



Legal Education in India: Contemporary Challenges and Reform Priorities

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ABSTRACT

India's legal education system is regulated through statutory and professional bodies, yet its link with a digitising justice system remains uneven. This article asks how reform can improve professional preparation without narrowing linguistic or regional access. It uses a targeted doctrinal and narrative review of legislation, rules, judicial decisions, government policy documents, and selected scholarship. The review is interpretive. It does not measure graduate outcomes or establish causal effects. Five connected concerns emerge: limited practitioner participation, fragmented clinical training, uneven bilingual legal skills, weak institutional links, and insufficient preparation for eCourts, online dispute resolution, and AI-assisted research. The paper develops a digital-justice reform framework rather than treating technology as an isolated elective. It proposes structured practitioner appointments, sequenced clinics, bilingual drafting, supervised use of e-filing and ODR systems, AI-output verification, confidentiality training, and joint governance by colleges, courts, bar bodies, and legal services authorities. These measures should be assessed through observable student work, not attendance alone. Digital competence must remain tied to professional ethics, access to justice, and human legal judgment. The recommendations are policy priorities that require institution-level testing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Legal education connects the university with the justice system. It develops doctrinal knowledge, professional judgment, ethical responsibility, and the capacity to assist people who need legal help. The Supreme Court has linked sound legal education to the administration of justice and the quality of the Bar [1]. The Advocates Act, 1961 and the Bar Council of India Rules place this field within a formal regulatory framework [2, 3]. Formal compliance alone, however, does not establish that a graduate can interview a client, draft a pleading, use an e-filing system, verify an AI-generated citation, or explain a legal remedy in language the client understands. These abilities depend on curriculum design, supervision, institutional support, and sustained exposure to legal practice.

Digital justice tools and algorithmic decision-support in courts also raise governance questions about access, fairness, and the future of professional work-related work by Pandey and collaborators provides complementary context [4-5].

The context has also changed. Digital filing, video hearings, online case information, and data-based court administration now form part of Indian judicial practice. eCourts Phase III seeks to make courts more accessible, efficient, and technologically enabled, while the national ODR policy plan treats online dispute resolution as an element of access to justice [6-7]. Generative AI is also entering legal research and writing.

These developments do not reduce the importance of doctrinal teaching; they make verification, confidentiality, procedural fairness, and digital inclusion more important. A law graduate may err by misunderstanding software just as readily as by misunderstanding a statute. Digital competence should therefore be taught as a legal and ethical competence, not as an isolated computer skill.

This review asks how Indian legal education can strengthen professional preparation while preserving linguistic and regional access and responding to the digitisation of justice. Its contribution is an integrated reform framework linking practitioner participation, clinical education, bilingual communication, eCourts, ODR, AI-assisted legal research, and institutional accountability. The discussion gives particular attention to affiliated and small-city law colleges, where reform must often proceed with fewer staff and facilities. It does not propose a uniform curriculum for every institution; instead, it identifies minimum capabilities and governance options that can be tested in varied settings.

2. REVIEW METHOD AND SCOPE

The study adopts a doctrinal and narrative review design. It draws on the Advocates Act, the Legal Services Authorities Act, the Bar Council of India Rules of Legal Education, reported Supreme Court decisions, and official materials from the Law Commission of India, Department of Justice, NALSA, NITI Aayog, Ministry of Education, Press Information Bureau, and University Grants Commission [1, 3-5, 8, 9]. Selected books and peer-reviewed articles were used to examine the history of legal education, clinical learning, online courts, and AI-related legal pedagogy [10, 11, 12]. Bibliographic details were checked against official repositories or publisher pages through July 2026.

Sources were organised under six themes: regulatory structure, practitioner participation, clinical learning, language and communication, institutional cooperation, and digital-justice competence. A source was retained when it carried legal or policy authority, directly addressed one of these themes, or made a relevant scholarly contribution [13-19]. The review excluded unverifiable citations and records that lacked sufficient publication details. It is interpretive rather than systematic and does not claim exhaustive database coverage, statistical synthesis, or representative coverage of Indian law colleges.

