

PROCEEDINGS OF THE OFFICIAL SATELLITE EVENT OF 5TH WORLD CONGRESS ON JUSTICE WITH CHILDREN: “ADVANCING CHILD- CENTRED JUSTICE”

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Introduction

The satellite event titled “*Advancing Child-Centred Justice*” was organised on June 3, 2025, by the Centre for Child Rights (CCR) at National Law University Odisha (NLUO), in collaboration with Child Rights and You (CRY), as part of the 5th World Congress on Justice with Children. Held in a hybrid mode from NLUO, Cuttack, the event served as India’s academic and policy-oriented contribution to the global discourse on child justice. Over 150 participants (in-person and online), including child rights champions from the judiciary, government, academia, and civil society, participated in the event, reflecting their commitment to the greater cause of advancing justice and upholding the rights of children.

The objectives of the event were:

- To advance understanding of General Comment (GC) 27 and its implications for India’s justice systems,
- To evaluate the strengths and gaps in the current juvenile justice and child protection frameworks, and
- To generate concrete recommendations that can inform both national policy and international advocacy.

A key focus was placed on the event, on moving beyond formal justice mechanisms to include health, education, identity, social protection, and cultural attitudes as core to the lived experience of justice for children.

The event followed a hybrid format, featuring a central high-level panel discussion with distinguished speakers from the judiciary, government, academia, and civil society. It was followed by a reflection and recommendations

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session that included comments from in-person participants and online attendees from across India and globally. The event concluded with a vote of thanks to acknowledge the contributions and collaborative efforts. Visual presentations and data-driven insights accompanied some of the speeches, including a comparative South Asia-focused study shared by NLUO.

Background and Context of the Event

The primary motivation behind hosting the Official Satellite Event was to localise and contextualise the global discourse on access to justice for children. With a special focus on GC 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the event aimed to reimagine access to justice not only as legal redress but as a comprehensive ecosystem encompassing dignity, participation, protection, and inclusion. Featuring a distinguished panel of jurists, administrators, academics, and practitioners, the discussion aimed to identify the legal, structural, and psychosocial barriers that children face, while also presenting innovative solutions and reforms. The deliberations contributed vital inputs to GC 27.

The Congress theme, *“Advancing Child-Centred Justice: Preventing and Responding to Violence Affecting Children in Justice Systems,”* highlighted the global urgency of transforming justice systems into spaces of protection, participation, and transformation for children. India, with its vast child population and socio-legal complexities, stands at a critical juncture where discourse must translate into systemic reform. This satellite event aimed to serve as a knowledge platform that blended academic, judicial, administrative, and grassroots perspectives.

About the Organisers

The Satellite event was co-hosted by the CCR – NLUO and CRY.

Centre for Child Rights (CCR) – National Law University Odisha (NLUO):

The Centre for Child Rights (CCR) at National Law University Odisha (NLUO) is one of India’s leading academic centres dedicated to child rights, juvenile justice, and rights-based advocacy. Established in 2015, CCR stands out nationally as the only child rights centre housed in a law university with a full-time Chair Professor position, reflecting NLUO’s long-term commitment to child-centred jurisprudence.

CCR combines rigorous academic research with practical engagement. It operates at the interface of law, policy, and grassroots intervention, producing evidence-based research that informs legal reform, judicial practice, and administrative implementation. The Centre collaborates extensively with state departments, judicial committees, and child protection agencies. It also offers specialised courses and training modules for students and professionals, fostering the next generation of child rights advocates.

Through its active engagement with government and civil society, CCR has contributed to national consultations on child rights and has submitted alternative reports to international bodies, including the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Its field-driven approach ensures that academic findings are translated into actionable insights.

Co-hosting the satellite event of the 5th World Congress on Justice with Children, reflected CCR's belief that justice for children extends beyond legal access - it must be lived, inclusive, and rights-based. With its academic integrity and strategic partnerships, CCR continues to shape India's discourse on making justice truly child-centred.

