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AFFORDABILITY AND ACCESS: SOCIO-LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OF HIGH FEES IN NATIONAL LAW UNIVERSITIES IN INDIA

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Abstract

This paper hypothesizes that the current self-financing fee structures in National Law Universities systematically marginalize students from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, thereby violating the constitutional principles of substantive equality, equal opportunity, and access to justice. Through a combination of doctrinal analysis, empirical data, and theoretical critique, the paper argues that the commodification of legal education in NLUs not only undermines their foundational purpose but also entrenches socio-economic exclusion. Relying on reports such as the IDIA Diversity Survey and NLSIU's 'Elusive Island of Excellence,' and landmark judgments including Mohini Jain, Unnikrishnan, and Ashok Kumar Thakur, the study reveals a regressive shift from public good to private commodity in legal education. The analysis is structured across chapters dealing with the evolution of legal education, marketization, jurisprudence, demographic exclusion, and theoretical models like Bourdieu's symbolic violence and Sen's capability approach. The final section proposes policy reforms, including sliding fee models, state subsidies, and affirmative action in entrance exams. With stronger constitutional grounding and policy clarity, this work aims to reclaim NLUs as truly democratic institutions.

I - Introduction

“When access to education is shackled, it definitely retards human development and stifles social harmony.”

- Asok Kumar Ganguly

The emergence of National Law Universities (NLUs) was rooted in the constitutional vision of ensuring equal access to justice through high-quality legal education. Conceived as a response to stagnation and elitism in conventional law colleges, the NLU model was meant to democratize legal education and foster public-spirited legal professionals. However, over the years, these institutions have transformed into exclusive spaces shaped by neoliberal

imperatives and marketization. With fee structures ranging from ₹10–20 lakhs over five years, NLUs are increasingly unaffordable to students from marginalized backgrounds. The reality contrasts with their founding promise of equity and access. This paper argues that the high-cost, self-financing model adopted by NLUs undermines constitutional guarantees of substantive equality, educational access, and justice. The paper will analyze the socio-legal consequences of this inaccessibility by examining constitutional provisions such as Articles 14, 15(4), 21, and 39A, judicial pronouncements like *Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka* and *Ashok Kumar Thakur v. Union of India*, and empirical evidence from diversity studies at NLUs.

It contends that the existing framework privileges formal notions of merit and neutrality while ignoring structural disadvantages faced by first-generation learners, vernacular students, and economically weaker sections. In advancing this argument, the paper develops an interdisciplinary critique drawing from theories of justice, social exclusion, and legal institutionalism. Ultimately, it calls for urgent reform—financial, pedagogical, and constitutional to reclaim legal education as a tool of empowerment rather than exclusion.

Literature Review

The evolution of legal education in India has been a subject of sustained scholarly engagement, particularly in the context of the country's constitutional commitment to equality and justice. Early legal education under colonial rule was characterized by formalism and rote learning, aimed primarily at producing clerks and pleaders to serve the colonial bureaucracy. Post-Independence, reformers and jurists envisioned a new model that would integrate law with democratic governance and social transformation. N.R. Madhava Menon's writings, especially *Transformative Legal Education* (2012), articulate this vision in detail, situating the establishment of National Law Universities (NLUs) as a constitutional experiment to democratize the legal profession. Menon's work underscores that NLUs were intended to bridge the gap between law and society by producing socially conscious lawyers equipped to advance the goals of justice enshrined in the Constitution. However, the later institutional trajectory diverged significantly from this founding vision, a shift that becomes the focal point of much contemporary critique.¹

¹ N.R. Madhava Menon, *Legal Education for Professional Responsibility: An Appraisal of the New Pattern*, 13 Indian Bar Rev. 295, 300 (1986); Jill Cottrell, *10+2+5: A Change in the Structure of Indian Legal Education*, 36(3) J. Legal Educ. 331, 334 (1986).

Upendra Baxi's early interventions in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in *Legal Education and Democratic Justice* (1989), provide a foundational critique of Indian legal education's elitist character. Baxi warns that when law schools distance themselves from constitutional morality and the realities of social exclusion, they become complicit in perpetuating injustice. He argues that the legal academy's autonomy must not translate into market-driven detachment from the needs of the marginalized. His critique anticipated the neoliberal turn that later came to dominate higher education in India. These early perspectives situate legal education within the broader framework of democratic participation and underscore that affordability and access are not merely administrative concerns but constitutional imperatives central to the legitimacy of the legal system itself.²

The regulatory framework governing legal education has also drawn academic scrutiny. The *Advocates Act, 1961*³ and the supervisory role of the Bar Council of India (BCI) were meant to professionalize legal training, but as noted in several BCI reports and the National Knowledge Commission (2006), they have failed to prevent the rise of self-financing models that prioritize institutional sustainability over accessibility. The Bar Council's periodic *Legal Education Committee Reports* reveal internal inconsistencies in policy—oscillating between calls for standardization and tolerance of market autonomy. The absence of a coherent national framework has allowed NLUs to function as quasi-private institutions, dependent on student fees rather than state grants.⁴ Scholars such as Arjun Aggarwal and Julius Getman have traced this regulatory failure to the lack of political will to treat legal education as a public good, thereby exacerbating the divide between elite and ordinary law schools.⁵

Judicial pronouncements have played a decisive role in shaping the discourse on the right to education and its constitutional dimensions. The Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka* (1992) established that education is integral to the right to life under Article 21, recognizing that economic barriers cannot restrict access to fundamental

² Upendra Baxi, *Towards a Socially Relevant Legal Education: A Consolidated Report of the UGC's Workshop on Modernization of Legal Education* (1979); P.B. Gajendragadkar, *Committee Report on Legal Education* (1964).

³ *Advocates Act 1961* (Act No. 25 of 1961).

⁴ National Knowledge Commission, *Report to the Nation 2006* (Government of India 2007); Bar Council of India, *Legal Education Committee Report* (various years).

