



LEGAL AWARENESS AS SOCIAL POWER: WHY INDIA NEEDS MORE THAN JUST LAW SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

In a constitutional democracy such as India, law is more than just a vocation: law is a language of rights, obligations and (when required) defiance. For many millions of Indians, this language of law is foreign. The legal world is often viewed as insensitive, inaccessible, and complicated. It is seen as existing either in the rarefied air of elite justice systems or as paralysed in the tropics of unexamined social inequality. This difference between understanding what law exists and what law is understood and acted upon (especially for marginalised communities) becomes a tremendous barrier to justice. Legal awareness is more than simply the knowledge of legal information: it is social power. It empowers individuals with the language of rights to demand redress and accountability for injustices - it creates the possibility of resistance against exploitation. Legal awareness changes an individual's role from a passive subject of behaviour to an active citizen of democracy. Law schools have progressively taken the role of producing professional lawyers to satisfy the ongoing civil and criminal justice needs of society. This is, however, only a small part of the overall need for basic legal literacy at the grassroots level. Law students today are undergraduate/ post-graduate students who are being trained not only for a vocation as an advocate or judge; they are also being trained as educators, agents of social change, and connectors to their community. If their new learning of law can be conceived and applied beyond the formal context of law practice, then it may become a catalyst for transformation. This article explores why legal awareness must be central to India's justice project, and how law students, legal institutions, and public policy must work together to build a more informed, empowered, and participatory society. Because in the end, justice delayed may be justice denied—but justice uninformed is justice unrealised.

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UNDERSTANDING LEGAL AWARENESS: A TOOL BEYOND LEGAL LITERACY

Legal Awareness an Instrument of Change, Not Just Legal Knowledge: Legal awareness is more than just knowing what the law provides; it is knowing how to exercise it. Every citizen of the country, by India's constitutional framework, is entitled to fundamental rights, access to legal remedies, and protection against the arbitrary abuses of power. Yet millions of citizens do not know the legal means available to them. How many citizens are aware that, as a citizen of India, you are entitled to free legal aid under Article 39A of the Constitution? How many know that to arrest you without due legal process violates Article 22 of the Constitution? Laws exist, but without legal awareness, those laws cannot be used. In reality, legal ignorance often equates to injustice. Women suffer domestic violence without having the ability to complain. Workers tolerate unpaid wages without knowing how to protest. Consumers are cheated, having no idea that redress is available. Legal awareness converts passive victims into active rights holders.¹ Legal awareness is not simply a right; it is a prerequisite of participatory democracy. It enables citizens to demand accountability from their representatives, resist injustice, and seek remedies through the proper legal and institutional channels. It can turn the law into a social instrument, rather than a set of abstract rules to be interpreted by the courts.

The Role of Law Students: From Learners to Legal Educators: Law students are not just advocates, judges of the future, but are now (in many ways) the current carriers of legal knowledge. This weighty burden of changing technical legal jargon and terms into simple words in a language everybody can understand rests on the shoulders of law students. Law schools in India generally teach theoretical doctrine, followed closely by courtroom simulation. Engaging law students in community and population service at home can prove to be the greatest vehicle for legal learning.

Law students are given possibilities to change circumstances for the following:

- Holding legal literacy drives in slums, schools and rural areas
- Participating in a Legal Aid Clinic under the Bar Council of India Rules
- Conducting legal workshops, working along with District Courts or NGOs

¹ Constitution of India, arts 14, 15, 17, 21, 39A
Legal Services Authorities Act 1987 <https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/A1987-39.pdf>

- Delivering simplified legal knowledge to local languages through social media

Many trailblazer colleges have been running vibrant Legal Aid Societies already, but the difficulties challenging us are sustaining legal literacy and participation in inclusive ways that will have a meaningful impact on communities, leading to the training of law students to develop their capacities for empathy, active listening and applying law in action. When the law student assists a domestic worker in drafting her complaint or advises a consumer in applying to the online grievance portal, it reflects a challenge the justice system is often unable to execute. In this respect, law students become change and learning agents.