These limitations shape the claims made below. The materials can identify recurring concerns and support plausible reform proposals, but they cannot show that a particular teaching practice caused poor graduate performance or estimate how widely a problem occurs across institutions. Statements about preparedness are therefore framed as reported gaps or institutional risks. The proposed reforms should be tested using student work, supervisor evaluations, placement and transition data, and graduate experience.

3. HISTORICAL AND REGULATORY SETTING

3.1 Historical Formation

Pre-colonial Indian legal learning formed part of religious, customary, and administrative traditions rather than a modern university-based profession. Dharmashastra texts addressed duties, dispute resolution, and punishment, while legal and administrative functions under later rulers were performed by officials and persons trained in the relevant traditions. Kane remains an important source on this history [11]. Colonial rule altered the institutional setting. New courts required persons familiar with English law and with Hindu and Muslim personal laws, and formal legal instruction gradually developed in colleges and universities.

This transition established the law degree as a route into the profession. It also raised issues that remain central to current debates: the balance between academic and professional education, the role of English, and the relationship between higher education institutions and the Bar. Anand traces the past development and future direction of Indian legal education [8]. Krishnan examines how later reforms restructured the field and contributed to the national law school model [12]. That model raised interdisciplinary and academic ambitions, but it did not remove the need to improve the larger and more diverse sector of university departments and affiliated colleges.

3.2 Post-Independence Regulation and the Digital Turn

The Advocates Act, 1961 gives the Bar Council of India a central role in setting professional standards and recognising law degrees for enrolment [2]. The Rules of Legal Education, 2008 address programme structure, faculty, infrastructure, teaching time, non-law subjects, and professional courses [3]. The division of responsibility among the Bar Council, the University Grants Commission, and universities was examined in the Law Commission's 184th Report [20]. Supreme Court decisions have repeatedly affirmed the need for coordinated standards. Dayanand College of Law recognised the Bar Council's powers over

course standards, inspection, degree recognition, and enrolment consequences, while universities retain direct control of legal education [21]. Bonnie Foi Law College upheld its authority to prescribe competence-related requirements linked to enrolment and practice [22]. Prof. Yashpal warned against institutional expansion unsupported by genuine educational capacity [23].

These authorities provide the regulatory structure, but the justice system that graduates enter is increasingly digital. Technology now affects court records, hearings, filing, access to legal services, and dispute resolution [6, 7, 24]. The relevant regulatory question is no longer whether a college owns computers or offers a stand-alone technology paper. It is whether students can use digital systems lawfully, critically, and safely. Curriculum design must also address poor connectivity, disability barriers, limited digital literacy, and restricted access to English-language interfaces. Digital reform that ignores these conditions may widen the gap between formal and meaningful access to justice.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW AND IDENTIFIED GAP

Literature on Indian legal education has long examined the distance between classroom doctrine and professional work. Menon's clinical-education handbook and the work of Bloch and Prasad connect practical training with legal aid and social justice [10, 14], while Vasanthi argues for stronger clinical legal education in India [19]. Anand, Krishnan, the Law Commission, and Mahaseth address the field's history and division of institutional responsibility [8, 12, 13, 20]. Together, these sources support practical and ethical learning, but they do not establish a single causal explanation for graduate unpreparedness. Institutional conditions are too varied for such a conclusion.

More recent scholarship considers legal education in the era of generative AI. Bliss [9], Munir [15], and Prakash and Nair [16] discuss AI literacy, verification, assessment, bias, privacy, and the continuing importance of human judgment. Susskind places online courts within a broader access-to-justice argument [17]. Indian policy documents on ODR and eCourts provide a domestic institutional context [6, 7]. This literature shows that digital skills are not value-neutral: a platform may improve access for one group while creating barriers for another. Training should therefore address procedural fairness, accessibility, confidentiality, and critical evaluation.

