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# COMMUNITY MEDIATION MODELS: INDIA VS USA VS SINGAPORE

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## ABSTRACT

India's judicial system is often slow, causing many people to look for other ways to resolve disputes. These include Lok Adalats, set up under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, and the more recent Mediation Act, 2023. However, it is unclear if these government-backed forums can truly be called community mediation because they may not have strong local support, might involve pressure on people to agree, and could focus more on quickly settling cases than on fixing relationships.

This paper compares different models of community mediation in India, the United States, and Singapore to see if they can help improve access to justice. In the US, community mediation is led by local volunteers who take a restorative justice approach, focusing on repairing relationships. Singapore has a system that mixes government support with trained community mediators, making it efficient and effective in achieving settlements that promote social harmony.

The study shows that India's system, while handling a lot of cases quickly, lacks real community involvement, can favour those with more power, and may not be truly voluntary. These issues are highlighted through a case study of a rural family dispute and practical experiences from the field.

The paper suggests combining Singapore's structured and efficient system with the US model's focus on local volunteers and restorative justice. It also proposes adding Indian-specific protections like checking for vulnerability, allowing people to opt out, and providing cultural sensitivity training. This approach could be supported by Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution, helping to create a fairer and more inclusive justice system.

**Keywords:** Community Mediation, Lok Adalats, Access to Justice, Comparative ADR, Mediation Act 2023, Restorative Justice

## I. INTRODUCTION

India's justice system is under a lot of pressure due to a large number of pending cases. People, especially in rural areas and among weaker groups, often wait for years or even decades for their legal matters to be resolved. Formal courts are not always accessible, affordable, or safe for these groups. The promise of justice for all, as outlined in the Constitution, is not always met because delays and costs make it hard for people to get timely relief.

To address this, alternative dispute resolution (ADR) methods like Lok Adalats were introduced. These are "people's courts"<sup>1</sup> set up by the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987<sup>2</sup>, under the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) and state/district agencies. Lok Adalats help settle disputes quickly, often without cost. Recent efforts include pilot projects on community mediation, the release of a training manual, and initiatives in Baghpat, Uttar Pradesh. The Mediation Act, 2023 also recognizes community mediation as a separate option for disputes that affect local peace and require mutual agreement.

However, there are doubts about whether India's system truly represents community mediation. Critics argue that these forums may not be based on real community involvement, may not focus on restoring relationships, and may not be voluntary. There are reports of pressure on people to settle, mediators with limited training, lack of community ownership, and imbalances in power between parties, especially for women, lower castes, and economically weaker groups. While settlements ease the court burden, they sometimes do not provide real justice or are not truly voluntary.<sup>3</sup>

This paper explores whether a more robust model of community mediation could meaningfully improve access to justice in India. It looks at models in the US and Singapore, which offer different strengths: the US uses local volunteers and a restorative approach, while Singapore has a hybrid system that combines government support with community orientation. The paper argues that India can learn from these systems to develop its own model, combining Singapore's efficiency and legal support with the US's local volunteer and

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<sup>1</sup>National Legal Services Authority, Community Mediation Training Manual, Chapter 2 - Understanding Conflict, pg.11

<sup>2</sup> Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, No. 39, Acts of Parliament (India).

<sup>3</sup> Khan, M.H. (2024). Mediation and Lok Adalat: An Examination of Challenges and Issues. ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts, March 2024, 5(3), 2194–2199. 2196, 3) Quality and Training of Panelists Like mediation.... Doi: <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i3.2024.6203>

restorative approach, while taking into account India's unique cultural and social context, including traditional panchayat systems and existing inequalities.

Key questions the paper considers include:

1. Why has community mediation developed more in some places than others?
2. Are Lok Adalats and community mediation pilots truly community-led, or are they imposed from above?
3. What changes in structure, law, and culture would allow India to create a more legitimate and fair community-based mediation system?

## II. CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY MEDIATION

Community mediation is a method of solving conflicts that arise within a community or social group. These mediators must be from the community and must be answerable to it in a bid to settle the disputes by discussion. The focus is not on legal procedures but on achieved mutual understanding, restoring human relations and achieving win-win solutions. The key principles of community mediation include voluntary participation, confidentiality, neutrality of the mediators, and the involvement of the parties in formulating the settlement.

In the past, many communities used informal methods to resolve disputes.

