

DIGITIZING HARMONY: THE ROLE OF LEGAL SERVICES AUTHORITIES IN FAMILY DISPUTE RESOLUTION BEYOND COURTS

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ABSTRACT

The Indian family justice system faces a critical backlog, resulting in protracted emotional and legal stress for litigants. With traditional courts overwhelmed, Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) — especially mediation — has become vital in decongesting dockets and offering compassionate, timely solutions. Legal Services Authorities (LSAs), established under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, have significantly advanced the practice of family mediation, particularly at the grassroots level. This study presents a socio-legal, empirical analysis conducted at the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA), Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, focusing on mediation trends and administrative efficacy between 2019 and 2024. Findings highlight critical infrastructural bottlenecks — including limited mediation spaces, lack of digital tools, and minimal financial incentives for mediators. Despite these limitations, Kerala has demonstrated notable success in mediation, underscoring the commitment of its legal aid apparatus. To address existing inefficiencies, this paper proposes a Mediation Software Model, developed under the Kerala State Mediation and Conciliation Centre (KSMCC), featuring digital case tracking, mediator dashboards, honorarium calculators, and an Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) interface. The study concludes that digital transformation, enhanced training, and systemic incentives are essential for empowering LSAs to deliver inclusive, effective justice in family matters.

Keywords – Legal Services Authority, Online Dispute Resolution, Alternative Dispute Resolution, Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, Mediation.

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I. INRODUCTION

India's family courts are grappling with growing pendency and inadequate infrastructure. The delays not only burden the judiciary but also inflict emotional and financial strain on disputing parties. As an alternative, mediation — a core component of ADR — offers an empathetic, efficient, and less adversarial means to resolve disputes, particularly in sensitive family matters. Legal Services Authorities, especially at the district level, have emerged as key enablers of this paradigm shift. The DLSA Thiruvananthapuram, operating under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, in coordination with KELSA and NALSA, provides legal aid and promotes mediation. This article examines how the DLSA mediates family conflicts and proposes a scalable, digital solution to enhance its performance.

II. Objectives of Study

- To assess the role of the DLSA in facilitating family mediation services.
- To evaluate the infrastructure and administrative mechanisms supporting mediation.
- To analyse mediation data and trends from 2019 to 2024.
- To propose a digital Mediation Software Model to enhance operational efficiency.
- To document replicable best practices and innovations from the field.

III. Review of Literature

Scholarly literature and institutional reports underscore ADR's transformative potential in the Indian justice system. The Law Commission of India¹ NALSA policy papers², and jurists like Justices B.N. Srikrishna³ and S. Muralidhar⁴ have championed mediation⁵ for its cost-effectiveness and emotional resilience. However, gaps persist in district-level implementation, especially concerning digital readiness and data management. This study addresses these lacunae with empirical grounding.

¹ Law Commission of India, 222nd Report on Need for Justice-dispensation through ADR (April 2009), available <https://lawcommissionofindia.nic.in/reports/report222.pdf>

² National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), Vision Document and Guidelines for Legal Services Clinics, (2015) <https://nalsa.gov.in/>

³ B.N. Srikrishna, "Mediation: The Right Path Forward for India's Legal System," Supreme Court Cases (J), (2017) 6 SCC J-1

⁴ S. Muralidhar, Law, Poverty and Legal Aid: Access to Criminal Justice, LexisNexis (2004), esp. Chapter 7: Role of Mediation in Criminal Justice

⁵ <https://www.mondaq.com/advicecentre/content/4458/Alternative-Dispute-Resolution-In-India-A-Brief-Overview>

IV. Methodology

A mixed-method design was adopted: field visits to DLSA Thiruvananthapuram's mediation centres and front offices; semi-structured interviews with mediators, legal officers, and administrative staff; and analysis of seven manually maintained registers.⁶ A digital infrastructure assessment was conducted alongside a review of mediation case records and outcomes from 2019 to 2024⁷.

V. Sampling Design

- Sampling Type: Purposive sampling of stakeholders and mediation case files.
- Period Covered: January 2019 – March 2024.
- Sample Size: 4,874 mediation-referred family dispute cases analysed.

