NATIONAL LEGAL SERVICES AUTHORITY

REPORT

WEST ZONE REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON "ENHANCING ACCESS TO JUSTICE"

"United Voices, Stroger Tomorrow. Advancing Access to Justice through Dialogue, Dignity & Inclusion"

Brilliant Convention Centre, Indore, Madhya Pradesh on 8-9 August, 2026



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Report on West Zone Regional Conference on "*Enhancing Access to Justice*"

The Madhya Pradesh State Legal Services Authority (MPSLSA) under the aegis of The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), convened the West Zone Regional Conference on "*Enhancing Access to Justice*" with the theme *"United Voices, Stronger Tomorrow. Advancing Access to Justice through Dialogue, Dignity & Inclusion"* at Brilliant Convention Centre, Indore, Madhya Pradesh on 8-9 August, 2026.

The states in the West Zone includes Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Dadra & Nagar Haveli, Daman & Diu, Goa.

The conference witnessed around more than 650 participants including, Chief Justice of India, Judges of the Supreme Court of India, Chief Justices/Acting Chief Justices of West Zone High Courts, Judges of High Courts, Member Secretaries of all States Legal Services Authorities, Officer/Officials of National Legal Services Authorities, Chairperson of HCLSC, West Zone Senior most Judicial Officers, Judicial Officers, Secretaries of DLSAs, Prosecution Officers, Child Development Project Officers, Legal Aid Defence Councils, Panel Lawyers, Mediators, Para Legal Volunteers, Non-Governmental Organisations, Beneficiaries of NALSA Schemes, Sign Language Interpreters, Other Departments Officers.

INAUGURAL SESSION

The inaugural session was graced by **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Surya Kant**, Chief Justice of India & Patron-in-Chief, NALSA. The session witnessed the august presence of **Dr. Mohan Yadav**, Hon'ble Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh; **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vikram Nath**, Judge of the Supreme Court of India & Executive Chairman, NALSA; **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Satish Chandra Sharma**, Judge, Supreme Court of India; **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Manmohan**, Judge, Supreme Court of India; **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vijay Bishnoi**, Judge, Supreme Court of India; **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Alok Aradhe**, Judge, Supreme Court of India; **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Sheel Nagu**, Judge, Supreme Court of India; **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Sanjeev Sachdeva**, Judge, Supreme Court of India; **Mr. Arjun Ram Meghwal**, Hon'ble Union Minister of State (Independent Charge), Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India; **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vivek Rusia**, Acting Chief Justice, High Court of Madhya Pradesh & Patron-in-Chief, MPSLSA; **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Anand Pathak**, Judge, High Court of Madhya Pradesh; **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vivek Agarwal**, Judge, High Court of Madhya Pradesh.

Welcoming the august gathering, **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vivek Rusia**, Acting Chief Justice, High Court of Madhya Pradesh & Patron-in-Chief, MPSLSA, extended a warm welcome to the city of Indore, the karmabhoomi of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar and India's cleanest city. Highlighting the core philosophy of the conference, he observed

that justice flourishes when institutions speak with a unified purpose, when dialogue replaces division, when human dignity remains at the heart of every endeavour, and when inclusion ensures that no individual is left unheard or behind. He outlined the proactive efforts of MPSLSA to take legal services beyond the courtroom through pre-litigation community mediation, Special Jail Lok Adalats, and pioneering initiatives such as sign-language mediation training, thereby ensuring equal participation for every section of society.

Delivering the opening address, **Mr. Arjun Ram Meghwal**, Hon'ble Union Minister of State (Independent Charge), Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India, highlighted India's civilisational legacy as the "*Mother of Democracy*", deeply rooted in the rule of law, natural justice, and consensus building. Emphasising Article 39A of the Constitution, he stated that making "*Ease of Justice*" a national mission, alongside Ease of Living and Ease of Doing Business, was essential to realising the vision of *Viksit Bharat @ 2047*. He further emphasised the need to ensure that the protective umbrella of the Constitution reaches the last person in the queue through technology-enabled and citizen-centric governance.

Following the speech, **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Surya Kant**, Chief Justice of India and Patron-in-Chief, NALSA, officially released the **NALSA Scheme on the Right to Education**, titled "**SHIKSHA**", along with the **NALSA theme song video in Indian Sign Language (ISL)**.

This was followed by the release of the **Hindi editions of the NALSA Schemes** by **Dr. Mohan Yadav**, Hon'ble Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, underscoring the principle that justice is meaningful only when information about it reaches every citizen in their own language.