⁵ Arjun Aggarwal, 'Legal Education in India: A Critical Review' (1975) 17 *Journal of the Indian Law Institute* 42; Julius Getman, 'Clinical Legal Education in India: Possibilities and Problems' (1987) 29 *Indian Bar Review* 65.

capabilities.⁶ This was further expanded in *Unnikrishnan v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (1993), where the Court cautioned against the commercialization of education and imposed limits on capitation fees in professional courses.⁷ Later, in *Ashoka Kumar Thakur v. Union of India* (2008), the Court reaffirmed the importance of substantive equality and the legitimacy of affirmative action in higher education.⁸ Together, these decisions articulate a constitutional jurisprudence that places affordability and access at the heart of educational justice. Yet, the persistence of exorbitant fees in NLUs reveals a deep disjunct between judicial doctrine and institutional reality—a contradiction that this research seeks to foreground and critique.

Empirical scholarship has supplemented these doctrinal insights by documenting the exclusionary patterns within the NLU ecosystem. The *IDIA Diversity Reports* (2015–2023) provide robust data showing that a majority of NLU students come from urban, upper-caste, and English-medium backgrounds, with less than 5 percent representing vernacular or first-generation learners.⁹ Similarly, the *NLSIU Report – “Elusive Island of Excellence”* (2021) and the *NALSAR Working Paper on Inclusion in Legal Education* (2021) reveal that, despite formal reservations, the economic and cultural homogeneity of student cohorts persists due to prohibitive costs, linguistic hierarchies, and the dominance of expensive coaching-driven admission processes like CLAT.¹⁰ These studies demonstrate that exclusion in legal education is multidimensional, rooted not only in economic status but also in symbolic and cultural capital. They confirm Pierre Bourdieu’s theory that elite educational institutions reproduce social hierarchies under the guise of meritocracy.

The theoretical literature provides further analytical depth to this critique. Amartya Sen’s *capability approach*, articulated in *Development as Freedom* (1999), is central to understanding how formal equality of access does not translate into substantive opportunity. Sen distinguishes between the possession of rights and the actual capability to exercise them—a distinction particularly relevant to students who may gain formal entry to NLUs but lack financial, linguistic, or cultural resources to fully benefit from their education.¹¹ This framework reveals that affordability is not just about lowering fees but about expanding the

⁶ *Mohini Jain v State of Karnataka* (1992) 3 SCC 666.

⁷ *Unnikrishnan v State of Andhra Pradesh* (1993) 1 SCC 645.

⁸ *Ashoka Kumar Thakur v Union of India* (2008) 6 SCC 1.

⁹ Increasing Diversity by Increasing Access (IDIA), *Diversity Reports 2015–2023* (IDIA Trust).

¹⁰ National Law School of India University, *Elusive Island of Excellence: Diversity and Inclusion Report* (NLSIU 2021).

¹¹ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford University Press 1999).

real freedoms necessary to thrive within elite academic settings. Complementing Sen, Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *symbolic violence* elucidates how institutional norms, language, demeanor, and networks reinforce privilege invisibly, making exclusion appear natural or deserved. These theories expose the subtle mechanisms through which NLUs, though formally open, remain sociologically closed spaces.¹²

Critical feminist and intersectional scholars further illuminate the layered nature of exclusion. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of *intersectionality* (1989) demonstrates that the experiences of disadvantage are compounded at the intersection of caste, gender, class, and language. Applied to the Indian context, intersectionality explains why a Dalit woman from a rural background faces barriers qualitatively different from those of an urban OBC or economically weak upper-caste student.¹³ Nancy Fraser's framework of *redistribution and recognition* (1997) complements this by arguing that social justice demands both economic restructuring and cultural inclusion. In the context of NLUs, redistribution would imply income-based fee reforms and state funding, while recognition would involve valuing diverse linguistic and cultural identities within campus life.¹⁴ These theoretical interventions expand the normative vocabulary of legal education reform beyond access to include belonging and participation.

The policy literature reflects a growing awareness of these systemic issues but remains fragmented. The *Law Commission of India's 266th Report* (2017) and the *BCI Three-Member Committee Report* (2014) acknowledge the widening inequities between NLUs and traditional law faculties but stop short of recommending a redistributive financing framework. The *National Knowledge Commission* (2006) had proposed establishing a National Council for Legal Education to oversee quality and access, but the proposal was never implemented. Comparative studies of legal education in jurisdictions such as South Africa, the United Kingdom, and Canada illustrate more progressive models, particularly sliding fee scales and state-subsidized public law schools, that successfully reconcile quality with inclusion. These comparative insights underscore that financial autonomy need not equate to social exclusion and that state commitment remains essential to maintaining education as a constitutional good. Despite this rich body of literature, a clear gap persists in the literature. Most studies address either the pedagogical evolution of legal education or its regulatory framework but seldom

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Harvard University Press 1991).

¹³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex' (1989) 1 *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 139.

¹⁴ Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (Routledge 1997).

integrate these analyses with constitutional jurisprudence and empirical data on socio-economic exclusion. There is limited work that systematically connects the high-fee, self-financing model of NLUs with violations of substantive equality and access to justice under the Indian Constitution. Moreover, while theoretical lenses like Sen's capability approach or Bourdieu's symbolic violence are occasionally invoked, they have not been applied cohesively to interrogate the structure of legal education in India. This research, therefore, seeks to fill that interdisciplinary gap by combining doctrinal analysis, empirical findings, and normative theory to develop a holistic socio-legal critique of affordability and access within the NLU model.

Statement of the Problem

The National Law Universities (NLUs), established to democratize legal education and actualize the constitutional vision of equal access to justice, have evolved into financially exclusionary spaces. The self-financing model adopted by these institutions—justified under the guise of autonomy and excellence—has resulted in exorbitant fee structures that systematically marginalize students from lower socio-economic and marginalized communities. This contradicts constitutional mandates of substantive equality (Articles 14 and 15), the right to education as part of the right to life (Article 21), and the directive for equal access to justice (Article 39A). The problem lies in the tension between constitutional ideals of inclusivity and the neoliberal governance of higher legal education, where merit is redefined by economic capacity, and public good is subordinated to market logic. This has resulted in a dual crisis—of access (economic and cultural exclusion) and purpose (erosion of justice-oriented legal education).

Hypothesis

The current fee structure of National Law Schools in India makes legal education unaffordable for a significant portion of the Indian population, which conflicts with the constitutional principle of 'equal opportunity' for all. This paper hypothesizes that the current self-financing fee structures in National Law Universities systematically marginalize students from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, thereby violating the constitutional principles of substantive equality, equal opportunity, and access to justice.