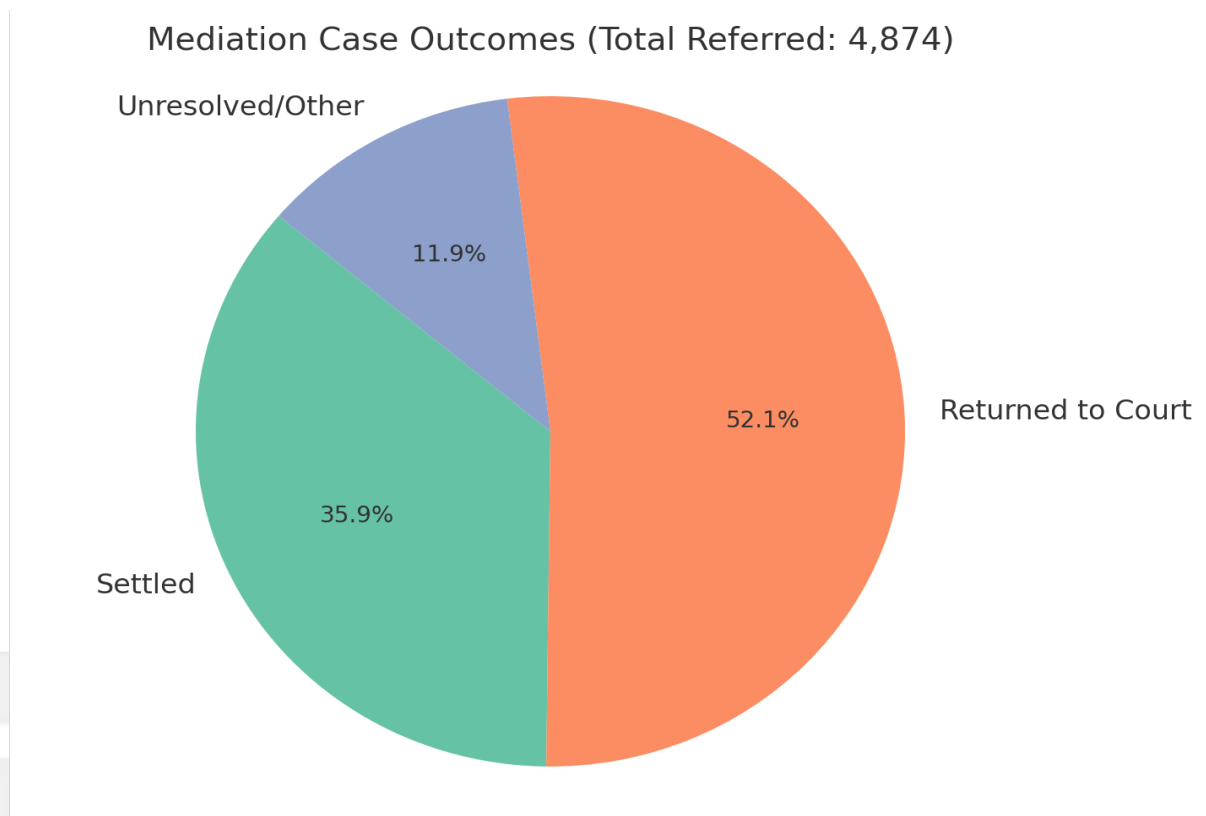
VI. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Key Findings:

- Cases Referred: 4,874
- Cases Settled: 1,751 (~35.9%)
- Returned to Court: 2,541 (~52.1%)
- Unresolved/other: ~11.9%
- Average Sitzings per Case: 3+
- First Sitting Resolution: ~20% of settled cases
- Common Case Types: Divorce, child custody, maintenance

⁶ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (SAGE Publications, 2014).

⁷ Creswell, John W. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (SAGE Publications, 2014).



Here is a pie chart visually representing the outcomes of the 4,874 mediation-referred family cases:

- Settled: 1,751 cases (~35.9%)
- Returned to Court: 2,541 cases (~52.1%)
- Unresolved/other: ~11.9%

VII. Operational Constraints and Infrastructure: DLSA Thiruvananthapuram

Despite growing reliance on mediation for family dispute resolution, several operational constraints continue to affect the effectiveness of the DLSA in Thiruvananthapuram: Manual registers hinder transparency, delay reporting, and complicate data aggregation. Inadequate infrastructure limits the number of simultaneous mediation sessions and fails to provide a fully child-sensitive environment in high-conflict family matters.