In India, for instance, village elders or panchayats used to deal with family, land, and caste-related matters long before the official courts came into being. In the West, community mediation in its current form started taking shape in the 1960s and 1970s following the civil rights movement and as a result court systems faced heavy workloads. One of the first successful implementations of mediation in resolving racial and community conflicts was the US community relations Service, established under the 1964 Civil Rights Act.<sup>4</sup>

Community mediation is usually effective when it is characterized by the following:

- **Local ownership:** The mediators are usually volunteers or local inhabitants who have

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<sup>4</sup> Grande Hamilton Lum, *The History of Community Mediation Uncovered: The Department of Justice's Community Relations Service* (Sept. 2024)

a deep understanding of the local culture, thus creating trust.

- **Accessibility:** It is usually low or no cost, has little formality and occurs within the community.
- **Restorative focus:** the emphasis is on restoring relationships, giving apologies and changing behaviour rather than just giving money or deciding who wins.
- **Inclusivity and Safeguards:** There are mechanisms for addressing power imbalances, protecting vulnerable participants such as women and minorities, and ensuring that participation remains voluntary.
- **Flexibility:** There are no strict rules, and the process is not rigid in terms of evidence.

The National Association for Community Mediation in the U.S. identifies features like the use of trained volunteers from all walks of life, self-referral by the people, and a reflection of the system in the community.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, when mediation is done through courts or institutions, it can have high success rates, but it might lose the community aspect if judges, lawyers, or officials are in charge, as these people tend to be more case-oriented than dialogue-oriented.

Singapore offers a balanced approach with state-supported mediation centers, volunteer mediators, and legal incentives to encourage participation, which helps to maintain social harmony in a plural society.

India Mediation Act of 2023 defines community mediation as a way to settle conflicts that disturb the peace and harmony of the local area or family, and requires mutual agreement before the mediation can proceed. Community mediation is by the community, in the community and for the community according to NALSA training materials. However, in practice, it is routed via District Legal Services Authorities, thus negating the aspect of control being sourced from local communities.<sup>6</sup>

Real community mediation is achieved not only when the government supports the efforts,

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<sup>5</sup> NACFM, Purpose, Preamble available at <https://www.nafcm.org/page/Purpose>

<sup>6</sup> National Legal Services Authority, Community Mediation Training Manual, Chapter 2 - Understanding Conflict.

but also when the local people are involved and trusted. When it doesn't work, it is often poor training, a cultural misunderstanding, or failure to address the power discrepancies between the people involved.

In this way, one model can be compared with another to see how it can be implemented in a different area, while respecting the unique contribution made by local circumstances.

### **III. MODEL ANALYSIS: INDIA, USA, AND SINGAPORE**

#### **INDIA**

India's primary framework rests on the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 (as amended). The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), State Legal Services Authorities (SLSAs) and District Legal Services Authorities (DLSAs) organise Lok Adalats to settle existing disputes or cases before they reach court. Lok Adalats' awards are recognised as court awards and can be enforced accordingly. Permanent Lok Adalats, established under Section 22-B, handle public service matters and combine conciliation and adjudication if it fails. Section 89 of the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908 and the Mediation Act, 2023 provide further possibilities, such as mediation prior to litigation for some business disputes.<sup>7</sup>

Lok Adalats are semi-formal and state-run with mediators often being retired judges or lawyers, or social workers. They aim to settle disputes to ease the court's burden. These sessions deal with a wide variety of disputes, such as family, some criminal and civil cases, and are often free of court fees.

Recent initiatives include the Community Mediation Training Manual<sup>8</sup> by the National Legal Services Authority and pilot schemes<sup>9</sup> involving training volunteers on local issues. But many sessions involve lawyers and not just volunteers. The country has millions of cases resolved by Lok Adalats each year, but there are inconsistent statistics on follow-up and satisfaction.

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<sup>7</sup> Dr. Dhiraj Bhusan Sarmah & Dr. Plabita Saikia, A Critical Appraisal of the Legal Service Authorities Act with Special Reference to Lok Adalat, 1 AIJACLA, 30, 30-49, (2021), <https://www.aequivic.in/post/aijacla-critical-appraisal-of-the-legal-services-authorities-act-with-special-reference-lok-adalat>

<sup>8</sup> National Legal Services Authority, Community Mediation Training Manual.

