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An endearing journey

Lawyer Pavani Reddy, who was awarded 'The Asian Women of the Year Award', in 2010 by the British Minister of Justice, Lord McNally, feels that though there are many women lawyers in India now than in the past, the number still is too low and she hopes that things will change soon

ASKARI JAFFER

All of 36, Pavani Reddy is one of the few female Asian individuals to manage an international law firm in London, a fantastic achievement in a trade, which is often criticised for its "old-boys network" environment. The passionate advocate shares her journey from her childhood in India to establishing herself in international law industry

Excerpts

What prompted you to take up this profession?

While studying my Bachelor's in Delhi, I worked part time with one of the biggest law firms Orr Dignam & Company and then at a US law firm. It was the work experience there which made me develop the interest in law, and I haven't questioned my choice ever since.

After getting my degree in India, I moved to the UK to start three month probation with Zaiwalla & Co Solicitors. Living and working alone in the UK made me learn about the meaning "dignity of labour". I fell in love with the work culture here and the rest as they say is history.

Do you have any role model in the legal profession?

Sarosh Zaiwalla – the Founder of Zaiwalla & Co Solicitors, the first Indian Lawyer to establish a city law firm in London – has been my mentor throughout this journey. I feel so lucky to have been given the fantastic opportunities, being fully aware that this isn't the case for all women in the world.

There were and even now are very few successful woman lawyers in India. Can you call yourself trendsetter for woman lawyers?

Although there are many women lawyers in India now than in the past, the number still is too low and the list of successful women lawyers is even lower but I am very hopeful that things will change soon, as there are more law schools and more women are entering the profession. I am considered a feminist, having entered a male dominated profession. However, I take great pride in the label. It has been hard in its own way, but that being said, the journey has been such an enriching experience. There have been certain instances of prejudice in the beginning of my career, but



Pavani Reddy

being passionate about my work with the determination to succeed had helped derail any negative rhetoric. Things have also changed since the time I decided to pursue law. More and more women are pursuing law as a career option today. It should only get better from here. I also want to reach out to all the women out there and tell them that nothing is unachievable if you set your heart and mind to it. It might seem difficult at first, but you need to be passionate about a task or a responsibility you take on.

In 2005, I became a Partner in Zaiwalla & Co and now I am the Managing Partner here. I head up the Litigation team at the firm and handle multi-million pound disputes in the Court of Appeal and Supreme Court. I also specialise in Arbitration and have won many arbitration cases for Indian clients. So yes, the journey has been long, fulfilling and enriching.

This profession needs a lot of homework and real time to be spent looking for various judgments? Don't you feel it is taxing?

The legal profession is as such very stressful and time consuming profession, where we are obligated with tremendous responsibilities that can either make or break cases. Considering my scope of work is international, dealing with governments, corporates and high profile individuals would mean the stakes are already high. There are times when it demands my complete attention and though process for weeks, and there are times when it is like a regular 9 to 5 job. If we are running a tight deadline, then you work round the clock. For instance I spend my 50-minute train journey to work by reading through files. However, at the end of the day, all this doesn't matter to me when I walk in home to my family. Spending time with my 9-year-old son helps me relax

and take my mind off work.

After all said and done, it is a male bastion. Do you face challenges in day-to-day work?

The situation has improved since the time I joined the profession. I also consider myself a feminist because of this. My journey has been a long and endearing one. I have had the opportunity to work with some of the most reputed cases, which have taught me so much about my profession as well as my life.

I cannot say that I might have been through many struggles, but yes, it did require a lot of hard work and dedication. I have always been someone who chases her dreams and where I am today is just a step forward in my endeavour.

I aspire to soon become an expert in arbitration having recently won three London arbitrations for Indian clients' worth over £10M dollars each. In the recent years I have not seen huge difference as more women are now pursuing law as a career in India. This is very encouraging.

How many associates to you handle in your firm?

It is a very big responsibility and the position requires significant time input not only on client's matters but also on administrative matters including business development. We are a boutique firm and size of our team is modest but our firm handles very high quality matters. Clients often transfer their cases to our firm from large city firms due to their dissatisfaction over fees, quality of services and many other factors. The clients are now keener on instructing small and Boutique law firms and this change is driven by clients with a desire to reduce costs and obtain personal service.

Can you mention some of the landmarks cases you have won.

Each and every case that I handle makes me feel proud of myself as there is an experience that comes with each of them. In fact to me every case is equally important and urgent.

One of the recent cases that has been challenging, but has received a lot of coverage is our representation of the Iranian private bank, Bank Mellat. A case we won after successfully challenging the sanctions imposed on the bank by UK government and the European Council as part of the sanctions regime against Iran.

