

# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LEGAL RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS



Open Access, Refereed Journal Multi Disciplinary  
Peer Reviewed

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# **BALANCING SPEEDY TRIAL AND VICTIM PSYCHOLOGY UNDER INDIA'S PLEA-BARGAINING PROVISIONS**

AUTHORED BY - SEREENA C.S., NIVEDITA RAJEEV

Post-Graduate Student (LL.M), Government Law College, Ernakulam, Kerala, India

## **Abstract**

The Indian Criminal justice system has redefined the role and relevance of victims from that of mere spectators to one of active participants through the introduction of victim-centric provisions like victim appeal and victim compensation. In the transformation from a system of retributive to reformatory justice, these provisions were originally designed to ensure that the rights of victims are not lost in the process. One of the major developments in this aspect was that of Plea Bargaining, discussed in Chapter XXIII of BNSS (corresponding to Chapter XXIA of CrPC)

This paper examines whether Plea Bargaining acts solely as a tool for the reduction of the backlog of cases, resulting in justice being sold, or whether justice is really heard through the effective participation of victims in the procedure.

Comparative and doctrinal analysis of plea-bargaining provisions has been evaluated in this study to showcase the shift in Indian jurisprudence from initial judicial skepticism to victim-centric restorative justice. The recommendations of the Malimath Committee, along with Law Commission Reports (142,154, and 177), are detailed to introspect its role in the statutory incorporation of Mutually Satisfactory Disposition.

The study reveals that even though plea bargaining reduces the backlog of cases to a limited extent, the process ultimately focuses on monetary settlement, often ignoring the post-negotiation psychological aspects of the victim. A significant finding of this study is the absence of a support system like a Victim-Witness Coordinator in the USA under the Crime Victims' Rights Act (CVRA), 2004, who assists the victims to overcome the post-bargaining trauma and ensures essential psychological services are made available. In contrast, the Indian legal system conveniently assumes that financial restitution automatically heals the emotional wound. Finally, the research also recognizes the presence of safety valves in the form of Writ Jurisdiction and Special Leave Petitions, thereby converting the bar on regular appeals from

absolute to restrictive, ensuring speedy justice does not override substantive justice under provisions of Article 21 of the Indian Constitution.

This paper contributes to the discussion of restorative justice under the plea-bargaining provisions in Indian Statutes, while addressing the non-existence of a Victim Wellness Cell after bargaining. In essence, this paper highlights the need to balance both psychological and monetary aspects to ensure that a victim-centric approach in plea bargaining is effectively implemented.

**Keywords:** Plea Bargaining, Victim Participation, BNSS, Restorative Justice, Victim Psychology, Mutually Satisfactory Disposition

## I. Introduction

The Indian criminal justice system has been crippling over years, experiencing chronic judicial delays due to the rising backlogs of cases. The constitutional requirement of the swift trial under Article 21 has been vague due to the structural congestion from these backlogs. The plea-bargaining mechanism was introduced and incorporated into the Indian criminal law framework <sup>1</sup> has now been re-enacted into the new criminal code <sup>2</sup> as a resolution for this problem. The effect of the plea-bargaining framework extends beyond being just a mechanism for the speedy disposal of cases to more of an efficient reform in the criminal justice system.

The shift from the traditional criminal justice adjudication, featured with full trial procedure for settling cases, to the court-supervised plea-bargaining procedure by way of a mutually satisfactory disposition raises a central question: Does the plea-bargaining mechanism serve as a mere facilitator of backlog reduction, or does the system meaningfully incorporate the victim participation and principles of restorative justice within its negotiation framework?

