

# LAW AND THE YOUTH: EXPLORING LEGAL AWARENESS IN RURAL ASSAM

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**Abstract:** In academic discourse, legal awareness refers to the comprehensive understanding individuals have of their legal rights, the procedures established by the legal system, and the avenues available for accessing justice. Such knowledge can be acquired through the guidance and support of legal professionals, paralegals, and other credible and authoritative sources. This paper seeks to examine the extent of legal awareness among youth residing in rural areas of Assam, focusing specifically on individuals aged 18 to 24 years from two rural colleges located in the Dibrugarh district. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants, and the study utilized a qualitative approach to facilitate an in-depth analysis of the data collected. The findings reveal that both male and female respondents in the targeted rural settings exhibit a significant lack of awareness and engagement with their legal rights and entitlements. Despite multiple initiatives undertaken by governmental and non-governmental organizations aimed at enhancing legal awareness—particularly among women—the study highlights an alarming level of indifference and distrust towards the legal system among the participants. This disinterest not only undermines efforts to promote legal literacy but also raises critical questions about the effectiveness and reach of current awareness programs in addressing the needs of marginalized rural youth.

**Keywords:** Law; Youth; Assam; Legal Awareness; Rural; Gender.

## INTRODUCTION

Legal awareness, commonly understood as individuals' knowledge of their legal rights and understanding of the processes and procedures within the legal system, is a foundational element for empowering citizens. This awareness enables people to access the legal system effectively, often with the support of legal professionals and paralegal workers. Legal awareness is particularly significant in rural communities, where the lack of access to information, legal resources, and infrastructure often limits individuals' ability to exercise their rights. In the north-eastern Indian state of Assam, the issue of legal awareness among the youth in rural areas is a critical concern that warrants urgent attention.

The issue of low legal awareness in rural Assam is complex and arises from a combination of social, economic, and political factors. Studies, such as those conducted by Deka (2008), highlight the role of limited educational and economic opportunities as primary barriers to understanding and utilizing the legal system. Rural youth, often constrained by inadequate access to quality education and employment opportunities, find it difficult to navigate legal procedures or assert their rights effectively.

Traditional social structures and entrenched gender norms further compound this issue,

particularly for women, who frequently face systemic barriers in accessing legal resources and services. Cultural expectations and the lack of gender-sensitive legal outreach programs mean that women are disproportionately excluded from legal empowerment initiatives. The intersection of these challenges underscores the pressing need for targeted interventions to promote legal awareness among rural populations, particularly the youth.

In response to the barriers faced by rural communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based groups have emerged as key players in promoting legal awareness in Assam. These organizations have been instrumental in conducting legal education programs and establishing grassroots initiatives to provide legal assistance. For instance, the Women's Legal Aid Cell in Guwahati has focused on raising awareness about legal rights and making legal services more accessible to marginalized groups, including women and youth. Such initiatives highlight the potential of collaborative efforts to bridge the gap in legal knowledge and resources in rural areas.

The youth population in rural Assam represents a critical demographic for fostering a culture of legal consciousness. Young people are not only potential beneficiaries of legal awareness programs but also active agents of societal change. By equipping rural youth with knowledge of their legal

rights and the skills to navigate the legal system, it is possible to build a generation that actively participates in shaping a more just and equitable society.

In rural settings like Assam, where traditional norms and socio-economic constraints often limit individual agency, empowering the youth with legal awareness has far-reaching implications. A legally informed youth population can challenge systemic injustices, advocate for community development, and contribute to the establishment of a robust legal culture. Furthermore, increased legal awareness among the youth can mitigate issues such as exploitation, discrimination, and denial of basic rights, fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

The lack of legal awareness in rural areas has profound implications for both individual rights and broader societal development. On a personal level, individuals with limited understanding of their legal rights are more vulnerable to exploitation and injustice. This vulnerability can manifest in various forms, including denial of property rights, workplace exploitation, and lack of access to government welfare schemes.

