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## ACCESS TO JUSTICE: LEGAL TECH AS A SOCIAL EQUALIZER IN INDIA

~ *Mohit Ahlawat*

### Introduction

Access to justice is a fundamental pillar in the democratic setup. On the ground, however, many aggrieved people must fight an uphill battle with justice and are unable to avail timely and affordable legal remedies in India where the legal system is widely considered independent and committed to dispensing justice. The reasons are many: backlog of cases, procedural intricacies, exorbitant costs, lack of language proficiency, and sheer ignorance of legal rights.

The emergence of Legal Technology presents opportunities for drastic transformation. Legal Tech denotes the application of digital tools, software, and artificial intelligence (AI) to reform and improve legal processes for greater efficiency, accessibility, and affordability. In recent years, India has witnessed a proliferation of Legal Tech in the country—from AI-based legal research platforms to Online Dispute Resolution systems and virtual courts—these advancements are enabling the efficient delivery of legal services while also acting as social levellers that help bridge the justice divide for the underserved credit populations.

### Overview of Gap in Indian Justice System

India remains with a legal system that bears the promise of over 4 crore cases to be dealt with, many of them waiting for many years in courts. The traditional legal process tends to be slow, expensive, and intimidating to a common citizen. This is more so if an individual belongs to rural areas or is part of marginalized communities. Lack of physical access to courts, awareness, language, and expenses of legal advocacy are contributing factors for this justice gap.

Research reveals that many litigants in India earn less than ₹3 lakh annually. From their perspective, bearing the expenditures for retention of counsel, arranged trips to court, and the labyrinthine procedures is beyond their capacity. Plus, legal resources and expertise are mostly concentrated in urban areas, thereby neglecting rural populations.

## **Legal Tech: Transforming the Landscape**

### **1. Digital Courts and Virtual Hearings**

An essential Legal Tech intervention in India has been the digitization of court processes. The project e-Courts was launched by the Supreme Court's e-Committee to computerize over 18,000 courts in the country. Consequently, systems are now in place for e-filing of cases, digital management of court records, and more recently virtual hearings.

Virtual hearings were the norm during the period of the pandemic because they permitted the litigants and lawyers to partake in proceedings from remote locations. It was transformative for individuals from far-off or rural areas, who had hitherto travelled for great distances to appear before the court. Likewise, virtual courts have somewhat enabled women, persons with disabilities, and old persons to access justice easily without being hampered by the issues of distance, transport, and attendant kitty of money.

### **2. Online Dispute Resolution (ODR)**

ODR systems are providing challenging competitors to traditional systems, especially for civil, commercial, and domestic disputes. At the outset, platforms such as We-Vaad.com, Presolv360, and SAMA online provide safe and secure environments where parties can institute dispute resolution, generally in a period not exceeding 90 days. ODR is primarily helpful for low-value issues that would normally benefit less from being in court due to cost and time involved.

ODR portals can be accessed easily through simple and convenient interfaces. Multiple Indian languages are supported on the same platform. They offer mediation, arbitration, and negotiation methods for a small fraction of the usual cost. Thanks to ODR, one no longer needs to be physically present in a court premise for resolving any dispute. This has made it easier and far less cumbersome for big-time players to resolve their issues.

### **3. AI and Vernacular Accessibility**

Language has historically been another major impediment to justice in India, as proceedings and documents are often in English or convoluted legalese. This problem is being tackled by Legal-Tech with AI-powered translation tools. From the Supreme Court justices' perspective, they have started using AI for translating judgments into regional languages, including Hindi, Tamil, Punjabi, and Marathi. The litigants thereby understand their rights and decisions taken by courts without depending too much on lawyers.

Manupatra, Kanoon.ai, and Legit Quest among others use machine learning and natural language processing for searching through the legal databases, to put forth relevant precedents, and predict outcomes of cases. These tools make knowledge of law available not only to lawyers but laymen, NGOs, and legal aid workers in their preferred languages.

