

## **PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS BY HON'BLE JUSTICE SAVITRI RATHO, JUDGE, ORISSA HIGH COURT AND CHAIRPERSON–JUVENILE JUSTICE COMMITTEE, ORISSA HIGH COURT**

*Delivered on the occasion of unveiling of the first internationally indexed issue of the Journal on the Rights of the Child of National Law University Odisha post indexation held on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2025*

I am delighted to be amongst you for the unveiling of the first issue of the *Journal on the Rights of the Child of National Law University Odisha*, Volume VI, Issue number II (post indexation).

To quote **John F Kennedy**: “*Children are the world’s most valuable resource and its best hope for the future.*”

Children are one of the most important demographic set of any society. No society can function properly without ensuring that its children are protected, preserved and nurtured. India, since its independence and foundation as a republic, has been working towards providing a just and equitable environment to its children.

Through the enactment of various legislations like

- the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986,
- the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostics Technique Act, 1994 (and its subsequent amendment in 2003),
- the Commission for Protection of Child Rights Act, 2005,
- the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006,
- the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009,
- the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012,
- the National Food Security Act, 2013,
- the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015,
- the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016, and
- signing and ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC),

A definite shift can be observed from just welfare provisions towards a rights-based approach, where the children are not just considered passive recipients of welfare measures who need to be protected, but human beings who have their own rights and a voice and the state and society's obligation to ensure the same.

A total of 1,77,335 cases of crime against children were registered in the country in 2023, showing an increase of 9.2% over 2022, according to the latest National Crimes Record Bureau (NCRB) report.

In case of Odisha, there has been a spike of 4% in crimes registered against children from 8240 in 2022 to 8577 in 2023. The major crime heads were kidnapping and abduction and offences under the POCSO Act against children. With the advent of digital era, the issues around child rights, ranging from privacy violations to juvenile delinquency, have become more complex and entangled.

Often, we come across reports of teenagers and adolescents indulging in serious crimes apart from being its victims. Homes are no more safe havens for children as parents are unable to devote time and attention to their children and very often fail to inculcate the right values and morals in them.

Thus, it is obvious that mere legislation is not enough. Child rights, child welfare, child development is a shared responsibility. We cannot expect the State to do everything. Judicial intervention should be the last resort. Unless the entire society picks up its socks and ensures the implementation of the various enacted laws, children will not derive any benefits from them.

In such a scenario, our keen attention and focus on child rights becomes necessary, even more so than ever before, and the role of institutions like the Centre for Child Rights (CCR) at National Law University Odisha (NLUO) becomes extremely significant.

### **Juvenile Justice Committee (JJC), Orissa High Court**

As a judge of the Orissa High Court, and the Chairperson of its Juvenile Justice Committee (JJC), I realize everyday how essential it is to sensitize and actively collaborate with various stakeholders, including legal professionals to further enrich and propagate awareness and advocacy about child rights as the issues of children cannot be dealt with in isolation. It requires constant dialogue, active collaboration with governmental as well as non-governmental institutions,

people from various walks, teachers, parents and children themselves to understand the problems faced by the children. The Committee convenes seminars, state level consultations, and workshops to discuss and adopt the best practices for furthering the objectives behind child protection laws and their effective implementation in Odisha. To provide a repository of the best practices alongwith the details of activities of the Committee and share the views and suggestions of various stakeholders which includes Judges, State Government Officers, Judicial Officers, research scholars and others, the JJC has re-launched its e-newsletter titled "*Sishu Surakhya*" this September which was published with the collaboration of United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). This *Sishu Surakhya* is available in the website of the JJ Committee and can be downloaded.

**Now coming back to CCR**, CCR is the oldest research centre of NLUO. I am told CCR is the second oldest centre for child rights or children and law in any NLU.

Under the leadership of the Vice Chancellor, Prof Ved Kumari, who herself is one of the most important chroniclers of Juvenile Justice in the world, CCR has become the only centre with a fully functional chair professorship on child rights amongst all the Universities (law and non-law included) headed by Prof Biraj Swain, the Chief Minister's Chair Professor cum Director of CCR.

Through its teaching, research, advocacy, training, mentoring and publications, CCR has played a significant role in strengthening child rights discourse, jurisprudence, raising awareness and influencing policy engagement in Odisha, India and beyond.

Centre for Child Rights and therefore its journal are intersectional. The journal includes case commentaries, legal research, economic analysis, social science research, data re-analysis and visualization as published works.

I have been told that the editors intend to carry pop culture review as well as commentaries on programmes dedicated to or telling children's stories in our current world.

I truly believe this journal will be a vital scholarly resource in informing judicial reasoning and institutional reforms on child rights, inside the Courts and outside, in the society too.

I found that the present issue of the journal has contributions from practicing academics, lawyers, research scholars and students. There is discussion of

different issues around child rights, such as public finance, right to education, digital vulnerability of children, sextortion, issue of consent vis-à-vis POCSO, importance of social work interventions in rehabilitation of children in conflict with law, nutrition, status of schools etc.

I must admit that the successful publication of this issue post indexation, with all due diligence, is not just a proud moment for CCR but it also feels like a personal achievement since I re-launched the journal not so long ago. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of April 2025, which is six months and three days ago, I stood in the NLUO, to re-launch the journal after a 5 years' Covid 19 – induced hiatus. It was the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Centre for Child Rights.

Although it is very difficult to say no to Prof Swain, when she first invited me for launching the journal on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2025, I had to turn down her request as our entire Committee was to go to Delhi to participate in the 10<sup>th</sup> National Stakeholders Consultation on “Safeguarding the Girl Child: Towards a Safer and Enabling Environment for her in India”, organized by the Juvenile Justice Committee of the Supreme Court. To my pleasant surprise, I found that she rescheduled the date today.

I am told that Child Rights and You – in short CRY, has partnered with CCR in the production and launch of this issue and the previous issue. CRY, as most of you know, is an Indian organization that brought children's issues into our living rooms through their greeting cards. It has a 45 years' legacy and has a presence in 22 states and union territories of India and is currently reaching almost 5 million children directly. Its acronym is obviously misleading, as it strives to bring smiles in the faces of children.

I congratulate the entire team of CCR, Hon'ble VC Prof Ved Kumari, the National Law University Odisha and CRY.

I wish you luck with your future editions. I hope that the journal will pave the way for the most relevant scholarship on child rights. I look forward to reading this issue and the future issues and taking ideas and insights to work towards a world where every child in Odisha, India and the world achieves their best potential.

In conclusion, I leave you with Nelson Mandela's quote, “*There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way it treats its children.*”

**Thank you!**