Research Questions

1. How does the current self-financing fee structure of National Law Universities contravene the constitutional guarantees of equality, education, and access to justice?
2. To what extent does the high-cost model of legal education create structural and intersectional barriers for students from marginalized social, economic, and linguistic backgrounds?
3. How have judicial pronouncements such as *Mohini Jain*, *Unnikrishnan*, and *Ashok Kumar Thakur* shaped the jurisprudence of educational equality and how do they apply to the NLU model?
4. What are the socio-legal implications of the marketization of NLUs for the democratization of the legal profession and access to justice in India?
5. What policy and institutional reforms can align the functioning of NLUs with constitutional principles of social justice, equality, and inclusivity?

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the evolution of legal education in India and the constitutional rationale behind the establishment of NLUs.
2. To analyze the fee structures of NLUs vis-à-vis state and central universities and evaluate their socio-economic impact.
3. To investigate how the current model of legal education perpetuates exclusion based on class, caste, language, and geography.
4. To critically assess judicial and constitutional doctrines on the right to education, equality, and access to justice in relation to NLU governance.
5. To propose normative and policy recommendations to make NLUs affordable, inclusive, and aligned with the constitutional vision of education as a public good.

Research Methodology and Scope

This study employs a doctrinal and socio-legal research methodology integrating constitutional analysis, theoretical interpretation, and empirical review. The doctrinal aspect examines Articles 14, 15(4), 21, and 39A of the Constitution and landmark judgments such as *Mohini Jain*, *Unnikrishnan*, and *Ashok Kumar Thakur* to assess how NLU fee structures align with the principles of equality, education, and access to justice. The socio-legal component draws upon secondary empirical sources—particularly IDIA Diversity Reports, NLSIU's Elusive Island of

Excellence, and institutional data—to evaluate patterns of exclusion. The study further applies theoretical lenses from Amartya Sen, Pierre Bourdieu, and Nancy Fraser to link structural inequality with educational access.

The scope of the study is limited to publicly funded National Law Universities in India, focusing on their undergraduate programs and fee regimes. It does not include private law schools or postgraduate legal education. The research is confined to secondary data and doctrinal interpretation, acknowledging that the absence of primary fieldwork may restrict quantitative depth. Nevertheless, the integrated constitutional, empirical, and theoretical approach ensures a robust and holistic assessment of the affordability and access crisis within the NLU framework.

II - Background of Legal Education in India

The history of legal education in India is deeply intertwined with the country's constitutional values and its evolving socio-political conditions. From being a colonial artifact designed to produce law clerks and courtroom practitioners, legal education has gradually transitioned into an institutional space for shaping legal consciousness, democratic engagement, and public leadership. In the post-independence period, law was envisioned not merely as a profession but as a powerful tool to advance the constitutional promise of justice - social, economic, and political. However, the ideal of accessible, socially relevant legal education has often been stifled by structural barriers, institutional fragmentation, and regulatory irregularities.

A landmark moment in the regulation of legal education came with the enactment of the Advocates Act, 1961. The Act created a uniform class of legal practitioners, Advocates, and empowered the Bar Council of India (BCI) to oversee both legal education and professional standards through its Legal Education Committee. This statutory mandate marked a shift from university-driven models to profession-regulated standards¹⁵. While it laid the foundation for centralized control over curriculum and eligibility norms, the system still struggled with chronic issues such as outdated pedagogy, lack of full-time faculty, disassociation from social realities, and an absence of institutional innovation.

¹⁵ The Advocates Act, 1961, §§ 7(1)(h), 7(1)(i), 10, 15, 49; see also Faizan Mustafa et al., *A Study to Create Evidence-Based Proposals for Reform of Legal Education in India – Phase II*, at 9–10 (NALSAR Univ., 2021), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4517431>.

By the 1960s and 1970s, academic critics began highlighting the intellectual stagnation within Indian legal education. Scholars such as Arjun Aggarwal and Julius Getman emphasized that legal training had become overly formalistic and disconnected from constitutional and social concerns. They critiqued the prevailing reliance on rote memorization, rigid syllabus, and minimal exposure to legal research or critical reasoning¹⁶. Parallely, international collaborations, particularly with the Ford Foundation, sought to modernize legal training by supporting institutions like the Indian Law Institute (ILI) and promoting curricular reform at selected universities¹⁷. However, these initiatives remained piecemeal and failed to achieve systemic transformation.

A more ambitious intervention emerged in the form of proposals for a *National Law School* model—an idea that emerged through various reports and academic discussions, including the 1964 Gajendragadkar Committee Report and the UGC workshops chaired by Upendra Baxi. These proposals called for institutions with academic autonomy, national character, full-time residential programs, and a socio-legal pedagogical approach¹⁸. The idea was to reimagine legal education not only as a professional requirement but as a vehicle for nation-building and the democratization of justice.

This vision was finally realized in 1987 with the establishment of the National Law School of India University (NLSIU), Bangalore. Under the leadership of Prof. N.R. Madhava Menon, NLSIU introduced a five-year integrated B.A., LL.B. (Hons.) program with interdisciplinary content, clinical legal education, continuous evaluation, and residential learning¹⁹. The model quickly proliferated, leading to the creation of over twenty National Law Universities (NLUs) across various states, each aspiring to replicate and improve upon the original NLSIU design. However, the rapid institutional expansion brought new complications. A 2021 study commissioned by NALSAR University of Law noted that while NLUs were originally

¹⁶ Arjun P. Aggarwal, *Legal Education in India*, 12(2) **J. Legal Educ.** 231, 236 (1959); Julius Getman, *The Development of Indian Legal Education: The Impact of the Language Problem*, 21(5) **J. Legal Educ.** 513, 520 (1969).

¹⁷ Jayanth K. Krishnan, *Professor Kingsfield Goes to Delhi: The Ford Foundation and Legal Education in India*, 46 *Am. J. Legal Hist.* 447, 460 (2004); H.C.L. Merillat, *The Indian Law Institute*, 8(4) *Am. J. Comp. L.* 519, 521 (1959).

¹⁸ Upendra Baxi, *Towards a Socially Relevant Legal Education: A Consolidated Report of the UGC's Workshop on Modernization of Legal Education* (1979); P.B. Gajendragadkar, *Committee Report on Legal Education* (1964).