Currently, the scholarly works in this regard have been overly emphasised in the area of plea bargaining as a mechanism of backlog reduction and the upper hand rights of prosecutors in the negotiation procedure; works concerning the psychological impact on victims post-bargaining procedure are very limited. Even though the statutory wording of the criminal codes recognises the participation of victims backed by a compensation mechanism, no attention is given to the post-bargaining trauma it causes on the victims, making the framework largely based on restitution rather than informational or psychological support within plea proceedings. This paper undertakes a comparative and doctrinal analysis of plea-bargaining mechanisms in

<sup>1</sup> Chapter XXIA into the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (CrPC)

<sup>2</sup> Chapter XXIII of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 (BNSS),

the USA and India by analysing statutory provisions of the new criminal code along with the constitutional safeguards and interpretations of the judiciary. The Indian framework of plea bargaining is compared with institutional models of victim rights protection in the United States. The study argues that even though there is procedural victim participation in the Indian plea-bargaining framework, the provisions clearly omit mental care support systems post bargaining. The study proposes reforms to align constitutional commitments with meaningful post trauma mental care support for the victims of plea bargaining.

## II. The Evolution of Plea Bargaining in India

Courts used to think that the only way to get to the truth and achieve justice was through a full trial. The limitation of this approach was realised when there was a rise in case delays and backlogs.

The numbers made things look even worse. In 2011, the National Crime Records Bureau found that the conviction rate was around 28%.<sup>3</sup> There were millions of cases pending in the lower courts. Criminal cases would often go on for years. This meant that the people who were accused had to wait a while to find out what would happen to them, and the victims had to wait a long time for closure. This paved the way for the introduction of plea bargaining.

The development of plea bargaining was gradual. The Law Commission of India played an important role in this. In its 142<sup>nd</sup> Report (1991), it said that if someone pleads guilty voluntarily, they should get a concession in order to save time, money and reduce psychological effect.<sup>4</sup> The 154<sup>th</sup> Report categorised the kind of offences that can be resolved through plea bargaining, excluding offences of a serious nature.<sup>5</sup>

The Malimath Committee also supplemented the Law Commission reports. It said that plea bargaining was a way to reduce the number of cases pending in the courts and to get justice faster through court-supervised negotiation.<sup>6</sup> Instead of just focusing on making sure that justice was served, people started to think about how to make the system more efficient.

Even after these recommendations, the courts were not always on board with the idea of plea bargaining. Initially, the Supreme Court criticised that it was trading justice, which could lead to coercion by influential people.<sup>7</sup> However, the Gujarat High Court later said that if plea

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<sup>3</sup> National Crime Records Bureau, *Crime in India 2011* (2011)

<sup>4</sup> Law Comm'n of India, *Report on Concessional Treatment for Offenders Who on Their Own Initiative Choose to Plead Guilty Without Any Bargaining*, Rep. No. 142 (1991).

<sup>5</sup> Law Commission of India, *Report on the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973*, Rep. No. 154 (1996).

<sup>6</sup> Comm. on Reforms of Crim. Just. Sys., Ministry of Home Affairs., Gov't of India, *Report* (2003) (Malimath Committee Report).

<sup>7</sup> *Murlidhar Meghraj Loya v. State of Maharashtra*, AIR 1976 SC 1929.

bargaining was done in a supervised way, it could be a good thing.<sup>8</sup> This decision paved the way for the government to change the law and introduce plea bargaining into the criminal justice system.

Plea bargaining was made a part of the criminal justice system through the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2005. Chapter XXIA of the Criminal Procedure Code deals with plea bargaining, and the mechanism now continues under Chapter XXIII of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023.

The concept of plea bargaining was recognised and accepted by the US long ago and has been described as highly desirable for effective case resolution.<sup>9</sup> However, India has approached plea bargaining in a more regulated manner. It is only allowed in certain types of cases. The evolution of plea bargaining in India shows that the country is trying to find ways to make a shift from the way of doing things, where the focus was only on having a full trial. Now the focus is on finding a balance between justice and efficiency. The question is, will this new system work, and will it be fair for everyone involved, especially the victims of crimes?