In his address, **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Manmohan**, Judge, Supreme Court of India, stated that the conference theme, "*United Voices, Stronger Tomorrow*", highlighted the importance of coordination between the judiciary and the executive, the development of future ready infrastructure, and the transition from an adversarial framework to cooperative dispute resolution through dialogue, dignity, and inclusion. He illustrated the significance of mediation through the example of two parties disputing over a single orange. A traditional court based approach might divide the orange between them. However, a mediator, by uncovering their underlying interests, may discover that one party requires only the peel to make perfume, while the other needs only the pulp to prepare juice. By addressing their actual needs rather than their rigid demands, both parties can obtain everything they require, resulting in a mutually beneficial resolution without any lingering conflict.

Thereafter, **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vikram Nath**, Judge, Supreme Court of India and Executive Chairman, NALSA, released **"SPARSH," a Braille guide to the NALSA Schemes**, aimed at enabling visually impaired persons to independently access information relating to legal services.

This was followed by the launch of the admission portal for the **certificate course on mediation**, titled "**Transforming Conflict into Consensus**," by **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Satish Chandra Sharma**, Judge, Supreme Court of India. The course is a joint initiative of the Madhya Pradesh State Legal Services Authority and Dharmashastra National Law University, Jabalpur.

Addressing the gathering, **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vikram Nath**, Judge, Supreme Court of India and Executive Chairman, NALSA, centred his remarks on the three core pillars of the conference: (*a*) dialogue, (*b*) dignity, and (*c*) inclusion. He advocated the use of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, particularly mediation, to promote collaborative problem solving instead of adversarial litigation. Quoting Mahatma Gandhi's *talisman*, he urged everyone to evaluate whether institutional actions truly benefit the poorest and weakest in society, calling it the ultimate test of whether access to justice is realized in practice.

Hon'ble Mr. Justice Manmohan, Judge, Supreme Court of India, formally launched the **Justice for Children Litigation Fellowship**, a flagship one-year initiative of the Madhya Pradesh State Legal Services Authority and National Law University Delhi, undertaken with the support of UNICEF. The fellowship aims to empower young lawyers to champion the rights of vulnerable children.

Mr. Arjun Ram Meghwal, Hon'ble Union Minister of State (Independent Charge), Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India, released the literary book **Nyay ke Swar**, a compilation of poems and creative expressions by para-legal volunteers, visually impaired children, and inmates of reform homes.

In his address, **Dr. Mohan Yadav**, Hon'ble Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, highlighted the rich historical legacy of justice and good governance in Madhya Pradesh, tracing it from the eras of Emperor Vikramaditya and Devi Ahilyabai Holkar to the present day. He emphasised that the historical traditions of fair administration, including Devi Ahilyabai Holkar's unbiased approach to justice, even in matters involving her own family continue to inspire the State's governance framework.

Delivering the keynote address, **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Surya Kant**, Chief Justice of India & Patron-in-Chief, NALSA, emphasised that the core themes of the conference should not be viewed merely as slogans, but as an accurate reflection of functional legal aid. True legal aid, he observed, means that people are "*spoken to and not merely spoken at*" and are treated as citizens rather than case numbers. He further stated that dialogue, dignity, and inclusion must accurately describe the delivery of legal aid when it truly works. Observing that access to justice cannot be secured through laws alone, he underscored the importance of speaking in the language of the common people and understanding local realities. He urged Para-Legal Volunteers to serve as dedicated social healers within their communities. He stated that the true test of a judicial institution was not how effectively it served those who had the means to approach it, but how effectively it reached those who never could.

Hon'ble Mr. Justice Anand Pathak, Judge, High Court of Madhya Pradesh and Executive Chairman of the Madhya Pradesh State Legal Services Authority, delivered the formal vote of thanks, bringing the inaugural session to a close. He thanked the Member Secretaries, judicial officers, Legal Aid Counsels, Para-Legal Volunteers, and all other participants. He emphasised that the success of legal services programmes ultimately depended upon their dedication and grassroots efforts.







The Inaugural Session was followed by ***The Tapestry of Justice***, an exhibition of innovation, inclusion and transformative legal services, inaugurated by **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Surya Kant**, Chief Justice of India and Patron-in-Chief, National Legal Services Authority.





TECHNICAL SESSION - FIRST DAY

The ***first day*** of the Conference featured two thematic technical sessions addressing key dimensions of access to justice:

The ***first*** technical session on **"Mediation Beyond Courts: Building a Culture of Dialogue, Community Resolution and Inclusive Participation"** was chaired by Hon'ble Mr. Justice Manmohan, Judge, Supreme Court of India, with Hon'ble Mr. Justice Sheel Nagu, Judge, Supreme Court of India, as Co-Chair. The session featured Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vivek Rusia, Acting Chief Justice, High Court of Madhya Pradesh & Patron-in-Chief, MPSLSA, and Shri Aman M. Hingorani, Senior Advocate, Supreme Court of India & Mediator, as distinguished speakers.

