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2026 INSC 369

REPORTABLE

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF INDIA
CRIMINAL APPELLATE JURISDICTION

CRIMINAL APPEAL NO. ..... OF 2026
(Arising out of SLP (Crl.) No (s) ..... of 2026@Crl.MP. 7862 of 2017)

SHANKAR MAHTO **... APPELLANT(S)**

VERSUS

STATE OF BIHAR **... RESPONDENT(S)**

O R D E R

SANJAY KAROL, J.

THE APPEAL AND ITS PREVIOUS ORDERS

Delay condoned.

Leave granted.

1. While dealing with an appeal by the appellant, challenging the judgment of conviction and sentence to death awarded to him and confirmed in terms of Criminal Appeal No. 425 of 2002 passed by the High Court of Judicature at Patna, as per judgment dated 20th February, 2014, this Court in terms of the order dated 05th May, 2017, this Court noticed that inordinate delay was affecting matters in which legal aid was involved. With an intent to find out the cause for the same

and issue directions as may be necessary, Ms. Vibha Datta Makhija, learned senior counsel, was appointed as *amicus curiae* to assist the Court. Since then, the matter has been listed on numerous occasions. By order dated 16th October, 2019 it was recorded that various deliberations had taken place across agencies including the Supreme Court Legal Service Committee[1] and National Legal Service Authority, with the learned *amicus curiae*, and the same had been crystallized into a note of suggestions. Notices were sent to the High Courts/State Governments/Union Territories to enable them to give their suggestions before any modalities could be finalized. The order dated 26th February 2020, and 5th March, 2020, reveals that the death reference from which the original proceedings before this Court arose was decided, and as such, this miscellaneous petition was de-tagged.

2. Order dated 19th January 2021 reads as under:-

> "We have noticed that in the special leave petitions filed by Supreme Court Legal Services Committee (SCLSC) on behalf of the convicts, there is an inordinate delay which becomes difficult to condone. Needless to say, the situation brings about a lack of even handedness in dealing with matters of condonation of delay. We see no reason why these delays should continue to occur particularly with the availability of tools provided by information and communication technology which are easily available. In this matter, Ms. Vibha Datta Makhija, learned Amicus Curiae, has submitted a report dated 15.01.2021 in consultation with the SCLSC on measures to curb the delay. Valuable as that report is, we consider it appropriate to constitute a Committee comprising of certain experts who would examine all the suggestions and responses which may be received by it from the High Courts as well as the other stakeholders. In view of the other suggestions (Annexure B) by NALSA and the response submitted by various High Courts, we find it appropriate to constitute a Committee comprising of Secretary (Ministry of Home Affairs), Government of India, Director General, National Informatics Centre, Member (Process), E-Committee, Supreme Court of India and Member Secretary, NALSA. The Committee shall examine the aforementioned suggestions/responses and submit a report with regard to digitization, translation and electronic transmission of records to facilitate access to justice and timely filing of appeals/SLPs by the convicts, by utilizing the Information and Communication Technology tools, within four weeks. We have also gone through the Module and the Note dated 16.10.2019 as per the

[1] 'SCLSC'

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> report for timely filing of appeals/SLPs of convicts though the Legal Services Institutions. We therefore direct the High Courts to submit their responses to the Committee through their Registrars General within two weeks. The Committee shall submit its report within two weeks' thereafter. The Secretary General of this Court shall coordinate meetings of the Committee...."

3. By order dated 23rd May 2025, certain questions were put to the Secretary of the SCLSC, and he was required to file an affidavit in that regard. The questions are as follows :-

> "i. What is the current pendency upto 30.05.2025, i.e. out of the total requests received by the SCLSC so far. How many cases have been filed, and how many are under consideration?
>
> ii. What has been the year wise average days of delay in filing petitions of applicants under each category of applicants as provided under Section 12 of the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, after Operation Cleanup in the year 2018?
>
> iii. Is there adequate infrastructure and staff to deal with the load of SCLSC?
>
> iv. What are the reasons for delay, and how have those delays been addressed?
>
> v. What is the status of online connectivity between the SCLSC with other stakeholders like High Courts, Prisons, Panel Counsels etc?"

The Supreme Court Legal Services Committee, in response to the above posed queries, submitted in affidavit dated 14.07.2025, the relevant portion of which is extracted as under:-

> "**POINT WISE RESPONSE TO THE DIRECTIONS ISSUED BY THIS HON'BLE COURT ON 23.5.2025**
>
> I. In response to direction (i) i.e., "what is the current pendency, upto 30.5.2025, for the total requests received by the SCLSC, how many cases have been filed and how many cases are under consideration", the following data as taken from the SCLSC website portal is extracted herein below in tabular form for the convenience of this Hon'ble Court:

S.NO	Year	Total Legal Aid Applications /Requests Received	Total Cases Assigned to Panel Advocates	Total ANR in which legal aid refused/ closed	Legal Aid Applications pending with SCLSC)
1	**2024**	4062	1972	906	Nil
2	**01-01-2025 to 30-05-2025**	3305	1819	476	688

(a) The data of total cases assigned to the Panel Advocates for the period between 01-01-2025 to 30-05-2025 is as per the information available on the SCLSC website portal and manual record as the data of newly increased panel advocates has to be updated. (As per information available on the SCLSC website portal is 745 and manual record is 1074).

(b) The updated data of the actual cases filed/pending before the Hon'ble Supreme Court is not available on the SCLSC website portal as there is no official intimation or updating on the login IDs by the panel advocates post assignment.

Average year wise delay in filing petitions

II. In response to directions/query (ii), i.e. the average year wise delay in filing petitions of applicants under the categories enumerated under Section 12 of the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, after the Operation Cleanup in the year 2018, it is submitted that the feature providing for the information regarding the delay caused in the filing of petition is not available on the SCLSC website portal.

Mode of availing legal aid services

The procedure for grant of legal aid is brought to the knowledge of this Hon'ble Court which is as under:

(a) The SCLSC has made provisions for receiving the applications from the persons seeking legal aid services, both in physical form and through the SCLSC online portal (sclsc.gov.in).

(b) The legal aid application can also be submitted through:

(i) the High Court Legal Aid Services Committee (HCLSC) or;

(ii) the district legal aid authorities or;

(iii) jail authorities or;

(iv) NALSA Portal or;

(v) Directly from the litigant.