### **III. The Statutory Framework of Plea Bargaining under the BNSS.**

The Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 incorporates plea bargaining in Chapter XXI-A and included right of the accused to initiate plea bargaining, ensures voluntariness in the procedure and court supervision.<sup>10</sup> The provision did not extend invariably to all offences; it expressly excluded offences punishable with imprisonment for more than seven years, socio-economic offences and offences committed against women or children below fourteen years of age.<sup>11</sup> Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, has retained this structure. The rules for plea bargaining are contained in Sections 289 to 300.<sup>12</sup> Section 289 says who can use plea bargaining.<sup>13</sup> Section 290 accused right applies for plea bargaining within thirty days of being charged with a crime.<sup>14</sup> The aspect of voluntariness and in camera. Proceedings are also retained through Section 290(2).<sup>15</sup>

Section 291 deals with the procedure for negotiation between the accused, prosecution and victim and formulation of an acceptable deal through “Mutually Satisfactory Disposition”.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *State of Gujarat v. Natwar Harchandji Thakor*, (2005) Cri LJ 2957 (Guj).

<sup>9</sup> *Santobello v. New York*, 404 U.S. 257 (1971)

<sup>10</sup> Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, No. 2 of 2006, ch. XXIA, ss 265A–265L (India).

<sup>11</sup> Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, s 265A(1) & proviso (India).

<sup>12</sup> Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, ch. XXIII, ss 289–300 (India)

<sup>13</sup> Id. ss 289–300

<sup>14</sup> Id. ss 289–290.

<sup>15</sup> Id. s 290(2).

<sup>16</sup> Id. s 291.

Sections 292 and 293 require the court to ensure that the proposition reached is not against justice and public interest.<sup>17</sup> Sections 294 and 295 discusses about the report by the court on such disposition, the sentence awarded, compensation payable and probation if necessary.<sup>18</sup> The finality of judgment given under Section 296 is detailed in Section 297 with provision for constitutional remedies.<sup>19</sup>

#### **IV. Victim Participation and Restorative Justice under Plea Bargaining**

The idea of Victim Participation and Restorative Justice, when it comes to Plea Bargaining, is a new thing. Under the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, victims get to be a part of the process through the “Mutually Satisfactory Disposition”.<sup>20</sup> Now, victims were no longer treated as mere witnesses.

Restorative Justice to be really effective, the victim has to be heard and understood. The accused needs to take responsibility and try to make things right. This is the view of international standards and what experts think is important.<sup>21</sup>

While examining to what extent the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, lives up to these standards, it aligns to some extent. Victims can take part in negotiations, and there exists a provision for judicial oversight.<sup>22</sup> However, the main goal of these negotiations is still about punishing the offender and awarding compensation. Indian Plea Bargaining, though ensures participation of victims to meet the requirement of participation of victims, it does not do enough to help them heal or move forward. To really understand how this affects victims, we need to look at how they feel. Effectively addressing victim psychology and post-negotiation consequences is important to ensure that real restorative justice takes place.

#### **V. Victim Psychology and Post-Negotiation Trauma in Plea Bargaining**

Courts have now understood that justice is not just about punishing the offender. It is also about how the crime affects victims socially. In *Aftab Savanoor v. State of Goa*, the Court said that Victim Impact Assessment is necessary to understand what are the consequences of the crime on the victim's life.<sup>23</sup> The Court also said that helping victims recover and get support is

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<sup>17</sup> Id. ss 292–293.

<sup>18</sup> Id. ss 294–295.

<sup>19</sup> Id. ss 296–297.

<sup>20</sup> Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, ch. XXIII, ss 289–300 (India).

<sup>21</sup> Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power, G.A. Res. 40/34, ¶¶ 4–8 (Nov. 29, 1985); Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice* 10–15 (2002).

<sup>22</sup> Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, s 292–295 (India).

<sup>23</sup> *Aftab Savanoor v. State of Goa*, 2019 SCC OnLine Bom 1809, ¶ 7.

sometimes more important than punishing the offender. This line of thought expanded the basic idea of social justice.

The law does offer some help to victims. Section 357A(6) of the Code of Criminal Procedure says that the state or District Legal Services Authority can give victims medical help and financial support.<sup>24</sup> The Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, still offers this help under Section 396(6).<sup>25</sup>

Getting over trauma isn't just about getting money or medical help. Research shows that victims can feel anxious, scared and have trouble sleeping for a time. They might also feel like their reputation is hurt or may experience trust issues. These emotional injuries can last even if the physical injury isn't that bad. In cases where the victim and offender agree on a plea bargain, the quick settlement can sometimes make victims feel like they're being ignored, and their suffering is not fully acknowledged.