¹⁹ N.R. Madhava Menon, *Legal Education for Professional Responsibility: An Appraisal of the New Pattern*, 13 *Indian Bar Rev.* 295, 300 (1986); Jill Cottrell, *10+2+5: A Change in the Structure of Indian Legal Education*, 36(3) *J. Legal Educ.* 331, 334 (1986).

envisioned as tools for equitable access, they have increasingly become financially inaccessible to marginalized groups. Factors such as high tuition fees, English-dominated entrance exams like CLAT, and urban-centric campus cultures have created barriers for rural, vernacular, and first-generation learners²⁰. This regression from democratization to elitism is evident in student demographics, where representation from disadvantaged groups remains disproportionately low despite formal reservation policies.

Moreover, legal education today faces regulatory dissonance. Conflicts between the UGC and the BCI, the absence of a permanent national academic body for law, and weak postgraduate research infrastructure have hampered pedagogical innovation. Despite recommendations from bodies such as the National Knowledge Commission (2006) and the BCI's Three-Member Committee Report, meaningful reform in curriculum design, faculty development, and institutional governance remains stalled²¹. Compounding the problem is the shift in professional aspiration among law students—from public service to corporate law—driven largely by rising education costs and skewed placement structures.

Moreover, the evolution of Indian legal education has been characterized by a persistent tension between constitutional aspirations and institutional realities. While regulatory reforms and academic vision have sought to make legal education a transformative force, issues of affordability, inclusion, regulatory coherence, and public accountability continue to hinder its potential. Without addressing these foundational challenges, legal education risks becoming a site of exclusion rather than empowerment, undermining its critical role in the realization of constitutional justice.

III - Objective Of Establishing National Law Schools

The establishment of National Law Schools in India was not merely an administrative experiment but a foundational attempt to reimagine legal education as a constitutional project. It emerged from a deep dissatisfaction with the stagnation that characterized traditional law colleges—institutions marked by rote pedagogy, disengaged faculty, poor infrastructure, and a glaring disconnect from both the legal profession and society's pressing needs. The National

²⁰ *supra* note 1, at 77–95.

²¹ National Knowledge Commission, *Recommendations of the Working Group on Legal Education* (2006); Gopal Subramaniam et al., *Report of the 3-Member Committee on Reform of Legal Education*, submitted in *Bar Council of India v. Bonnie FOI Law College*, SLP No. 22337 of 2008.

Law School of India University (NLSIU), Bengaluru—established in 1987 under the stewardship of Prof. N.R. Madhava Menon—was the first institution to embody this transformative vision. It was conceived as a model law school that could set national standards for academic excellence, professional training, and social commitment²².

One of the primary objectives of this institutional innovation was to professionalize legal education by introducing a full-time, rigorous, and interdisciplinary academic program. Departing from the outdated three-year format, NLSIU launched the five-year integrated B.A. LL.B. (Hons.) program, integrating legal studies with subjects such as political science, economics, sociology, and history. This approach aimed to deepen students' understanding of the law not just as a set of rules, but as a social construct shaped by political and economic forces. Clinical legal education, research-oriented teaching, and continuous internal assessments replaced the archaic system of end-term evaluation and minimal classroom engagement²³. The objective was to prepare lawyers not merely for courtrooms, but for policymaking, social reform, and constitutional advocacy in a democratic society.

Equally important was the aim to strengthen the justice delivery system by producing a cadre of well-trained, socially conscious legal professionals. The National Law Universities (NLUs) were expected to act as incubators for public-spirited lawyers, judges, and academics who would contribute meaningfully to the administration of justice. In this conception, legal education was viewed not as a market commodity but as a public good, integral to the realisation of constitutional values. The institutional vision was rooted in the directive principles of state policy—especially Article 39A of the Constitution of India—which calls upon the State to ensure equal justice and provide free legal aid to those unable to access the system²⁴. By training a generation of socially responsive lawyers, the NLUs were expected to close the justice gap and make the legal system more inclusive.

Another key dimension of the National Law School model was its commitment to regional and social inclusivity. These institutions were designated as “national” in their character, not only in terms of their nomenclature but in the demographic diversity of their student body. Merit-based admission tests and constitutionally mandated reservations were instituted to attract

²² Alok Prasanna Kumar, *Madhava Menon and Legal Education*, 54(20) Econ. & Pol. Wkly. 10 (2019).

²³ Law Commission of India, *Report No. 266: The Legal Education in India – Problems and Prospects* 21–22 (2017), <https://lawcommissionofindia.nic.in/reports/Report266.pdf>.

²⁴ India Const. art. 39A; see also Law Commission of India, *supra* note 2, at 29.

students from across regions, castes, religions, and linguistic groups. In theory, these mechanisms were designed to democratise access to elite legal education. Yet, over time, this inclusivity has been compromised by rising tuition fees, expensive entrance coaching, and increasing cost of living—structural factors that disproportionately disadvantage students from rural, vernacular, and economically weaker backgrounds²⁵.

Furthermore, the NLUs were envisaged as hubs of critical legal scholarship and public policy research. They were designed to transcend narrow vocational training and become sites of intellectual engagement, where debates on justice, rights, governance, and law reform could thrive. The goal was to cultivate a generation of lawyers and legal academics who could challenge orthodoxy and contribute to the progressive evolution of Indian jurisprudence. However, this intellectual mandate is undermined when access to these institutions is skewed in favor of students with existing socio-economic privileges. Cultural capital, fluency in English, and prior access to high-quality schooling have become informal prerequisites, creating barriers that the formal merit-based system fails to address²⁶.

At their core, National Law Schools were envisioned as transformative spaces—intended to bridge the divide between law and justice, privilege and marginalization. Yet, the current trend of escalating costs and commodification risks betrays their founding mission. The movement from a publicly oriented, constitutional model of legal education to a self-financing, neoliberal paradigm has generated a disturbing paradox: institutions established to democratize the legal profession are increasingly inaccessible to those who need them most. As the following chapters will demonstrate, this paradox lies at the heart of the contemporary affordability crisis that plagues India's legal education landscape.

IV - Fee Structure Of NLU's Vis-À-Vis Law Faculties Of State And Central Universities In India

Legal education in India today operates within a deeply bifurcated financial structure. On one hand lie the National Law Universities (NLUs), elite public institutions with self-financing models and corporate placement-driven culture. On the other lie, the conventional law faculties

²⁵ *A Study on Student Demographics, Accessibility and Inclusivity at National Law School 2015–16*, SSRN Abstract No. 2788311, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2788311> (last visited June 5, 2025).