Child Rights and You (CRY)

Child Rights and You (CRY) is a pioneering Indian non-profit organisation committed to realising the rights of underprivileged children. Since its founding in 1979, CRY has emerged as one of the country's most trusted voices on child rights, working across 20 states and union territories (UTs). Its mission is rooted in the belief that all children deserve the right to a safe, healthy, and empowered life, irrespective of their caste, class, or geography.

CRY adopts a comprehensive rights-based approach, focusing on four key pillars: education, health and nutrition, safety and protection, and child participation. Through partnerships with grassroots organisations and direct interventions, CRY addresses systemic issues that impact children's lives. It partners with district, state, and national governments to strengthen policy and governance systems for children, ensuring effective implementation of key child-related laws.

CRY's strength lies in its ability to connect local realities with national policy engagement. Its Research and Knowledge Exchange (function) tracks

public budgets and generates research that guides programmatic action and influences public policy. Through these efforts, CRY upholds child rights as guaranteed by the Constitution of India and the UNCRC.

In co-hosting the satellite event with NLUO, CRY brought its decades of practice-based learning to the fore. The organisation's insights from the field offered a grounded and intersectional lens to discussions on GC 27. CRY's enduring commitment is to ensure that justice for children is not symbolic, but accessible, systemic, and transformative.

Proceedings

Introductory Remarks by Prof Biraj Swain

Prof Biraj Swain, Chief Minister's Chair Professor and Director of CCR, set the agenda for the event with a multilingual welcome and contextual overview. She proudly introduced CCR and CRY as partners in this effort and presented the event as a vital opportunity to think critically about what child-centred justice means in today's world.

Prof Swain positioned the event as India's academic and policy contribution to the 5th World Congress on Justice with Children, held in Madrid during June 2–4, 2025. She highlighted that the theme of the Congress -“Advancing Child-Centred Justice: Preventing and Responding to Violence Affecting Children in Justice Systems” is both urgent and timely in the Indian context. She emphasised that the World Congress is a global effort that includes children and youth at its heart, and the theme of GC 27 allows for expanding justice beyond courts to real, everyday access.

Prof Swain asserted that even in 2025, the most vulnerable children still face obstacles in accessing justice-whether legal, social, or psychological. She positioned the event as not only a discussion on what exists but also a collective brainstorm on what needs to be created, and emphasised that access to justice must be made “real, lived, and felt” in the everyday lives of children-not just in statutes and court orders.

Prof Swain explained that GC 27 obligates states to ensure effective remedies and mechanisms for children's rights violations-not merely symbolic provisions. The CCR and CRY would use the deliberations from this event to prepare India's contribution to the UNCRC for GC 27, she added. She

introduced all the speakers with deep respect and admiration, noting their contributions to jurisprudence, governance, and grassroots engagement.

Prof Swain, while hoping that the event would generate practical, scalable, and interdisciplinary recommendations for child-centred justice, described the conversation as a “north star moment”, a guiding light for stakeholders across legal, academic, and social sectors to realign toward a justice system that truly serves the smallest voices.

Prof Rangin Pallav Tripathy’s Welcome Address

Prof Rangin Pallav Tripathy, Professor of Law and Registrar at NLUO, delivered the welcome address. In his address, he acknowledged that, despite it being 2025, we still need to advocate for justice with children, which should not have been necessary if progress had been achieved.

He envisioned an ideal scenario where the world could ideally say that children are better off now than in 2021, but the reality shows otherwise. He urged attendees to ask themselves not only how to do the right thing but also to identify what the right thing is, which is often the real challenge. He emphasised the importance of platforms like CCR and NLUO to reflect critically and strategically on what has been achieved and what remains to be done. He also expressed pride that NLUO is offering a space where such discussions can take place, highlighting the university’s role as a convener of inter-sectoral dialogue on child rights.

