Armoring advocates: From rhetoric to reality

APOLOGIST

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AS a former journalist who traded the newsroom for the courtroom a few years ago, I've borne witness to the raw underbelly of India's legal fray. The adrenaline of chasing stories gave way to the solemn duty of defending clients, but the dangers I once reported on as distant headlines soon became personal perils.

None shook me more than the brutal slaying of the advocate couple Gattu Vaman Rao and Nagamani in February 2021. Representing victims of land encroachments and environmental harms, they were killed in broad daylight by those they had challenged legally. Their dying declarations, confirmed by forensic analysis, exposed the threats linked to their professional work. The Supreme Court's 12th August 2025 order transferring the investigation to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) highlights longstanding weaknesses in local law enforcement's impartiality and promptness.

This tragic episode is not isolated; it reflects a growing national concern over violence targeting legal professionals and has intensified calls for a dedicated Advocates Protection Act to shield those who uphold justice.

Escalating risks and the demand for dedicated legal safeguards:

In the past decade, violence targeting lawyers has sadly become more frequent—ranging from courtroom chaos and mob attacks to premeditated killings—often because lawyers challenge entrenched political, corporate, or criminal interests.

Bar associations in Telangana and elsewhere have vocally demanded laws explicitly protecting advocates. The All India Lawyers Advocacy Group (AILAJ), following prolonged campaigning, drafted a national Advocates Protection Bill in 2021 proposing stringent penalties for assault and intimidation, fast-track investigations, and victim compensation. Though the Bar Council of India also issued the draft bill the same year, the bill languishes in legislative purgatory.

Skeptics note that existing laws like Sections pertaining to attempt to murder, voluntarily causing hurt, and criminal intimidation of the new Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), or the old Indian Penal Code (IPC), coupled with procedural provisions for prompt FIR registration under the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (old Code of Criminal Procedure), already criminalise violence against any citizen, including advocates. So why insist on a specialized statute?

Why a specialised advocates' protection law matters?

General criminal laws do not fully capture the distinct vulnerabilities advocates face, given that threats often arise directly from their professional duties and can be politically or economically motivated.

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A dedicated law could institutionalize:

- Strict timelines for investigation—such as FIR registration or filing of charges within 24 hours of complaint.
- Specialised courts or fast-track tribunals focused exclusively on offenses involving legal practitioners.
- Stronger penalties, including imprisonment up to 10 years, higher fines, and mandatory compensation for victims.
- Preventive protections, including police escorts for advocates facing threats and formal threat assessments.

The 2021 Bill's proposed maximum penalties of up to 10 years' imprisonment and fines up to ₹ two lakh send a crucial zero-tolerance message in a system often marred by delays and political influences. Vaman Rao's case tragically exposes these gaps, where local police hesitated amid political pressure, prompting Supreme Court's intervention.

However, laws alone, regardless of their strength, will not suffice without committed enforcement. Police must be sensitized to prioritize advocates' security, and bar councils should actively monitor threats to ensure timely action.

A reflection on professional conduct:

While the need to shield advocates from external threats remains pressing, there is also a rising concern about integrity within the profession. Reports have highlighted troubling trends, such as advocates entering settlements in motor accident cases without fully informing clients and sometimes pursuing compensation awards primarily for personal gain. Instances where lawyers take on cases with an agreement to receive a percentage of the proceeds further point to challenges around ethical boundaries. Such practices risk eroding client trust and, over time, can contribute to wider unease and distrust toward the justice system.

Another area requiring careful reflection is the increasing recourse by some advocates and Bar Associations to boycotting courts or disrupting court proceedings as forms of protest. While recognizing the right to protest against perceived injustices, such actions can unintentionally affect the very parties lawyers represent—often vulnerable litigants desperate for timely relief. Interruptions and adjournments caused by collective boycotts of courts can cause delays, increase costs, and impede justice delivery.

Courts are not just professional workplaces but institutions foundational to upholding rights and societal order. When proceedings are disrupted or hearings boycotted, it diminishes access to justice and can erode public confidence in the legal system. It is important that any advocacy for reform be balanced with the duty to uphold professional ethics and ensure client interests remain paramount.

Professional bodies and bar councils must continue to encourage dialogue, ethical training, and responsibility within the legal community, ensuring protests do not compromise justice or client welfare.

