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Talwant Singh
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Introduction to the India Legal Information Institute

TALWANT SINGH*

Ordinary citizens, litigants, students of law and lawyers in a civil society have a right to know about the prevailing law of that country. The traditional way of disseminating legal information – on paper – has given way to the electronic format in most of the developed countries. Gradually, this change is also beginning in the developing countries. In India, no one has a copyright to the text of judgments delivered by the courts; however, in the headnotes of judgments, copyright issues are involved. The bigger Internet players have started fee-based legal websites where one can become a member and/or registered user by paying periodical subscriptions. These can run into thousand of rupees every year. Only after paying the access fees can the visitor gain access to the complete headnote or the plain text of the judgment.

Official websites of the Supreme Court as well as other High Courts are maintained by the National Information Centre (NIC). Except few websites, like those for the Supreme Court, Delhi High Court and Bombay High Court, other websites for most of the High Courts are not regularly updated. Even if this were otherwise, there is no subject classification of the judgments and one can only search judgments on the basis of the names of the parties, name of the judge, date of decision or the number of the case. There cannot be any search based upon the law in question or the subject matter involved in the judgments.

Under these circumstances, a need was identified in India for an institute with the sole motive of providing “Free Legal Information to All.” Deliberations took place among the prominent jurists of the country, including

* Mr. Talwant Singh is the General Secretary of the Indian Legal Information Institute. He holds a master’s degree in Commerce and a bachelor of law, along with an advanced diploma in Management and a certificate in Basic Computer Language. After practicing law for about fifteen years, in 2000 he joined the Delhi Higher Judicial Service as an Additional District & Sessions Judge. Mr. Singh has written articles and books on electronic case management and has lectured at various judicial conferences.

retired Chief Justices of India, prominent lawyers, serving members of the judiciary, academicians and technical experts. They sought to provide a platform where concrete efforts would be made to fulfill the objective of providing Free Legal Information to All, and hence, India Legal Information Institute was born on November 25, 2006.²

The Advisory Board of INDLII consists of 16 retired Chief Justices of India. Mr. Adish C. Aggarwala, Senior Advocate and Additional Advocate General of the State of Punjab, President of International Council of Jurists is the Chairman of INDLII. Mr. Talwant Singh, Additional District & Sessions Judge for Delhi is the General Secretary of INDLII.

The mission statement of the Institute states that everyone has a right to know the law of the land free of cost. To fulfill this aspiration, the Institute undertakes to collect legal information about India from all available sources; publish the material on the Internet with free and full public access; grant rights to the public to use the legal resources without any restrictions; create awareness about the availability of free legal resources; remove hurdles coming in the way of providing free legal information; and coordinate with other Institutions of the world to explore sources & utilisation of legal information.

INDLII provides up-to-date legal information about federal luminaries of India, such as President of India, Chief Justice of India and Prime Minister of India. The Life sketches of Governors of States, Chief Justices of High Courts, Chief Ministers of States, Speakers of State Assemblies and Judges of High Courts are also provided. Brief descriptions about the federal bodies like the Supreme Court of India, Law Commission of India, National Human Rights Commission, National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission and Bar Council of India are also available. One can also check the list of Universities and Colleges providing legal education and an E-journal provides the latest articles on different aspects of law in India.

Our aim is to provide all Central Acts, State Acts, Rules and Regulations on the Internet. Efforts are under way to provide all the Supreme Court judgments and 21 High Courts' Judgments on this website with subject and Act/Section indices. We also endeavor to provide judgments of quasi judicial bodies like the Central Administrative Tribunal, National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission and Copyright Board on this site. The District Judiciary in India is also being connected to the Internet and we wish

² Its website can be found at www.indlii.org.

to uplink the District Courts' websites and to publish their judgments on our website.

The Discussion Forum provides a platform for the common man to put forward his legal problems to legal experts who answer the queries within a short time. An exchange of views among stake-holders of the judicial system also takes place at our website. We have special write-ups on the emerging fields of cyber law and forensics. The legal jargon has been explained in the glossary part of the website. News and views from India and abroad are updated on a daily basis and information is provided regarding upcoming events and conferences being held in India in the law related fields.

INDLII has been registered as a Charitable Not-For-Profit Trust. Initial funds were provided by the founder Chairman, but there is no regular inflow of funds either from the Government or from the other stake-holders in the legal field. But the Institute is committed to its ideology of providing Free Legal Information to All despite the odds. The Institute entered into a strategic relationship with an Ahmedabad-based software company. Under this arrangement, the legal content for the website has been provided by the Institute and the website has been designed and hosted by M/s Bitscape of Ahmedabad. To meet the expenses, the other partner is free to place advertisements in the margins of web pages at the website. This way, the Institute is able to host its website with a minimum of financial burden to its slim financial resources. Moreover, the arrangement has given enough time to the trustees to concentrate on the development of content rather than be worried about getting the website developed, designed and hosted.

To collect legal information at the grass roots level, the Institute is forming State and District Chapters of INDLII. These are being headed by eminent jurists of the respective States/Districts and other known legal personalities have been added as members. The main activities of these Chapters are to collect legal information and forward it to INDLII Headquarter in New Delhi. The Chapters will also organize seminars, workshops and conferences and spread the message of INDLII of providing Free Legal Information to All.

On the technical side, we provide judgments as well as statutes in HTML format in response to the search made. These HTML pages also contain advertisements in margins placed by our strategic partner, but as soon as a viewer wants to print the judgment or the statute, the page is printed in PDF format without the advertisement. This dual use of technology has enabled us to provide the best printed format for judgments and statutes and it

has also ensured that the strategic partner is able to generate some revenue to sustain the website it is hosting.

We are also working on a world class search engine which will allow a fast search of the entire database in response to any query by a viewer. For this purpose, meta-tagging of the entire data is under way. Once this process is complete, the search will yield more relevant data and be much faster. During the next few years, INDLII will emerge as one of the largest free legal databases in the world. The challenge is great. India is the largest democracy of the world. It already has more than 5000 Central Acts, and innumerable State Acts, Regulations and Rules. There are 26 Justices on the Supreme Court of India and about 750 Judges in 21 High Courts, and nearly 13,000 Judges in 780 District Courts in India. Collectively, they pronounce thousands of judgments every day. There are other quasi-judicial bodies at the federal as well as the state or district levels. These include Consumer Forums, Administrative Tribunals, School Tribunals, Human Rights Commissions and Legal Aid Authorities. Additionally, the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanism is in place and consists of arbitration, mediation and conciliation bodies. Efforts are being made in and out of the Courts by ADR bodies to settle disputes in an amicable way, and final adjudications, awards, and settlements of these bodies are also of interest to the legal fraternity. Efforts shall be made to collect them, index them by subject, and publish them on the INDLII website. With the collective efforts of all our well wishers, we will be able to achieve the goals we have set.