<sup>9</sup> NALSA Launches Pilot Project "Community Mediation: Towards A Litigation-Free Rural India" In Baghpat available at <https://mediate.com/news/nalsa-launches-pilot-project-community-mediation-towards-a-litigation-free-rural-india-in-baghpat/>

## UNITED STATES

The first community mediation centers in the U.S. started in the 1970s and were influenced by the civil rights movement and court reforms. The Alternative Dispute Resolution Act (ADR) of 1998 led to federal courts developing ADR programs, but the power of mediation comes from independent or non-profit community mediation centers, of which there are 300-650 in the U.S. These are often volunteer-driven and address community disputes, school disputes, petty crimes, housing and family disputes.<sup>10</sup>

They have trained volunteer community mediators (not lawyers), are locally controlled and adaptable, and are committed to restorative justice (making amends, accepting responsibility and reconciling relationships). The public often chooses mediation, and the boards are composed of community members. The services are typically low-cost or free, and are funded by grants, donations, or in some cases, reclaimed court fees.

This approach has the advantages of being trusted and credible. Mediators are familiar with the community and culturally sensitive. Restorative circles are used in schools to reduce suspensions and create a feeling of community. The system can be unstable due to uncertain funding and quality issues when training or oversight is weak.<sup>11</sup>

## SINGAPORE

Singapore's Community Mediation Centres (CMCs) operate under the Community Mediation Centres Act (Cap 49A, 1997). Overseen by the Ministry of Law, CMCs handle neighbourhood, family, and social disputes not involving seizeable offences. Mediation is generally voluntary but can be referred mandatorily by magistrates in certain cases (e.g., under Criminal Procedure Code). Recent enhancements propose mandatory mediation for specific neighbour disputes (like noise) before tribunal proceedings, with penalties for non-attendance.<sup>12</sup>

### Features:

- Hybrid model - government-supported infrastructure with volunteer community

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<sup>10</sup> Caroline Harris Crowne, The Alternative Dispute Resolution Act of 1998: Implementing a New Paradigm of Justice, <https://nyulawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/NYULawReview-76-6-Crowne.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> History of Community Mediation in the U.S., <https://2mediate.org/history1.html>

<sup>12</sup> Navene Elangovan, Channel News Asia, Singapore: Mandatory Mediation in Neighbourhood Disputes, <https://civilmediation.org/singapore-mediation-neighbourhood-disputes/>

mediators (many grassroots leaders);

- Structured yet informal process (minimal formality, no strict evidence rules);
- Focus on harmony and efficiency in a dense, multi-racial society;
- Confidentiality protections;
- Co-location with State Courts in some instances;
- Integration with Community Disputes Resolution Tribunals (CDRT) for unresolved cases.

Singapore achieves high settlement rates through a combination of state backing, public education, and cultural emphasis on consensus. Mediators undergo training, and the system promotes social cohesion. It's accessible and accountable.<sup>13</sup>

#### **IV. COMPARATIVE EVALUATION**

A comparison demonstrates the different strengths and weaknesses of each approach:

**Nature:** India's approach is mainly linked to courts and state-driven. The USA's model is community-based non-profit centres. Singapore is a combination of government supported but community based, with legal support.

**Mediators:** India mediators are often lawyers or retired judges. The USA relies on untrained volunteer community members. In Singapore, volunteers are trained and controlled by the institution, often local leaders.

**Trust Level:** In India, trust is medium-low because of bureaucratic or judicial interference. In the USA, trust is high in community centers due to their local basis. In Singapore, trust is high due to the system's speed and fairness, and state legitimacy in an ordered and lawful society.

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<sup>13</sup> Community Mediation in Singapore, 10th Anniversary Community Mediation Centre Commemorative Book: Who are we? ISBN 978-981-08-1142-6. Retrieved from <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/linkeddata/primary-entity/work/0e43baf3-cc40-43f9-afd0-df69b3fd6136>

**Focus:** India focuses on speedy case disposal. The USA aims to heal relationships and provide restorative effects, such as apologies or expectations of behaviour. Singapore promotes harmony with speed, to avoid disputes in urban spaces.

**Legal Support:** India has robust legal support (1987 Act, 2023 Mediation Act). The USA has limited support at the federal level (the 1998 ADR Act) but strong support at the state and local level and in common law. Singapore has targeted, well-connected legislation<sup>14</sup>.

**Outcomes and Legitimacy:** Lok Adalats can deal with many cases but are criticised for being too fast. U.S. centres foster social connections, but vary in scalability. Singapore’s system produces consistent, non-escalated outcomes in a small area.

India’s approach is quantitative but may lack the qualitative “community” and voluntariness of true grassroots approaches. Singapore demonstrates that state backing needn’t be a barrier to community engagement if accompanied with training and safeguards. The USA demonstrates the importance of diverse volunteers for legitimacy in diverse communities, which may be relevant to India.