Procedure in availing legal aid services

(c) That there is a mandatory check list of documents which are necessary for the purpose of consideration of grant of legal aid before approaching this Hon'ble Court. The persons seeking legal aid can seek assistance of the HCLSC for completion of documents. On completion of documents, the cases are then referred to the screening committees, consisting of Senior Advocates, to render an opinion on the merits of

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the applications. The cases of applicants under judicial custody are directly assigned to the panel advocates.

(d) That on 29.11.2014, under the Chairmanship of Hon'ble Mr. Justice T. S. Thakur, Judge, Supreme Court of India & Executive Chairman, NALSA a resolution was passed which reads as under:

"3. All matters that are required to be filed before the Supreme Court be processed and prepared by the High Court Legal Services Committee, including translations of documents and that SLSAs transfer adequate funds to High Court Legal Services Committees for preparation and translation of documents before dispatch to the Supreme Court Legal Services Committee for filing."

(e) That in terms of the circular dated 13.4.2015 issued by the SCLSC (adopting the circular issued by NALSA dated 19.2.2015), all legal aid cases which are to be filed before this Hon'ble Court, are to be prepared and processed by the HCLSC, before they are dispatched to SCLSC for filing.

(f) That on completion of documents the matters which are civil in nature or criminal in nature confined to the cases pertaining to the complainant, quashing, transfer, etc. are referred to the Ld. Screening Committee (consisting of Senior Advocates to render opinion on the merits of legal aid applications). The cases recommended by the Ld. Screening Committee are processed further. The cases of persons under judicial custody/prison are directly assigned to the panel advocate for filing the matter before the Hon'ble Supreme Court.

(g) That the assignment letter assigning the case to the panel advocates specifically stipulates to file the case within 15 days. There is a Login ID of each Panel Advocate and the legal aid applications along with documents which are scanned and indexed are also available in the respective Login IDs immediately on assignment. The panel advocates and the legal aid applicant can communicate directly on the address and contact number of both given in the assignment letter.

However, there is no timely official communication by the panel advocate regarding the filing of the case before the Hon'ble Supreme Court or the orders passed by the Hon'ble Supreme Court till the submission of bill and return of documents by Panel Advocate to SCLSC after disposal of the matter.

III. That in response to directions (iii), i.e., availability of adequate infrastructure and staff to deal with the load of SCLSC, it is submitted that SCLSC is well equipped with infrastructure and staff.

Reasons for Delay in filing legal aid applications before the Hon'ble Court

IV. In response to directions (iv), i.e., the reasons for delay, and how have those been addressed, it is submitted that the reasons for delay are broadly identified as under:

(a) Submission of legal aid application after delay by the legal aid applicant;

(b) submission of incomplete documents by the legal aid applicant;

(c) delay caused by the panel lawyers in filing the petitioner after assignments of the matter.

(d) Translations of vernacular documents, custody certificate to be obtained from jailors, retrieving records from the high court in case of appeals, collating information from the litigant/ or next friend in case of death of parties are some of the causes for delay.

Methods adopted to curb the delays

That there are various methods adopted by SCLSC to curb the delays which are as under:-

(e) That recently, there was a massive campaign initiated in January 2025 (Mission Mode). Vide letter dated 10.1.2025, the Director General of Prisons and Member Secretaries of High Court Legal Services Committees and the State Legal Services Authorities were communicated with the decisions of the Hon'ble Chairman, SCLSC requesting to collect the data with respect to:-

- Matters in which High Court has upheld the conviction but inmate has not yet filed appeal.
- Matters is which the prisoners have remain in jail for half/more than half of sentence period and bail prayer rejected by the High Court but inmate has not yet moved this Hon'ble Court.
- Prisoners whose remission/pre-mature release has been rejected by the state sentence review board and writ against that order has also been rejected by the High Court but inmate has not yet moved this Hon'ble Court.

It was requested to send the details of prison inmates covered under aforesaid three categories and willing to avail legal services of Supreme Court Legal Services Committee.

Thereafter, reminders were sent on 06.02.2025 and 19.02.2025 to the authorities for furnishing the requisite data in pursuance of the MISSION MODE. Further, a letter dated 05.03.2025 was sent to the Authorities to provide complete documents with respect to the inmates whose names were mentioned in the data collected and who were willing to avail legal aid services.

A video conference chaired by Hon'ble Justice Suryakant, the then Chairman of SCLSC was held on 01.04.2025 with the Hon'ble Chairpersons of all the State Legal Services Authorities and High Court Legal Services Committees regarding MISSION MODE.

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The letter dated 05.04.2025 was sent to all the Concerned Authorities requesting to expedite furnishing of the documents.

The another letter dated 05.04.2025 was sent to all the Concerned Authorities in pursuance of the Video Conferencing dated 01.04.2025 to constitute a team of 05 Panel Advocates for visiting the jails to create awareness among the inmates and submit a stage wise report to SCLSC.

The letter dated 03.05.2025 was sent to the Registrar Generals of all the High Court communicating the virtual interaction scheduled on 05.05.2025 at 5.30 P.M. of the then Hon'ble Chairman, SCLSC with the Hon'ble Chief Justices of High Courts, Hon'ble Executive Chairperson of SLSAs and HCLSCs.

It is submitted that, after the successful implementation of Mission Mode, SCLSC is now receiving legal aid applications along with documents from the various Legal Services Authorities to provide legal aid to the jail inmates.

(a) The panel of Advocates in the category of AOR, Non-AOR and Arguing Counsel is reconstituted by expanding the panel and additional advocates have been taken on the panel and the number is increased.
(b) An additional category of Assisting Counsels has been introduced who will provide assistance to the AORs, Non AORs and Arguing Counsels to ensure timely filing and assistance in preparation of the cases.
(c) The number of the Ld. Screening Committee is increased for expeditious grant of legal aid.

V. That In response to directions (v), i.e. the status of online connectivity between SCLSC is as under:

- The facility of online connectivity through video conferencing and intercommunication with the High Court Legal Services Committee, Prisons, Panel Counsel, etc. is available on the SCLSC web portal i.e., sclsc.gov.in.

- Separate Login IDs are allotted to the HCLSCs, SLSAs, DLSAs, TLSAs, Prisons, Panel Counsels and any communication is immediately is shown in the respective Login IDs.