At the societal level, low legal awareness can hinder community development and perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality. Without adequate knowledge of legal rights and remedies, communities are less likely to hold authorities accountable or demand systemic change. This lack of accountability can, in turn, reinforce existing power imbalances and impede progress toward social justice and development.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The body of existing literature on legal awareness among youth in rural Assam offers critical insights into the challenges and potential strategies for addressing this issue. For instance, the article "Gender Disparity and Legal Awareness in Assam" by Meeta Deka (2008) explores the complex interplay of historical and socio-political factors that have significantly contributed to the inadequate levels of legal awareness in the state, particularly among women. This study highlights how entrenched gender disparities, deeply rooted in cultural and societal norms, hinder the dissemination of legal knowledge and awareness in rural areas.

Ikram and Hanif (2020) highlight the transformative impact of education and economic empowerment on enhancing legal awareness and self-reliance among rural women in Punjab, Pakistan. While there are parallels between the challenges faced by rural women in Punjab and those in Assam, it is crucial to acknowledge the distinct cultural and socio-economic contexts of the two regions. Therefore, while lessons can be drawn from Pakistan's experiences, solutions for Assam must be tailored to the region's unique circumstances to ensure relevance and effectiveness.

Legal awareness is an essential component of empowering individuals to understand and exercise their legal rights effectively. It encompasses the dissemination of knowledge about legal rights, legal literacy, and mechanisms for accessing justice. Addressing the issue of legal awareness among youth in rural Assam necessitates a comprehensive approach that accounts for its multifaceted nature. This includes acknowledging the socio-economic disparities, educational gaps, and cultural barriers that shape the lived experiences of these communities.

Legal literacy in Assam, particularly in rural areas, remains constrained due to the web of socio-economic barriers, infrastructural lag and cultural beliefs. Chauhan (2023) highlights the drawbacks of the formal legal aid system of India, focusing on the geographical boundaries, inadequacy of resources, and lesser reach of the legal services to such places. Similarly, Barman (2023) states that most legal aid initiatives fail to contextually adapt to the social and cultural realities of the society, thereby restricting the invoking of the same by the rural population. This form of systemic challenge is more acute in rural areas of Dibrugarh, Assam, where women from tribal and tea garden communities face a significant and steep decline in rural literacy. Borah (2023) observes a very low awareness among women about the basic entitlements, and therefore, suggests that it might be the same in the case of young girls.

Rural populations often face significant hurdles in accessing legal information and services due to geographic isolation, economic hardships, and illiteracy. In particular, studies emphasize gender-based disparities, with rural women experiencing lower levels of legal awareness due to patriarchal norms, restricted mobility, and limited access to

education. These gender disparities are particularly pronounced in rural Assam, where systemic inequities further exacerbate the problem. Hussain (2008) argues that rural women, mainly from Muslim and tribal communities, experience legal exclusion, both structurally and symbolically. It is important that legal literacy needs to be conceptualized as a 'process' for legal engagement instead of a 'one-time intervention' to fill in the gap between formal legal system and lived social realities.

Various government and non-governmental organizations have implemented initiatives aimed at promoting legal awareness in rural areas. North East Network (2023) has conducted legal literacy programmes incorporating activities like street plays, group discussions among rural women and youth. These efforts stress the need for culturally relevant and localized interventions, which can pave the way for legal empowerment. Gogoi (2022) studies the efforts by NGOs in Lakhimpur, Assam which engage with the youth and show how a collaboration between community leaders and school networks can be instrumental in promoting legal awareness. These programs often focus on providing legal aid, organizing awareness campaigns, and conducting workshops tailored to the needs of vulnerable populations, including women and youth. However, the impact of these initiatives varies, highlighting the need for more targeted and culturally sensitive approaches.

Global and national studies have explored the relationship between youth and legal awareness, emphasizing the role of education, media, and technology in bridging knowledge gaps. Saikia (2021) points out towards the poor condition of education system in rural Assam, which stands as a major obstacle in generating legal awareness. Without the basic foundation of education, one cannot expect marginalized groups to educate themselves about the intricacies of the legal system. The under-resourced and poorly managed education system, according to Saikia (2021), hinders sustained legal literacy. The initiatives of NGOs and legal aid centres often lack the pedagogical continuity to attain legal empowerment. Nath (n.d) also noted that formal education alone does not guarantee legal knowledge if not paired with rights based training or targeted legal literacy programmes.

