justice, emphasizing that these challenges are neither isolated nor incidental, but arise from deeply embedded structural and societal factors. The Hon'ble Co-Chair observed that despite the existence of legal safeguards, multiple barriers continue to impede effective realization of rights.

Understanding Barriers to Access to Justice

The Hon'ble Co-Chair identified key barriers faced by women and children, categorizing them into: -

- Socio-economic constraints
- Lack of legal awareness
- Social and cultural barriers and
- Procedural and institutional challenges.

The Hon'ble Co-Chair observed that financial dependency, stigma, and complex procedures often deter victims from approaching legal institutions.

Socio-Economic and Informational Constraints

The Hon'ble Co-Chair noted that economic dependence and litigation costs significantly impact access to justice, particularly for women. Further, lack of awareness regarding rights and entitlements leads to underreporting of offences and underutilization of available legal remedies.

Social and Cultural Barriers

Highlighting entrenched gender norms and societal pressures, the Hon'ble Co-Chair observed that stigma and fear of retaliation often prevent victims from seeking redressal, thereby reinforcing cycles of silence and vulnerability.

Role of Legal Services Authorities and Legal Framework

Referring to the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, the Hon'ble Co-Chair emphasized that women and children are entitled to free legal aid irrespective of income. The Hon'ble Co-Chair highlighted the role of Legal Services Authorities in providing representation, counselling, and access to alternative dispute resolution mechanisms.

Grassroots Outreach and Role of PLVs

The Hon'ble Co-Chair underscored the importance of legal literacy and outreach programmes, and emphasized the role of Paralegal Volunteers (PLVs) in bridging the gap between institutions and communities by identifying beneficiaries and facilitating access.

Illustrative Example: Representation and Access in J&K

Drawing from his experience in Jammu & Kashmir, the Hon'ble Co-Chair highlighted that earlier there was minimal representation of women in the legal profession. However, with increased participation of women in the judiciary, legal profession, and as Paralegal Volunteers, accessibility and responsiveness of the system have improved significantly.

The Hon'ble Co-Chair further referred to the example of reservation of women in professional education, particularly in medical institutions, which led to greater availability of female professionals and improved access to services for women, demonstrating how **structural interventions can address socio-cultural barriers**.

Victim-Friendly Justice Delivery

The Hon'ble Co-Chair emphasized the need for child-friendly courts, confidentiality safeguards, psychological support systems, and simplified procedures to ensure a victim-centric justice delivery system.

KEY POINTS AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE SPEAKERS

I. Ms. Manju Dhoundiyal, Consultant (Women and Children Issues)

Understanding Vulnerability: Beyond Legal Frameworks

The Speaker commenced her address by emphasizing that issues concerning women and children cannot be addressed solely through legislative measures, as vulnerability is deeply rooted in socio-cultural conditioning. She observed that societal norms often discourage women and children from expressing their needs or asserting their rights, thereby limiting their access to justice.

Normalization of Violence and Institutional Response

The Speaker highlighted that violence against women and children is frequently normalized, trivialized, or inadequately acknowledged. She referred to instances where acts of physical violence are dismissed as insignificant, thereby discouraging victims from seeking redressal and reinforcing cycles of abuse.

She further raised concerns regarding **insensitive institutional responses**, noting that in certain cases, serious offences are addressed through inappropriate approaches, including attempts at reconciliation or social compromise, which undermine the gravity of the offence.

Inappropriate Resolution Mechanisms and Re-Victimization

Drawing attention to judicial and societal practices, the Speaker referred to instances where perpetrators are encouraged to marry victims, including minors, as a form of resolution. She emphasized that such approaches are fundamentally flawed and result in **re-victimization**, particularly in cases involving children, where consent and autonomy are compromised.

Reframing Identity: From Victim to Survivor

The Speaker stressed the importance of shifting the narrative from “victim” to “survivor”, emphasizing restoration of dignity, autonomy, and self-worth. She observed that terminology plays a significant role in shaping both institutional attitudes and individual recovery.

Psychosocial Impact and Loss of Agency

Drawing from her field experience, including interactions with survivors of trafficking and abuse, the Speaker highlighted that many victims internalize a sense of unworthiness and do not perceive themselves as entitled to protection or justice. She emphasized that this psychological impact often becomes a major barrier to accessing legal remedies.

She therefore underscored the importance of **psychosocial support**, including counselling and sustained engagement, as a foundational component of rehabilitation.

Implementation Gaps in Legal Frameworks

The Speaker observed that while India has comprehensive laws, including the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 and the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, significant gaps persist in their implementation.

She highlighted issues such as lack of adherence to confidentiality provisions, absence of child-friendly procedures in practice, and inadequate understanding of legal mandates among stakeholders.