Uniform, low remuneration of ₹3,000 per family case for mediators does not account for case complexity or time invested. COVID-19 pandemic led to a temporary shift toward online mediation, but without sustained institutional backing or integration into long-term strategy.

VIII. Mediation Centre and Human Resource Infrastructure

The District Legal Services Authority (DLSA), Thiruvananthapuram, functions from a two-storeyed facility that accommodates core services including mediation, legal aid clinics, Lok Adalats, and community outreach programs. The first floor contains four mediation rooms, while the ground floor hosts two more mediation spaces along with ‘Shalabhakoodu’—a child-friendly zone designed with toys, books, and learning tools to ease children's anxiety during legal proceedings. The DLSA currently has 34 empanelled mediators, appointed through a structured process by the Kerala State Legal Services Authority (KELSA). Eligibility typically includes:

A minimum of 10 years’ legal practice in District or High Courts. Proven interest in mediation, legal aid, or social justice initiatives. The district is also supported by nearly 300 Paralegal Volunteers (PLVs), selected based on: Interview performance with SSLC (Class 10) as the minimum academic requirement. Dedication to social service, empathy, and grassroots engagement. PLVs are instrumental in delivering legal aid and conducting outreach activities.

Paralegal Volunteers (PLVs) form the grassroots backbone of the DLSA’s outreach machinery. Their roles include assisting walk-in litigants—particularly women, senior citizens, and differently-abled individuals—at the Front Office Legal Aid (FOLA) desks and during field-level legal awareness programs. With approximately 300 PLVs currently engaged by DLSA Thiruvananthapuram, each selected through an interview process with a minimum qualification of SSLC, their services span drafting applications, guiding litigants, and supporting legal aid referrals. Each PLV receives an honorarium of ₹750 per day, which remains modest considering their multitier responsibilities and outreach load.

IX. Mediation Software Model: A Digital Roadmap

To streamline mediation services and promote institutional accountability, a comprehensive Mediation Management Software has been proposed under KSMCC with the following features:

- Mediator Dashboard: Personalized calendar, case updates, pending action alerts.
- Public Access Portal: Case status updates via OTP or case ID.
- Admin Panel: Register maintenance, real-time reporting, audit trails.
- Honorarium Calculator: Tracks payments and automates honorarium bills.

- Legal Update Hub: Repository of judgments and policy updates.
- ODR Platform: Secure video conferencing, chat logs, digital signature integration.

X. Empirical Field Study at DLSA Thiruvananthapuram

Front Office Legal Aid (FOLA)

The Front Office Legal Aid (FOLA) unit at DLSA Thiruvananthapuram functions as a readily accessible legal support point, primarily assisting walk-in litigants—especially women, senior citizens, and persons with disabilities—who often lack immediate legal representation. This initiative embodies the constitutional mandate under Article 39A of the Indian Constitution⁸, which directs the State to ensure free legal aid to the economically and socially weaker sections of society to promote equal justice. Empirical observations indicate that women form the majority of applicants, with a steady inflow of family-related cases—at least three to four per day on average. These typically involve disputes relating to divorce, domestic violence, maintenance, and child custody. The high daily footfall underscores the importance of a responsive and well-trained legal aid front office.

Mediation Centre

Handles court-referred family disputes. As part of its documentation protocol, the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA), Thiruvananthapuram, maintains seven essential registers to ensure administrative continuity and accurate case tracking. These include: the Mediation Register (a comprehensive log of all mediation-referred cases), Court-wise Register (categorization based on referring courts), Mediators' Register (details of empanelled mediators and assignments), Posting Book (daily mediator schedules), Honorarium Ledger (payment records for settled cases), Daily Proceedings Register (session-wise entries), and a Register for Settled and Unsettled Cases (noting outcomes and cases returned to court). While these manual records serve as the backbone of operational monitoring, they also present constraints in terms of transparency, timely reporting, and data accessibility—underscoring the

⁸ Article 39A of the Indian Constitution, inserted by the 42nd Amendment, mandates the state to ensure equal justice and free legal aid to the poor and weaker sections of society. It aims to eliminate barriers to justice based on economic or other disabilities. This provision ensures that opportunities for securing justice are not denied to any citizen.

urgent need for digital transformation. Lack of digitization slows workflow and inhibits data-driven policymaking.