²⁶ C.M. Malish, *Measuring Access to Higher Education: Indicators and Indications*, 55(40) Econ. & Pol. Wkly. 54, 55 (2020).

under central and state universities follow a public-subsidy model anchored in the idea of higher education as a welfare imperative. This dichotomy is not merely institutional—it directly affects affordability, access, and the constitutional vision of legal empowerment for all.

IV.I NLUs and the High-Cost Self-Financing Model

The emergence of NLUs was guided by the ambition to professionalize legal education and position it alongside India's premier engineering, medical, and management institutions. Yet this professionalization came with a caveat: these universities were expected to be financially autonomous, operating with minimal recurring support from the state. This self-financing model—rare in the domain of public higher education—has led to a near-total reliance on student fees to sustain operations²⁷.

As a result, the cost of pursuing a five-year B.A. LL.B. (Hons.) program at NLUs has become prohibitively high for most. Data from the 2023–24 academic cycle shows annual expenses ranging from ₹1.8 to ₹3.3 lakhs, culminating in a total burden of ₹9–16 lakhs across five years²⁸. This figure excludes non-fee expenses like Common Law Admission Test (CLAT) coaching, relocation costs, and living expenses—creating steep economic barriers for students from low-income and rural backgrounds. While merit-based admissions and reservations under Article 15(4) aim to promote inclusion, economic exclusion persists in practice, undermining the constitutional commitment to equality of opportunity.

IV.II State and Central Universities: Low-Cost, Public-Funded Legal Education

In contrast, law faculties of state and central universities continue to adhere to a public funding model, receiving regular grants from state governments and the University Grants Commission (UGC). These institutions, such as the Faculty of Law, University of Delhi; Banaras Hindu University; Government Law College, Mumbai; and others, charge nominal annual fees, typically between ₹5,000 to ₹30,000.²⁹ This structure keeps the total cost of a five-year legal education under ₹1 lakh, making it far more accessible to students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

²⁷ Law Commission of India, *Report No. 266: The Legal Education in India – Problems and Prospects* 21–23 (2017),

<https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s3ca0daec69b5adc880fb464895726dbdf/uploads/2022/08/2022081654.pdf>.

²⁸ Faizan Mustafa et al., *A Study to Create Evidence-Based Proposals for Reform of Legal Education in India – Phase II*, NALSAR University of Law, at 77–85 (2021), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4517431>.

²⁹ University of Delhi, Faculty of Law – *Prospectus 2023–24*; Banaras Hindu University Law Faculty Website; Government Law College, Mumbai – *Fee Circular 2023–24*.

Although these institutions often face constraints such as faculty shortages, infrastructural deficits, and bureaucratic hurdles, their subsidized nature ensures wider demographic participation, particularly among first-generation learners, rural students, and those from vernacular-medium backgrounds. In this model, legal education remains closer to the constitutional ideal of a tool for social mobility rather than an elite pursuit.

IV.III Access and Equity: The Constitutional Divide

The coexistence of these parallel financial regimes has created a two-tiered legal education ecosystem. NLUs, while offering superior facilities, global exposure, and corporate pathways, have become de facto exclusionary spaces for economically weaker sections. Conversely, traditional law faculties, though inclusive in fee structure, are often undervalued in legal academia and the job market.

This structural inequity raises profound constitutional concerns. Articles 14, 15(4), and 39A of the Constitution mandate the State to ensure substantive equality, affirmative support for the disadvantaged, and equal access to justice³⁰. However, when elite legal institutions operate in a manner that perpetuates socio-economic exclusion, they not only violate the spirit of these provisions but also risk breeding a legal profession detached from the realities of the marginalized.

Furthermore, the career choices of NLU graduates are increasingly shaped by the economic pressures associated with high fees. The need to recover educational investment often steers students towards lucrative corporate careers, away from litigation, academia, or public interest law—subverting the foundational vision of NLUs as training grounds for justice-oriented professionals³¹.

Table – 1.0 – Comparative Fee Structure of NLUs vs State & Central University Law Faculties

Institution	Annual Fee (₹)	Total Estimated Cost (5 Years)	Type
1. NLSIU, Bengaluru	₹3,30,000	₹16,50,000	NLU (Autonomous)
2. NALSAR, Hyderabad	₹2,45,000	₹12,25,000	NLU

³⁰ India Const. arts. 14, 15(4), 39A.

³¹ C.M. Malish, *Measuring Access to Higher Education: Indicators and Indications*, 55(40) Econ. & Pol. Wkly. 54, 55 (2020).

Institution	Annual Fee (₹)	Total Estimated Cost (5 Years)	Type
			(Autonomous)
3. WBNUJS, Kolkata	₹2,68,000	₹13,40,000	NLU (Autonomous)
4. NLU, Delhi	₹1,86,000	₹9,30,000	NLU (Autonomous)
5. NLU, Jodhpur	₹2,35,000	₹11,75,000	NLU (Autonomous)
6. GNLU, Gandhinagar	₹2,80,000	₹14,00,000	NLU (Autonomous)
7. RMLNLU, Lucknow	₹1,75,000	₹8,75,000	NLU (Autonomous)
8. HNLU, Raipur	₹1,85,000	₹9,25,000	NLU (Autonomous)
9. CNLU, Patna	₹1,70,000	₹8,50,000	NLU (Autonomous)
10. MNLU, Mumbai	₹2,45,000	₹12,25,000	NLU (Autonomous)
11. Faculty of Law, University of Delhi	₹6,500	₹32,500	Central University
12. Banaras Hindu University, Faculty of Law	₹12,000	₹60,000	Central University
13. Aligarh Muslim University, Faculty of Law	₹10,000	₹50,000	Central University
14. Jamia Millia Islamia, Faculty of Law	₹12,000	₹60,000	Central University
15. Dr. Ambedkar Government Law College, Chennai	₹1,800	₹9,000	State Government College

Institution	Annual Fee (₹)	Total Estimated Cost (5 Years)	Type
16. Government Law College, Mumbai	₹5,000	₹25,000	State Government College
17. Osmania University, Hyderabad	₹8,000	₹40,000	State University
18. Punjab University, Chandigarh (UILS)	₹12,500	₹62,500	State University
19. University of Calcutta, Faculty of Law	₹5,000	₹25,000	State University
20. Lucknow University, Faculty of Law	₹10,000	₹50,000	State University

Sources – Latest university brochures of National Law Universities and State & Central University Law Faculties.