- The stakeholders including the legal aid applicants can apply for counseling/meeting through video conferencing and on receipt of such application a date and time is given on which the said counseling/meeting can be facilitated.

The status of the legal aid applications submitted by the legal aid applicant can be checked on the SCLSC web portal."

4. The Supreme Court Legal Service Committee, sought directions from this Court in the following terms as recorded in order dated 01st September 2025.

There appears to be some laxity on part of the authorities to furnish affidavits in terms of our order which anguish us (order dt 16.09.2025 to be picked) and as such we had requested the Learned *Amicus Curiae* to interact with the Chairpersons of the Legal Service Authorities and furnish the requisite information in tabular form.

> **"Order dated 01st September, 2025**
>
> "I. For High Court Legal Services Committee (HCLSC)
>
> a. In cases where the applicant has directly approached the Supreme Court Legal Services Committee (SCLSC), the HCLSC must transmit the complete Paperbook filed before the High Court and the Courts below within seven days of the requisition from SCLSC.
>
> b. In cases where application for legal aid is forwarded from the HCLSC to SCLSC when the applicant has approached the HCLSC, the HCLSC should ensure that the complete Paperbook of the High Court and Courts below is accompanied along with the forwarding letter.
>
> c. In cases where the matter referred to is not a criminal matter and/or the applicant is not in judicial custody, the HCLSC must forward the
>
> duly signed/identified vakalatnama and attested affidavit within seven days of receipt of the same from the SCLSC.
>
> d. The HCLSC shall also send the soft scanned copies of all the documents to SCLSC.
>
> **II. Jail Authority/Jail Superintendent**
>
> **a.** In cases where the legal aid applicant is in judicial custody and approaches SCLSC through HCLSC, the Vakalatnama and custody certificate (with complete particulars) duly attested and signed by the Jail Authority/Jail Superintendent must be sent (digital and hard
>
> copy) to HCLSC within three days from the receipt of request received from the Prison in mate. The HCLSC shall send the Paperbook, true
>
> copy of order passed by the High Court and the lower courts records, alongwith documents received from the Jail (Vakalatnama, Custody
>
> Certificate and duly attested affidavit hard as well as scanned copy) to SCLSC within seven days from the date of receipt of request from
>
> SCLSC.
>
> **b.** As and when the Advocate or the SCLSC sends a request for any additional document, the same must be sent to the SCLSC within seven days from the request received in this regard."

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Order dated 16.09.2025:

> "We express our anguish in the manner in which the statutory authorities have not chosen to respond to the orders passed by this Court.
>
> 2. Under these circumstances, we request Ms. Vibha Dutta Makhija, learned amicus curiae, to personally get in touch with the Chairman of all the State Legal Services Authorities with a further request to them, ensuring necessary compliance of the order before the next date of 4 hearing."

5. In view of the above orders, the matter came to be reserved for orders.

LEGAL AID: A CONCEPTUAL AND LEGAL INTRODUCTION

6. Legal aid, simply put, refers to the provision of free or affordable legal services to individuals who lack the economic or social capacity to access justice through conventional means. It rests on the idea that equality before the law must be real and not symbolic. Legal aid helps ensure that rights are not confined to those who can afford legal representation, but are available to all, including the poor and marginalized. In this sense, it plays a crucial role in making legal protections meaningful. In India, the concept of legal aid is closely tied to the vision expressed in the Preamble of the Constitution, which promises justice be it social, economic, and/or political, along with equality of status and opportunity, and affirms the secular character of the State. Social justice, in this context, requires the State to reduce structural inequalities and protect vulnerable groups from exclusion and exploitation. Legal aid contributes directly to this goal by enabling disadvantaged individuals to assert their rights and seek remedies against injustice. Political justice, on the other hand, is concerned with ensuring meaningful participation in democratic processes and equal access to institutions of governance. Without access to legal advice and representation, many citizens would find it difficult to exercise these rights effectively, whether in matters of

voting, representation, or challenging arbitrary state action. The commitment to secularism further strengthens the case for legal aid, as it demands that the legal system remain neutral and accessible to all individuals irrespective of religion, ensuring that justice is administered without discrimination or bias. This commitment was given a clear constitutional expression through the insertion of Article 39A by the 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1976. Article 39A directs the State to promote justice on the basis of equal opportunity and to provide free legal aid so that no individual is denied access to justice due to economic or other disadvantages. While the legacy of the 42nd Amendment remains contested because of its enactment during the Emergency period from 1975 to 1977, Article 39A is arguably one of its most constructive and enduring contributions. It firmly situates access to justice within the Directive Principles of State Policy. Over time, the Judiciary has further strengthened this framework by linking legal aid to Article 21 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to life and personal liberty. Courts have interpreted this right to include fair legal procedures and access to legal representation, thereby reinforcing the centrality of legal aid in a just legal system. On the whole these developments show that legal aid in India is not merely a matter of policy, but a constitutional responsibility that advances the broader ideals of justice, equality, secularism, and fairness envisioned in the Preamble.

7. The development of this concept through judicial pronouncements is important to note for the purposes of the directions issued in this Judgment. At the outset, it be noted that in ***Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration***[2] held that prisoners do not surrender their fundamental rights at the prison gate. In that context, let us proceed further.

The most recognizable name in the line of cases of this Court, furthering the Directive Principles of State Policy as mentioned in Article 39A of the

[2] (1978) 4 SCC 494

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Constitution of India, is ***Hussainara Khatoon v. State of Bihar***[3], in which the Court held that the speedy trial to be a facet of Article 21 and free legal aid is an essential component of fair, just and reasonable procedure in law. It was emphasized that the State had an obligation to ensure access to justice and that the Court was required to take steps to provide legal representation and expedite criminal trials. Even before this, in the year 1978, this Court in Madhav ***Hayawadanrao Hoskot v. State of Maharashtra***[4] held that the right to counsel was a fundamental right traceable to Article 21.

We take note of another case from the same year i.e., ***Khatri (II) v. State of Bihar***[5] in which it was held that free legal aid is a fundamental right and that it attaches from the moment the accused is first produced before a Magistrate and not only at the commencement of the trial. Further, it was held that the right to legal aid does not depend on a request to that effect from the accused, thereby placing a positive obligation on the State to provide the same.