Lok Adalats and Legal Awareness

- Regular Lok Adalats conducted for pending cases: As part of a nationwide initiative to reduce pendency and promote amicable dispute resolution, the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), in collaboration with the Mediation and Conciliation Project Committee (MCPC) ⁹of the Supreme Court, launched a 90-day campaign titled “Mediation for the Nation” from July 1 to September 30, 2025. The drive is being implemented across all levels of courts—Taluka, District, and High Courts—with a focus on resolving civil disputes such as matrimonial issues, cheque bounce cases, accident claims, and consumer matters. The campaign also encourages online mediation and is monitored by High Court Mediation Monitoring Committees to ensure effective implementation and impact. Furthermore, to ensure the success of this special drive, the following features will also be incorporated:
- Mediation may be conducted completely offline in physical mode, online mode, or Hybrid mode.
- Taluk or the District Legal Services Authority shall facilitate online mediation. It will be monitored by the Mediation Monitoring Committee of the High Courts in their respective State. In settlement efforts, the assistance of a counsellor and/or subject matter expert shall be taken as per need.¹⁰

XI. Special Initiatives by DLSA Thiruvananthapuram

Śalabhakoodu – Child-Friendly Legal Space: A dedicated child-friendly zone within the DLSA premises, providing a safe and comforting environment with toys, books, and learning aids for children accompanying litigants in family disputes.¹¹ In a pioneering move within Kerala, the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA), Thiruvananthapuram, has established a dedicated virtual trial room under its ‘Salabha Koodu’ initiative to support children, especially POCSO victims, involved in legal proceedings. This child-friendly space, equipped with books, games, and comforting amenities, is designed to minimize trauma and promote psychological

⁹ <https://www.sconline.com/blog/post/2025/06/27/nalsa-mcpc-launch-pan-india-90-day-mediation-drive/>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ NALSA (Child-Friendly Legal Services for Children) Scheme, 2024

well-being during trial processes. Complementing this, the Kerala Legal Services Authority (KeLSA) has launched the Child Legal Assistance Programme (CLAP) to provide focused legal aid to children, particularly in custody battles before family courts.¹²

‘Chalanam’ – Tribal Legal Aid Program: A specialized outreach initiative offering legal aid, rights awareness, and application support for Scheduled Tribe communities in remote and forest areas, with the help of mobile legal clinics and PLVs. Outreach campaigns and mobile legal awareness camps under ‘Chalanam’ and other initiatives. The ‘Chalanam’ initiative, along with other programs, focuses on enhancing legal literacy and access to justice through various outreach activities. These campaigns and camps are vital for creating a more just and equitable society by ensuring that everyone is aware of their legal rights and has access to the necessary legal support.¹³

‘Niyama Gotram’ – CLAT Training for ST Youth: A preparatory coaching program to support Scheduled Tribe students in cracking law entrance exams such as CLAT, with the goal of enhancing indigenous representation in the legal profession.¹⁴ The training is being conducted by the district legal services authority in collaboration with the District Scheduled Tribes Development Department, Government Law College of Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala Law Academy Law College and Mar Gregorios College of Law.¹⁵

‘Samvāda’ – Legal Literacy for School Students: A legal awareness initiative under the NALSA (Child-Friendly Legal Services to Children and their Protection) Scheme, 2015. Designed by KeLSA, Samvāda operates with the mission "Catch Them Young and Watch Them Grow." It aims to instill civic responsibility and legal values in students from Grades VIII to XII (across State, CBSE, and ICSE schools). PLVs, in collaboration with legal aid lawyers, organize school visits, interactive sessions, mock courts, and courthouse tours.

