

Fair Stipends or Unpaid Privilege? A Comprehensive Debate -

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[Junior lawyer](#), Ritesh Chowdhury, represents grassroots activism, with statements like: “*How can we survive on ₹200-300 per day when seniors charge ₹20,000 per hearing?*” exposing the stark compensation disparity in the legal field. “*Career in litigation is not as lucrative as a corporate job, and thus GLASS provides an additional allowance for a year to sustain and not leave practice because of monetary reasons*” – [Aaditya Thorat](#), highlighting the financial barriers to entering litigation.

Introduction

Legal internships in India play a central role in places where law education and professional assimilation collide. From 2025, the Bar Council of India (BCI) [will require](#) law graduates to complete a structured 12-month internship under the supervision of qualified advocates, either in legal departments or courts, before registration as advocates. This step is being taken to ensure that entry is more professionalised and that practical readiness is ensured before candidates enter courtroom practice. Yet, this has not solved the nagging question in the whole scheme of things. Should interns be remunerated?

Unpaid Internships and Barriers to Equal Access

This is where the matter lies in Ria's recount, as shared by [Bar & Bench](#). Academically speaking, Ria was brilliant and deserved a place in a top Delhi chamber. However, she had no means to pursue the internship, as it was all dependent upon stipend support. Her inability to afford rent and travel expenses highlights the deeper, systemic discrimination at play. Unpaid internships disproportionately favour students from privileged backgrounds and create socio-economic barriers to entering the profession. This kind of inequality has created a clear stigma in student surveys. Nearly [75% of legal interns](#) prefer paid opportunities, only about 5% are okay with unpaid roles, and just a few believe that experience alone, whether paid or unpaid, makes an internship worthwhile.

Guidelines, Courts, and Institutional Responses

Even though the [government has talked](#) about paid internships, it does not intend to legislate mandatory stipends. In a reply to a parliamentary question posed in July 2025, the Ministry of Law & Justice stated that no framework or binding guidelines to mandate a minimum stipend for law interns are being considered. Instead, it [reaffirmed](#) that the BCI is drawing up a Model Code of Legal Internships aimed at ensuring fairness, transparency, and grievance procedures, though not by any means statutory or mandatory.

An important role has already [been played](#) by the BCI by issuing non-binding guidelines in October 2024 with a recommendation for a minimum stipend of Rs. 20,000 per month in urban areas and Rs. 15,000 in rural areas for junior advocates and interns. These guidelines are non-binding and would be applicable for an unspecified period of at least three years from the commencement of the advocate's engagement, alongside the expectations of documented mentorship, performance tracking, and transparency, all subject to the limitations of recognising the financial constraints of small firms or solo practitioners.

Early in 2024, there was a sharp increase in legal activism. The Delhi High Court directed the BCI and Bar Council of Delhi to look into [representations demanding](#) a standard stipend policy and fair remuneration for interns and young advocates. The calls reverberated in the legal community. Simultaneously, a PIL was filed in the [Bombay High Court](#) by Ajit Vijay Deshpande claiming Rs. 5,000/month for junior lawyers earning below Rs. 1 lakh annually. The court [sympathised](#) with the cause but outrightly rejected the petition, ruling out a stipend mandate in the absence of a clear statutory direction or financial support. The judges cited exorbitant living costs in Mumbai, suggesting that amounts exceeding Rs. 45,000 may be required for survival. However, they added a caveat: *moral support alone cannot substitute for legislative authority*.

On a larger scale, the argument against obligatory stipend legislation is founded upon the perception that training, networking, and reputation are more valuable than monetary payment; these very qualities are deemed to outweigh the 'value' of an internship. And therein lies a double-edged sword: the experience and goodwill gained by an intern can be justified as compensation by firms that thrive on unpaid interns to work for them is a kind of orthodox exchange, unspoken yet candidly dissected by [Legally India](#). Some work for these firms during

the year or summer and punch in long hours for experience and reputation, not because they see the work as meaningful, but pay and qualify this by stating that other firms pay at least good money for “shit work”.

The Value of Training vs The Right to Fair Compensation

Those who argue in favour of paid internships have debated various ethical and moral issues associated with this proposition. They [argue](#) that the legal system in India must [uphold](#) the constitutional principles of equality before the law (*Article 14*) and the right to life with dignity (*Article 21*), both of which [support](#) fair compensation for legal interns. Denying pay to those whose contributions constitute genuine legal work undermines these fundamental rights and raises serious ethical and legal concerns. It becomes an ethical and legal issue not to pay interns when their work can be regarded as actually relevant legal work. Interns may therefore be viewed as an alternative labour force, one that is still not recognised under the law, and thus remains ignored in terms of value and stature in a prestige-based market.

Many perspectives converge on the question of how internships should be structured in India. On one end of the spectrum, world-class law firms in metropolitan cities offer structured, paid internships and vacation schemes, with stipends ranging between ₹10,000 and ₹40,000. On the other hand, NGOs, rural chambers, and small practitioners often rely on unpaid internships or token amounts, constrained by limited resources despite their commitment to social justice. The pandemic further transformed this landscape, normalising remote internships and making them more accessible for students from distant or underprivileged backgrounds. Yet, the very rise of these virtual formats has introduced new challenges concerning oversight, the quality of learning, and the assurance of fair compensation.