Chapter V - The Socio-Legal Crisis of Inaccessibility in National Law Universities in India

The National Law Universities (NLUs) in India, initially conceived as institutions of excellence to democratize and professionalize legal education, have increasingly become symbols of exclusion. This exclusion is not merely economic; it is social, cultural, linguistic, and epistemological. The promise of inclusive legal education, rooted in the egalitarian spirit of the Indian Constitution, stands undermined by the very structures that were supposed to advance it.

This chapter undertakes a critical interrogation of the systemic inaccessibility of NLUs through a socio-legal lens. It argues that the problem is not incidental but structural arising from a confluence of institutional design, flawed metrics of merit, market-driven governance, and a failure to address deep-rooted inequities in access to education.

V.I. From Formal Merit to Structural Inequality

It is commonly asserted that admissions to NLUs are based purely on merit, evaluated through competitive examinations like the Common Law Admission Test (CLAT). Yet, such a

conception of merit, if severed from the social contexts in which it operates, becomes a tool of exclusion rather than inclusion.

The jurisprudence of equality under Article 14 of the Constitution mandates not only formal parity but substantive equality³². In *Ashoka Kumar Thakur v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court reaffirmed that measures of substantive equality must recognize and account for historical disadvantage³³. However, when merit is measured through English-dominant, time-intensive, and coaching-driven entrance tests, it ceases to be a neutral criterion and instead reproduces privilege³⁴.

Indeed, data from the IDIA Diversity Report (2021–22) reveals a troubling homogeneity within NLU student bodies: over 77% of students had parents with graduate degrees, only 3% came from vernacular-medium schools, and nearly all were from upper-middle or upper-income households³⁵.

This concentration of privilege raises the question: Can institutions of public legal education be said to fulfill their constitutional function if they systematically exclude the very sections of society for whom legal empowerment is most critical?

V.II. CLAT and the Entrenchment of Privilege

The CLAT regime, hailed as a transparent and objective gateway to India's premier law schools, in practice functions as a gatekeeping mechanism. More than 80% of students admitted to NLUs report participation in costly private coaching programs, often exceeding ₹1,00,000³⁶. This creates a two-tiered system: those who can afford access to resources that increase their performance, and those who, despite possessing intellectual potential, are excluded due to economic limitations. The “backwash effect” i.e., a distortion of educational focus in favor of standardized test preparation, which further exacerbates the problem by marginalizing holistic development in secondary schooling³⁷.

The judiciary has held, in *Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka*³⁸ and *Unnikrishnan v. State of Andhra Pradesh*³⁹, that access to education is a facet of Article 21's right to life. If that is so, then a legal education system that predicates entry on financial capital risks breaching the

³² *E.P. Royappa v. State of Tamil Nadu*, (1974) 4 SCC 3.

³³ *Ashoka Kumar Thakur v. Union of India*, (2008) 6 SCC 1.

³⁴ *supra* note 11.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *A Study to Create Evidence-Based Proposals for Reform of Legal Education in India – Phase II*, NALSAR Univ. (2021).

³⁸ *Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka*, (1992) 3 SCC 666.

³⁹ *Unnikrishnan v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, (1993) 1 SCC 645.

positive obligation of the State to ensure educational access for all.

V.III. Campus Culture and Epistemic Exclusion

Even when students from marginalized backgrounds enter NLUs, their experience is often shaped by a subtle but persistent cultural exclusion. The medium of instruction, peer group dynamics, faculty interaction, and academic expectations are all aligned with the life-worlds of urban, English-speaking elites.

Students from Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and religious minorities frequently report alienation, tokenization, and stereotype-driven treatment⁴⁰. A majority of them are also first-generation learners, facing not only academic challenges but a lack of familiarity with professional norms and institutional behavior.

This reproduces what legal philosopher Pierre Bourdieu refers to as “symbolic violence” where structures of inequality are internalized as individual failure⁴¹. Without culturally responsive pedagogy and institutional support mechanisms, such students are denied the full benefit of their legal education, despite gaining formal access.

V.IV. The Legal Profession and the Reproduction of Elites

The implications of exclusion in legal education are not limited to campuses; they shape the profession and the justice system itself. NLUs have become primary feeders for elite litigation firms, corporate houses, and international academia. Yet the demographics of their graduates, overwhelmingly urban, English-speaking, and upper-caste reflect a narrow slice of Indian society⁴².

This leads to a homogenous legal elite with limited lived experience of caste-based discrimination, rural disenfranchisement, or linguistic marginalization. The jurisprudence that emerges from such a bar is less likely to resonate with the realities of Dalit women in land disputes, Adivasis in forest evictions, or Muslims facing surveillance and disenfranchisement. The promise of “equal access to justice” under Article 39A of the Constitution remains aspirational unless the path to becoming a legal professional is made genuinely accessible⁴³. The presence of public interest litigation as a tool is meaningless if the practitioners of law are structurally disconnected from the constituencies they claim to represent.

⁴⁰ Ujjwal Ashutosh & Devakumar Jacob, *Inclusivity and Marginality in Modern Law Schools*, 28(2) IOSR-JHSS 10 (2023).

⁴¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1977).

⁴² *supra* note 11.

⁴³ India Const. Art. 39 A.

V.V. Marketization of Legal Education

Perhaps the most alarming trend is the neoliberal capture of legal education. NLUs, operating under self-financing models, are forced to depend on student fees, creating annual cost burdens ranging from ₹2 to ₹3.5 lakhs. This excludes hostel and incidental costs and pushes the five-year expense upwards of ₹15 lakhs in many cases.

This high-cost model contradicts the directive principle in Article 38, which mandates the State to secure a social order in which justice, social, economic, and political shall prevail in all the institutions. By creating legal institutions that are financially inaccessible to the vast majority, the State risks abdicating its responsibility to make legal education an instrument of justice.

Instead of producing public-spirited advocates, legal education has become an investment for elite families, with a return measured in corporate salaries. The normative vision of the legal profession as a site of service, reform, and constitutional guardianship is thereby subordinated to market logic.