Insights from State-level laws:

Several Indian states have taken pioneering steps to protect advocates, though with mixed results:

- **Rajasthan Advocates Protection Act (2023):** Criminalizes violence against advocates with penalties up to seven years' imprisonment and fines of ₹50,000, along with compensation provisions. Reports show increased reporting and police engagement but ongoing attacks highlight implementation challenges.
- **Karnataka Prohibition of Violence Against Advocates Act (2023):** Penalizes assaults or obstructions with up to three years' imprisonment and ₹1 lakh fines. Improved FIR registrations are noted, yet rural court violence persists.
- **Telangana Welfare and Protection Bill (2024):** Awaiting enactment amid continuing advocacy.

From demands to deliverables-Closing the implementation gap:

Despite unified demands from bar associations, much remains rhetorical as high-profile attacks provoke protests without sustained legislative or executive follow-through. Bills stall in committees, police investigations delay, and public trust suffers.

Recommendations for meaningful progress-Judiciary's role:

- Proactively invoke suo motu jurisdiction to expedite cases involving attacks on lawyers.
- Establish fast-track courts dedicated to such cases to ensure timely justice.
- Mandate police oversight and hold officers accountable for delays or lapses.
- Promote structured collaboration with bar councils for intelligence sharing and protection planning.
- Monitor enforcement of protection laws through periodic judicial reviews.

Role of Advocates Associations:

- Maintain comprehensive, transparent data on incidents of violence and threats.
- Lead public interest litigations pressing for legislative and enforcement reforms.
- Sustain continuous engagement with lawmakers and police to institutionalize protective measures.
- Form internal safety and counseling cells to support threatened members.
- Conduct regular training on legal rights, threat management, and security.
- Build alliances with national and international human rights and legal professional organizations to amplify advocacy.

A call beyond catharsis:

Witnessing Vaman Rao's empty chambers, now a shrine of unfulfilled justice, I can't dismiss these demands as mere emotion.

An Advocates Protection Act isn't a silver bullet, but in a system where general laws buckle under pressure, it could fortify the frontlines. Yet, true reform hinges on collective resolve: Legislatures to legislate boldly, executives to execute faithfully, and judiciaries to adjudicate swiftly, apart from the legal community's own commitment to ethical conduct and professionalism. Globally, we've seen that protecting lawyers isn't charity—it's self-preservation for democracy.

India must urgently enact enforceable laws, implement police and judicial reforms, and nurture a culture that protects legal defenders without compromising the profession's integrity.

Only through this integrated approach can the rule of law be safeguarded — armoring those who stand as society's sentinels against injustice.

(The author is former Senior Editor, The Economic Times, and currently practising as an advocate at the Telangana High Court)

Literary letters of historical significance: From Gurudev to Maharani of Vizianagaram

NOMULA SRINIVAS RAO

HISTORY often leaves behind timeless imprints in the form of letters, writings and exchanges of ideas. Among them, two remarkable letters stand out—one penned by Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore in 1914, and the other by Maharani of Vizianagaram, Vidyavathi Devi, in 1915. Both letters highlight not only the literary connections between Bengal and Andhra but also the compassion and human values of the illustrious Pusapati dynasty of Vizianagaram.

Tagore wrote a deeply personal letter from Ramgarh in the Kumaon Hills on May 24, 1914. Addressed to Gurajada Apparao, one of Andhra's towering literary figures, the letter reflects Tagore's inner struggle and his search for peace:

"Thank you for your kind letter. I had been forced to go through a very great dissipation of mind for a long time—so I have taken shelter here in the solitude of Himalayas to gather my scattered forces and regain my spiritual equilibrium. You can easily understand that this is most important for me and I cannot set my mind to anything else for some time to come. I am sure you will understand and excuse me if I fail to meet your demand, at least for the present."

These words reveal not only Tagore's vulnerability but also his respect for Gurajada's correspondence. The humility with which he seeks pardon for not fulfilling a request illustrates the mutual admiration between two literary stalwarts from different regions of India.

Rabindranath Tagore with Maharani of Vizianagaram Vidyavathi Devi

Barely a year later, another significant letter was written—this time by Maharani Vidyavathi Devi to Dr. Col. Illington, Superintendent of King George Hospital, Visakhapatnam. Dated April 7th, 1915, the letter concerns none other than Gurajada Apparao, who was serving as her private secretary and had fallen ill.

The Maharani's compassionate concern is evident:

"Will you be good enough to attend to my Private Secretary Mr. G.V. Apparao who is now staying at Vizagapatam with P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar. He has been ailing for the past so many months and has just gone to Vizag for a change and better medical treatment. I hope you will give him your very best attention, and inform me of his progress from time to time. Please send your bill to me for payment."

This letter reflects not only the Maharani's deep care for Gurajada Apparao but also the Pusapati dynasty's tradition of treating their associates with dignity and responsibility. Her willingness to personally ensure his medical treatment highlights a humane dimension of royal patronage.

