

**ADDRESS BY THE HON'BLE PRESIDENT OF INDIA
SMT DROUPADI MURMU
AT THE VALEDICTORY SESSION OF 1ST REGIONAL
CONFERENCE ON 'ACCESS TO LEGAL AID:
STRENGTHENING ACCESS TO JUSTICE IN THE GLOBAL
SOUTH'**

New Delhi, November 28, 2023

I am indeed happy to be here to attend the first regional conference on access to legal aid. I believe that making legal aid accessible to people in need is the cornerstone of any modern state. It plays a crucial role in shaping a social order which is equitable, just and worthy of trust. With participation of 69 Africa-Asia-Pacific countries of the Global South in this conference, this event is a significant milestone in our collective pursuit of justice and equality.

I am sure this meeting has provided a platform to you all – judges, ministers, civil society experts and other distinguished stakeholders – to share lessons in improving access to justice. I understand this is for the first time that the leaders of the two pillars of democracy, legislature and judiciary, came together to deliberate on this subject.

Among the topics you have discussed, there is one relating to “strategies for reducing pretrial detention, including through provision of early access to legal aid services”. Various factors are responsible for the large numbers of pre-trial or ‘under-trial’ prisoners. They lose crucial years of their lives behind the bars in many cases. All efforts must be made to provide timely and effective legal aid to them. Also,

another topic of the conference, about the role of bar associations, university clinics, para-legals and civil society, is important, as we need to make the whole society a part of the solution. The quality and effectiveness of legal aid services is, of course, vital, and there is always room for improvement in that area.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Access to justice for all has been a theme close to my heart. In fact, it was only two days ago, on the occasion of Constitution Day, that I had yet again stressed its importance. Equality is not only the foundation of justice, but a necessary condition of justice too. It has been long since the world proclaimed that all human beings are equal, but we need to ask ourselves if we all have equal access to justice.

In practice, it means some people are often unable to seek redressal of their grievances due to several factors. Our principal task is to remove those obstacles. The chief obstacle, of course, is often the cost of justice. In India, several praiseworthy steps have been taken to help economically disadvantaged sections of society to approach legal institutions for remedial action. Equal justice and free legal aid have been incorporated in the Constitution of India among Directive Principles of State Policy. In light of the international commitment as well as the constitutional obligation, the Right to Free Legal Service is recognised as a statutorily guaranteed right in India.

Moreover, the Legal Services Authorities Act of 1987 has resulted in the creation of legal services institutions at various levels. Steps taken by the National Legal Services Authority, that is, NALSA, have

also played a key role in expanding legal aid. The aim, on the whole, has been to advance 'Ease of Justice'. But I feel that there is a need to launch an awareness campaign among people not only to make them conscious of their rights, but also to help them get legal assistance, if such a need arises. Such an awareness campaign must focus on rural areas and socially disadvantaged groups to dispel the impression that justice is the advantage of the stronger.

There are many more hindrances in the way of equal access to justice. In India, for example, the language of the higher judiciary is English, which makes it difficult for a large section of society to understand the judicial processes. However, the Supreme Court of India has started publishing verdicts in various regional languages on its website. Legal aid institutions also help in bridging the language divide.

Technology holds great promise in making access to legal aid more democratic. It has reduced distances and made justice dispensation easier in many cases. I am sure your discussions must have touched upon the use of technology in furthering the cause of justice. An innovative attitude in integration of technology in the justice delivery system will make it more inclusive as well as more efficient.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is a regional conference with a focus on the Global South. Due to a variety of historical forces, this group of countries still continues to battle poverty. The task before us is to raise the standards of living for all. Gandhiji used to call it 'sarvodaya', the welfare of all. Access to justice is, naturally, a very important tool to achieve that goal. The Global South, then, faces challenges which are quite similar in nature

yet they are different from the rest of the world. We can respond to these challenges by joining hands and by sharing our best practices.

Conferences like this one not only provide an ideal platform to do so, they also have the potential to deliver much more. They can help us reduce socio-economic disparities at home. Moreover, with more democratic and efficient justice systems, the Global South can take a lead in showing the way to more sustainable development for the whole world. In fact, improving access to justice is an effective tool to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly, SDG 16.

With that aim in mind and in order to strengthen the South-South collaboration, India organised two 'Voice of Global South Summits' this year. The first summit in January, with the theme of 'Unity of Voice, Unity of Purpose', marked a new beginning. The second summit, earlier this month, had the theme of 'Global South: Together for Everyone's Growth, Everyone's Trust'. The representatives of the Global South discussed ways to achieve shared aspirations for inclusive and equitable international development. The voice of the Global South was also heard in the G20 Summit under India's presidency this year. Our priority is to make the G20 inclusive and people-centric.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am sure the two days of deliberations have achieved the objectives of the conference, and you have explored opportunities for greater regional and international collaboration and sharing of innovations, knowledge, and strategies, including through a Regional Legal Aid Network. Let us use this platform to work together to change the lives

of people in our countries by enhancing legal aid and access to justice.

I wish to acknowledge the efforts of the National Legal Services Authority, and the collaborators – International Legal Foundation, United Nations Development Programme and United Nations Children’s Fund – for conceptualising and organising this conference. My best wishes to all the distinguished guests and participants in this conference for success in their efforts to strengthen the legal aid system and promote a people-centric approach in facilitating access to justice.

Thank you.

Jai Hind!

Jai Bharat!