Hon’ble Justice Madan B Lokur’s Deliberation

Honourable Justice Madan Bhimarao Lokur, former Judge of the Supreme Court of India and currently the Chairperson of the United Nations Internal Justice Council, at the outset congratulated NLUO and CRY for organising the satellite event with such a dedicated audience for child rights. In his deliberation, he focused on three categories of children: victims of violence, children in conflict with law (CICL), and children in need of care and protection (CNCP) who require access to justice.

On victims of violence, Justice Lokur cited NCRB 2022 data: 93,000 children recorded as victims of violence versus 30,000 children accused of violence. He argued that this ratio calls for urgent attention to victims and for recognising the vast number of unreported cases. He further apprehended

that real numbers were likely to be much higher due to underreporting. He described various forms of violence: sexual abuse, physical abuse, child trafficking (including via the darknet), child labour, and child marriage.

Justice Lokur raised critical examples and shared a case of a seven-year-old rape survivor who had to come to court seven times, re-experiencing trauma due to procedural delays. He also mentioned the case of a 13-year-old pregnant survivor denied immediate compensation because she was 33rd in line, indicating bureaucratic insensitivity. He pointed out language barriers, too, citing the case of a trafficked girl from Kolkata whose trafficker falsely claimed to be her father.

Justice Lokur also highlighted the systemic coercion of children to plead guilty to receive lighter sentences. He critiqued the focus on conviction rates rather than acquittal rates and specifically noted delays in juvenile justice inquiries, and gave an example of the Delhi High Court directing termination of over 700 inquiries pending for more a year. He condemned the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions in observation homes and places of safety.

Justice Lokur asserted that CICL are also CNCP and criticised the lack of proper sanitation, hygiene, and discipline in child care institutions. He urged regular social audits and performance reviews of existing schemes and childcare institutions. He also emphasised the lack of access to legal aid as a critical barrier to justice for children.

Justice Lokur recommended that legal aid be made more accessible and that acquittal rates should be studied alongside conviction rates. He further recommended social audits, legal aid reforms, restorative justice, and an overall shift toward child-sensitive and empathetic justice systems. He also suggested that restorative justice and trauma-informed practices must be institutionalised, and to enforce child rights effectively, political will is essential.

Address by Hon'ble Justice Savitri Ratho

Honourable Justice Savitri Ratho, Judge of the High Court of Orissa and Chairperson of the Juvenile Justice Committee, Orissa High Court, delivered an impassioned speech grounded in her lived experience as a judge. She asserted that justice for children is not a peripheral aspiration but a core constitutional and moral commitment of any just society. She defined meaningful access to justice as extending beyond physical and procedural access to become

transformative and rooted in dignity, participation, and systemic trust. She said, “justice is a right of the child, not a favour granted by the system”, while emphasising the importance of building an entire ecosystem that fosters a sense of safety, inclusion, and healing for children, especially those navigating legal systems.

Justice Ratho described Odisha’s proactive judicial efforts through the Juvenile Justice Committee of the Orissa High Court, which she chairs alongside Honourable Justice Aditya Kumar Mohapatra and Honourable Justice Murahari Sri Raman. She further highlighted the fact that the Committee regularly engages with line departments, Child Welfare Committees (CWCs), Juvenile Justice Boards (JJB), and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It holds quarterly meetings to assess the pendency of cases, institutional health of observation homes, availability of legal aid, and progress in rehabilitation. She shared that the committee works to resolve both procedural delays and systemic attitude problems across departments, while mentioning about the training programmes and workshops conducted for legal functionaries to strengthen the implementation of the JJ Act.

Based on her first-hand judicial experience and lived realities, Justice Ratho shared her courtroom experiences with CICL, child victims, and children from broken or violent homes. She noted that many children arrive fearful, withdrawn, or even aggressive, but leave the courtroom calmer when treated with empathy and dignity. She acknowledged that such positive experiences are still too rare and should become the norm.

She raised her concern about children who face multiple vulnerabilities including Dalit, Adivasi, transgender, migrant, differently-abled, and impoverished children and how they face compounding barriers in the justice system. She also pointed out that many of these children do not have access to legal aid or rehabilitation services and are often further harmed by insensitive systems

Justice Ratho also highlighted critical gaps such as persistent procedural delays in children’s cases, lack of trauma-informed processes and personnel, inadequate number of child-friendly courts, insufficient gender and disability-sensitive legal services, stigma and discriminatory treatment by institutions, particularly for marginalised groups etc.