Most recently, this Court in ***Suhas Chakma v. Union of India***[6] speaking through K.V. Viswanathan, J. extensively dealt with this issue of systemic deficiency in access to free legal aid for prisoners, particularly the under trials. The Court discussed the Standard Operating Procedures prepared by NALSA, on "*Access to Legal Aid to Prisoners and the Functioning of Prison Legal Aid Clinics-2022";* "Standard Operating Procedures for the smooth functioning of Under Trial Review Committees", among others, including the e-prison module/e-kiosks in prisons. Some of the relevant extracts of the judgment including the directions issued therein are as follows:-

> "***Pre-litigation assistance***
>
> ***34.*** *One of the important areas where legal aid, was in the initial days found wanting was in the pre-litigation arena. NALSA has risen to the occasion by introducing "Early Access to Justice at Pre-Arrest, Arrest and Remand Stage Framework", under which all DLSAs upon*

[3] (1980) 1 SCC 81
[4] (1978) 3 SCC 544
[5] (1981) 1 SCC 627
[6] 2024 INSC 813

receiving the intimation of request of the suspect/arrestee to have free legal assistance during interrogation, shall inform the deputed lawyer as per the duty roster. The assigned lawyer is to then to go to the police station concerned to provide legal assistance to such persons.

… … …

37. *NALSA lawyers step in to obtain translated copies of documents wherever necessary; ensure that in case of a foreign national, the High Commission concerned is informed and also make submissions if the suspect/arrestee appears to be a child/juvenile. Statistics reveal that as of June 2024, 17,894 suspects have been given legal assistance at the pre-arrest stage at the police station. Of them, 7466 were not arrested. It is set out that 13,747 accused were provided assistance at the police station before producing them in courts, 94,875 at the remand stage, 37,929 bail applications were filed at the remand stage in which 20,182 accused were granted bail. While we commend NALSA for the steps taken, we also direct that they continue to keep up the momentum and plug the gaps, if any, which they themselves have fairly identified and placed before the Court.*

Directions

48. *In view of the above, we dispose of the matter by issuing the following directions:*

48.1. *While commending the work already done by NALSA, the SLSAs and the DLSAs, we have no reason to doubt that the Legal Services Authorities at different levels will continue to work with the same momentum to achieve the constitutional objectives and objectives of the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987.*

48.2. *NALSA in cooperation with the SLSAs and the DLSAs will ensure that the SOP on Access to Legal Aid Services to prisoners and functioning of PLACs are operated efficiently in practice. NALSA will periodically update and improve the measures prescribed under the SOP-2022 so as to address any of the inadequacies that may emerge while operating the same at the field level.*

48.3. *The Legal Services Authorities at different levels will adopt methods to strengthen the monitoring of PLACs and to review their functioning periodically.*

48.4. *The Legal Services Authorities will periodically update the statistical data and after analysing the results take steps to address the shortcomings that may come to light.*

48.5. *The Legal Services Authorities, at all levels, should ensure that the Legal Aid Defence Counsel System, which is a pioneering measure, functions to its full potential. In this regard, periodic inspection and audit of the work of the Legal Aid Defence Counsel should be carried out. Steps should also be taken to improve the service conditions of the personnel working in the Legal Aid Defence Counsel System, whenever it is felt necessary and appropriate.*

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48.6. *For the success of the functioning of the legal aid mechanism, awareness is the key. A robust mechanism should be put in place and periodically updated to ensure that the various beneficial schemes promoted by the Legal Services Authorities reaches the nook and corner of the nation and particularly, to those whose grievances it has set out to address. Adequate literature including in the local languages in the States and appropriate promotional methods should be launched so that the consumers of justice to whom the schemes are intended can make best use of the same.*

48.7. *In this regard, inter alia, the following measures to create awareness could be undertaken through the length and breadth of the nation to spread the message of the availability of legal aid:*

(a) In public places like police stations, post offices, bus-stands, railway stations, etc. boards in prominent places be displayed furnishing the address for contact and the phone numbers of the nearest legal aid office. This should be done in the local language and in English.

(b) Promotional campaigns in the local language be undertaken through radio/All India Radio/Doordarshan. This will be in addition to the promotional measures undertaken through the digitalisation process — like hosting of websites and prominent mention thereon on the landing page of the legal services authority wherever permissible.

(c) To create complete awareness about the existence of legal aid schemes, promotional campaigns may include such other creative measures including organisation of street corner plays (nukkad natak) in rural areas so that the poor rural masses comprehend the facility available to them through the legal aid scheme. These should be undertaken without dislocating the normal life of citizens. Further, these measures will not only create awareness about legal aid to the accused but will also create awareness for the victims and for those whose civil rights have been infringed.

48.8. *The Legal Services Authorities will periodically review and update SOP-2022 for the Undertrial Review Committee (UTRC).*

48.9. *The huge gap between total number of persons identified by the UTRC and the number of persons recommended for release should be looked into and adequate corrective measures be taken. Similarly, the difference between the number of prisoners/inmates recommended for release and the number of bail applications filed should be particularly looked into by NALSA/SLSAs/DLSAs and adequate corrective measures taken.*

48.10. *The "Early Access to Justice at Pre-arrest, Arrest and Remand Stage Framework" established by NALSA for pre-litigation assistance should be diligently pursued and the work undertaken under the framework be periodically reviewed.*

48.11. *Interaction by the Legal Service Authorities at different levels with convicts who had not preferred appeals should be periodically undertaken and the convicts be informed of their right to free legal aid.*

48.12. *Periodic interaction should be held with jail visiting lawyers (JVLs) and Para Legal Volunteers (PLVs). This is to ensure updation of their knowledge so that the system functions efficiently as a whole.*

48.13. *Steps for continuing education of lawyers involved in pre-litigation assistance and those associated with the Legal Aid Defence Counsel set-up should be provided by Legal Services Authorities. Apart from this, it should also be ensured that adequate law books and access to online libraries are available to lawyers engaged at the pre-litigation assistance stage and those involved with the Legal Defence Counsel set-up.*

48.14. *Periodic reports should be submitted by the DLSAs to the SLSAs and the SLSAs to NALSA, if not already done. NALSA should digitise the whole process whereby at the Central level NALSA can, on the click of a button, get details of the updates done by SLSAs and DLSAs on regular basis.*

48.15. *The Union of India and the State Governments shall continue to extend their cooperation and assistance to the Legal Services Authorities at different levels for the effective implementation of the measures taken by them.*