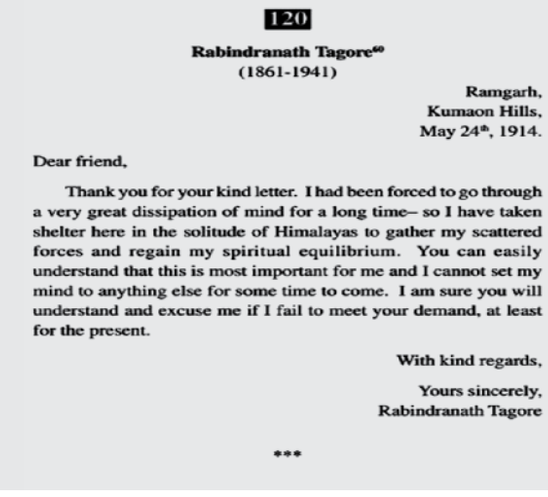
Gurudev's communication with Apparao highlights the cultural bridge between Bengal and Andhra, while Maharani Vidyavathi Devi's letter underscores the benevolence of the Vizianagaram royal family. They are reflections of empathy, mutual respect, and nurturing of intellectual and human values. Since the early 1900s, the Pusapati dynasty has been a beacon of support for literature, music, science, and education. Their contributions have shaped generations of scholars, artists, and reformers. From supporting stalwarts like Apparao to founding educational institutions and encouraging cultural exchange, the dynasty has left an indelible mark on the intellectual and cultural history of Andhra Pradesh.

As the saying goes, 'The true measure of royalty lies not in grandeur but in the compassion with which it nurtures the society it leads.'

The Pusapati dynasty stands as a shining example of this enduring legacy.

(The writer is OSD to Ashok Gajapathi Raju, Governor of Goa)

Original Letter from Rabindranath Tagore to Gurajada Apparao (May 24, 1914):



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Rabindranath Tagore[60]
(1861-1941)

Ramgarh,
Kumaon Hills,
May 24th, 1914.

Dear friend,

Thank you for your kind letter. I had been forced to go through a very great dissipation of mind for a long time– so I have taken shelter here in the solitude of Himalayas to gather my scattered forces and regain my spiritual equilibrium. You can easily understand that this is most important for me and I cannot set my mind to anything else for some time to come. I am sure you will understand and excuse me if I fail to meet your demand, at least for the present.

With kind regards,

Yours sincerely,
Rabindranath Tagore

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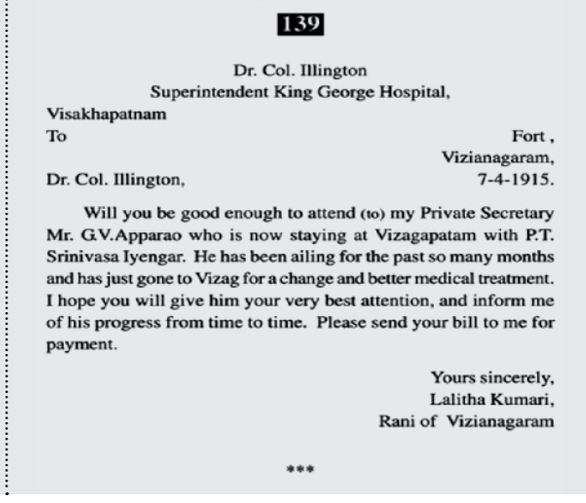
Letter from Maharani Vidyavathi Devi to Dr. Col. Illington (April 7, 1915):



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Dr. Col. Illington
Superintendent King George Hospital,
Visakhapatnam

To

Fort ,
Vizianagaram,
7-4-1915.

Dr. Col. Illington,

Will you be good enough to attend (to) my Private Secretary Mr. G.V.Apparao who is now staying at Vizagapatam with P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar. He has been ailing for the past so many months and has just gone to Vizag for a change and better medical treatment. I hope you will give him your very best attention, and inform me of his progress from time to time. Please send your bill to me for payment.

Yours sincerely,
Lalitha Kumari,
Rani of Vizianagaram

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Let go of futile baggage, be at ease with life

DR ACHYUTA SAMANTA

IN life, we strive for success, peace and happiness. We aim to achieve stability and comfort, both external and internal. But often, we miss the one fundamental truth and that is the less luggage we carry, the more comfort we experience.

This isn't just about physical luggage. It is about emotional, mental, spiritual and material luggage. The lighter our load, the smoother will be our journey. This principle applies to every stage of life. We just need to pause, reflect and recognise how unnecessary weight, whether physical or guilt, ego, regrets or attachments slows us down, drains our energy and clouds our vision.