¹² <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2024/May/08/kerala-virtual-trial-room-salabha-koodu-to-support-child-victims-in-pocso-cases-launched>

<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=194371>

¹³ <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=194371>

¹⁴ <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/thiruvananthapuram/2022/Apr/27/legal-services-authority-in-trivandrum-to-train-st-students-2446826.html>

¹⁵ Ibid.

Legal Aid for Differently-Abled Individuals: DLSA has operationalized dedicated helpdesks in association with the State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, ensuring accessible legal services and rights-based assistance.¹⁶

Defense Counsel System (DCS): Institutional provision of trained and experienced legal professionals to represent under trial prisoners who lack access to private legal counsel, thereby strengthening access to justice in criminal cases.¹⁷

Paralegal Volunteers (PLVs): A robust network of around 300 PLVs—including women, senior citizens, and transgender individuals—selected based on social commitment and communication skills. PLVs play an active role in legal aid front offices, awareness drives, and community dispute resolution, receiving ₹750 per day as honorarium¹⁸.

Legal Awareness Camps and Legal Expos: Regular community-based events conducted in rural, tribal, and marginalized settings to spread legal literacy, promote entitlement awareness, and strengthen people's interface with justice delivery institutions.¹⁹

XII. Suggestions for Strengthening DLSA Mediation & Legal Aid Framework

1. Scale Software Model State-wide: Implement the proposed mediation management software across all DLSAs via KSMCC for standardised tracking and reporting.
2. Enhance Mediator Honorarium: Review and revise honorarium (currently ₹3,000 per case) to attract and retain skilled mediators, especially for complex family matters.
3. ODR & Digital Training: Conduct capacity-building workshops for mediators, PLVs, and staff on Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) tools and digital case handling.
4. Infrastructure Upgrades: Develop dedicated mediation halls, waiting lounges, and child-friendly spaces (like 'Shalabhakoodu') in all DLSA offices.
5. Digitize Registers & Audits: Replace manual recordkeeping with centralized digital platforms for real-time case status, settlement outcomes, and audit readiness.
6. Incorporate Expert Mediators: Create special panels of mediators with proven expertise in family law, child psychology, and gender-sensitive mediation.

¹⁶ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/thiruvananthapuram/legal-aid-clinic-for-people-with-disabilities/articleshow/90945588.cms>

¹⁷ <https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s3ec0369386f6bb1dfed68692a24c86869/uploads/2025/05/2025052055.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://nalsa.gov.in/para-legal-volunteers/>

¹⁹ <https://doj.gov.in/legal-literacy-and-legal-awareness-programme-lllp/>

7. Integrate Private Mediation: Recognize accredited private mediation centers and include their success ratios to broaden mediation outreach and data capture.
8. Leverage Law Colleges: Formalise partnerships with law college Legal Aid Clinics, incorporating faculty and final-year law students into DLSA outreach and documentation.
9. Strengthen Community Engagement: Involve PLVs and Legal Aid Lawyers in grassroots legal literacy drives through Samvada, Chalanam, and door-to-door legal empowerment.
10. Monitor Settlement Ratios: Digitally track settlement vs. return-to-court statistics to evaluate mediator performance and case-type suitability.
11. Promote Inclusive PLV Recruitment: Ensure recruitment of women, transpersons, tribal youth, and differently-abled individuals as PLVs to foster inclusive representation.
12. Root-Level NALSA Awareness: Launch localized awareness campaigns (street plays, reels, IEC materials) to educate the public on their rights under NALSA schemes.

XIII. Conclusion

As India's justice system seeks to reduce pendency and humanise the legal process, the role of Legal Services Authorities in advancing family dispute resolution outside conventional courtrooms has never been more critical. The Thiruvananthapuram DLSA stands as a compelling model—where community-rooted legal aid, trained mediators, and inclusive outreach converge to offer people-centric alternatives to litigation. However, to truly digitize harmony, the system must evolve. Integrating digital tools like the proposed Mediation Software Model, enhancing infrastructural and human resource support, and fostering legal literacy from the grassroots to schools are essential steps forward. By bridging the gap between empathy and efficiency, technology and tradition, Legal Services Authorities can redefine access to justice—resolving not just disputes, but restoring relationships with dignity and care.