48.16. *We direct the Registry to forward a copy of this judgment to all the High Courts in the country. The High Courts may consider the feasibility of issuing a practice direction to the effect that all courts including the High Court while furnishing the copy of the judgment of conviction/dismissal/reversal of acquittal/dismissal of bail applications, may append a coversheet to the judgment informing the convict about the availability of free legal aid facilities for pursuing higher remedies. The coversheet may set out the contact address and phone number of the legal aid committee attached to the court for seeking appropriate guidance. Similar information may be made available in the notices issued to the respondents by the courts concerned in appeals against acquittal. The High Courts may on their webpage carry information about the legal aid facilities available in the State."*

DELIBERATIONS AND THE RESULTS THEREOF

8. The purpose of the deliberations before this Court should aim to take forward the position as it stands after the above judgment. The end result of the continued deliberations carried out by Ms. Makhija, learned *amicus curiae* has resulted in the preparation of the following Standard Operating Procedure, duly seconded by Ms. Aparna Bhat, learned senior counsel for SCLSC and Ms. Rashmi Nandakumar, learned counsel appearing for NALSA.

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"STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE (SOP) FOR TRANSLATION AND TRANSMISSION OF RECORDS FOR FILING LEGAL AID APPEALS AND SPECIAL LEAVE PETITIONS (SLPS), 2025

1. OBJECTIVE

1.1 The primary objective of this SOP is to establish a structured, efficient, and accountable framework for the timely translation, transmission, and monitoring of case records in legal aid matters. This is particularly critical in criminal cases where procedural delays can significantly hinder the filing of appeals or Special Leave Petitions (SLPs) before higher courts, infringing on the rights of convicts to speedy justice.

1.2 This SOP aims to:

(i) Minimise delays in the legal aid process by setting clear timelines and responsibilities.
(ii) Ensure high-quality, accurate translations of judicial documents to facilitate effective representation.
(iii) Promote coordination among various stakeholders, including High Court Legal Services Committees (HCLSCs), District Legal Services Authorities (DLSAs), State Legal Services Authorities (SLSAs), Supreme Court Legal Services Committee (SCLSC), National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), jail authorities, and translators.
(iv) Incorporate digital tools for real-time tracking and transparency.
(v) Uphold constitutional principles under Articles 21, 39A, and 142 of the Constitution of India, ensuring access to justice for all legal aid beneficiaries.
(vi) Address systemic issues such as translator shortages, communication gaps, and documentation errors through proactive monitoring and accountability measures.

1.3 This SOP applies to all legal aid cases filed/pending before the High Courts and the Supreme Court.

2. SCOPE AND DEFINITIONS

2.1 Scope

This SOP covers the entire lifecycle of record handling in legal aid cases, appeals and SLPs, from the pronouncement of judgment in the Trial Court to the filing of appeals/SLPs before the High Courts and the Supreme Court. It includes translation, digitisation,

transmission, monitoring, and quality control processes. It is mandatory for all HCLSCs, DLSAs, SLSAs, SCLSC, NALSA, and associated jail authorities across India.

2.2 Definitions

(a) Certificate of True Translation: A sworn affidavit certifying the accuracy and fidelity of the translated document.

(b) Declaration of Non-Association: A statement by the translator affirming no personal or professional connection to the case or parties involved.

(c) Impugned Judgment: The judgment or order being challenged before the High Courts and/or the Supreme Court.

(d) Legal Aid Matter: Cases where free legal services are provided to eligible persons under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, at any level.

(e) Source Language: Language in which the vernacular records of the particular High Court are maintained.

(f) Video Conferencing (VC): Secure digital meetings using platforms compliant with data protection standards as per court procedures.

3. CATEGORIZATION OF CASES

To prioritise resources and ensure expedited handling for urgent matters, cases shall be categorised based on the nature and severity of the case. Prioritisation shall influence timelines, resource allocation, and monitoring frequency.

3.1 Category A1: High-Priority Criminal Cases

3.1.1 Includes cases involving death sentences, life imprisonment, or sentences of ten years or more, of persons in custody and cases of Juvenile Offenders.

3.1.2 Rationale: These cases involve severe liberty deprivations and require immediate action to prevent prolonged injustice.

3.1.3 Additional Requirements: Mandatory daily status updates during the initial 15 days post-judgment.

3.2 Category A2: High-Priority Civil Cases

3.2.1 Matters relating to the imminent apprehension of the demolition of property.

3.2.2 Matters relating to dispossession, eviction etc.

3.2.3 Matters pertaining to medical termination of pregnancy.

3.2.4 Matters pertaining to the custody of children.

3.2.5 Any other category of cases duly notified by the HCLSCs

3.3 Category B: Medium-Priority Criminal Cases

3.3.1 Includes cases involving sentences of less than ten years but more than one year, or cases with significant human rights implications (e.g., women, or SC/ST atrocity cases).

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3.3.2 Rationale: Balances urgency with resource constraints for less severe but still critical matters.

3.3.3 Additional Requirements: Bi-weekly reviews and prioritised translator assignment.

3.4 Category C: Civil and Other Cases

3.4.1 Includes all other civil matters, family disputes, property cases, and criminal cases with sentences of one year or less.

3.4.2 Rationale: These are handled on a standard timeline unless escalated due to exceptional circumstances (e.g., involving vulnerable groups).

3.4.3 Additional Requirements: Quarterly audits for compliance.

3.4.4 Escalation Protocol: Any case may be re-categorised upon review by the HCLSC Monitoring Committee if new facts emerge (e.g., health deterioration of the convict).

4. TRANSLATION AND DOCUMENTATION

4.1 Initiation of Translation

4.1.1 Translation shall commence immediately upon:

(a) Admission of an appeal for final hearing in the High Court, or

(b) Receipt of the convict's consent for appeal in criminal cases, and

(c) Acknowledgment of eligibility for grant of legal aid by the Legal Service Institution i.e., HCLSC/SCLSC.

4.1.2 All documents shall be scanned and digitised before and after translation to enable secure sharing.

4.2 Priority Documents for Translation

4.2.1 The following documents shall be translated on a priority basis to be filed along with the appeal/SLP:

a. judgment, (full text, including reasoning and operative part), orders and pleadings

b. Statements of at least two principal witnesses including cross-examination.

c. First Information Report (FIR) and chargesheet (including annexures)

d. Relevant exhibits, such as medical reports, forensic evidence, or property documents

e. Trial court records, including depositions of key experts (e.g., doctors, ballistic experts)

f. Bail applications, interim orders, and any prior appellate decisions

g. Convict's personal details, including socio-economic background for legal aid eligibility.