Direct studies on areas like legal awareness among rural youth in Assam are still rare. The available empirical studies focus on women, children, or, in general, rural populations. There is also a dearth of research on the concept of legal consciousness in Assam. It is notable that although India has expanded e-governance and online legal services, little attention has been paid to digital legal literacy. The preceding review of literature also shows the impact of socio-economic background, education and gender in shaping one's legal awareness. However, few studies have systematically looked into these aspects, particularly in case of the youth in rural Assam. Similarly, literature is scarce in regards to effectiveness of NGO and state interventions to generate legal awareness. Such gaps point to a need to inquire about the extent of legal awareness of the rural youth in Assam. Along the same lines, the current study is designed to pursue the following set of objectives.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To document the socio-economic profile of the respondents. This objective seeks to note the different backgrounds of the young respondents, and the ways it impacts their level of legal awareness.

- To investigate the extent of legal awareness among youth in rural Assam:

This objective aims to systematically examine the current level of understanding and knowledge that young individuals in rural Assam possess regarding their legal rights, responsibilities, and the functioning of the legal system.

- To identify the factors influencing limited engagement with the legal system:

This objective seeks to explore the underlying socio-economic, cultural, and structural barriers that contribute to the low participation and interaction of rural youth with the legal system, thereby uncovering the key determinants of this phenomenon.

- To evaluate the effectiveness of existing legal awareness programs:

This objective involves assessing the reach, impact, and limitations of the legal awareness initiatives currently implemented in rural Assam.

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the dimensions of legal awareness among young individuals. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents, focusing on young women and men aged 18 to 24 years from two colleges located in rural areas of the Dibrugarh district. A total of 40 students participated in the study, with an equal distribution of 20 males and 20 females. The respondents mainly belonged to three communities – Adivasi (tea tribe), Sonowal Kachari and Ahom. All of them were first generation undergraduate learners coming from low-income households.

**Table 1:** Gender basis of Sample Tribes and Communities

Community	Male	Female
Adivasi (Tea tribe)	13	11
Sonowal Kachari	4	4
Ahom	3	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>20</b>

The primary method of data collection involved semi-structured interviews, which allowed for an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives. To further enrich the findings, the researcher also engaged in discussions with faculty members and other staff at the selected colleges.

Thematic analysis was employed as the analytical framework for identifying and interpreting key themes emerging from the interviews and discussions. Throughout the research process, the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were strictly upheld. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement in the study, ensuring ethical standards were rigorously maintained during both data collection and analysis.

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the research was conducted within a restricted geographical area and involved a relatively small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader contexts. Additionally, the study faced constraints due to a paucity of time, which restricted the depth and scope of data collection and analysis. Furthermore, potential biases inherent in the qualitative data collection

methods, such as interviewer influence or respondent subjectivity, must be acknowledged as they could have affected the accuracy and reliability of the results.

## FINDINGS

This study argues that gender and socio-economic marginalization are significant determinants of extent of legal knowledge. The following are the themes derived from the data collected from the respondents. It was noted that while male respondents expressed frustration and disappointment from an 'apparently' hostile legal system, female respondents were prone to fear and internalized stigma from the system. Though different in nature, the forms of disengagement were equally potent for the youth respondents.

## ROLE OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

The socio-economic status of the respondents played an important role in their access to and engagement with legal literacy. All participants belonged to marginalized groups and their household earnings stand in the low-income category. They were involved in tea plantation work, daily wage labour, small scale farming and weaving.

'My parents work in the tea garden. They are not much aware about a lawyer's job,' said Dalimi. (Tea tribe, Female, 20).

In addition, as the respondents were the firsts in their families to receive higher education, they were quite cautious about what they were learning. It was more evident with the female respondents who had a larger share in managing household work along with their studies. The girls from Ahom and Sonowal communities were still in a better position than the Adivasi girls. Yet, due to restricted mobility and imposition of socio-cultural expectations, all female respondents were reluctant to discuss about law or their legal rights.