The types of crimes that are often part of plea bargaining can make these concerns worse. The category of offences eligible for plea bargaining is often viewed as minor offences. They can still have serious emotional consequences.<sup>26</sup> Crimes like threatening someone, defaming them, cheating them or hurting them physically can cause lasting fear, damage their reputation or make them feel insecure. To take the presence of extreme violence as a yardstick to measure emotional trauma cannot be justified. This kind of harm can equally cause emotional impact on the victim.

In India, there are counselling systems for victims of certain crimes like sexual violence or child abuse.<sup>27</sup> The government has protocols and compensation schemes for these victims.<sup>28</sup> But victims of crimes that are often part of plea bargaining don't get this kind of support. They mostly get financial help rather than specific mental health support.

International standards say that helping victims should go beyond just giving them money. Article 8 of the Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crimes and Abuse of Power says that helping victims can include giving them services.<sup>29</sup> Experts agree that these

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<sup>24</sup> Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, s 357A(6) (India).

<sup>25</sup> Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, s 396(6) (India).

<sup>26</sup> Hemant Singh, *Victim Rights in Plea Bargaining* (LL.M. dissertation, Rajiv Gandhi Nat'l Univ. of Law, Patiala).

<sup>27</sup> Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Gov't of India, *Guidelines & Protocols: Medico-Legal Care for Survivors/Victims of Sexual Violence* (2019).

<sup>28</sup> National Legal Services. Auth., *Compensation Scheme for Women Victims/Survivors of Sexual Assault* (2018); Violence Against Women in India: Comprehensive Care for Survivors, 113 Indian J. Med. Res. 1 (2021); NIMHANS, Training Materials on Trauma and Child Protection (on file with author).

<sup>29</sup> Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crimes and Abuse of Power, G.A. Res. 40/34, art. 8 (Nov. 29, 1985).

services should include counselling and rehabilitation.<sup>30</sup> These standards show that justice for victims isn't about money but also about helping them emotionally.

In plea bargaining, what happens after the agreement is not clearly defined. Once the deal is done and compensation is decided, the formal interaction between the justice system and the victim usually ends. The emotional impact of the plea bargain is not part of the law.

The problem isn't about procedures; it's also about therapy. The legal system acknowledges harm and offers compensation. There is no effort to help victims deal with their trauma after a plea bargain. The idea that monetary compensation brings closure doesn't consider the complexity involved in emotional recovery

So there needs to be a system in place that addresses the needs of victims in plea-bargained cases. This system wouldn't turn plea bargaining into therapy. It would just acknowledge that plea bargaining has consequences that go beyond just sentencing. Without this support, the emotional impact of crime might be acknowledged legally, but will remain ignored clinically.

## ***VI. Comparative Perspective USA V India***

### ***6.1 The United States Model of Victim Support in Plea Bargaining***

In the modern U.S. criminal process, plea bargaining is not secondary but structurally central. Plea bargaining typically involves a defendant's guilty plea in exchange for concessions such as charge reduction or favourable sentencing recommendations, thereby increasing the number of case dispositions.

A vital doctrinal feature of the U.S. framework is that victim status is tied to the offence and the harm suffered, not to the procedure followed for case disposal. In other words, a person becomes a victim at the moment harm is caused, and that legal recognition does not weaken merely because the case concludes through a plea rather than a full trial.

U.S. federal law adopts a deliberately broad interpretation so that victims are not excluded from assistance simply because a trial does not occur. Under the Crime Victims' Rights Act (CVRA), a crime victim means a person directly and proximately harmed by the commission of a federal offence.<sup>31</sup> This ensures that the victim is entitled to dignified treatment even in plea-resolved matters, preventing a situation where victims are effectively sidelined because adjudication is done in a shorter course.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Pradeep Kumar Singh, Plea Bargaining and Criminal Justice in India, 7 Athens J.L. 33, 45–47 (2021).

<sup>31</sup> 18 U.S.C. s 3771(e)(2) (2018).

<sup>32</sup> Id. s 3771(a)(8).