4.2.2 The rest of the lower court record shall be fully translated ensuring completeness of the record, which will be filed within 60 days of filing the appeal/SLP.

4.3 Translation Standards

4.3.1 Translations must be from the original language (e.g., regional languages) to English, unless specified otherwise by the appellate court 4.3.2 Use legal terminology consistent with standard judicial glossaries

4.3.3 Every translated document shall include:

(a) A unique reference number linking it to the original (b) Page-wise cross-references.

(c) Certificate of True Translation signed by the translator and supervisor

(d) Declaration of Non-Association with the case or the parties signed by the translator and supervisor to avoid conflicts of interest

4.3.4 Formats: Translations shall be in PDF with searchable text, watermarked for authenticity.

4.4 Handling Sensitive Information

4.4.1 Redact personal identifiers (e.g., names of the victims/Protected witnesses' addresses, Aadhaar numbers etc.) in compliance with data protection laws

4.4.2 Ensure that translations of sealed documents (e.g., in-camera proceedings) are handled confidentially and sensitively.

5. TIMELINES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

5.1 The following table outlines key stages, responsible authorities, actions, and timelines. All timelines are mandatory and subject to extensions only with documented justification and approval from the SCLSC.

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APPEAL BEFORE THE HIGH COURT – CRIMINAL CASES

STAGE	RESPONSIBLE AUTHORITY	ACTION	TIMELINE	CATEGORY-SPECIFIC NOTES
Pronouncement of judgment	Trial Court	Supply a copy of the judgment of conviction along with the order on sentence. A translated copy of the Trial Court judgement tobe provided to the Convict	On the same day, in case the accused is present in court or within 24 hours if the accused is present through VC Within 15 days.	For Category A: Notify HCLSC via email/SMS alert immediately on pronouncement.
Communication of judgment	Trial Court	Transmit judgment to HCLSC and DLSA.	Within 7 days	Include case categorization and convict details.
Obtaining convict's consent to appeal	HCLSC / DLSA / Jail Authorities	Conduct VC or in person interaction; document consent in writing.	Within 7 days of receiving judgment	For Category A: Daily follow-ups if consent is delayed.
Document Collection and Digitization	DLSA/Jail Superintendent	Gather all trial records; scan and upload to platform.	Within 10 days	Ensure completeness; flag missing documents.
Translator Assignment	HCLSC Secretary / Registrar High Court	Assign from empanelled list based on language expertise.	Within 15 days (Category A); 20 days (B); 30 days (C) from the date on which the appeal was admitted by the High Court.	Prioritize LL.B. degree holders for complex cases.

STAGE	RESPONSIBLE AUTHORITY	ACTION	TIMELINE	CATEGORY-SPECIFIC NOTES
Translation of Priority Documents	Assigned Translator/ Supervisor	Translate, vet, and certify documents.	Within 15 days (Category A); 20 days (B); 30 days (C)	Daily progress reports for Category A.

SLP/APPEAL BEFORE THE SUPREME COURT – CRIMINAL CASES

STAGE	RESPONSIBLE AUTHORITY	ACTION	TIMELINE	CATEGORY-SPECIFIC NOTES
Pronounce-ment of judgment	High Court	Upload certified copy to the integrated digital platform.	Immediate (within 24 hours)	For Category A: Notify HCLSC via email/SMS alert.
Communication of judgment	Registrar (Judicial), High Court	Transmit judgment to HCLSC	Within 7 days	Include case categorization and convict details.
Obtaining convict's consent to appeal	HCLSC / DLSA /Jail Authorities	Conduct VC or in person interaction; document consent in writing.	Within 7 days of receiving judgment	For Category A: Daily follow-ups if consent is delayed.
Document Collection and Digitization	DLSA /Jail Superintendent	Gather all trial records; scan and upload to platform.	Within 10 days of consent	Ensure completeness; fla g missing documents.
Translator Assignment	HCLSC Secretary	Assign from empanelled list based on language expertise.	Within 3 days of consent	Prioritize LL.B. degree holders for complex cases.
Translation of Priority Documents	Assigned Translator / Supervisor	Translate, vet, and certify documents.	Within 15 days (Category A); 20 days (B); 30 days (C) of conse nt	Daily progress reports for Category A.

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Transmission of Translated Records	**HCLSC**	**Compile, verify, and transmit to SCLSC/legal aid lawyer for filing.**	**Within 30 days (A); 45 days (B); 60 days (C) of consent.**	**Use secure digital channels; obtain acknowledgment.**

Filing of Appeal/SLP	**Legal Aid Lawyer / SCLSC**	**Prepare and file based on transmitted records.**	**Within 15 days of receipt of consent**	**Report any deficiencies immediately.**
Monitoring of Jail Cases	**Jail Superintendent with DLSA**	**Update Legal Proceedings**	**Reviewed every 15 days of consent**	**Escalate delays to HCLSC.**

STAGE	RESPONSIBLE AUTHORITY	ACTION	TIMELINE	CATEGORY-SPECIFIC NOTES
		Register; conduct VC reviews.		

APPEAL BEFORE THE SUPREME COURT – CIVIL CASES

STAGE	RESPONSIBLE AUTHORITY	ACTION	TIMELINE	CATEGORY-SPECIFIC NOTES
Pronouncement of judgment	**High Court**	**Upload certified copy to the integrated digital platform.**	**Immediate (within 24 hours)**	**For Category A: Notify HCLSC via email/SMS alert.**
Communication of judgment	**HCLSC**	**Email/ Handover a copy of the judgment to the Legal Aid Benficiary**	**Within 24 Hours for Category A Cases and within 7 days for other cases**	**Include case categorization**

Consideration of application for grant of Legal aid	**SCLSC**	**Consider eligibility of the Legal Aid Beneficiary and fitness of case for filing an SLP/Appeal.**	**Within 24 Hours for Category A Cases and within 14 days for other cases from the date of receipt of application for grant of legal aid.**	**For Category A: Daily follow-ups**

Document Collection and Digitization	**HCLSC in case the legal aid beneficiary received legal aid before the High Court, otherwise the Legal Aid Beneficiary.**	**Gather all trial records; scan and upload to platform.**	**Within 10 days**	**Ensure completeness;flag missing documents.**
Assignment of case to a lawyer	**SCLSC**	**Assign the case to a lawyer on the panel of SCLSC**	**Within 24 Hours for category A cases and within 7 days for other cases**	

STAGE	RESPONSIBLE AUTHORITY	ACTION	TIMELINE	CATEGORY-SPECIFIC NOTES
Of Translation documents	**SCLSC**	**All documents to be translated by the lawyer assigned the case through a translator of repute. Fees for translation to be reimbursed by SCLSC on a bill being produced by the lawyer.**	**Within 5 days for category A cases and 20 days for other cases.**	

Note: Non-compliance with timelines will trigger automatic alerts and may result in potential disciplinary action.