VI - The Constitutional Promise and the Jurisprudence of Equality

The Indian Constitution recognizes education as a cornerstone of democratic participation and equal justice. Articles 14, 15(4), 21, and 39A together form a robust constitutional framework that not only protects individual rights but also mandates the State to undertake affirmative measures for historically disadvantaged communities. The current structure of National Law Universities (NLUs), with their high fees and exclusionary admission filters, stands in direct tension with this framework.

VI.I. Article 14 and the Equality Jurisprudence

Article 14 guarantees "equality before the law" and the "equal protection of the laws." The jurisprudence of Article 14 has evolved from a formalistic understanding of equal treatment to a more nuanced recognition of substantive equality, which focuses on the real-life impact of laws and policies.

In *State of Kerala v. N.M. Thomas*, the Supreme Court affirmed that equality sometimes requires differential treatment to account for systemic disadvantage⁴⁴. The Court emphasized that affirmative action is a facet of equality, not an exception to it.

This understanding was reinforced in *Ashoka Kumar Thakur v. Union of India*, where the Court held that affirmative measures, including reservations in higher education, are valid as long as

⁴⁴ *State of Kerala v. N.M. Thomas*, (1976) 2 SCC 310.

they serve the objective of achieving real equality of opportunity⁴⁵. However, when institutions such as NLUs impose economic entry barriers, even while offering social reservations, the very goal of substantive equality is frustrated. Economic exclusion becomes a parallel and invisible form of discrimination.

VI.II. Article 15(4): Special Provisions for Social Justice

Article 15(4) enables the State to make special provisions for socially and educationally backward classes. While NLUs do implement caste-based reservations, these are undermined by the high fee structure and reliance on expensive preparatory tools like CLAT coaching.

The judgment in *Balaji v. State of Mysore* made it clear that classification based on backwardness must be reasonable and should truly enable access.⁴⁶ Without fee waivers, scholarships, or structural financial support, caste-based reservations become hollow concessions in a self-financing regime. In effect, economic criteria now function as a silent exclusion mechanism.

VI.III. Article 21 and the Right to Education

In *Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka*, the Supreme Court interpreted the right to education as intrinsic to the right to life under Article 21, arguing that "the right to education flows directly from the right to life."⁴⁷

This was further elaborated in *Unnikrishnan v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, where the Court held that the State has a duty to provide affordable access to professional education, especially in essential fields like law and medicine.⁴⁸ The judgment cautioned against the commercialization of education and called for regulatory safeguards.

Despite these constitutional guarantees, the NLU model has normalized high-cost education, shifting the burden entirely onto students and their families. This represents a form of constructive denial of the right to education.

VI.IV. Article 39A and Access to Justice

Article 39A of the Constitution mandates the State to provide equal access to justice and promote legal literacy and free legal aid. NLUs were envisioned as part of this constitutional project—to produce lawyers who would serve the public, especially the marginalized.

⁴⁵ *Ashoka Kumar Thakur v. Union of India*, (2008) 6 SCC 1.

⁴⁶ *M.R. Balaji v. State of Mysore*, AIR 1963 SC 649.

⁴⁷ *Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka*, (1992) 3 SCC 666.

⁴⁸ *Unnikrishnan J.P. v. State of A.P.*, (1993) 1 SCC 645.

However, as the *P.A. Inamdar v. State of Maharashtra* case noted, professional institutions must not commercialize education at the cost of social equity⁴⁹. By functioning as elite, fee-intensive spaces, NLUs risk creating a legal profession disconnected from the realities of the majority.

VI.V. The Myth of Neutral Merit

The idea of merit often invoked in NLU admissions and placements must be interrogated through the lens of constitutional morality. As *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* emphasized, merit cannot be disentangled from social privilege and structural inequality⁵⁰.

Entrance exams like CLAT, though facially neutral, advantage students with access to English-medium schooling, coaching, and cultural capital. This converts merit into a proxy for wealth, thus undermining Article 14's guarantee of fair access.

VI.VI. Re-Theorizing Legal Education – Exclusion, Privilege and Structural Barriers

The crisis of affordability and access in National Law Universities (NLUs) must be understood not merely through institutional or legal analysis, but also through theoretical frameworks that expose the deeper logic of inequality. Law schools are not value-neutral spaces; they reproduce power, privilege, and exclusion. To understand this reproduction, this section draws from interdisciplinary thinkers whose work provides the necessary analytical tools.

Amartya Sen's capability approach shifts the focus from abstract rights to actual freedoms and capabilities that individuals possess to exercise those rights.⁵¹ In the context of legal education, mere access to admission does not guarantee the *capability to succeed*.

Students from marginalized backgrounds may be formally admitted through reservation policies, but without affordable fees, linguistic inclusion, and institutional support, their substantive freedom to benefit from education is compromised. The NLU model, by treating all students as equally placed once admitted, ignores these structural disadvantages and fails to deliver on Sen's vision of "development as freedom."

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence is central to understanding how elite institutions like NLUs maintain dominance through culture and language rather than overt coercion⁵². Symbolic violence refers to the normalization of the dominant class's values, which are internalized by marginalized individuals as legitimate standards.

⁴⁹ *P.A. Inamdar v. State of Maharashtra*, (2005) 6 SCC 537.

⁵⁰ *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, 1992 Supp (3) SCC 217.

⁵¹ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁵² Pierre Bourdieu, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Sage Publications, 1977).

At NLUs, English fluency, elite schooling, and corporate careerism are not just prevalent—they are valorized. Students from vernacular, rural, or non-affluent backgrounds often struggle to navigate the hidden curriculum of elitism. They are made to feel inferior, not through overt exclusion, but through subtle institutional signals that privilege certain forms of cultural capital while rendering others invisible.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality helps illuminate how multiple axes of identity like caste, class, gender, language, and religion, interact to shape patterns of exclusion in elite educational institutions like NLUs⁵³.

For instance, a Dalit woman from a rural area studying at an NLU may simultaneously face caste stigma, gender bias, and linguistic barriers in a space designed predominantly for urban, upper-caste, male students. Policies that target only one axis (such as caste-based reservations) often fail to capture the complexity of such lived experiences. Intersectionality calls for layered, context-sensitive policy design.