THE REALITY GAP: LAWS EXIST, BUT PEOPLE DON'T KNOW THEM

One of the world's most formidable legal frameworks exists in India. Legally, until states are required to protect all citizens through the constitutional and statutory rights enacted. However, it is troubling that legal enactment and social empowerment are decoupled—just because a law exists does not mean people can use it. This is the "reality gap"—the gap where rights exist on paper and are unknown, unreachable, or unusable by huge swaths of society. The problem is not the existence of laws, but the lack of legal awareness, the lack of access to the law, and the lack of trust in the legal process. In India, a massive and multifaceted legal framework exists—on paper—where the promise is protection, dignity, and equality for all citizens. Landmark legislation such as the Right to Information Act, 2005, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, and the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, reflect the desire of the state to create a just nation where the rule of law governs. However, while these laws remain progressive, their promise often does not come to fruition. It's not due to their bungled drafting, but is instead a more profound, systemic problem: the widespread lack of understanding of the law. To many citizens, particularly in rural and marginalised communities, the law remains foreign—it is distant, intimidating and inaccessible. A survey conducted in late 2021 by NITI Aayog showed that more than sixty per cent of rural Indians surveyed did not even understand their right to free legal aid under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987. This ignorance is an alarming gap, and this gap is not just a lack of information; it is a justice gap. The law might reside in the statutes, but if people do not know it exists, a source they do not understand, if they do not feel empowered to invoke it, then the law is, for all intents and purposes, non-existent. Consider the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005. Some hailed it as a landmark moment in Indian legal history but in practice, in many parts of India, the law is virtually

unutilised due to the social stigma, fears of backlash, and the failure of women to recognize that they are facing abuse that is a crime, and therefore, it is not simply a private matter that they should quietly endure. Just the same, the conversely positive progress ushered in by the Right to Information Act is indicative of the Indian government going from strength to strength. Beginnings were not born from legal theory; rather, they were sown in the dusty villages of Rajasthan, where ordinary people were mobilised by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan to pursue wage transparency. The law attained national strength only following years of grassroots campaigns, public hearings, and local learning to help people learn how to file RTI applications, insist on accountability, and understand their right to know. Without this social translation, laws remain frozen, as abstractions, and divorced from the lives they are meant to transform. The distance and disconnection that exist between law and people—between legal rights and lived realities- is more than a theoretical problem; it is a moral and constitutional crisis. To close this gap of reality is more than statutes, but will require sustained commitment to provide public legal education, engage at the grassroots level, and reform institutions such that awareness is understood as a form of access. Then alone can law be enacted not as a privilege for a few, but as a positive and empowering experience for all.

THE DEEPER PROBLEM: LEGAL LITERACY IS NOT INSTITUTIONALIZED

At the crux of India's justice delivery dilemma is an essential structural problem: legal literacy is not institutionalised. Though the Constitution and an assortment of statutes present access to justice for all, the state has not set up a uniform or widespread mechanism to educate citizens on their legal rights and responsibilities. Legal literacy is treated instead as an occasion or top-down awareness initiative, rather than an ongoing governance and education function. The state has not enacted a public school legal rights curriculum, nor is there a spade of investment in community-based access to justice educational models. In effect, people can only acquire an understanding of law if they can afford legal services or attend legal training, thereby depriving the majority of the population of legal knowledge. This gap in societal understanding is not merely a communication gap—but a structural failure that results in a hierarchy of legal access: understanding and ability to navigate the system, knowing that the system was designed to be accessible to all individuals. Further, law is still taught, interpreted, and disseminated in English and in legal codes that render it inaccessible to swathes of the population whose lived realities are entrenched in regional language, culture(s) and informal justice systems. The state's failure to institutionalise legal

literacy in the schooling system, governance systems, and public discourse has led to a society in which people may elect their government, earn income, and live without much of an idea about the legal system they are living under stress. They still will rely on intermediaries, possibly be exploited by power structures, and feel despair at the presence of injustice. Neo-liberal administrations will be more effective and compliant if society is legally illiterate, yet more difficult to empower. If legal literacy were institutionalised, it would be foundational in educational curricula at schools, present in panchayat-level governance, and legally based information packaged with every government scheme offered to members of the public. Without institutional commitment, legal empowerment will always be for the privileged, and the justice of the right-holders will continue to evade the poor who require it the most. Bridging the gap in legal awareness in society is not a question of charity or outreach; rather, it is an obligation of the constitution, and a precondition of democratic equality.