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6. TRANSLATOR ENGAGEMENT AND OVERSIGHT

6.1 Recruitment and Empanelment

6.1.1 All High Courts to create and sanction regular/ contractual posts of Translators and Translation Supervisors which must not be less than one third the judge strength of the respective High Courts, and fill all posts within 90 days of vacancy

6.1.2 Additionally, panel Translators to be paid market per page rates to be determined by respective High Courts, the expenses of which will be borne by the respective High Courts.

6.1.3 Minimum Eligibility Criteria for Translators:

(a) Bachelor's degree in source language and/or English; preference for LL.B. or legal certification;

(b) Minimum 2 years of translation experience in legal/judicial contexts; (c) Proficiency in at least two languages (source and English).

6.1.4 Minimum Eligibility for Translation Supervisors:

(a) Post Graduate Diploma in Translation (PGDT), and/or Bachelor'sDegree in Source Language or English;

(b) LL.B. degree;

(c) Minimum 5 years of translation experience in legal/judicial contexts;(d) in at least two languages (source and English).

6.1.5 Empanelment Process:

(a) Open advertisement and screening by a committee (HCLSC Secretary,judicial officer, language expert);

(b) Written proficiency test (legal text translation) and interview;(c) Background verification for integrity.

6.2 Training and Development

6.2.1 Mandatory induction training on legal terminology, ethical standards, and digital tools (duration: 5 days).

6.2.2 Annual/Periodic refresher courses and workshops on emerging legal issues.

6.2.3 Performance Metrics: Accuracy rate >95%, turnaround time adherence.

6.3 Oversight Mechanisms

6.3.1 All translations shall be assigned as per the time-lines indicated above.

6.3.2 All translations shall be verified within 15 to 30 days of submission, failing which the concerned officer shall be required to furnish an explanation for the delay.

6.3.3 Each translation shall be checked, verified and vetted by the Translation Supervisor.

6.4 Remuneration and Incentives

6.4.1 Fixed salary for permanent posts as per the respective High Court pay-scales; 6.4.2 per-page rates for panel translators at market rates; and

6.4.3 Incentives for timely completion in Category A cases.

6.4.4 Periodic revisions of rates are made commensurate with prevailing market rates.

7. DIGITAL COORDINATION

7.1 Platform Integration: SCLSC, HCLSCs and Jail authorities shall integrate their systems into a unified digital platform to ensure seamless coordination, monitoring and timely exchange of information. NALSA shall be given access to this platform for real-time oversight and data analysis.

7.2 Key Features:

(a) Secure uploading/downloading of documents with encryption.
(b) Real-time tracking dashboards for case status, timelines, and alerts.(c) Role-based access: View-only for litigants; edit for authorities.
(d) Automated reminders (e.g., SMS/email) 48 hours before deadlines. (e) Audit logs for all actions to ensure traceability.

7.3 Technical Support: MTNL or the designated service provider agency shall provide 24/7 helpdesk, regular updates, and cybersecurity audits.

7.4 Data Backup and Recovery: Daily backups; compliance with the IT Act, 2000.

7.5 Training: Mandatory digital literacy sessions for all stakeholders.

8. MONITORING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

8.1 Monitoring Committee Composition of SCLSC & HCLSC as per Regulation 10 of The National Legal Services Authority (Free & Competent Legal Services) Regulations, 2010:

8.1.1 **Every High Court and Supreme Court shall have a Monitoring Committee which shall consist of:**

(a) **One Senior Advocate of high repute, having a practice of not less than 15 years;**

(b) **Three Senior Advocates/ Advocates of high repute having a practice of not less than 10 years; and**

(c) **Member Secretary, SCLSC/HCLSC (Ex-Officio)**

8.1.2 **The tenure of the Members of the Monitoring Committee shall be three years, except the Member Secretary, who shall be ex officio.**

8.1.3 **The HCLSC/ SCLSC shall share the data regarding the marking of matters and progress of filing of matters with the Monitoring Committee on a weekly basis.**

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8.1.4 **The Monitoring Member Committee shall meet at least on a fortnightly basis virtually or physically to review the progress of the matters and will be responsible for issuing necessary recommendations to the HCLSC/SCLSC Member Secretary to maintain the efficiency of the system.**

8.2 Committee Functions:

8.2.1 **Monthly reviews of progress, delays, and compliance.**
8.2.2 **Monitor the compliance of timelines set above.**
8.2.3 **Performance evaluation of lawyers, translators, and jail staff.**
8.2.4 **Recommend actions: Warnings, training, or removal for defaults.**
8.2.5 **Investigate complaints within 15 days.**

8.3 Reporting:

8.3.1 **Monthly reports to SCLSC/NALSA in a standardised format.**
8.3.2 **Annual consolidated report highlighting trends and recommendations.**

9. COORDINATION WITH JAIL AUTHORITIES

9.1 VC Meetings:

9.1.1 **Mandatory every 15 days involving HCLSC, DLSA, Jail Superintendent, and convict (where feasible).**
9.1.2 **Agenda: Case status updates, consent verification, document needs.**
9.1.3 **Minutes recorded and uploaded to the platform.**
9.1.4 **SALSA and SCLSC will coordinate virtual meeting between the SALSA lawyer handling the matter at the High Court to brief the SCLSC lawyer assigned to the case with the issues involved in the case within one week of the SCLSC lawyer being assigned to the case.**

9.2 Legal Proceedings Register

9.2.1 **To be maintained by the Jail Superintendent.**
9.2.2 **Columns: Convict ID, Case Details, Appeal Status, Communication Logs, Updates.**
9.2.3 **Updated weekly; shared digitally with DLSA.**

9.3 Support for Convicts: Provide access to legal aid kiosks in jails for document review.

10. INTER-AGENCY COMMUNICATION

10.1 Document Sharing: All judgments, translations, and filings shared via digital platform with copies to HCLSC, SLSA, and SCLSC.
10.2 Acknowledgement Protocol: Each communication requires a digital receipt within 24 hours; escalations for non-response.