Nancy Fraser offers a compelling framework by distinguishing between redistribution (economic justice) and recognition (cultural inclusion), arguing that both are essential for achieving participatory parity which is a condition where all individuals can interact as equals in public life⁵⁴.

NLUs fail on both fronts. Their redistribution failure is evident in their high tuition fees, costly entrance processes, and minimal financial aid. Simultaneously, their recognition failure lies in an academic culture dominated by English, urban norms, and a narrow conception of merit that privileges corporate law over community advocacy. Without addressing both dimensions, NLUs remain structurally unjust and exclusionary.

The Constitution of India envisages education as an instrument of democratic empowerment and social transformation. NLUs, as publicly established institutions, were originally designed to nurture constitutional citizenship and promote access to justice.

However, driven by neoliberal imperatives, NLUs have become increasingly privatized, redefining education as a consumer good and students as clients. This trajectory erodes their legitimacy as vehicles of social mobility and justice.

Drawing from the theoretical perspectives of Sen, Bourdieu, Crenshaw, and Fraser, it is essential to reframe legal education as a constitutional project - one that centers the capability

⁵³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*, 43 Stan. L. Rev. 1241 (1991).

⁵⁴ Nancy Fraser, *Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation*, in *Redistribution or Recognition?* (Verso, 2003).

to learn, resists symbolic domination, addresses intersectional exclusions, and strives for true participatory parity. Only then can NLUs fulfill their mission in a pluralistic and constitutionally committed democracy.

Chapter VII: Recommendations and Conclusion

The preceding analysis makes it unmistakably clear: National Law Universities (NLUs), though conceived as beacons of justice, have increasingly become institutions that mirror and perpetuate inequality. Rather than democratizing legal knowledge, they often act as gatekeepers, accessible only to those who possess economic privilege, cultural capital, and linguistic fluency. To reclaim NLUs as constitutional institutions rooted in equity and justice, policy reform is not only necessary but urgent. This chapter offers a set of grounded, specific, and ethically anchored reforms that speak directly to the structural barriers identified throughout this work.

I. Making Affordability Real: Income-Based Fee Models

At present, NLUs apply a one-size-fits-all approach to fee structures. A student whose parents earn ₹25,000 a month pays the same fees as one whose family earns ₹25 lakhs annually. This flat-fee regime is not only regressive—it is constitutionally indefensible. Justice demands a sliding fee model, where tuition is aligned with a student's financial background. Much like progressive taxation, this model ensures that those with greater means contribute more, thereby easing the burden on those for whom even filling out a CLAT form is a financial ordeal.

Such systems have been successfully implemented in other democracies and align with Article 38 of the Constitution, which mandates the State to reduce inequalities in income and opportunity. If we genuinely believe in equal opportunity, then affordability cannot be left to chance or charity—it must be embedded in policy.

II. Ending Dynamic Pricing: Putting a Cap on Educational Inflation

Institutions like NLSIU have adopted dynamic pricing mechanisms, where fee hikes are pegged to market conditions, demand, or institutional rankings. This trend commodifies education and treats students as clients in a free market. But legal education is not a luxury good—it is a public function.

There must be a legal cap on annual fee increments across all NLUs. These institutions should operate within predictable financial models so that economically vulnerable students and their families can plan their future without fear of sudden fiscal shocks. Such a measure is essential

to uphold financial dignity and transparency.

III. Reworking CLAT: Inclusion Begins at the Entry Gate

The Common Law Admission Test (CLAT) serves as the main gateway to NLUs. But the test—English-only, speed-based, and coaching-driven—functions more as a filter of privilege than a measure of aptitude. Those who come from English-medium schools, can afford ₹1–2 lakh worth of coaching, and live in metro cities are heavily advantaged.

A reformed CLAT must build inclusion into its architecture. This involves:

1. Reservation quotas within CLAT vernacular-medium students, and those from Economically Weaker Sections (EWS);
2. Offering CLAT in regional languages, aligning with the constitutional principle of linguistic pluralism;
3. Providing state-funded preparatory programs for disadvantaged aspirants.

IV. Reclaiming Public Responsibility: More Grants, Less Fees

The justification that NLUs must be financially autonomous to ensure “quality” education is flawed. These are public universities meant to serve constitutional ends and not private institutions serving market forces. The State must recommit to funding NLUs through annual grants and UGC-linked development support. Institutions that perform well on diversity indicators and public service output should be incentivized.

V. Mandatory Diversity Audits

At present, no NLU is legally required to publish data about the class, caste, or schooling backgrounds of its students. As a result, structural exclusion operates silently and invisibly.

A law or regulation must require annual diversity audits, disaggregated by caste, class, gender, language, schooling type, and region. These reports should be made public, creating accountability through transparency. The objective is not to shame institutions but to help them see what they often cannot see about themselves.

VI. Support Beyond Admission: Retention and Belonging

Access is not merely about getting in; it’s about staying in and growing. Many students from marginalized backgrounds drop out or struggle academically due to cultural alienation, language barriers, and the absence of mentors who understand their journey.

Each NLU must establish:

1. Equal Opportunity Cells with legal authority and funding,
2. Peer mentorship networks led by students from diverse backgrounds,
3. Language support labs and remedial teaching tailored to vernacular students,
4. Mental health counselling responsive to intersectional burdens.

VII. Legal Oversight: Towards a National Framework

Currently, NLUs exist in a regulatory limbo. They are not under the UGC in any meaningful way, and the Bar Council of India's control is often peripheral and outdated. What is needed is a centralized statutory framework which would bring coherence, enforceability, and vision to a fragmented system.

A National Council for Legal Education and Access should be established under the UGC Act. This council would:

1. Regulate fee structures and scholarship frameworks,
2. Monitor compliance with reservation mandates,
3. Evaluate curriculum for socio-legal relevance and constitutional alignment.

Legal education is not a prestige project; it is a public obligation. The law, by its nature, is a tool of collective justice, and those who study it must be able to access it without mortgaging their futures or their identities. The structural inequality embedded within the NLU model cannot be corrected by token gestures or isolated scholarships. What is needed is systemic reform anchored in constitutional morality, democratic accountability, and ethical ambition.

The recommendations offered here are not radical. They are necessary. They represent the minimum commitment needed to transform NLUs from elite islands into inclusive, democratic institutions where every student, regardless of background, has the chance not just to enter, but to belong, succeed, and lead.

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