

Law students take action!

By Ashish Poonia, student, Legal Aid Cell, Chanakya National Law University, Patna

What happens when a group of students from a leading national law university take it upon themselves to work for access to social justice at the grassroots? It is educative, inspiring, moving, and above all transformative.

Punas *gram panchayat* (village council) of Samastipur district in Bihar was witness to a legal awareness program conducted by the legal aid cell of Chanakya National Law University (CNLU), Patna, in collaboration with Sehgal Foundation, on February 19, 2017. Seven law students along with faculty member, Mrs. Sugandha Sinha, shared information on the Consumer Protection Act, Right to Public Services, *gram kacheris* (village courts), and one's rights if arrested.

The secretary of Punas gram panchayat explained the functioning of the gram kacheris and how people can take advantage of the existing judicial setup that administers justice at the grassroots level. He shared that gram kacheris are unique to Bihar and aim to provide low-cost and speedy justice to rural people. He urged residents of Bihar to be proud of this and to refer their disputes to gram kacheris before taking it to any other forum. People do not need to hire lawyers, and the fee is only one hundred rupees to file their application.

A CNLU student who did a study on the functioning of gram kacheris highlighted some of the major findings of her study. She pointed out that Gram Kachahari "*Apki samasya ka niptara Jaldi karta hai Jalbazi mein nahi*" (solves your problem in a speedier manner but not in hurry). She emphasized how people can come forward and avail justice without going too far from their homes. She noted that most of gram panchayats do not have *nyaya mitra* (justice friend), a law graduate who helps gram kacheris in dispensing justice.

The second topic of training, the Consumer Protection Act, was covered by Ashish Poonia. He gave the definition of a consumer and what type of matters can be brought before the consumer redressal forum. He explained that consumer disputes are resolved in a speedier manner and the consumer doesn't need to hire a lawyer to approach the consumer redressal forum. He described the preliminary process in which notice must be served to the manufacturer of the product or to the shopkeeper. He talked about the fees a consumer needs to pay to the consumer redressal forum for filing a complaint and provided a toll-free number, 1800114000, that any consumer can call with any query pertaining to a consumer dispute.

The third topic, Rights of Arrested Persons, was presented in the form of a skit by all seven CNLU students, demonstrating that an arrested person has rights and police cannot violate those rights. Some of the rights include: 1) a woman can only be arrested by a female police officer and only before sunset, 2) police cannot handcuff every person but only the accused to prevent flight, 3) every person making a First Information Report (FIR) has a right to ask for a copy of the FIR, 4) women should be kept in different cells with a toilet facility, 5) every arrested

person has the right to inform any person of his choice that he has been arrested, and 6) the arrested person should be medically examined before his incarceration.

The fourth topic was the Right to Public Services. Neha and Shreya Shikha talked about the rights covered under this Act and the time limits within which every person in Bihar has a right to receive the benefit of a public service. They explained how people suffer when they are unable to access important certificates (birth certificate, caste certificate, etc.) on time and how, using the provisions of this act, people can receive various services in a timely manner.

Finally, Rakesh Kumar from Bela Panchayat pointed out that people in his village have voiced their rights collectively and, as a result, a number of problems related to Public Distribution System and village development have been solved.

At the end of the session, CNLU students and Sushila Devi (sarpanch of Gram Panchayat Punas) discussed the problem of solving the nonappointment of Nyaya Mitra in her panchayat. They agreed that an application must be filed before the district magistrate. The students and Sehgal Foundation staff helped the sarpanch draft the application, which was later signed by 50 villagers.

About 125 villagers benefited from the program, and villagers of nearby gram panchayats, namely Bedaulia, invited CNLU students and Sehgal Foundation to conduct similar programs.

Hopefully, these programs will further inspire law colleges, National Social Service volunteers, and other educational institutes to conduct similar awareness programs in villages near their colleges, so that villagers can become aware of their rights, become empowered, and improve their overall well-being.



Ashish making villagers aware on Right to Services, Punas, Samastipur



Neeraj Dubey, Sehgal Foundation, explaining the objectives of the program