The CVRA is the principal legal instrument through which the U.S. system attempts to reconcile the speed of plea resolution with the victim's participatory and psychological needs. It provides victims a reasonable opportunity to interact with prosecutors and to be heard at important stages, including plea proceedings.<sup>33</sup>

From a trauma-informed perspective, participation is not merely symbolic. Where plea bargaining can pose a risk of compressing the narrative of harm into a short procedural process, structured victim participation, including victim impact communication, can help validate the experience of injury, and reduce feelings of exclusion during negotiated justice.

The Department of Justice's Attorney General Guidelines for Victim and Witness Assistance (2022 ed., effective March 31, 2023) assures practical implementation of victim rights across federal agencies.<sup>34</sup>

Alongside personnel-based support, the U.S. also makes sure that victims are kept updated at all stages. The Department of Justice's Victim Notification System (VNS), for instance, illustrates the U.S. emphasis on predictable information access and stage-wise updates.<sup>35</sup> Such tools reduce uncertainty and procedural anxiety by ensuring victims are not dependent solely on informal updates or discretionary communication.

Beyond rights and procedural participation, the U.S. model relies on dedicated institutions. The Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), created under the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA), acts as the cornerstone of federal victim-assistance capacity through programme administration and funding support. The Crime Victims Fund (CVF) operates as an offender-funded mechanism used to finance victim services, including trauma-informed programmes implemented through sub-grants and partner organisations.<sup>36</sup>

The distinctive feature of the U.S. approach is the creation of a balance between increasing case disposal and development of a strong institutional base to support the psychological aspects of victims. This integrated design is especially relevant to victim psychology because it treats participation and support as part of case processing, not as an optional add-on.

## 6.2 Victim Information Systems (VIS) in India

In India, victim participation is primarily recognised through compensation provisions such as Section 357A(6) CrPC and Section 396(6) BNSS.<sup>37</sup> While these provisions provide financial

<sup>33</sup> Id. s 3771(a)(4)–(5).

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Dept. of Just., **Attorney General Guidelines for Victim and Witness Assistance** (2022 ed., effective Mar. 31, 2023).

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Dept. of Just., **Victim Notification System (VNS) Overview** (2023).

<sup>36</sup> 34 U.S.C. s 20101 (Victims of Crime Act).

<sup>37</sup> Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, s 357A(6) (India); Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, s 396(6) (India).

and interim relief, they do not establish a structured plea-stage support mechanism comparable to U.S. victim notification and coordination systems.

Communication regarding plea negotiations typically occurs through prosecutors or Legal Services Authorities, without automated notification systems, integrated tracking mechanisms, or dedicated victim-coordination units. Consequently, although compensation is available, psychological and informational support remain external to the plea-bargaining framework rather than institutionally embedded within it.

## VII. Constitutional Dimensions and Judicial Safeguards

The paper also examines the appellate framework under the plea-bargaining provisions to understand whether a process introduced mainly for reducing case backlog has been able to safeguard victim rights and participation. Although Section 265G of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973,<sup>38</sup> now reenacted as Section 289 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023,<sup>39</sup> Prevents regular appeals; this bar is not absolute but only restrictive in nature. The provision itself allows access to constitutional remedies through the writ jurisdiction of High Courts under Articles 226 and 227 and to the Supreme Court under Article 136 of the Constitution.<sup>40</sup> Judicial interpretation has clarified that the finality attached to plea-bargaining judgments is statutory in nature and not constitutional, and cannot exclude the powers of judicial review. In *George Boban v. State of Kerala*, the Kerala High Court held that even if there is a bar on regular appeals under Section 265G CrPC, writ jurisdiction remains maintainable to examine whether the mandatory safeguards under Chapter XXIA of the CrPC have been followed, particularly to ensure that the plea was made by abiding by the legal procedures.<sup>41</sup> The Court made it clear that plea-bargaining judgments are not closely examined in appeals. This is to ensure that the main goal of plea-bargaining, which is to dispose of cases, is achieved. However, these judgments can still be reviewed by courts, in limited cases, to test the legality, jurisdictional error or if the procedure was unfair. The courts will not look at the merits of the case or the amount of the settlement. This limited judicial review allows courts to step in if the plea-bargaining process ignores the victims' rights or interests. This ensures that the goal of justice does not compromise on fairness and justice. The Court's oversight guarantees that victims' rights to fairness, dignity and access to justice are protected under

<sup>38</sup> Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, s 265G.