'Discussing law means that we have done some wrong. We prefer to be silent on that topic.' said Luna. (Ahom, Female, 22)

## LEVEL OF LEGAL AWARENESS AMONG YOUTH

The findings reveal a concerning low level of legal awareness among the majority of respondents. 52.5 percent (21) of respondents were generally aware of the availability of legal aid to common people. Only 7.5 percent (3) were females among the individuals who demonstrated basic knowledge of laws pertaining to gender discrimination, child marriage, and domestic violence, substantial gaps in their understanding were evident. 90 percent (36) of respondents perceived the legal system as inaccessible and cumbersome for ordinary citizens, further exacerbating their lack of engagement with legal processes. A pronounced disparity in legal awareness was noted along the lines of gender, highlighting systemic barriers that prevent equitable access to legal knowledge and services.

Respondents associated law mainly with criminal activities, encounters with police, courtrooms, rather than looking at its emancipatory potential for citizens.

‘Law is for criminals and police. We are not involved in such matters,’ stated Tilok. (Tea tribe, male, 19)

The respondents who had participated in institution-based awareness programmes were vaguely aware about fundamental rights, legal aid, or protective laws like the Domestic Violence Act, 2005. All female respondents could strongly recall the existence of gender specific laws in the state, but they did not possess the confidence to invoke the same.

‘I know that dowry is illegal. I also know that there are punishments for domestic violence. But going to the police or court will tarnish the reputation of any family. I don’t think I will suggest that,’ said Mina. (Sonowal, Female, 20)

## DISINTEREST AND DISTRUST TOWARD THE LEGAL SYSTEM

The respondents’ understanding of the legal system was largely derived from social media or

second-hand accounts of others’ experiences. This limited exposure contributed to widespread distrust in legal institutions. All male and female respondents expressed skepticism regarding the efficiency and accessibility of the legal framework. They frequently characterized legal procedures as excessively lengthy, complex, and financially burdensome, rendering justice unattainable for many. High legal fees charged by lawyers were a common point of critique, as were allegations of corruption at various stages of the judicial process.

‘The justice system is not for poor people. Money is very important,’ said Samir. (Sonowal, Male, 21)

For the female respondents, the fear of social consequences acted as a major barrier to seek legal aid.

‘If we talk to a policeman or lawyer, we will become the talk of the town. We just hope we never need law,’ said Ritu. (Ahom, Female, 23)

Such kind of exclusionary practices and bias from the formal legal system further bolster legal disengagement of the rural youth, primarily those belonging to marginalized groups.

## IMPACT OF GOVERNMENTAL AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL INITIATIVES

Efforts to enhance legal awareness through governmental and non-governmental initiatives have had limited success. The District Legal Services Authority (DLSA), a state-led initiative, and several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Dibrugarh are actively engaged in organizing workshops on issues such as women’s rights, child rights, and domestic violence legislation. However, the outreach of these programs appears insufficient, as respondents reported that such initiatives are predominantly restricted to urban areas. Notably, only two respondents had experience of attending such programmes.

‘Once, our college Women Cell organized a talk on legal awareness. But I could not understand much. Very less students attended it. It seemed very difficult,’ said Kabita (Ahom, Female, 20)

The respondents emphasized the urgent need for legal awareness campaigns to be conducted in educational institutions.

Encouragingly, the inclusion of legal literacy courses in the National Education Policy (NEP) has introduced some respondents to foundational legal concepts through their coursework.

‘For the first time, I felt legal awareness is important. Also, that everybody should know about their legal rights. I liked the course,’ said Rumi. (Tea tribe, Female, 19)

## **BARRIERS TO LEGAL ACCESS AND KNOWLEDGE**

The socio-economic profile of the respondents presented significant barriers to legal access and knowledge. Factors such as economic hardship, limited awareness of legal procedures and institutions, digital illiteracy, and deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes emerged as primary obstacles. Geographic inaccessibility of legal institutions further compounded the problem, especially as the respondents resided in remote or rural areas. For young women, cultural restrictions, societal norms, and the fear of dishonour severely constrained their mobility and ability to seek legal recourse or engage with legal systems.