BRIDGING THE REALITY GAP: A SOCIAL-LEGAL STRATEGY

In India, bridging the chasm between legal rights and legal access requires more than merely symbolic or short-lived awareness campaigns; it requires a structural, strategic, and inclusive approach that grounds legal institutions in the fabric of social reality. To induce transformational thinking about legal access, legal awareness has to be reframed as being equally important as the voting booth as an essential element of democracy, and not pushed out to the fringes of pressed non-profits or short-lived government initiatives. A real social-legal strategy must begin by embedding a civic learning framework into public life that starts with legal education. Legal knowledge, on an elementary level, begins in school, where children can be introduced to their basic constitutional rights, how courts work, and the laws that govern regulated civic behaviour. This should not only be taught in civics classes, but through anecdotal, experiential learning. Further, educational frameworks around legal knowledge are essential in communities, particularly in rural and underserved areas where their access to justice is hindered by illiteracy, fear and social norms. In addition to schools, community-based legal education must be institutionalised, especially in rural and impoverished areas, where illiteracy, intimidation, and societal hierarchies block access to justice. This means training leaders in the local community, local school teachers, NGO workers, and even ASHA workers or Anganwadi personnel as legal facilitators to raise awareness and lead people through basic legal processes. Law schools and legal professionals

also need to step out of their academic surroundings and interact with society—not as experts but as partners. Legal aid clinics, street law programs, and pro bono networks must be regenerated and become more accountable, law students must undertake fieldwork that serves 'real' communities (as opposed to just 'checking off' their law school requirements), and students must engage with local practitioners and community leaders in this work. Furthermore, in this digital age, technology must be used as a vehicle for conveying legal information and then delivered as mobile applications, through social media, through audio-visual sources, or through helplines—and indeed as much as possible in regional languages. Technology alone is not the solution; it must work in collaboration with grassroots experience. Lastly, the government needs to view legal literacy not as a soft, optional add-on, but as a formal right, like health care or education, with budgets, departments, and monitoring processes. Bridging the gap from reality is therefore not just bringing people to the law—it is to bring the law to the people, in ways they can understand, trust, and act upon. The law must not only be unwrapped, but democratised, so people can use it as an instrument of justice rather than a private profession or abstract institution. Rights-based societies do not become rights-based simply by laws—they require people to understand, claim and defend those laws, together.

RTI MOVEMENT: FROM LAW TO GRASSROOTS POWER

The evolution of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in India is a primary and compelling example of legal literacy as a form of social power. The RTI movement did not originate in a legal think tank or an academic institution, but rather out of the everyday struggle of village residents in Rajasthan, underwhelmed by a government employment scheme and without a dialogue of basic transparency. Villagers and labourers began to question wage disparity and why they were not being paid in full under public works regimes. They asked to see the muster rolls and records of payment, not from legal training, but necessity. The local needs became *jan sunwais* (public hearings) wherein the local government documents were read verbatim, and the public could see the vast differences between what was given as official figures and the realities on the ground. It was within the public hearings that the villagers were forming an effective legal literacy, both in challenging state records through public hearings, and knowing that collective voices could puncture bureaucratic silence. This was law in action, not only in theory. Years before Parliament codified the right to access information, the people had already claimed it in practice. Their pro-active, persistent

activism, mobilising people and educating communities, put enough pressure on the government to enact the Right to Information Act in 2005. The RTI Act made the right of every citizen to get information from a public authority a formal law - a substantial step towards transparency.

The particularity of the RTI, however, and something that transformed it from a marginal political tool into a widespread movement, was not just the formality of the law - it was the law's accessibility and the commitment and agency of ordinary citizens. Farmers, pensioners, students, journalists, and activists across the country began to file RTIs to shine light on corruption, access basic services, and exercise their rights as informed citizens. The law gave power to individuals to act on their rights to ask questions of power, and it also gave communities the confidence to act on their rights to engage with the state as legal actors. The success of the RTI movement underscores the core message of this article: **legal empowerment does not begin with the drafting of a statute—it begins with legal awareness at the grassroots.** It was not law schools that made the RTI a tool of justice, but community education, grassroots mobilisation, and persistent civic action. The movement demonstrated how legal knowledge, when shared among the people and rooted in real-life struggles, could reshape the relationship between the state and its citizens. In this sense, the RTI is more than a transparency tool—it is a case study in how **legal awareness can² democratise the law**, transform passive subjects into active citizens, and shift justice from being an elite service to a collective right.