The gap lies in the limited connection between established and newer debates. Clinical education, bilingual communication, practitioner teaching, eCourts, ODR, and AI-assisted research are often discussed separately. That separation is particularly unhelpful for affiliated and small-city institutions, whose students need a coherent learning sequence rather than disconnected electives. The framework proposed here places digital justice within the core curriculum: clinics combine client counselling with secure digital intake; drafting courses teach both pleadings and e-filing; and research courses combine authority-based reasoning with verification of AI output. This integrated approach is the paper's principal analytical contribution.

5. CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

5.1 Practitioner Participation and Practical Training

Regular daytime programmes improve continuity but can make sustained participation by practising advocates more difficult. The effect will vary among institutions and should not be described as a general decline without empirical evidence. The narrower practical concern is that students need repeated exposure to procedure, files, clients, negotiation, drafting, evidence, ethics, and courtroom conventions [10, 14, 19, 20]. A single guest lecture cannot provide that exposure, and observation without a defined task, supervision, or feedback is also insufficient.

This is not a choice between academics and advocates. Full-time academics provide conceptual depth, research training, continuity, and assessment; practitioners contribute current professional knowledge and practical judgment. Each contribution requires a defined place in the curriculum. A ceremonial practitioner lecture is unlikely to change student work, while a course that never asks students to apply doctrine to a file remains incomplete. Institutions should structure co-teaching, supervision, and assessment so that the two forms of expertise reinforce one another.

5.2 Language of Instruction and Professional Communication

Indian legal education operates in both English and regional languages. Regional-language access enables many students to study law and serve their communities; it should not be treated as an academic weakness. At the same time, appellate materials, legal commentary, digital research tools, and higher-court practice

remain predominantly English-based. A student may understand a legal rule yet struggle to read a reported judgment, prepare an English draft, or use a digital interface. The converse also matters: a student who works only in English may be unable to explain legal rights clearly to a client in the local language.

The relevant competence is therefore bilingual legal communication: reading, translation, plain-language explanation, drafting, and oral advocacy. It should be taught through legal materials across the programme rather than confined to a general-English paper. The National Education Policy supports multilingual education while recognising the importance of quality and mobility [25]. Digital-justice teaching should follow the same approach. Students should learn the terminology of eCourts and ODR systems in English and in the languages used by local clients. Human-centred guidance on AI also directs attention to linguistic inclusion and unequal access [18].

5.3 Faculty Eligibility and a Hybrid Teaching Model

Regular academic appointments require qualifications that many experienced practitioners have not pursued. Professional experience cannot replace every academic function, but it should not be excluded. The University Grants Commission's Professor of Practice guidelines provide a route for accomplished professionals to contribute to curriculum, teaching, and mentoring without displacing regular faculty [26]. This model is useful in law because procedural, technological, and professional knowledge changes with practice.

An effective hybrid model requires written roles. Full-time faculty should retain responsibility for course design, assessment, academic standards, and student support. Practitioners may teach defined modules, supervise simulations, review drafts, and assess professional work. Retired judges, mediators, legal aid lawyers, cyber-law specialists, court personnel, and law librarians can contribute additional expertise. Appointment alone is not enough: the institution should record teaching hours, student work, feedback, and the relationship between practitioner input and course outcomes.

5.4 Weak Institutional Links with Courts and Legal Services

Many colleges lack stable operational arrangements with district courts, bar associations, legal services authorities, mediation centres, prisons, and child-protection bodies. Visits may occur, but learning often ends with attendance. The Legal Services Authorities Act and the NALSA Legal Services Clinics Regulations provide a basis for legal aid and clinical partnerships [27, 28], while Tele-Law and related programmes show how technology can support legal assistance [24]. Such arrangements can support education only when client protection remains central. Students should neither give unsupervised legal advice nor handle personal information carelessly. A partnership should specify permissible student tasks, supervision, consent, record storage, error correction, and learning outcomes. Students might observe a hearing, prepare a case note or anonymised intake form, or conduct a supervised legal-literacy session; each task requires different safeguards. Without clear rules, a clinic may expose both clients and students to avoidable risk.