Guiding Principles and Child-Centric Approach

Referring to the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, the Speaker emphasized that the **principle of the best interest of the child** must guide all institutional actions. She stressed that decisions must prioritize safety, dignity, and long-term well-being, rather than procedural convenience.

Need for Capacity Building and Institutional Sensitivity

The Speaker highlighted the need for **capacity building across stakeholders**, including police, judiciary, and support institutions, to ensure sensitivity, awareness, and effective response.

She emphasized that strengthening protection systems requires not only legal reforms but also **attitudinal change and inter-institutional coordination**, ensuring that responses are humane, consistent, and survivor-centric.

II. Ms. Sampurna Behrua, Executive Director, India Child Protection

Bridging the Gap Between Law and Implementation

The Speaker commenced her address by emphasizing that India possesses a robust legal and policy framework for the protection of women and children; however, the primary challenge lies in the gap between legislative intent and ground-level implementation. She observed that laws often remain ineffective due to lack of enforcement, monitoring, and accountability.

Prevention as a Core Strategy

The Speaker emphasized that protection frameworks must prioritize prevention alongside response, highlighting the need for early intervention, awareness, and systemic vigilance.

She proposed a structured and multi-dimensional approach to strengthening systems, focusing on policy implementation, awareness, enforcement, and capacity building.

Illustrative Example: Impact of Focused Enforcement (Child Marriage)

The Speaker referred to recent efforts in addressing child marriage, noting that focused enforcement over a short period has led to large-scale prevention of such incidents and increased prosecution. This, she emphasized, demonstrates that effective implementation of existing laws can yield measurable and impactful outcomes.

Deterrence Through Prosecution and Awareness

The Speaker highlighted the importance of deterrence, emphasizing that visible enforcement and awareness of legal consequences play a crucial role in reducing

offences. She stressed the need for time-bound investigation and trial, noting that delays weaken the deterrent effect and erode confidence in the justice system.

Illustrative Example: Cybercrime Intervention and Deterrence

Drawing attention to emerging challenges, the Speaker cited interventions in the cyber domain where targeted deterrence messaging resulted in a significant reduction in demand for exploitative content. This example highlighted the effectiveness of combining technology, awareness, and enforcement in addressing new forms of crime.

Institutional Gaps and Capacity Deficits

The Speaker identified several systemic challenges, including vacancies in statutory bodies such as Child Welfare Committees, lack of trained personnel, and inadequate infrastructure. She noted that these gaps directly affect the ability of institutions to respond effectively and in a timely manner.

She also referred to practical challenges faced at the ground level, including instances where complaints are not taken seriously or victims are discouraged from pursuing formal processes.

Need for Convergence and Integrated Systems

The Speaker emphasized the importance of inter-agency convergence, noting that departments often function in silos, leading to fragmented responses. She advocated for integrated systems, including digital platforms and coordinated mechanisms, to ensure seamless support and accountability.

Technology and Emerging Challenges

The Speaker highlighted the growing prevalence of cybercrimes against children, emphasizing the need for technological capacity, forensic tools, and specialized training for stakeholders, including investigators, prosecutors, and judicial officers.

Behavioural Change and Societal Responsibility

The Speaker underscored the importance of shifting societal attitudes, particularly in addressing victim-blaming and promoting accountability of perpetrators. She emphasized the need for sustained awareness and sensitization initiatives across institutions and communities.

Monitoring, Accountability, and System Strengthening

Concluding her address, the Speaker emphasized the need for robust monitoring and reporting mechanisms to track implementation of laws and schemes, ensuring accountability and continuous improvement in protection systems.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS HELD DURING THE SESSION

The Technical Session IV witnessed comprehensive deliberations on the challenges and systemic gaps in ensuring effective legal protection and support systems for women and children. The discussions highlighted that while India has a strong legal framework, the primary challenge lies in implementation, accessibility, and coordination.

A key theme that emerged was the need to shift from a reactive approach to a **preventive and proactive framework**, focusing on early identification of vulnerability and community-level interventions. The importance of legal literacy and awareness was emphasized as a critical factor in enabling access to justice.

The session underscored the necessity of **institutional convergence**, bringing together police, legal services authorities, healthcare providers, and child protection agencies to provide integrated and seamless support to victims.

Deliberations also highlighted the importance of **victim-centric and child-friendly processes**, including confidentiality safeguards, psychological support, and sensitive judicial handling of cases.

The role of **Paralegal Volunteers and grassroots outreach mechanisms** was recognized as essential in bridging the gap between institutions and beneficiaries.

The discussion further emphasized the need for **effective enforcement and deterrence**, including time-bound investigation and prosecution, supported by monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

The importance of addressing **societal attitudes and behavioural change** was also highlighted, particularly in combating normalization of violence and victim-blaming.

Overall, the session reflected a consensus on the need for a **holistic, coordinated, and dignity-centric approach**, supported by effective implementation of existing frameworks, capacity building, and sustained institutional and societal engagement.