This model confirms that context matters:

| Feature       | India                                      | USA                               | Singapore                                |
|---------------|--|-----------------------------------|--|
| Nature        | Court-linked / State-driven                | Grassroots / Decentralized        | Hybrid (Govt-supported + community)      |
| Mediators     | Often legal professionals / retired judges | Community volunteers              | Trained volunteer / grassroots mediators |
| Trust Level   | Moderate (perception of pressure)          | High (local roots)                | High (efficiency + neutrality)           |
| Focus         | Settlement / backlog reduction             | Relationship repair / restorative | Harmony + efficiency                     |
| Legal Backing | Strong (1987 Act, 2023 Act)                | Moderate (1998 ADR Act + local)   | Strong (CMC Act + referrals)             |

India’s scale and inequalities need safeguards not provided by the USA’s volunteer model,

<sup>14</sup> The Statutes of the Republic of Singapore Community Mediation Centres Act, 1997

while Singapore's hybrid model offers insights for incorporating formal justice.

## V. CHALLENGES IN INDIA

While India has made some progress, there are some key issues with the community mediation system.

First, the **“myth of community”** in the present system. While designed as “people's courts,” many Lok Adalats are administered by DLSA and have panels largely comprised of legal practitioners. Panchayat methods are used but can lack impartiality and formal protections, and sometimes reflect social hierarchies. Recent pilot programs and manual by NALSA seek to change this to more community-based involvement, but this is still a work in progress.<sup>15</sup>

Second, **power imbalance problems**. Weaker parties - e.g. women in family cases, trafficked or abandoned brides, lower-caste people, illiterate individuals - may be subjected to subtle or overt pressure. Research and anecdotal evidence report cases where weaker parties agree to adverse settlements to avoid litigation, social ostracism or reprisals. Privileged group members may (un)consciously skew mediation. The NALSA manual notes potential issues in caste or gender situations where weaker parties fear speaking out.<sup>16</sup>

Third, **issues of voluntariness versus forced settlement**. The focus on disposal rates sometimes creates a perception of pressure to settle with implications under Articles 14 (equality) and 21 (right to life and liberty, including dignity and access to justice). Forcing undermines legitimacy and potentially compliance or further conflict. Training is uneven; manuals are provided, but not always followed, and panelists are not always well-prepared in facilitative rather than evaluative or directive, mediation skills.<sup>17</sup>

Also, rural awareness, enforcement (decree status, but sometimes no follow up), infrastructure and funding are poor. Cultural norms stressing harmony can be both a boon (settlement) and curse (elite domination, lack of critical debate). Over-dependence on state institutions may bureaucratise the system, taking it away from community control.

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<sup>15</sup> National Legal Services Authority, Community Mediation Training Manual.

<sup>16</sup> Dr. Mridula Rai, Lok Adalat and Access to Justice: A Study of Grassroots Dispute Resolution in India, 134 <https://theinfinite.co.in/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Lok-Adalat-and-Access-to-Justice.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Upasana Singh, Evaluating Lok Adalats In India: The Challenges of Measuring Restorative Justice, HILSR Law Review

A **mini case study** illustrates these dynamics.

Imagine a typical North Indian village family case of a married daughter seeking alimony after being abandoned. The case ends up in a Lok Adalat through DLSA. The panel, with a village lawyer and social worker, persuades the parties to settle for “family prestige” and to avoid delays. The husband promises a small, one-off payment; the wife, with family elders and under social pressure, accepts although she prefers long-term support. A swift award is passed. Some months later, non-compliance returns her to the “normal” court. This “disposed” the case, but not the relationship or economic challenges, and the woman felt her voice mattered less than maintaining harmony and efficiency. Elements of this situation are echoed in critiques of expediency and power dynamics.<sup>18</sup>

### **Interview learnings**

Comments from mediators and their experiences in India suggest that it is still hard to build community mediation. Experienced mediator A.J. Jawad noted that court-linked mediation is the most prevalent form of mediation while community or private mediation is rare. He said that in India, people tend to search for a person of authority when it comes to resolving conflict. This is due to the hierarchical and high-context nature of Indian culture. This can make court-connected mediation, with retired judges and other legal professionals, seem too formal and not very participatory. This can make people more reluctant to participate, particularly those who are already disadvantaged.<sup>19</sup>

## **VI. RECOMMENDED REFORMS: A HYBRID MODEL FOR INDIA**

A hybrid “Community-Led Mediation Framework” model should be developed in India, tailored to its circumstances and drawing on the positive aspects of various models.