5.5 The Digital-Justice Competence Gap

Digital justice changes routine legal work. Graduates may need to search an electronic case file, calculate a limitation period from an online order, file a document, participate in a virtual hearing, protect client information, or use an ODR platform. They may also rely on an AI tool that produces a confident but false authority. These are current, not merely future, concerns in Indian legal practice, reflected in the eCourts programme and the national ODR policy plan [6, 7]. Recent legal-education scholarship likewise treats critical use of AI as a professional learning requirement [9, 15, 16]. Four elements of competence follow. First, students must understand the relevant platform and procedure. Second, they must verify the source, date, authority, and jurisdiction of legal information. Third, they must protect confidentiality, disclose AI use where require, and retain human professional judgment. Fourth, they must recognise when an online process excludes a user because of language, disability, cost, or connectivity. Instruction limited to prompts or software commands does not address these requirements.

6. REFORM PRIORITIES

6.1 A Sequenced Practice Curriculum and Hybrid Faculty

A coherent curriculum should sequence practical experiences across the degree and integrate academic and practitioner teaching.

Practical learning should be built throughout the degree. Early activities may include guided court observation, case reading, file organisation, and reflective writing. Later stages may include client interviewing, negotiation, drafting, mediation, trial simulation, and supervised legal service. Assessment should accompany each stage. Portfolios, revised drafts, oral performance, supervisor reports, and reflective notes provide stronger evidence of learning than attendance certificates. This sequence is consistent with clinical scholarship and the NALSA framework [10, 19, 28].

Practitioner participation should be organised with the same care. Colleges may use professors of practice, adjunct appointments, intensive short courses, weekend sessions, or structured online participation [26]. The format should reflect local practice conditions. An academic coordinator should provide the syllabus, assessment rubric, and relevant student context; the practitioner should contribute current files or suitably anonymised examples, simulations, and feedback. This structure preserves academic accountability while making professional experience part of the course.

6.2 Continuous Bilingual Legal Skills

Legal-language instruction should continue across several semesters. Students should learn to read a judgment in English, state its ratio in plain language, translate its practical effect, and prepare a short document in the language required by the client or forum. Bilingual stages can be included in moot courts and client interviews. Assessment should reward legal accuracy and intelligibility rather than ornamental English. The aim is professional communication within institutions and communities. Digital materials should form part of this work: students can compare online case information with the authenticated order, identify the risks of mistranslation, and prepare accessible instructions for a client joining a virtual hearing or ODR session. AI-assisted translation may be demonstrated, but students must verify its output against the legal text and the client's intended meaning. This approach supports multilingual access without compromising legal accuracy [18, 25].

6.3 Court-Linked and Technology-Enabled Clinics

Law colleges should enter written agreements with district courts, legal services authorities, bar associations, mediation centres, and relevant community institutions. Each agreement should define student tasks, supervision, confidentiality, consent, assessment, complaint handling, and the treatment of digital records and remote consultations. The NALSA clinic regulations, the Legal Services Authorities Act, and Tele-Law provide useful guidance for such partnerships [24, 27, 28].

A technology-enabled clinic need not purchase an expensive proprietary platform. It may begin with secure appointment records, supervised video consultations, anonymised case follow-up, links to verified legal information, and observation of ODR processes. Students can prepare plain-language instructions on e-filing, online hearings, cyber-fraud reporting, and access to legal aid. Live client data should never be entered into open AI systems. The clinic should also maintain a non-digital route for people who cannot use the technology. These safeguards connect innovation with equal access.