10.3 Escalation Matrix: Level 1 (DLSA), Level 2 (HCLSC), Level 3 (SCLSC) for unresolved issues.
10.4 Annual Joint Workshops: To foster collaboration and address bottlenecks.

11. QUALITY ASSURANCE

11.1 Audits: Quarterly random audits of 20% translations by independent panels.
11.2 Certification: Supervisors must certify accuracy; dual-check for Category A.
11.3 Feedback Mechanism: Post-filing reviews from lawyers on translation utility.
11.4 Continuous Improvement: Incorporate feedback into annual training.

12. AUDIT, REVIEW AND AMENDMENTS

12.1 Review of the implementation of the SOP: Annually by SCLSC and NALSA, or sooner if directed by the Supreme Court.
12.2 Consultation Process: Inputs from HCLSCs, SLSAs, jail authorities, and stakeholders via workshops.
12.3 Amendments: Approved versions disseminated digitally; training on changes mandatory.
12.4 Effective Date: This SOP is effective from .

13. DELAY EXPLANATION

This SOP ensures a robust, transparent system to uphold justice in legal aid matters. Compliance is mandatory; violations may invite accountability measures under relevant laws. A checklist in the following Format shall be incorporated by all HCSLSCs and SCLSC to be submitted in all applications filed seeking condonation of delay before the High Court/Supreme Court.

Date on which the impugned order was uploaded on the website of the High Court/Trial Court:	
Date on which the impugned order was communicated to the convicted person:	
Date on which consent to file SLP/Appeal was given:	
Date on which translated documents along with relevant papers were transmitted to SCLSC/HCLSC:	
Date on which a lawyer was appointed by SCLSC/HCLSC:	

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Date on which documents were handed over to the lawyer by SCLSC/HCLSC:	
Date of filing of the SLP/Appeal:	
Explanation/Remarks (if any):	

9. In view of the above SOP, it is suggested by the learned *amicus curiae* that directions be issued on the following terms:-

> "a. The High Courts be directed to take steps to create or upgrade the cadre of Translators and Translation Supervisors, and to select a panel of translators in accordance with paragraph 6 of the SOP, within two months from the date of this Hon'ble Court's order;
> b. The NIC be directed to create a seamless, efficient, and unified digital platform to enable SCLSC, HCLSCs, and Jail Authorities to upload and exchange information within two months from the date of this Hon'ble Court's order;
> c. The SCLSC and HCLSCs be directed to constitute Monitoring Committees in terms of Clause 8 of the SOP within one month from the date of this Hon'ble Court's order;
> d. The Member Secretary, NALSA, be designated as the nodal officer to oversee the implementation and periodic review of the SOP…"

DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

10. We have given careful consideration to the SOP and the proposed directions. We are of the considered view that this SOP is a result of in depth deliberations conducted by the "*stakeholders*" or "*major players in the game*", that being the case the same deserves consideration by all the High Courts on the administrative side, so that, necessary changes to the procedure in place, can be adopted in furtherance of the aims of the SOP. As such, it is directed that a copy of this order be placed before the learned Chief Justice of the High Court, for necessary consideration and appropriate action at their end.

11. While implementation of the entire breadth of the SOP is left to the wisdom of the High Courts, we do hereby direct that the timelines mentioned under

Heading 5 of the SOP shall be treated as binding. This is for the purposes of streamlining the filing of appeals in cases where the respective Legal Services Committees are required to take lead. This, it is our hope, will go a long way in addressing the structural gaps that had prompted this Court to take forward the present proceedings apart from dealing with the death reference from which they emanated.

12. Regarding the issue of translators, while we do not issue any directions, we may only observe that the poor quality of translation has engaged the attention of this Court, recently, on quite of few occasions, indicating that some sort of structural change is necessitated in this regard. The respective High Court may seriously examine and take decision on paragraph 6 of the SOP within a time bound period, i.e., not more than four weeks.

13. The aspect of monitoring and accountability as delineated in paragraph 8 of the SOP ensures that there is effective monitoring and '*keeping tabs*' on the functioning and processes to be undertaken by the Legal Services Committees of the respective High Courts. Let the necessary constitution of the committee be carried out at the earliest. The Standing Committee/Administrative Committee, may appoint the members either by itself or after consulting the Full Court, as may be warranted. The Member Secretary of HCLSC shall be an *ex-officio* member. In so far as the constitution of the committee for this Court is concerned, the Member Secretary, SCLSC is directed to bring this order to the notice of the learned Executive Chairman, SCLSC and solicit orders thereon as may be deemed suitable by such authority.

14. On the aspect of coordination with jail authorities and inter-agency communication, the suggestions made in the SOP (para 9) shall be implemented forthwith as far as practicable. The last aspect delineated upon therein i.e., delay explanation (para 13-SOP), in our view, is a necessary change that will enable the tabling of the actual time taken in the process of filing the appeal. It is as such directed that the said format shall be incorporated forthwith into the necessary

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documentation. We hereby grant two weeks from the date of this order for it to be incorporated after which any appeal filed by HCLSC shall necessarily contain the same.

15. Suggestions *'b'* and *'d'* of the learned *amicus curiae* reproduced in paragraph 9 of this order shall be read as directions issued by this Court.

16. The Registrar (Judicial) is directed to circulate a copy of this order to the Registrars General of all the High Courts, who shall ensure a copy of the same is placed before the Learned Chief Justices and the Executive Chairpersons of the State Legal Service Committees, for necessary follow up action and requisite changes as may be required.

Let status report/compliance report be filed by all concerned institutions including the National Informatics Centre, by 30th April 2026. The matter shall come up before this Bench for further consideration on 4th May 2026.

We place on record our appreciation for all counsel who are appearing in this matter and more particularly Ms. Vibha Datta Makhija, learned senior counsel, *amicus curiae*.

……..…..J.
(SANJAY KAROL)

……..……J.
(NONGMEIKAPAM KOTISWAR SINGH)

New Delhi;
16th April, 2026