**1. Legal Framework (Inspired by Singapore):** Enrich the Mediation Act, 2023 and Legal Services Authorities Act laws with additional regulations governing community mediation centres at panchayat and municipal levels.

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<sup>18</sup> Analysis on Lok Adalats In India Its Evolution Impact And Challenges, The Lawway With Lawyers Journal Volume:-22 Issue No:- 22 ,May 24, 2025 Issn (Online):- 2584-1106.

<sup>19</sup> A.J. Jawad, Mediation in the High-context Society of India – An Interview with A.J. Jawad, Wolters Kluwer Mediation Blog (May 26, 2021). <https://legalblogs.wolterskluwer.com/mediation-blog/mediation-in-the-high-context-society-of-india-an-interview-with-aj-jawad/>

Create limited mandatory mediation proceedings for some family or community disputes with robust opt-out and safeguards, confidentiality provisions and links to formal courts or tribunals if mediation cannot resolve disputes. Establish a national body under the National Legal Services Authority or Mediation Council with training and accreditation guidelines.

**2. Community Ownership (Inspired by the USA):** Emphasise employing and training local volunteer mediators from various backgrounds like women, youth, different castes, pensioners and influential community leaders.

Make sure panels are representative of the community. Promote self-referrals as well as referrals from courts. Encourage restorative practices, particularly in schools and communities, in circles or discussion groups that prioritise relationships.

**3. India-Specific Safeguards:** Mandate checks for power imbalances or vulnerability (such as signs of domestic violence, which may require separate sessions or legal advice).

Have strict policies on non-coercion and permit withdrawal at any point without fear of reprisals. Offer cultural awareness training, which may include traditional practices but must uphold constitutional principles such as equality and dignity. Provide independent systems to track and gather feedback from participants on their satisfaction and the system's efficacy.

**4. Capacity Building:** Promote standardised but adaptable training based on NALSA's manual, which focuses on facilitation skills, bias and ethics. Collaborate with NGOs, law schools and community organizations for continuous programs. Provide incentives to volunteers but avoid making mediation a remunerated profession.

**5. Integration and Resources:** Establish new community mediation centers in existing DLSAs or panchayats and use existing infrastructure. Provide separate funding to these mediation centers (beyond legal aid) Embrace technology for awareness and hybrid sessions where appropriate. Begin pilot projects for greater restorative practices in schools and slums.

This approach retains India's good legal system and scale but adds the USA's community focus and restorative nature, and Singapore's organisation.

We transform Lok Adalats from primarily being settlement centres to becoming community centres. It would require a step-by-step roll-out in willing states or districts, with central

guidelines.

Concerns about opposition from lawyers and judges used to court-focused roles; financial constraints; or existing social and economic disparities, can be overcome through the participation of stakeholders and the success of pilot schemes.

## **VII. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

Community mediation has great potential to enhance justice in India by making the process of dispute resolution more affordable, non-adversarial and culturally sensitive.

The right model involves balancing government support and community ownership, voluntary versus necessary protection, and efficiency and fairness. India's current system has achieved remarkable success in disposing cases via Lok Adalats, but it falls short in community involvement, training and protection against inequities. The USA can teach us about local support and healing; Singapore about a structured hybrid model that can lead to peace but not injustice.

The proposed hybrid model, with certain safeguards, could help realise the constitutional ideal of justice. It would not be an alternative to courts but complement them, clearing the dockets and tackling underlying social problems. To achieve this, reforms must go beyond putting "community" in front of titles, and instead invest in people, training, monitoring, and changing the culture from a numbers to an empowerment-based approach.

### **Suggestions for immediate action:**

1. Accelerate the national roll-out of community mediation centres, with volunteer recruitment guidelines.
2. Amend regulations to ensure vulnerability and opt-out checks in referrals.
3. Integrate restorative justice in school and judicial education.
4. Research participants' experiences and longer-term outcomes.
5. Conduct public campaigns displaying mediation as a right, not responsibility-shifting.
6. Provide adequate funding and inter-departmental co-ordination (Law, Rural

Development, Women & Child).

If done right, community mediation can develop from an alternative process into an accessible and participative piece of justice.

This will help develop not only settled cases but also stronger communities. The process requires political commitment, administrative support and ongoing focus on ground realities. India has a great legacy of peaceful dispute settlement; the trick is to build on it with contemporary safeguards and other experiences.

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