6.4 AI-Assisted Research and ODR Skills

Law schools should integrate AI literacy into legal research, writing, ethics, and clinical courses. Students should understand how generative systems operate, why they may invent authorities, and how to verify outputs against official or recognised legal sources. An assignment might require a student to audit an AI-generated memorandum, identify unsupported propositions, locate the correct authorities, and explain the practical consequences of an error. This keeps the focus on legal reasoning and preserves the instructor's role in developing professional judgment [9, 15, 16, 18]. ODR should likewise be taught as both process and policy. Students should examine consent and notice, neutrality, enforceability, confidentiality, record retention, and power imbalance. They should compare negotiation, mediation, arbitration, and automated pathways, and ask whether users can understand and challenge the process. The national ODR policy plan provides a direct Indian basis for this work [7]. By the end of the course, students should be able not only to operate a platform but also to assess whether its design meets requirements of procedural fairness.

6.5 Governance, Resources, and Measurable Implementation

Implementation requires an institutional owner. A law college may create a small team comprising faculty members, practitioners, court or legal services representatives, librarians, and clinic supervisors. The group should approve partnership arrangements, data-protection procedures, an AI-use policy, and assessment

criteria. It should meet periodically and publish an annual activity report. Where several affiliated colleges operate in one district, shared practitioner panels and joint training can reduce costs.

Assessment should be specific and observable. Useful indicators include the amount of supervised work completed, the number and quality of revised drafts, the accuracy of citation checks, bilingual communication performance, compliance with confidentiality rules, and feedback from supervisors and service users. Graduate follow-up may help study the transition to practice, but it cannot support causal claims without an appropriate research design. The Bar Council, universities, and the UGC may support common minimum outcomes while allowing local implementation [3, 20, 26].

Table 1 consolidates the proposed framework by linking curriculum priorities with possible indicators. These indicators are not presented as national standards; they are starting points for local testing and follow-up empirical study.

Table 1. Integrated legal-education reform priorities and possible local indicators

Domain	Identified concern	Reform and assessment priority
Practitioner participation	Professional input is often occasional and detached from assessment.	Use defined co-teaching and supervision roles; review student drafts and performance.
Bilingual communication	Students may lack either professional English or client-facing regional-language skills.	Assess judgment reading, translation, plain-language advice, drafting, and oral advocacy.
Clinical learning	Visits and legal-aid activities may end with attendance and limited feedback.	Create sequenced, credit-bearing tasks with supervision, consent, confidentiality, and reflection.
Digital justice	e-filing, virtual hearings, ODR, and digital evidence may sit outside the core curriculum.	Use supervised platform exercises and assess procedural accuracy, accessibility, and fairness.
AI-assisted research	Students may use generated text without checking authority, privacy, or bias.	Require source verification, audit trails, confidentiality rules, and reasoned human review.
Institutional governance	Colleges, courts, bar bodies, and legal services institutions may work separately.	Use written partnerships, shared oversight, annual reporting, and locally measurable outcomes.

7. CONCLUSION

Indian legal education has a substantial regulatory and institutional foundation. The present challenge is one of connection: digital justice, academic teaching, professional practice, language support, and legal aid should not operate as separate initiatives. Graduates now require doctrinal knowledge and practical judgment together with the ability to use eCourts, ODR platforms, digital records, and AI-assisted research tools. These capabilities must remain subject to verification, confidentiality, fairness, and human accountability. The proposed framework is intended to be workable. It combines a hybrid faculty model, sequenced clinical activities, bilingual legal training, technology-enabled practice, and measurable institutional collaboration. It does not assume that technology alone will improve justice, nor does it treat regional-language access or limited resources as reasons to postpone digital preparation. The central principle is that digital competence should support access to justice rather than create a new barrier. These conclusions remain limited by the narrative method. The review used no institution-level data and did not test a causal relationship between curriculum and graduate preparedness. Future research should compare institutional types and regions, examine student work before and after specific interventions, record implementation costs, and analyse the experiences of clients and supervisors. Such evidence can clarify which elements of the framework warrant common regulatory standards and which should remain local options.

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