Let us begin with what we watch every day. The school-going kid! When children begin their academic journey, they are full of curiosity, innocence and joy. But soon, the weight of the school bag increases and also the expectations and pressure on the child. A nursery child carries only essentials like books, colours and playful things. But as they progress to higher grades, their bags become heavier, symbolising how life burdens them with more than what is necessary.

When children carry less, they feel freer. They walk faster. They think clearly. They enjoy their journey. When they are weighed down, their enthusiasm wanes, their back hurts and their joy fades.

The same principle applies to adults, professionals, leaders and everyone walking the path of life.

Whenever we travel, we realise how much easier it is to move when we carry a few things. More luggage means more pain. Those who travel light reach faster, adapt better and are less worried about what they might lose.

Similarly, in life, we are all travellers moving from one place to another, one phase to another. Some shift homes. Others shift jobs. Some change cities, while some transition from one relationship to another. In every transition, those who carry less emotional and mental baggage adjust better. When we cling to past mistakes, broken relationships, grudges, or past glories, we prevent ourselves from embracing the present or preparing for the future. Philosopher Seneca said, "He who is everywhere is nowhere." A person divided between past hurts and future fears never lives fully in the present. Forgiveness, therefore, becomes the greatest baggage remover towards others and ourselves. When we forgive, we drop the unnecessary. We free ourselves. The idea of less baggage is central to almost all religious traditions.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna tells Arjuna to act without attachment, ego and expectation. In Buddhism, the path to enlightenment requires letting go of desires and attachments. In Jainism, renunciation and minimalism are the means to spiritual progress. In Islam, Prophet Muhammad said, "Detach from the world, and Allah will love you." The spiritual path in Islam values simplicity (zuhd), humility and trust in divine providence over attachment to possessions or status. Even in the Christian tradition, the teachings of the Desert Fathers and mystics emphasise inner silence, solitude and detachment from worldly distractions. In each tradition, the path to spiritual progress requires us to drop something and not accumulate more.

Mahatma Gandhi embodied this philosophy in his daily life. His belief in non-possession was not merely about material goods. It was about renouncing ego, pride and greed. He famously said, "The world has enough for everyone's need,

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but not enough for everyone's greed."

What do we mean when we talk of baggage in this context?

- **Emotional:** Resentment, anger, unresolved trauma.
- **Mental:** Overthinking, guilt, self-doubt.
- **Material:** Hoarding, unnecessary possessions.
- **Spiritual:** Ego, pride, judgment, righteousness.

The more of these we carry, the farther we are from peace. A person who learns to let go becomes lighter, freer and more at ease with life and its uncertainties.

I have lived a life filled with struggle, responsibility and challenges. From my childhood to my journey in public service, I have seen both extreme poverty and the heights of success. But through it all, I have held on to a simple philosophy of carrying less, giving more. Even today, despite heading large institutions and organisations, I strive to keep my personal life simple by having less or no baggage.

I avoid unnecessary materialism, I forgive quickly and I try not to dwell too long on setbacks. That is my path to more comfort.

It is about mental peace. It is about being able to sleep peacefully and maintain a natural glow in the skin. It is about having clarity in decision-making. When your heart is not clouded with anger or jealousy, and your mind is not heavy with doubt or over-analysis, you work better, lead better and live better.

In today's world, success is often equated with accumulation of wealth, status, recognition, even followers. But true success lies in simplification. The more we accumulate, the more we fear losing. The more we fear, the more anxious we become.

Covid taught us this truth in a harsh but clear way. When everything shut down, we realised how little we actually needed to survive. It was not our wardrobes or luxury cars or TV screens that gave us peace. It was health, family and inner strength. In leadership too, the most effective ones are those who delegate, trust and keep their egos in check. They create teams, empower others and release control. That implies less luggage.

The journey of life is between birth and death. Everything in between is movement - constant, unpredictable and temporary. We come into this world empty-handed. We leave the same way. Whatever we gather is only temporary luggage. What remains is how we lived. Did we live joyfully? Did we forgive? Did we release what no longer served us? Did we lighten our load? If yes, then our journey was comfortable. Peaceful. Spiritual. Today, I encourage every reader, not as a moral instruction, but as a heartfelt invitation to examine these questions. You may find that the path becomes clearer. And your heart finally feels at ease. It is the key to peace, the root of forgiveness and the secret to a life well-lived.

Let us all strive, in our own ways, to carry less, so we may live more.

(The writer is a former MP and founder of Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology and Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences, Bhubaneswar)