Hybrid Models and Emerging Challenges

Some advocacy voices are now calling for more proactive institutional strategies, urging law universities to establish internship portals that thoroughly vet opportunities, monitor stipend disbursements, and ultimately prohibit unpaid internships as a rule rather than the exception. Similar centralised systems and oversight mechanisms have already been implemented with success in technical and policy internships, introducing transparency and accountability into the process. For instance, [Visvesvaraya Technological University \(VTU\)](#) has launched a centralised internship portal requiring all internships to be registered and vetted by a university committee to ensure quality and credibility.

When this debate goes on, it raises a strong argument in favour of legislation. As stated above, the norms suggested by BCI are advisory, while courts and the legal academia are clamouring for clear-cut legislation providing for fixed law defining internship classification, hours of work, payment, grievance mechanisms, and rights of the internees. [No clear law](#), hence undue execution and exploitation. Such legal ambiguity in rectifying internship desiderata perpetuates exploitation in the name of training and drags the profession into unjust richness and prejudiced accessibility.

Law Firms' Perspective: The Dilemma of Early-Year Interns

First and second-year law students often lack foundational legal skills, which limits the scope of meaningful work they can contribute. Their tasks are typically administrative filing, proofreading, and basic research, not necessarily qualifying as “legal work” that merits a stipend. Even well-intentioned mandates risk discouraging smaller firms from offering opportunities to these junior students, inadvertently reducing early exposure crucial for professional development.

By contrast, senior-year interns frequently handle substantive tasks like drafting pleadings or assisting with research, which amounts to “real contributions”. Yet, compensation remains inconsistent. A candid discussion on [Legally India](#) reveals that some top-tier firms, such as AZB, offered as little as ₹3,000 per month, while others like SAM paid nothing at all. At the same time, leading firms may offer ₹10,000 to ₹50,000 in more competitive settings. The resulting disparity undermines equity and signals that meaningful work isn't always fairly rewarded.

The internship market is oversaturated hundreds of students competing for limited spots, many willing to work for free. This dynamic enables firms to rely on unpaid labour, with “experience” serving as a substitute for fair compensation. Such conditions perpetuate systemic inequities, where students from privileged backgrounds can afford unpaid internships, while others cannot a central concern of the broader debate about equity in legal training.

*A balanced proposal is a **tiered stipend model**: early-year interns receive structured, mentorship-based exposure without mandatory pay, preserving firms' capacity to train new entrants; senior-year interns, whose contributions are substantive, receive fair compensation aligned with regional standards. The BCI's non-binding recommendation of ₹20,000/month in urban areas and ₹15,000 in rural areas offers a helpful benchmark for such differentiated practices.*

Beyond Internships: The Junior Advocate Stipend Debate

Beyond internships, the BCI has ventured into measures to give greater sustenance. In July 2025, it proposed a stipend of [Rs. 50,000 per month for junior advocates](#), under thirty years of age, admitted in the bar after July 2023, thus targeting the alleviation of the severe financial crunch faced at an early stage of the career and the easy retention of potential talent in litigation. Going beyond one's mind in any respect from the discussion on stipend accompanying the internship, more milestone changes in the perception of the stakeholders may be countenanced, supporting the raging storm of institutionalised stress, generated in the first instance by studying law.

Conversely, internships, as regards stipend for legal interns, throw a shadow on similar debates in other sectors. For one, medical interns in government hospitals went on a strike concerning delinquent stipends, causing a kind of administrative review demanding more consistency in payment systems. [Though contextual elements are different](#), the one pervasive theme in every profession remains, compulsory training with unpaid stipends requires fair compensation.

Conclusion: Building a Balanced and Inclusive System

In conclusion, arguments about legal intern stipends are not just about money; they contrive an agenda about the sagacity, availability, and change in the training of law in India. Opportunities for internships should be recognised not as charity but as work-for-pay roles with a balanced acknowledgement. As of now, rules are around, and choices are plenty. Public opinion inclines toward the idea of reform; however, no law can be brought in, and they lack the financial support to make things possible.

Future success lies in converting the aspirational directions of BCI into enforceable provisions, whether through the State Bar Councils or legislation itself, or an institutional mandate issued by universities. This would then enable India's young legal community to create a fair and just legal system of inclusion that would unite both justice and mercy with the practice.

About the author



Hey! Dear Reader,

My name is Sakcham Singh Parmaar. I began my academic journey at Litera Valley School in Patna, Bihar, India, where I excelled in various activities, earning numerous accolades and forming lasting connections with inspiring teachers and friends. Currently, I am pursuing a B.A.LL.B (HONS.) at Jindal Global Law School, O.P. Jindal Global University, Delhi NCR, India, one of India's top private law colleges. Actively involved in multiple societies, I am deeply passionate about legal research, recognizing its importance in a legal career. As a sophomore, I am eager to learn and achieve even greater heights. My work ethic is highly praised by seniors and colleagues, who describe me as hardworking, eager for knowledge, dedicated, and able to maintain a disciplined yet friendly demeanour.

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