

Full text of the speech delivered by
Hon'ble the Chief Justice of India Justice N V Ramana
at an event organized by NALSA

Vigyan Bhawan
08 August, 2021

At the outset, I must thank Brother Justice Lalit for inviting me to be a part of this event. Having been the Chairman of NALSA, the activities of NALSA are very close to my heart.

Today, we have gathered here to release NALSA's vision and mission statement along with legal services mobile application.

Incidentally, this day, i.e., 8th August, 79 years ago, marked the turning point in India's freedom struggle. Our freedom fighters, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, appealed to the masses to overthrow a power which only gave them a "*dominion status*". It was this deep-rooted desire to end inequality and discrimination, that led the masses to call for the "*Quit India Movement*".

The concept of free legal aid to the needy has its roots in the freedom movement. Those days, the legal luminaries

rendered pro-bono services to freedom fighters, who were targeted by the colonial rulers.

This spirit of service found reflection in the Constitution, with those very same legal luminaries serving as members of the Constituent Assembly. Today, I pay my humble respects to our freedom fighters, who shaped the “*Constitutional Vision of Justice.*”

As the years progressed, the need was felt to institutionalise the mechanism for extending legal aid to those in need. Thus, came into force the National Legal Services Authority Act, 1987.

The legal aid movement, which started 25 years ago, has gained new momentum. Undoubtedly, ours is one of the largest legal aid systems in the world, with 75% of the population being eligible for its benefits.

Although, a majority of our population is eligible for the aforesaid services, it is an undeniable truth that, still, there are significant barriers in accessing the relevant legal

information. Hence, events like today's assume great importance.

If we want to remain as a society governed by the rule of law, it is imperative for us to bridge the gap of accessibility to justice between the highly privileged and the most vulnerable. For all times to come, we must remember that, the realities of socio-economic diversity which prevail in our nation, cannot ever be a reason for denial of rights.

Let our past not determine our future. Let us dream of a future based on legal mobility, a future where equality is a reality. That is why the project "Access to Justice" is an unending mission.

If, as an institution, the judiciary wants to garner the faith of the citizens, we have to make everyone feel assured that we exist for them. For the longest time, the vulnerable population has lived outside the system of justice.

The prevailing obstacles like lengthy, painstaking and expensive formal justice processes add to the woes of

realizing the goals of “*Access to Justice*”. As an institution, the toughest challenge before us is to break these barriers first.

Now, coming to the main agenda of today’s event. It is my absolute delight to unveil our vision for the future and the legal aid services app.

I have been informed that this app is going to be compulsorily installed in the mobile phones of the entire workforce of Legal Services Institutions, who will be able to submit a legal aid application within a few seconds from any place in the country.

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic we have successfully been able to continue our legal aid services. With the introduction of such technological tools, we have ensured that any such future challenge shall not hamper the work of the Legal Aid Institutions.

Accessing justice in India is not merely an aspirational goal. We need to work hand in hand with various wings of the government to make it a practical reality.

Majority of those, who do not have access to justice are from rural and remote areas which suffer from lack of connectivity. As a result, we may not be able to realize the full potential of modern tools for the time being. Immediately after assuming the office of the Chief Justice, I had an occasion to interact with brother and sister judges from High Courts across the country.

The problem of poor connectivity in rural and remote areas adversely affecting the justice delivery was highlighted by all. Taking this major concern into consideration, I have already written to the Government emphasizing the need to bridge the digital divide on a priority basis.

In this backdrop, NALSA needs to make collaborative efforts. I am happy to learn about the efforts to rope in the Department of Posts as a partner in this mission.

The services of the existing postal network can be utilized to spread awareness regarding the availability of free legal aid services and to increase the outreach of legal services to the eligible category of persons, especially to the persons residing in rural and far-flung areas of the country.

The service rendered by the post office and post-man will bridge the gap between people who are deprived of access to justice due to geographical constraints and will reduce the divide between the rural and urban population.

At this point, I would like to highlight the concerns regarding human rights and dignity which are sacrosanct.

The threat to human rights and bodily integrity are the highest in Police Stations. Custodial torture and other police atrocities are problems which still prevail in our society. In spite of constitutional declarations and guarantees, lack of effective legal representation at the police stations is a huge detriment to arrested/detained

persons. The decisions taken in these early hours will later determine the ability of the accused to defend himself.

Going by the recent reports even the privileged are not spared third - degree treatment.

To keep police excesses in check dissemination of information about the constitutional right to legal aid and availability of free legal aid services is necessary. The installation of display boards and outdoor hoardings in every Police Station/Prison is a step in this direction. However, NALSA must also actively carry out nationwide sensitization of Police Officers.

Today, I congratulate Brother Lalit again for releasing the Vision Statement. The changing needs of society with change in time is reflected in the vision, which defines our commitment to the cause of substantive justice.

With Brother Lalit as its Executive Chairman, NALSA is in the safest hands. Even though we had conceived various schemes and activities last year, we were not able to take

them up due to the pandemic. I am certain that they will be executed under Brother Lalit's able leadership. I am sure he will take it to greater heights.

I take this opportunity to appreciate the efforts put in by various stakeholders: the legal services authorities, the panel lawyers, mediators and the paralegal volunteers for showing immense flexibility and determination for the cause of justice even during such difficult times. Every intervention is a clear indication of the important position you hold in our justice delivery system.

I also compliment, Mr. Ashok Jain, Member Secretary, NALSA for his dedication and hard work.

As a part of this noble profession, I urge all lawyers, especially seniors, to dedicate some percentage of their working hours to help those in need. No institution, how so ever big or noble, can be successful, unless it is ably aided by all the stakeholders to turn it into a public movement.

I have an appeal to make to the media as well. It is the mass media which has the unparalleled capacity to spread the message of service. You are also stakeholders in this important mission.

As rightly said by Martin Luther King Junior, I quote, *“Every step towards the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering and struggle, the tireless exertion and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.”*

I earnestly hope that the momentum continues and NALSA along with the entire network of Legal Service Authorities continue to display utmost passion and vigour as well as experiment in an innovative manner so as to grow to its fullest extent possible.

THANK YOU.