Justice Ratho called for a paradigm shift from court-centric to child-centric justice systems and recommended increasing the number of child-friendly courtrooms, specially trained staff, and female officers who can interact with children in sensitive cases. She urged for widespread adoption of trauma-informed legal services, including specialised legal aid and psychological care, and advocated for community-based, non-institutional alternatives for CNCP.

She suggested strengthening linkages between juvenile justice functionaries and other service-delivery institutions to ensure holistic rehabilitation, and strongly reiterated that justice is not a privilege to be earned but a promise to be fulfilled for every child, regardless of their background.

Sharing by Smt. Shubha Sarma, IAS

Smt. Shubha Sarma outlined the initiatives of the Women and Child Development Department, Government of Odisha, which are directly impacting over 60 lakh people through schemes for nutrition, maternal health, and child protection. While addressing the august gathering, she shared that Odisha's Subhadra scheme has reached one crore women, providing them financial support. She highlighted the Odisha State Policy for Children 2022, which has seven focus areas, including justice and child participation.

For CICL, Smt. Sarma described Odisha's child-friendly police stations, fast-track courts for POCSO cases, and virtual hearing setups in JJBs. She further stated that regular meetings with the judiciary have reduced the incarceration of children for petty offences. She informed that, with prompt responses, children are being released and reintegrated faster compared to the past.

For CNCP, Smt. Sarma also emphasised the importance of prevention over reactive justice. She advocated for kinship-based care, community rehabilitation, and psychosocial support. She added that Odisha's non-institutional care coverage has grown 300% in three years, and legal adoption rates have increased by 200%, including for children with disabilities and girls.

While mentioning the key innovations, Smt. Sarma highlighted the ADVIKA programme, which focuses on adolescent empowerment and anti-trafficking awareness. She informed about orphan surveys and early disability identification campaigns, as well as the Ashirbad scheme, which offers post-COVID support to the affected children.

Her core message was: Justice must be restorative and empathetic; Justice for children begins long before conflict arises; and Governance must integrate rights-based empathy into everyday systems.

Address by Ms Sonal Kapoor

Ms Sonal Kapoor, Founder and CEO of Protsahan India Foundation, shared her extensive experience working with children in shelter homes and on the streets. She explained how trauma and neurobiological factors influence children's ability to narrate incidents of abuse. She cautioned against the rigid enforcement of mandatory reporting under the POCSO Act, which may force children into disclosing events before they are emotionally prepared. Such premature disclosures, she noted, often lead to further psychological harm.

Ms Kapoor introduced the HEART framework, which stands for Health, Education, Arts, Rights, and Technology. She suggested that interventions addressing trauma should include these dimensions to ensure holistic care. She further recommended allowing a 48- to 72-hour delay before reporting to (CWCs), enabling children to build trust and prepare emotionally.

She urged the integration of trauma modules into police and judicial training, as well as the inclusion of neurobiological insights into educational curricula. Her work advocates for systems that understand and accommodate the psychological needs of children, rather than demanding linear testimony from those whose experiences are fragmented by trauma.

Sharing by Shri Subhendu Bhattacharjee

Shri Subhendu Bhattacharjee, Director of Research and Knowledge Exchange at CRY, emphasised that child justice is inseparable from broader welfare concerns such as education, nutrition, health, and social security. Drawing from CRY's 45-year history of on-the-ground engagements across 20 states and UTs, he presented case examples illustrating the transformative impact of small interventions. These included a rescued child, an empowered mother, a trained village leader, and a dropout student re-enrolled in school.

He also cited landmark judgments such as *Independent Thought vs Union of India*, which addressed marital rape and child marriage, and the *Unni Krishnan* case, which affirmed the right to education. He highlighted the child-unfriendly provisions in existing laws and stressed that systems must evolve from child-friendly to child-centred frameworks that prioritise the voices and lived experiences of children.