BEYOND LEGAL EDUCATION TOWARDS LEGAL EMPOWERMENT

The path toward a just society does not conclude at the doors of law schools; it begins much further afield. Legal education is a valuable contributor to providing trained professionals; however, it is only part of an ecosystem to ensure justice for all. Legal empowerment—namely, the ability to know, claim and act on a person's rights—requires a much deeper and wider engagement than law schools can provide. Legal empowerment requires a cultural shift in conceptions of law: as not merely a subject for lawyers or judges, but as a living instrument for all citizens. Legal knowledge, in India, has most often been confined to formal institutions, erecting what appears to be an impenetrable barrier for the very people it is

² Ministry of Law and Justice, *National Legal Literacy Mission Reports*, Department of Justice, Government of India, *Nyaya Bandhu (Pro Bono Legal Services) App*, Right to Information Act 2005
<https://doj.gov.in/nllm/>, <https://probono-doj.gov.in/>, <https://rti.gov.in/rti-act.pdf>

intended for. Statutes that have an intention to uplift society often do not reach the grassroots, not because of how they are designed, but because of how they are not perceived. Empowerment begins when people - especially from marginalised and rural groups - can see the law not as something separate and distant but as something that belongs to themselves. To do this, legal awareness needs to be rooted not just in the legal education system, but also throughout society - private and social schools, panchayats, digital platforms, street corners, public campaigns and family discussions. This is why India requires more than simply law schools. It needs the law to be democratised—not only taught to students, but also translated for the citizenry. Law schools need to be bridges, not barriers, and engage in public legal education by way of community work, legal literacy campaigns, and pro bono work. Simultaneously, state institutions need to view legal literacy as a constitutional responsibility, making a long-term commitment to programs that train paralegals, generate multilingual India, and ensure legal understandings have often existed in the law and legal education, excluding people from formal institutions, conveying to the people the social inequality that legislation meant to resolve. Many laws that enact change and progress are trapped within the formal institutional space, never reaching the people, held back not by inability or apathy but by a lack of awareness and understanding. People, socially excluded or from rural areas, become empowered when they can see, they belong with the law, and the law is part of their lived experience.

To achieve this, legal awareness has to be institutionalised not simply in the legal education system but in the fabric of society, schools, panchayats, digital platforms, street corners, public awareness campaigns, and family conversations. Legal empowerment is not achieved when every citizen is a lawyer, but when every citizen knows when they are being oppressed—and what to do about it. A legally educated population is a powerful population. One that holds institutions accountable, resists abuse, and meaningfully participates in democracy. The law, then, is no longer a profession or its rule book—it is a tangible mode of social capital, opening the possibility of elevation from below. This is exactly why India's legal future is truly not only a matter of those who teach the law, but of everyone who is empowered to live by it.

CONCLUSION

The strength of a legal system is not the number of laws or the quality of law schools but the extent to which the public can understand and use law as an instrument of justice. India has

developed a remarkable legal infrastructure—constitutional mandates, progressive statutes, etc.—but too often, what is established does not connect to the intended beneficiaries of the law. Many still have no experiential or social connection to the law, which is overshadowed by its institutional complexity and obscurity. This is what can be bridged with legal consciousness and awareness. As we have seen in some initiatives (such as the Right to Information movement), laws are not powerful on enactment, but when claimed by the people. Bottom-up legal education, public hearings, and rights-based campaigns have shown that when lay persons see, understand, and experience the law, they do not wait for the law to protect them—they demand it. They don't simply ask for 'justice', they seek it out. That is why we need more than law schools in India. Legal education is limited to textbooks, courtrooms, and academic discussions and will not reach millions of people who are most in danger of being legally excluded. What we need is a culture of legal consciousness, where knowing your rights is just as natural as knowing your name. We need to bring the law to life, through schools, through community spaces, through local language media, and public awareness campaigns. Legal professionals and students need to be at the forefront of making law a public resource, not a private expertise. Legal awareness is not a replacement for legal education; it is necessarily the complement. While legal education trains a few, legal awareness empowers the many. Legal awareness turns citizens from passive subjects to active participants in democracy. And most importantly, it ensures that the law not only exists but it exists in the actions of, choices of, and voices of people. Only when every citizen feels that they are entitled to the law, are informed by law and empowered to access it, can we say justice exists in an accessible manner. It is this vision that lies at the heart of the future of India's democracy—and the justification for moving beyond law schools, towards a culture built on legal awareness as social power.

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