The session commenced with an **audio-visual presentation** showcasing innovative mediation initiatives and best practices of the Madhya Pradesh State Legal Services Authority. This was followed by a **presentation by a trained mediator with hearing impairment**, assisted by a sign language interpreter, who highlighted two successful mediations involving deaf-mute couples, one facing family abuse in Shajapur and another involved in an eight-year pending divorce in Delhi, where the use of sign language interpretation bridged the communication gap and ultimately reunited both families. This was followed by a presentation by a beneficiary of mediation, who shared their firsthand experience of being unable to effectively communicate their marital issues in a Delhi Family Court due to the absence of an interpreter; after approaching trained community mediators in Madhya Pradesh, they were finally understood, received proper counselling, and decided to withdraw their divorce case to rebuild their marriage.

Hon'ble Mr. Justice Manmohan Judge, Supreme Court of India, emphasized that formal legal results often come at the cost of relationships, whereas mediation preserves human dignity and social harmony. Shared a real-world example of a trademark infringement dispute between a multinational jeans company and a local manufacturer that, through mediation, transformed into a collaborative business partnership.

Hon'ble Mr. Justice Sheel Nagu, Judge, Supreme Court of India, urged the Central Government to establish the Mediation Council of India and bring Chapter X of the Mediation Act, 2023 (which deals with community mediation) into force. Praised the Madhya Pradesh State Legal Services Authority (MPSLSA) for training 251 community mediators who are actively reducing court pendency.

Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vivek Rusia, Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vivek Rusia, Acting Chief Justice, High Court of Madhya Pradesh & Patron-in-Chief, MPSLSA, introduced the '*Sanket Vani*' app, an Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) tool allowing hearing-impaired individuals to submit disputes via sign language videos for interpretation and mediation.

Shri Aman M. Hingorani, Senior Advocate, Supreme Court of India & Mediator, discussed the future intersection of mediation with modern technology, such as AI, blockchain, and smart contracts. Emphasized the critical role of law universities in capacity building, developing dedicated mediation courses, and providing structured feedback to trainees.



The ***second*** technical session on **"From Rights to Realities: Strengthening Access to Justice for Tribal Communities, Forest Dwellers and Denotified & Nomadic Tribes"** was chaired by Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vijay Bishnoi, Judge, Supreme Court of India, with Hon'ble Mr. Justice Alok Aradhe, Judge, Supreme Court of India, as Co-Chair. The session featured Hon'ble Mrs. Justice Sunita Agarwal, Chief Justice, High Court of Gujarat, and Shri Manoj Kumar Shrivastava, State Election Commissioner, Madhya Pradesh, as distinguished speakers.

The session commenced with an **audio-visual presentation** showcasing initiatives undertaken under the NALSA (SAMVAD – Strengthening Access to Justice for Marginalized, Vulnerable Adivasis and Denotified/Nomadic Tribes) Scheme, 2025, the presentation featured the *NALSA theme song* adapted into ***Bhili***, one of the major tribal languages of Madhya Pradesh. This was followed by a presentation by **a Para-Legal Volunteer** highlighting the successful implementation of legal services interventions for tribal communities and shared ground level experiences of legal aid outreach among tribal populations. She provided concrete examples of grassroots impact, including helping women facing domestic violence, enrolling children in schools, and running local de-addiction campaigns.

Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vijay Bishnoi, Judge, Supreme Court of India, emphasized that constitutional promises remain unfulfilled if people lack the means to claim their rights. He underscored that the NALSA SAMVAD Scheme transforms legal aid into a proactive mechanism and highlighted the need for seamless harmony among grassroots institutions like Gram Panchayats, health departments, and legal services.

Hon'ble Mr. Justice Alok Aradhe, Judge, Supreme Court of India, addressed the historical injustices and exclusionary conservation policies that have marginalized forest dwellers. He outlined specific barriers tribal communities face—such as language constraints and delayed rights recognition—and urged the legal and civil systems to build trust through sustained community dialogue.

Hon'ble Mrs. Justice Sunita Agarwal, Chief Justice, High Court of Gujarat, showcased the proactive, "fourth-generation" legal aid approach adopted in Gujarat. She shared success stories of direct community intervention, including the eradication of witch-hunting ("*Dakan Pratha*") and child marriage in tribal districts, as well as legal action to ensure tribal boarding schools comply with the Right to Education Act.