Shri Bhattacharjee's message reinforced the need for policies backed by grassroots realities and urged stakeholders to work collectively toward solutions that prevent children from entering the judicial systems unnecessarily.

Deliberation by Prof Ved Kumari

Prof Ved Kumari, Vice Chancellor of NLUO, delivered an online presentation from the 5th World Congress platform in Madrid, Spain, offering a comparative perspective on child justice indicators across South Asia. She noted that while India has made significant progress, there are opportunities to learn from regional experiences. Through the lens of GC 27, she emphasised that justice should be seen not only in terms of legal access but also in relation to socio-economic, health, and educational entitlements.

Prof Ved Kumari shared comparative data to illustrate how neighbouring countries such as Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives have made encouraging advances in areas like birth registration, secondary school attendance, under-five and neonatal mortality, and social protection spending on children. She suggested that these examples provide valuable insights into how consistent investment and child-sensitive governance approaches can yield positive results.

She reflected on aspects of India's child protection framework that could benefit from further strengthening, such as reviewing the minimum age of criminal responsibility, addressing adolescent concerns within protective laws in a sensitive manner, and ensuring stronger alignment between laws and their implementation. She also reflected on how provisions under the POCSO Act sometimes pose challenges in addressing consensual adolescent relationships, particularly for children from marginalised backgrounds. She suggested that a more nuanced and child-sensitive approach could help ensure that protective laws fully serve the best interests of all children.

Prof Ved Kumari emphasised the importance of justice systems that respond to children's lived realities, particularly those who may face challenges linked to documentation, mobility, or family support. She highlighted the importance of making socio-economic rights, such as health, education, nutrition, and identity, more accessible and enforceable, so that children can experience these rights as a lived reality.

Drawing from experiences in Nepal, she shared examples of juvenile care models that prioritise empathy and participation, noting that such approaches help strengthen systems for children by making them more supportive and inclusive.

Prof Ved Kumari concluded with constructive recommendations, including raising the age of criminal responsibility, sensitively re-examining how consensual adolescent relationships are addressed, strengthening judicial training to include trauma awareness and child development, and improving disaggregated data collection on vulnerable groups of children. She also invited international and regional collaboration with NLUO for evidence-based reforms and joint research contributing to GC 27.

Q&A Highlights

During the open floor reflection session, moderated by Dr Swagatika Samal, Researcher at CCR-NLUO, participants raised significant concerns. One speaker stressed the high burden on child protection functionaries and called for integrating AI and tech tools to streamline training, response systems, and case management. Another participant from the child protection sector raised the issue of how violence is narrowly defined, urging recognition of institutional, caste-based, and systemic violence that Dalit and Adivasi children face.

Justice Lokur responded by stressing the importance of societal education alongside legal reform, while Justice Ratho highlighted the role of families, schools, and communities in fostering empathetic responses to trauma. The session concluded with calls for intersectional frameworks to understand better how multiple forms of discrimination intersect with violence and systemic neglect.

Key Takeaways

The satellite event “Advancing Child-Centred Justice” successfully brought together diverse stakeholders from the judiciary, public administration, academia, and civil society to create a collaborative and holistic dialogue on child-centred justice in India. The event moved beyond traditional interpretations of justice and anchored discussions in the lived experiences of children, particularly those from marginalised communities.

Multiple speakers reiterated that justice is not merely a procedural or legal ideal but a lived, relational experience involving dignity, participation, empathy, and restoration. The conversation revealed that there is now growing national and institutional recognition of children as rights-holders, rather than as passive recipients of welfare or protection. Several panelists, including Justice Lokur, Justice Ratho, and Smt. Sarma, underscored that the judiciary, executive, and state institutions must lead by example in implementing rights-based approaches.

Speakers called for a radical rethinking of child justice systems, one that embraces trauma-informed, inclusive, and child-sensitive practices. The event served as an urgent reminder that time-bound reforms must accompany declarations and policy papers for any change to reach children on the ground.