<sup>39</sup> Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, s 289.

<sup>40</sup> INDIA CONST. arts. 136, 226–227.

<sup>41</sup> *George Boban v. State of Kerala*, 2015 (3) Crimes (HC) 707 (Ker.).

Article 21 of the Constitution.<sup>42</sup> It makes sure that the principles of fairness and justice in the plea-bargaining process are complied with.

### **VIII. Critical Analysis and Findings**

The study shows that plea bargaining in India, introduced to solve the problem of a backlog of criminal cases and delays in the system, does allow victims to participate through agreeable solutions, moving beyond the traditional adversarial model where victims were only witnesses. However, this participation is mostly on paper. It is not supported by a strong system in place to ensure that victims are involved in a meaningful way throughout the negotiation process. In practice, the agreements often focus on reducing sentences and awarding compensation. The law does not have a way to deal with the trauma, distress or long-term rehabilitation that victims face after a plea bargain. It is assumed that financial restitution heals the emotional wound. This leaves a gap in the system where emotional consequences are acknowledged but not addressed. A comparison with the United States shows how having laws that give victims' rights, a victim notification system and officers who assist them can create an effective support system. In India, the lack of a separate efficient infrastructural mechanism keep track of victims makes it harder to take care of their anxiety and mental healthcare.

However, plea bargaining in India is not completely without checks and balances. Although there are limits on appeals, there are still some remedies available under Articles 226, 227 and 136. This means that the courts can still review the process to ensure it is fair, legal and respects the dignity of victims under Article 21.

Overall, the findings suggest that plea bargaining in India mainly works as a way to speed up the process. It only symbolically involves victims and does not provide them with full support. For plea bargaining to be fair and centred around victims, reforms must focus on providing emotional support and information to ensure that the pursuit of speed does not compromise justice. Plea bargaining in India needs reforms that go beyond just giving compensation to provide a support system for victims. Plea bargaining should not just be about efficiency but about providing justice that's fair and restores the harm suffered by victims.

### **IX. Conclusions and Suggestions**

The plea-bargaining system in India needs to change the way it supports victims. Now, when a plea bargain is made, the victim is often thought to be satisfied with it and their emotional

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<sup>42</sup> INDIA CONST. art 21

and psychological aspect is ignored. The support systems we have now are mainly focussed for victims of extreme violence like sexual assault or acid attacks. This means that there is a sub-classification of victims themselves based on the gravity of the offence.

This aspect ignores the fact that psychological trauma is not based on the legal seriousness of the offence but on how the said incident has impacted the victim's life, particularly in cases where a full-fledged trial is not conducted. The paper recommends the establishment of a separate institutional framework within the plea-bargaining provisions itself for taking care of post-plea mental trauma.

The system, in the United States, is an example. They make sure that victims are part of the process and that they get the help they need. Automated Victims Notification System. helps the victims to get a systematic update about plea hearings, outcomes, and sentencing, and there are designated officers who act as a point of contact to explain procedures, assist with victims, and help in getting counselling and mental health services. The US model gives sufficient importance to psychological support rather than treating it as a secondary measure. Adopting a similar approach in India would require effective implementation of existing laws that focus on helping victims. This includes making trained mental health professionals available at various stages of the criminal process, providing counselling services to victims even after the plea has been finalised. These services should be easy to access. The stigma around seeking mental health care services and availing counselling often stops victims from asking for help. Public awareness initiatives are needed to take care of this issue. By including counselling and psychological care in the plea-bargaining process, the criminal justice system can ensure that victims are not ignored after a settlement. Their psychological harm should be addressed alongside the legal resolution.

This approach will promote a humane and victim-centred system. It will make the plea-bargaining process more just and fairer. Mental health care will remain a priority.