#### **4. Tele-Law and Mobile Legal Aid**

Hosting out of the Ministry of Law and Justice, Tele-Law seeks to establish contact between the rural populace and legal experts over video conferencing at Common Service Centres (CSCs). Paralegal volunteers help the applicants understand the processes, filing forms, and avail schemes of the government. More so, Tele-Law has been shown to be scalable and cost-efficient if combined with local outreach and awareness activities.

On the other side of the spectrum, mobile apps and helpline services continue to provide legal aid by offering information in multiple languages about rights, processes, and forms of redress available. These digital information platforms are crucial in disseminating legal awareness that ultimately empowers individuals in the pursuit of justice.

### **Legal Tech in Action: Case Studies**

#### **1. E-Lok Adalats and Fast Track Special Courts**

E-Lok Adalat (virtual Lok Adalat's) and Fast Track Special Courts (FTSCs) have been dealing with millions of cases digitally. Such mechanisms have proven invaluable specifically in matters where sensitivity is nearly fatal-domestic violence disputes, property disputes, and cases involving funding under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act. Inter alia, these courts seek to expedite the process of justice, reduce pendency, and give access to vulnerable groups through technology.

#### **2. AI-Assisted Legal Translation**

It would mark a landmark achievement for the Supreme Court to utilize AI for the translation of over 300 judgments into regional languages. In turn, the initiative would make essential legal knowledge accessible to the common man speaking other regional languages, allowing such people to act on their own in decisions and, thus, be more active participants in the legal proceedings.

### **3. Legal Aid for Marginalized Groups**

Amongst others, the digital legal-aid initiatives are greatly empowering women facing domestic violence, landless farmers in land disputes, and marginalized castes in seeking redress for discrimination. Timely information, tele-consultations, aid in native languages, and support have helped the platform empower vulnerable groups to assert their rights.

## **The Benefits: Legal-Tech as a Social Equalizer**

### **1. Bridging the Rural-Urban Divide**

Legal-Tech can thus help reduce the rural-urban divide by presenting legal services at the doorsteps of rural citizens. Legal forums for virtual hearings, ODR platforms, and mobile legal aid reduce the need for physically traveling, hence saving consumers time and money. In a country where more than 65% are in rural areas, this is an important concern.

### **2. Reducing Cost and Delay**

Legal-Tech reduces the cost and time of legal proceedings by automating routine tasks, streamlining case management, and allowing remote participation. The reduced cost and time will further help low-income litigants and contribute to clearing the massive backlog of cases pending in Indian courts.

### **3. Increasing Transparency and Accountability**

Digital platforms help in making legal processes more transparent. When you take e-filing systems, digital records, live-streamed court proceedings under your aegis, it becomes easier to track the progress of cases and hold stakeholders accountable. This reduces opportunities for corruption-la and ensures fairer outcomes for all.

### **4. Empowering Citizens through Information**

AI-enabled legal research tools and translation services in regional languages make access to legal knowledge common. In other words, Legal-Tech democratizes information by

rendering laws, judgments, and procedures into comprehensible language for the layperson so citizens can independently take informed decisions and enforce their rights.

### **Challenges and Barriers**

While having the power to transform, certain issues are stopping Legal-Tech from being adopted in India:

#### **1. Digital Divide**

Connectivity to the Internet in rural areas stands at simply 33% as against 67% for other areas. Many rural users are stricken with limited digital literacy that prevents their using online legal services, while poor infrastructure hinders video consultations or virtual court hearings. Bridging the digital divide is thus of utmost importance to ensure that the benefits of Legal-Tech reach all strata of society.

#### **2. Economic and Social Barriers**

For many negatively impacted litigants, even accessing the digital world can be a drain on finances. Awareness about legal rights and digitalizing possibilities seldom reach more vulnerable groups. Any attempt to promote Legal-Tech will require equally strong accompanying outreach and educational programs.