60 percent (24) of respondents were from the Adivasi community, with their families primarily employed as daily wage labourers in the tea gardens of the district. Among these respondents, 78 per cent were first-generation learners, a demographic that faces unique challenges in navigating both educational and legal landscapes. They also felt a sense of neglect from the formal justice system.

‘Our conflicts are mostly resolved within the community. Outside law is rarely used to solve our issues,’ mentioned Sunita. (Tea tribe, Female, 23)

These findings underscore the intersectional nature of barriers to legal awareness, encompassing economic, geographic, cultural, and educational dimensions.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Need for Effective and Targeted Legal Education Programs for Rural Youth

There is a pressing need to develop and implement legal education programs specifically tailored to the unique challenges faced by rural youth. It was found that respondents, particularly from the Adivasi community had very limited exposure to legal knowledge. As such, legal education programs should focus on enhancing their understanding of fundamental legal rights and responsibilities while addressing the socio-economic and cultural barriers that often limit access to education in these areas. Legal knowledge should be disseminated locally in vernacular languages so that the rural youth can relate it with their everyday realities. Interactive activities like street plays, storytelling and community games can make legal knowledge accessible and engaging for the rural population.

## ***THE IMPORTANCE OF GENDER-SENSITIVE APPROACHES TO LEGAL AWARENESS***

Female respondents in this study showed their indifference, fear, and stigma about legal aid. Therefore, legal awareness initiatives must adopt gender-sensitive frameworks to address this gap. These approaches should consider cultural norms, systemic inequalities, and specific vulnerabilities that limit women's access to legal resources. Women only activities could be conducted to ensure a safe and participatory environment. Local women can be recruited and trained as para legal volunteers to generate awareness among the women from marginalized groups.

## ***ENHANCING LEGAL LITERACY CAMPAIGNS IN RURAL AREAS THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA***

Legal literacy campaigns must prioritize accessibility and inclusivity to maximize their impact in rural regions. This includes employing multilingual resources, utilizing culturally relevant content, and leveraging local communication channels to reach diverse audiences. All the respondents were aware of smartphones and used them for their studies. The respondents were aware of platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram. These platforms could act as major tools in youth legal education. Digital content in vernacular languages in the social media platforms could be engaging for the youth to increase their legal awareness.

## **INTRODUCE BASIC LEGAL EDUCATION IN INSTITUTIONS**

While it was found that legal literacy courses were now introduced for some students, as first-generation learners, most respondents were unaware about their basic legal rights. Institutions like the college could introduce non-credit courses and mandatory workshops in their undergraduate curriculum. Programs should incorporate participatory approaches, such as peer-led workshops and experiential learning activities, to ensure that young people are not only recipients but also contributors to the dissemination of legal knowledge within their communities. The colleges can collaborate with the District Legal Services Authority and NGOs working on legal aid. They can also form permanent legal awareness cells in the campus that conduct regular workshops, monitor impact of activities, and revise content delivery based on participation and retention by students.

## **BUILDING TRUST THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED LEGAL COLLABORATIONS**

Establishing community-based legal services and outreach programs is essential for building trust and ensuring the sustainability of legal

education initiatives in rural areas. These services should prioritize accessibility, affordability, and cultural relevance to address the specific needs of marginalized groups. By fostering collaborative relationships with local stakeholders, such as community leaders and grassroots organizations, these efforts can enhance trust and ensure long-term engagement with legal awareness programs. It was found that some communities preferred resolving issues through local forms of governance. Legal awareness sessions can be held at Panchayat offices, including community leaders, women's groups, self-help groups to spread legal knowledge.

## **CONCLUSION**

To address the limitations and build on the insights gained, future research should expand the scope of inquiry. Specifically, there is a need to explore legal awareness and literacy in other rural regions of India to understand regional variations and unique challenges. Comparative studies examining the effectiveness of different types of legal literacy programs could provide valuable insights into best practices and strategies for improving legal awareness. These avenues for further research could contribute significantly to developing more inclusive and effective legal education initiatives.

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