The event concluded with a shared understanding that justice for children cannot be limited to statutory provisions or courtroom procedures. It must be a holistic experience rooted in empathy, dignity, and systemic reform. The key takeaways from the deliberations are:

Legal and Institutional Reforms

- Consider revising the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 7 years in line with international standards.
- Explore alternatives to transferring children to adult courts, even in cases of heinous offences.
- Review how consensual adolescent relationships are addressed under the POCSO Act to ensure child-sensitive application.
- Promote trauma-informed training for judges, police, and legal aid providers to strengthen child-friendly justice.
- Enhance legal aid systems for children so that they are proactive, timely, and responsive to children's needs.

Administrative and Programmatic Actions

- Strengthen and expand the reach of child-friendly courts and police stations to cover all the districts.

- Institutionalise trauma-informed care within child protection services, including observation homes, shelter homes, and CWCs.
- Ensure the presence of trained female officers and disability-inclusive infrastructure in all institutions handling child justice cases.
- Scale up virtual hearing mechanisms and digital facilities to reach children in remote and underserved areas.

Data, Evidence, and Monitoring

- Conduct disaggregated data collection across caste, gender, disability, region, and other vulnerabilities.
- Encourage regular social audits and performance evaluations of child protection systems and schemes.
- Integrate psychosocial well-being indicators into child protection monitoring.
- Invest in research partnerships with universities and child rights organisations to support longitudinal studies on child justice.

Community and Cultural Shifts

- Launch national awareness campaigns to destigmatise CICL and survivors of abuse.
- Integrate child rights education and sensitivity training into teacher and parent training modules.
- Encourage peer-to-peer learning and child-led monitoring systems within communities and institutions.
- Raise community awareness to reduce stigma and encourage safe reporting of abuse and exploitation.

Policy Engagement and Collaboration

- CRY will collaborate with government departments to explore pilot initiatives that integrate trauma-informed care and restorative justice approaches in selected districts.
- CCR will coordinate with law schools and judicial academies to integrate trauma-informed modules into judicial education and training.

- Efforts will be made to build a national consortium of academic and civil society organisations committed to tracking the implementation of GC 27 over the next five years.

Strategic Partnerships

- A proposal will be developed for international collaboration involving South Asian universities and child rights organisations to undertake comparative studies and track child justice indicators.
- Encourage research partnerships and internships for young professionals to work on child justice and promote cross-border cooperation for shared learning and collective action.

Capacity Building

- Develop training modules on trauma and neurobiology for frontline workers and child protection personnel.
- Translate training resources into regional languages for wider accessibility.
- Provide support to NGOs and local institutions to enhance their capacity for child-sensitive interventions.

Long-term Vision

- To move toward a justice system where every child, regardless of their background, feels heard, protected, and empowered.
- To institutionalise lived experience, evidence-based policy-making, and human dignity at the centre of all justice processes involving children.

The event concluded with a formal vote of thanks proposed by Dr. Pradipta Kumar Sarangi, Researcher, CCR – NLUO and Shri Ankit Kumar Keshri, UNICEF Consultant, CCR – NLUO.

Conclusion

The satellite event successfully brought together thought leaders and practitioners from different sectors to critically reflect on the barriers and possibilities for ensuring child-centred justice. It broadened the discourse beyond legal frameworks to include trauma-informed care, social protection,

inclusive services, and comparative data benchmarking. The discussions reaffirmed the core principles of GC 27 and provided actionable insights rooted in field experience, policy reform, and judicial leadership.

The event's recommendations included raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility, institutionalising trauma-informed judicial training, expanding non-institutional and kinship-based care, conducting social audits, and making socio-economic rights legally enforceable. The overarching call was to move from rhetorical commitments to lived realities, where every child feels safe, heard, and supported. The overarching goal is clear: to ensure that every child's voice is heard, every right is upheld, and justice is not merely a procedure but a lived experience of dignity, safety, and empowerment.
