

Legends in Law: Our Great Forebears (2024)

by V. Sudhish Pai. Law and Justice Publishing Company.

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In *Legends in Law: Our Great Forebears* (2nd ed. 2024),³ Senior Advocate V. Sudhish Pai offers a remarkable and deeply evocative tribute to some of the most influential figures in Indian legal history. This newly expanded edition, comprising 48 carefully selected profiles, stands as both a monumental archive and a passionate homage. It explores the intellectual, moral, and personal landscapes of eminent judges, lawyers, and scholars who left indelible marks on the Indian legal system. Combining legal history, moral philosophy, cultural memory, and literary narrative, Pai crafts a book that transcends genre: it is at once a chronicle, a meditation, a gallery of portraits, and a cultural artifact. Indeed, Pai openly borrows George Santayana's dictum that “progress depends on retentiveness”⁴ in the idea that contemporary lawyers must remember and learn from their forerunners. To this end, each chapter unfolds a procession of the greats before the reader, recounting both their professional legacies and personal stories.

The tone throughout is celebratory and anecdotal. Pai punctuates the narratives with rich gems of entertaining incidents and humorous anecdotes drawn from both correspondence and personal memory. The sketches emphasize human qualities alongside professional prowess; readers learn not only of each person's legal achievements but also of peculiarities and personal character. Pai does not merely summarise judicial contributions but goes a step further to animate these figures. He humanises them through personal quirks, intellectual convictions and public contributions. The format is essentially literary rather than academic: Pai writes in accessible, affectionate prose, often quoting letters or sayings of the legends. For example, the author includes mottoes and epigrams, often invoking Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes's aphorisms⁵ to enliven the portraits. The narrative does not linger on dates or dry chronology; instead, it flows like a series of character studies.

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³ V. Sudhish Pai, *Legends In Law: Our Great Forebears* (Law & Justice Publishing Co., 2nd ed., 2024).

⁴ George Santayana, *The Life of Reason: Reason in Common Sense* (1906).

⁵ Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Common Law* 1 (Little, Brown & Co. 1881).



The foreword, contributed by Justice M. N. Venkatachaliah, former Chief Justice of India, observes that biographers inevitably feel “an emotion of hero-worship” toward their subjects, and he judges Pai's effort to be “worthy” in informing “the present generation of lawyers of what distinguished some of our great forebears in the law.”⁶ He praises Pai's intent to preserve “for posterity something heroic” in these lives. It also underscores the thematic unity of the work: although each life is unique, they all share devotion to “the advancement of the cause of justice”.

Pai's method is distinctly literary rather than academic. He eschews exhaustive timelines in favour of moral parables and character studies. Each chapter reads like a contemplative monologue, shaped by narrative flair and punctuated by philosophical insight.

He divides the book into four major sections: "Law - Philosophy - Values - Development," "History of the Courts," "Men of Law," and "Letters." Each of these segments provides a different lens through which to view the evolution of Indian law and its architects.

The first section is philosophical and ethical in tone, where Pai introduces his moral universe. Here, he draws on both classical Indian jurisprudence and Western legal thought. The Upanishads meet Cardozo and Holmes; Krishna Iyer echoes dharma.⁷ This segment highlights law not merely as an instrument of governance but as a vehicle for justice, conscience, and virtue. It sets the stage for the personalities who embodied those ideals.

The second section is historical, detailing the development of India's legal institutions. From the colonial roots of the Supreme Court and the Privy Council to the Federal Court and the emergence of India's modern Supreme Court, Pai provides a compelling overview of the judiciary's structural evolution. He situates figures like Sir Barnes Peacock⁸ and Sir Rashbehary Ghose⁹ within the shifting sands of imperial power, institutional experimentation, and gradual indigenization of the legal system.

The third and largest section, "Men of Law," is the book's living heart. Pai breathes life into legal giants—Justice Vivian Bose,¹⁰ who combined civic service with legal acumen; Nani Palkhivala,¹¹ whose mathematical mind shaped jurisprudence; and Justice V.R. Krishna

⁶ V. Sudhish Pai, *Supra* note 3, Foreword by Justice Venkatachaliah.

⁷ *Id.* at 2.

⁸ *Id.* at 47.

⁹ *Id.* at 91.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 301.

¹¹ *Id.* at 457.

Iyer,¹² who composed poetry while transforming the social reach of constitutional law. Pai's portrayals of M.C. Setalvad, H.M. Seervai, P.N. Bhagwati and Soli Sorabjee, move beyond dry summaries, offering rich, character-driven sketches. These figures are seen as philosophers, reformers, visionaries, and in some cases (such as those of Justice H.R. Khanna), lonely warriors of principle.¹³

The final section, "Letters," adds a deeply personal dimension stitching past to present. Private correspondence between Pai and the family or associates of these legends reveals the warmth, affection, and mentorship that underpinned their greatness.