#### **3. Apathy to Change**

The Indian legal culture traditionally resisted change and an acceptance of technology. Many attorneys or judges are so used to manual procedures that they have learned to resist anything digital. Such resistance can be broken by training and capacity building.

#### **4. Issues Pertaining to Data Privacy and Security**

Legal matters usually contain sensitive pieces of personal or financial information. Hence privacy of records and complete security of digital legal records are to be maintained at all costs. Having the risk of any type of data breaches or misuse will only cause the unwinding of faith of users towards Legal-Tech platforms, thus discouraging the users from adopting them.

#### **5. Regulatory and Language Issues**

Regulations, while mandating availability of legal documents and digital processes in vernacular languages, are lax with their implementation. Definite regulatory guidelines

regarding the use of AI in legal proceedings, data protection, and digital evidence are still awaited.

## **Legal and Regulatory Framework**

The legal framework governing Legal Tech in India is evolving. The Information Technology Act, 2000 provides the foundation for digital legal processes, but it does not fully address emerging issues such as AI bias, data privacy, and confidentiality. Regulatory bodies like the Supreme Court's e-Committee, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), and the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) are working on guidelines for the secure and ethical use of technology in the legal sector.

Recent initiatives include:

- Mandating e-filing and digital records in courts.
- Guidelines for ODR platforms to ensure fairness, transparency, and data security.
- Requirements for legal documents and services to be available in regional languages.

However, there is a need for continuous regulatory updates to keep pace with technological advancements and ensure that Legal-Tech serves the interests of justice.

## **The Role of Legal Education**

Legal education in India is also adapting to the rise of Legal-Tech. Law schools are introducing courses on technology law, AI, and digital dispute resolution. Practical, hands-on training through legal clinics, MOOCs, and flipped classrooms is preparing future lawyers for a tech-driven environment. However, there is still a long way to go in integrating Legal-Tech into mainstream legal education.

## **The Future: Towards Inclusive Legal-Tech**

The prospects for Legal-Tech in India are bright. As more law firms, courts, and government agencies recognize the benefits of technology, adoption rates are expected to increase. Future innovations may include:

- **Advanced AI for legal research and predictive analytics:** AI will become even more integral to the legal profession, offering capabilities such as automated drafting of legal documents and advanced case outcome predictions.

- **Blockchain for secure contract management and dispute resolution:** Blockchain technology can enhance the security and transparency of legal transactions and records.
- **Voice and vernacular interfaces:** User-friendly interfaces in local languages and voice-based systems will make Legal-Tech accessible to those with limited literacy or digital skills.
- **Integration with government services:** Seamless integration with government databases and services can streamline processes such as property registration, licensing, and welfare claims.

**To ensure that Legal-Tech acts as a true social equalizer, the following steps are recommended:**

- Expand digital literacy and legal awareness programs into rural and marginal communities.
- Invest in rural internet infrastructure and offline legal aid clinics, thus offering support to the online mechanism.
- Strictly enforce regulatory compliance concerning vernacular accessibility and data protection.
- Partner with local governance institutions (panchayats) and NGOs to build trust and ensure far-reaching dissemination.
- Enable a continuous learning and adapting environment for the legal fraternity through training and capacity building.

## **Conclusion**

Legal-Tech stands to transmute the Indian legal system, making justice more efficient, accessible, and transparent. With the aid of digital tools, AI, and vernacular solutions, Legal-Tech is breaking the barriers hitherto keeping large sections of the population out of the justice system. Despite challenges in the realm of digital access, awareness, and regulatory frameworks, the ongoing adoption and generation of innovative Legal-Tech keeps hope for an inclusive and fair legal landscape alive.

Innovation and adaptability notwithstanding, Legal-Tech will be fully integrated into the practice of law, thereby democratizing access to legal services and making justice accessible to all. The future of Legal-Tech in India does not concern itself with just

efficiency or cost-effectiveness but with that aspect of fulfilling the promise of justice for every citizen, regardless of where they are or what language they speak or what their economic status is.