Shri Manoj Kumar Shrivastava, State Election Commissioner, Madhya Pradesh, highlighted the fundamental friction between modern individualistic law and the communitarian identity of tribal societies. He advocated for a legal aid framework that recognizes collective rights and operates as a capacity-building service rather than just a litigation tool.



THE SYMPHONY OF HOPE

The first day concluded with a cultural night titled ***The Symphony of Hope***, a specially curated cultural presentation by beneficiaries of Legal Services and children of beneficiaries, celebrating courage, resilience, dignity and the transformative impact of access to justice through music, dance and artistic expression.



TECHNICAL SESSION - SECOND DAY

The ***second day*** of the two-day West Zone Regional Conference on "Enhancing Access to Justice", witnessed participation from States and Union Territories across the West Zone, reflecting diverse regional representation and a shared commitment towards strengthening access to justice and featured two thematic technical sessions addressing critical dimensions of access to justice:

The ***third*** technical session on *"**Every Child Matters: Strengthening Child-Friendly Justice, Protection and Rehabilitation**"* was chaired by Hon'ble Mr. Justice Satish Chandra Sharma, Judge, Supreme Court of India, with Hon'ble Mr. Justice P. Sam Koshy, Judge, High Court for the State of Telangana, as Co-Chair. The session featured addresses by Hon'ble Mr. Justice Anand Pathak, Judge, High Court of Madhya Pradesh, and Hon'ble Dr. Justice Pushpendra Singh Bhati, Judge, High Court of Rajasthan.

The session commenced with an **audio-visual presentation** showcasing initiatives under the NALSA (Child Friendly Legal Services for Children) Scheme, 2024, and innovative child centred interventions of Legal Services Institutions. This was followed by **a presentation a Child Beneficiary**, sharing the transformative impact of

timely legal assistance, care and protection. Subsequently, a Para Legal Volunteer, highlighting grassroots interventions for child protection, legal awareness and access to justice.

Hon'ble Mr. Justice P. Sam Koshy, Judge, High Court for the State of Telangana, pointed out how children in conflict-affected or underprivileged areas often miss out on schooling and formal guidance. He stressed the need for joint state-level operational missions to rehabilitate innocent minds and bring them back into the educational mainstream.

Hon'ble Mr. Justice Anand Pathak, Judge, High Court of Madhya Pradesh, focused on post-trauma support and preventative care. He introduced the "*Shaurya Didi*" initiative, which pairs young female victims with lady police mentors to facilitate long-term emotional healing. He also proposed the creation of localised "Community Labs" for mental health counseling and urged the legal community to remember that "*Every FILE contains a LIFE.*"

Hon'ble Dr. Justice Pushpendra Singh Bhati, Judge, High Court of Rajasthan, touched upon sociological themes when discussing how society's treatment shapes a child's path. He used cinema as a "*reflection of society*," citing classic films (*Muqaddar Ka Sikandar* and *Deewar*) to illustrate how societal rejection, stigma, and physical beatings can push a vulnerable child into becoming a criminal. He also highlighted the unique psychological vulnerabilities of the digital native generations (Gen Z and Gen Alpha) and the absolute need for "healing touch" interventions. Emphasizing a rights-based approach where children are recognized as the future of the nation, he shared

real-world insights on utilizing clinical psychologists to ascertain the welfare of minors in complex habeas corpus disputes.

Hon'ble Mr. Justice Satish Chandra Sharma, Judge, Supreme Court of India, delivered the concluding observations, praising collaborative frameworks like "*Mission Bal Suraksha*" and the educational outreach of the NGO 'Prayas'. He advocated for tech-driven inclusivity such as developing app-based assistance for specially-abled and visually impaired children and strongly emphasized the need to protect children from the emotional trauma of matrimonial disputes.



The ***fourth*** technical session on *"**Beyond Incarceration: Rehabilitation, Reintegration and Access to Justice for Prisoners and Their Families**"* was chaired by Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vikram Nath, Judge, Supreme Court of India & Executive Chairman, NALSA, with Hon'ble Mr. Justice Ramesh Sinha, Chief Justice, High Court of Chhattisgarh, as Co-Chair. It featured presentations by Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vivek Agarwal, Judge, High Court of Madhya Pradesh, and Prof. Vijay Raghavan, Professor at the Centre for Criminology and Justice, TISS, Mumbai.

The session commenced with an **audio Visual Presentation**, showcasing innovative prison legal services, rehabilitation initiatives and best practices of Legal Services Institutions. This was followed by **a presentation by a Beneficiary**, sharing the transformative impact of legal aid, rehabilitation and reintegration after release and a Presentation by a Para Legal Volunteer working in prisons, highlighting legal aid interventions, Prison Lok Adalats, family reconnect initiatives and rehabilitation efforts.