Despite the book's scope and elegance, from a critical scholarly standpoint there are notable gaps. The book's approach is very much of an older-school, celebratory biography genre, and it rarely ventures into critical analysis or context beyond the narrative. There is little discussion of the broader social or political challenges these figures faced, nor any sustained engagement with controversies in their careers. Controversies, ideological critiques, and institutional biases are mostly sidestepped. Justice Bhagwati's reversal during the Emergency,¹⁴ for instance, is only lightly addressed. The socio-economic and caste backgrounds of the featured figures are rarely discussed. The portraits are unapologetically laudatory; true to the theme of "hero-worship" the author steers clear of any serious criticism or nuance. This is a stylistic choice, but it means the book is more devotional than dialectical. In an academic sense, *Legends in Law* reads as hagiography rather than historiography.

Closely related is the point that the selection of personalities is noticeably traditional. Pai's foreword and descriptions repeatedly call them "men of law", and indeed virtually every profile in the volume is male. There are no chapters on India's early women lawyers or jurists, such as Cornelia Sorabji (India's first woman barrister) or Justice Leila Seth (first female High Court Chief Justice). This omission is glaring when seen in the context of India's legal history. Cornelia Sorabji (1866–1954), for example, is widely recognized as India's first female lawyer – she studied law at Oxford in the 1890s and worked for the welfare of women under purdah.¹⁵ Leila Seth (1930–2017), another pioneer, broke multiple barriers: she was the first woman judge of the Delhi High Court and later the first woman Chief Justice of a state High Court.¹⁶ Neither figure is mentioned by Pai, and that is a missed opportunity. Even by the late 20th century women were still a tiny minority on Indian

¹² *Id.* at 443.

¹³ *Id.* at 431.

¹⁴ Anuj Bhuwania, "P.N. Bhagwati's Legacy: A Controversial Inheritance" *The Hindu* (June 27, 2017), available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/a-controversial-inheritance/article62113007.ece> (last visited on May 15, 2025).



benches (only about 11.7% of High Court judges were women as of 2021).¹⁷ Including the stories of these women would have added much-needed diversity to Pai's pantheon and better reflected the progress (and remaining gaps) in legal inclusion.

Another significant omission is any discussion of contemporary transformations in legal practice and education. *Legends in Law* is almost entirely historical in focus: it does not grapple with modern trends in technology, pedagogy, or legal aid. In today's digital age, technology has revolutionized the law, from online legal research to virtual hearings, yet Pai makes no attempt to connect his subjects' legacies to these developments. There is no speculative reflection on how past legends might respond to these changes or how their principles could guide new lawyers navigating this digital terrain. Including such reflections would not dilute the book's historicity but enrich it with relevance.

The book also overlooks systemic access issues in the legal system. The narrative does not address how socioeconomic factors, gender, or infrastructure influence who becomes a lawyer or who gets justice. For example, scholars emphasize the crucial role of law schools in promoting access to justice for the poor. Law students volunteering in legal aid clinics or pro bono programs are today seen as vital in 'closing the gap' for those who cannot afford counsel. However, in Pai's biographies, the only hint of outreach is occasional mention of eminent lawyers' work in famous cases or commissions, not their community engagement.

Further, as the publisher's description candidly admits, Pai's style is decidedly non-technical: it is "story-telling" rather than scholarly analysis. Readers seeking data, charts, or comparative tables of jurisprudence will find none. There are no reference notes, and sources are mostly allusions (quoting books and letters without formal citation). This is appropriate for a general readership, but it means the work may disappoint academics looking for in-depth research. While *Legends in Law* will be an excellent addition to every library of both lawyer and layman, its user-friendliness comes at the expense of rigor and completeness.

While Legends in Law adopts a predominantly literary, anecdote-rich mode, eschewing extensive footnotes or doctrinal analysis in favour of character sketches and moral parables,

¹⁵ Nikita Mohta, "The Trailblazing Journey of Cornelia Sorabji" *Indian Express*, Mar. 19, 2025, available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/books/cornelia-sorabji-first-indian-female-lawyer-9197231/> (last visited on May 15,2025).

¹⁶ Gauri Kashyap, "Women in the Judiciary - Have We Come Far From the 30s" *Supreme Court Observer*, July 23, 2021, available at: <https://www.scobserver.in/journal/women-in-the-judiciary-have-we-come-far-from-the-30s/> (last visited on May 15,2025).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

other recent works in Indian legal biography have taken differing tacks. For example, Indu Bhan's *Legal Eagles*¹⁸ blends narrative vignettes with succinct case-study analyses, integrating data on landmark judgments and practice-tips for aspiring lawyers. By contrast, *The Courtroom Genius: Nani Palkhivala*¹⁹ situates its subject within detailed socio-political contexts, examining Palkhivala's tax jurisprudence through archival speeches, budget-speech transcripts, and contemporaneous press reports, thereby offering both anecdote and institutional critique. Where Pai privileges moral exemplarity and philosophical resonance, Bhan and Sorabjee & Datar interweave narrative with empirical frameworks. This contrast underscores Pai's role as cultural historian and storyteller, rather than a conventional legal historian.

