

The Sikkim State Legal Services Authority under the aegis of National Legal Services Authority and in coordination with District Legal Services Authority, Southorganized a ***Mega Legal Awareness and Outreach Programme*** on 23rd April, 2023 at Kissan Market Namchi, on NALSA (Child Friendly Legal Services to Children and their Protection) Scheme, 2015, NALSA (Legal Services to Senior Citizens) Scheme, 2016 and NALSA (Protection and Enforcement of Tribal Rights) Scheme, 2015.

Hon'ble Mr. Justice Biswanath Somadder, Chief Justice, High Court of Sikkim & Patron-in-Chief, Sikkim SLSA was the Chief Guest in the programme while Hon'ble Mrs. Justice Meenakshi Madan Rai, Judge, High Court of Sikkim & Executive Chairperson, Sikkim SLSA was the Guest of Honour. Judicial Officers, District Collector, Superintendent of Police, Sub-Divisional Magistrate, Officers from the Police Department, Women & Child Development Department, NGOs: Sai Samiti and Kul Prasad, Retired Officers/Officials, members of Taxi Driver Association, Bhutia, Lepcha and Tamang Association, Bazaar Business Community, members of Motor Cycle Club, Hawkers Association, Panel Advocates, Para Legal Volunteers, Panchayats, Teachers and students of Senior Secondary School, New Secondary School and Namchi Girls Senior Secondary School, Caretakers and children from Mayallyang Children Home and Manjusha Short Stay Home, Members of the BAR Association of Namchi and the residents of Namchi and neighbouring areas were also present at the function.

Hon'ble the Chief Justice, informed in his address that the object of the legal services institutions is to ensure "Access to Justice" to all the marginalized and vulnerable sections of our society. He further deliberated on the rights of children, which ought to be protected and urged that the DLSAs should visit each school within their district and promote the effectiveness and ensure the efficacy of the Scheme of NALSA pertaining to children. Further, his Lordship requested the State administration to assist the Legal Services Institutions in implementation of the schemes of NALSA specially with regard to senior citizens so that they are not deprived of their rights.

Hon'ble Judge, High Court of Sikkim & Executive Chairperson, Sikkim SLSA in her address highlighted the provisions contained in the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 and Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 and stressed on the role of various stakeholders in ensuring the rights of children. She stated that children aged 6 to 14 years are entitled to free and compulsory education.

She also informed that as a society, duty is cast on us to ensure that children are not subjected to any form of abuse including sexual abuse and the students were apprised that any consensual act of children under the age of 18 (*eighteen*) years amounts to an offence under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012. It was also highlighted that people who are aware of such offences but do not report it are liable under the Act. Her Ladyship advised the parents present in the programme to obtain birth certificates of their children on time to avoid the offenders under the POCSO

Act from going scot free in the event that the age of the victim as a minor stands disproved.

The gathering was apprised that Para-Legal Volunteers of Sikkim SLSA have been appointed as Support Persons to assist the POCSO survivors during investigation, medical examination and trial. Also, separate rooms have been identified in all government hospitals for medical examination of victims of sexual assault to avoid further traumatization.

Hon'ble Executive Chairperson informed that upon the initiation of Sikkim SLSA, geriatric beds have been earmarked in hospitals and there are separate counters for senior citizens in the hospitals and banks and they have access to free travel in State Nationalized Transport (SNT) buses.

Resource Person, Shri Satyen Pradhan, Additional Secretary, Social Welfare Department informed that the tribal population in Sikkim accounts for 37% of the total population and Social Welfare Department is the nodal department for Tribal Affairs. It was apprised that four Eklavya Model Residential School (EMRS) have been set up for children from tribal community at Gangyap, Gyalshing, Suntaley, Namchi, Pakyong and Swayem, Mangan and further highlighted the achievements of EMRS in Sikkim. It was informed that a Tribal Research Institute has been set up by the Social Welfare Department, Gangtok that focuses on research of tribal affairs and currently, the infrastructure is being set up at Assam Linzey that will also house a museum and a guest house. He informed that scholarships can be availed by the children from tribal communities at the pre-matric and post-matric level and the information can be obtained from the website www.scholarship.gov.in.

Shri D.P. Sharma (Retired Secretary), President, Sikkim Senior Citizens Foundation, detailed the provisions of Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 and informed that Sikkim Senior Citizens Foundation has 114 members and its office is located above the Office of the Principal Accountant General at Deorali, Gangtok. He stated that any grievances faced by the senior citizens can be reported to the Foundation who will pursue it with the concerned Offices. He further informed that the Sikkim SLSA has published a booklet on the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on the Act which has proved to be very helpful for the senior citizens. He informed that children have a duty to take care of their parents and maintain them. Mr. Sharma lamented on the growing number of cases of sexual assault on senior citizens and requested the police personnel to patrol the areas where senior citizens reside to help mitigate the crimes committed against them.

Resource Person, Mrs. Tashi Choden Bhutia, Additional Secretary-cum-Director, Child Protection Scheme, Women & Child Development Department, Government of Sikkim informed the gathering about the Mission Vatsalya Scheme introduced by the Ministry of Women & Child Development, Government of India. She apprised the gathering that the children lodged at the Child Care Institutions receive a sum of

Rs.3,000/- per month under the Scheme and that foster care and sponsorship are also provided to the children by the Department. Till date, 244 children have been sponsored by the State Government. She further apprised the gathering that there are fourteen Children's Home in Sikkim and apart from the Homes, there are Open Shelter Homes and Short Stay Homes.

The welcome address was delivered by Ms. Subarna Rai, Member Secretary, Sikkim SLSA and the vote of thanks was proposed by Mrs. Samita Sharma, District & Sessions Judge & Chairperson, D.L.S.A., Namchi District during the programme at Namchi.

Stalls were set up by the Education Department, Food & Civil Supplies Department and Social Justice & Welfare Department with information on the various schemes and on the spot assistance was given to the public by the Panel Advocates and Para Legal Volunteers of Sikkim SLSA for availing these schemes. The students attended the stall set up by Education Department to learn about the various scholarship programmes of the State Government. A free health camp was also set up by Sikkim SLSA where free services were rendered by the doctors and staff of District Hospital Namchi and prescribed medicines were distributed free of cost.

After the programme the Hon'ble Executive Chairperson, Sikkim SLSA inspected the Old Age Home at Namchi where four senior citizens are presently lodged. The Home comprises of dormitories, recreational room, library, kitchen, etc. and her Ladyship was pleased to note that the Old Age Home was very well designed keeping in account the need of space and light and urged that proper maintenance should be continued.