Hon'ble Mr. Justice Ramesh Sinha, Chief Justice, High Court of Chhattisgarh, strongly endorsed the expansion of Open Jails, observing that such institutions afford prisoners a degree of structured liberty that closely mirrors the outside world. His

Lordship advocated for the comprehensive enhancement of in-house prison medical facilities to mitigate the reliance on external hospital referrals. Furthermore, he urged the relevant authorities to adopt a compassionate approach regarding the granting of short-term parole to inmates navigating severe familial illnesses.

Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vivek Agarwal, Judge, High Court of Madhya Pradesh, highlighted the necessity of institutional convergence and the establishment of robust support mechanisms under the NALSA SPRUHA Scheme, 2025. His Lordship emphasized that vocational training administered within prisons, such as ITI skill programs, must be actively accompanied by the provision of tangible tools and equipment upon an inmate's release to guarantee sustainable post-release livelihoods.

Prof. Vijay Raghavan, Professor at the Centre for Criminology and Justice, TISS, Mumbai, outlined three primary concerns for prisoners: legal representation, family stability, and undertrial idleness. He proposed actionable reforms including the use of "Prison PLVs," maximizing the Probation of Offenders Act to reduce prison overcrowding, and implementing family connection initiatives like Maharashtra's *Gala Bhet* scheme. Furthermore, he strongly recommended that trained social workers be formally appointed to DLSA offices, noting that they would become the vital "limbs" of the NALSA SPRUHA Scheme, ensuring its effective ground-level implementation by bridging the gap between incarcerated individuals, their families, and the legal aid system.

Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vikram Nath, Judge, Supreme Court of India & Executive Chairman, NALSA, stressed that justice must definitively move towards rehabilitation, skill development, and reintegration of prisoners into the mainstream, while also commending the ongoing success of the Legal Aid Defense Counsel System (LADCS).



CONCLUDING REMARKS

Delivering concluding remarks, **Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vikram Nath**, Judge, Supreme Court of India & Executive Chairman, NALSA, emphasized the philosophy of "*hate the sin and not the sinner*," stressing that justice must move towards rehabilitation, skill development, and reintegration of prisoners into the mainstream. He commended the ongoing Legal Aid Defense Counsel System (LADCS) and called for active civil society support, noting that the true measure of justice is ensuring continuous support and dignity for marginalized individuals and their families.

The deliberations across the Conference reiterated that access to justice must be understood not merely as the availability of legal remedies, but as a function of awareness, accessibility, responsiveness, and trust. The deliberation, inter alia, includes followings –

a. Correctional institutions must evolve from mere custodial centres into spaces focused on education, skill-building, and psychological healing.

b. Expanding open jails provides prisoners with structured liberty similar to the outside world, significantly improving mental well-being and paving the way for seamless community reintegration.

c. Grounded in the philosophy of "*hate the sin and not the sinner*," the justice system must ensure continuous support, empowerment, and the restoration of dignity for marginalized individuals, incarcerated persons, and their families.

d. To bridge the gap between policy design and ground execution (such as under the NALSA SPRUHA Scheme, 2025), trained social workers (MSWs) should be attached to DLSA offices as active operational "*limbs*."

> Para-Legal Volunteers (PLVs), trained social workers, and Legal Services Authorities must act as dedicated "social healers," bridging the gap between legal aid and vulnerable populations (including tribal communities, forest dwellers, and prisoners' families).

e. Addressing severe medical deficits in jails requires internal infrastructure upgrades and mandatory weekly Out-Patient Department (OPD) visits by local civil hospitals.

f. Initiatives such as the "*Shaurya Didi*" model (pairing young victims with compassionate female police mentors) demonstrate how relational, emotional, and psychological support can heal deep-seated trauma.

g. Initiatives like Maharashtra's *Gala Bhet Scheme* (allowing children to meet imprisoned parents in festive, open settings) and granting short-term parole for family emergencies significantly alleviate emotional suffering and improve inmate mental health.

h. Jail Adalats should avoid coercing guilty pleas for petty offenses merely for set-off sentences. Instead, authorities should maximize the Probation of Offenders

Act (1958) and personal bond releases under Section 479 of the BNSS to reduce prison overcrowding.

The Conference concluded with a shared commitment to advancing innovative, inclusive, and people centric approaches to justice delivery, in furtherance of the constitutional mandate of ensuring equal access to justice for all.

National Legal Services Authority

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