Readers will appreciate that Pai often includes witty stories or personal recollections – the kind of material lawyers hear in courtside gossip but seldom see in print. By emphasizing judicial wisdom and wit, *Legends in Law* casts the law as a culture and profession, not just an abstract system of rules. The work thus succeeds in its primary goal: inspiring reverence for India's juristic heritage. As the foreword suggests, the book cultivates “awe and respect” for these forebears while subtly reminding us that their common bond was justice. Those wanting role models of public-spirited advocacy or judicial courage will find much to admire here.

Law students and young lawyers, in particular, can benefit from knowing that they stand on the shoulders of giants. In Pai's portraits, one sees examples of courage, integrity, and intellectual curiosity. For instance, the volume's subjects include trailblazers who risked their careers for justice, or who went beyond the courtroom in public service. Though Pai does not explicitly extract lessons, readers can infer them: that dedication to principle can change society, that legal skill coupled with conscience is a powerful force, and that even small acts of wit or kindness define a lawyer's reputation.

Pedagogically, exposure to such exemplars is widely recognized as formative. Legal educators have found that students of law are hungry for direct contact with people who are living the lives they are trying to envision for themselves.²⁰ A law student who meets ambitious, public-minded figures in these pages may see a blueprint for a fulfilling career. By literally introducing a new generation to the personalities behind landmark judgments, Pai helps inculcate a sense of belonging to the “arc of the legal profession”.

¹⁸ Indu Bhan, *Legal Eagles: Stories of The Top Seven Indian Lawyers* (Random House India, 2015).

¹⁹ Soli J. Sorabjee & Arvind P. Datar, *Nani Palkhivala: The Courtroom Genius* (LexisNexis, 2012).

²⁰ Patrick Longan, Timothy Floyd & Justin L. Driver, “A Virtue Ethics Approach to Teaching Professional Identity” *St. Thomas Univ. Sch. of Law* (May 3, 2020), available at: <https://blogs.stthomas.edu/professional-identity/virtue-ethics-approach/> (last visited on May 15, 2025).



Moreover, the book encourages reflection on the continuity of legal principles. When modern lawyers see, for example, how an earlier advocate argued for fundamental rights, or how a former judge approached constitutional interpretation, they can draw lines from past to present. Justice Venkatachaliah's writes that although each legend was "exceptionally great," what truly matters is that "the advancement of the cause of justice [was] their dedication".²¹

Engaging with this work also sharpens the mind to narrative reasoning, an underrated legal skill. Courts often phrase their judgments with carefully chosen historical analogies and personal anecdotes. Pai's collection can serve as a mini-library of such literary devices. Indeed, the presence of many quotations and stories in *Legends in Law* reminds us that law and literature go hand in hand. Balram Gupta's comment about "the best of legal literature" indicates that connecting law to writing and storytelling is part of the book's appeal.²²

Finally, the book is simply inspiring on a human level. Many coming generations have grown up hearing only abstract talk of jurisprudence or news about scandals. *Legends in Law* offers a different diet replete with rare heroism, humour, and humanity. It shows that lawyers can be not only thinkers of abstract law but also vibrant characters. The pleasure it affords makes the learning stick – a rare compliment for a legal text.

Legends in Law: Our Great Forebears is, above all, an affectionate tour of India's legal heritage. In a time when graduate programs emphasize theory and case methods, Pai's book returns us to personalities and narrative. It implicitly argues that remembering past jurists is as crucial as any doctrinal lesson. The work succeeds handsomely in this aim: its engaging prose and rich anecdotes bring history to life for the reader. For these reasons, the volume is heartily recommended.

Future editions of this book must be bolder. They should include pioneering women, spotlight voices from marginalized communities, and extend the analysis to the changing contours of law in the digital age. Critical questions around caste, gender, technology, and access to justice must not be ignored. Only then can this narrative become as inclusive as it is inspiring. Still, in its present form, Pai's book remains essential reading. It reminds readers that law, at its finest, is a moral enterprise powered by individuals of character. For students beginning their journey, it offers direction. For seasoned advocates, it offers reflection. For the profession, it offers both legacy and hope.

²¹ *Supra* note 6.

²² Balram K. Gupta, "How Literature and Law Are Twins" *Indian Express*, Mar. 12, 2023, available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/how-literature-and-law-are-twins-8494455/> (last visited on May 15, 2025).

In a world of flux, *Legends in Law* serves as a compass pointing toward enduring values. Ultimately, it underscores an evergreen truth: 'Law is not only made by statutes and judges' pens, but by the personalities who wield them.' This volume ensures that those personalities are not forgotten.