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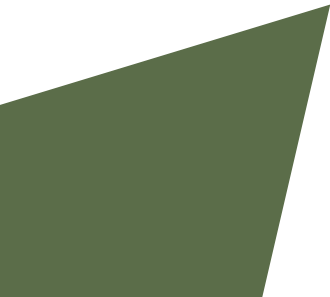
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Mother in Law: Leila Seth

Sanchi Agrawal¹

¹ 2nd Addl. Civil Judge (J.D.), Haridwar

MOTHER IN LAW: LEILA SETH

Book- On Balance.

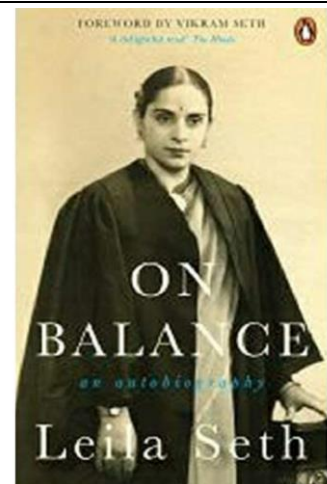
Author- Leila Seth

Publisher- Penguin Random House

Pages- 478

Price- Rs. 499

Year of Publication- 2003



The first woman Chief Justice of a High Court in India, the first woman judge of the Delhi High Court, the first woman to top the Bar examination in London, Late Hon'ble Justice Leila Seth's autobiography, '*On Balance*' presents a rich and heartwarming portrait of a strong woman who balanced both her professional and personal life. Born amidst the time when India launched the Quit India movement against the Britishers she went onto study law itself from London. She started her practice in the High Court of Patna (1959) and retired from the post of Chief Justice of Himachal Pradesh in 1992. Post retirement she was appointed in 1995 to examine the custodial death case of Ranjan Pillai. She was a member of 2013 Law Commission Reform in Criminal Laws (Justice Verma committee). She passed away in 2017.

The book has been divided into three parts. The first part deals with early days of her life which has been described by her as days of financial struggle especially after her father's death and her straying into law while in England with her husband, Premo. Her father worked in the Imperial Railway Service and her mother had studied from a missionary school. She has with utmost honesty written about how after her father's death, her mother brought up Leila Seth and managed the family. Since, they were broad minded and held progressive ideals, when she was born on the day of Diwali, the family was joyous of a girl being born. She studied from Loreto Convent, Darjeeling. She married Premo on 13th March, 1951, in a closed-knit affair. He worked in Bata. Due to economic constraints, the wedding was not treated like a celebrated affair and even as her wedding gift from her mother she asked for a photographer who could click some photographs. Soon after her marriage, she along with her husband moved to England leaving behind the elder son, Vikram (a renowned writer), who was just two years old at that time at her brother's, Shashi bhai's, home.

An amusing anecdote mentioned in her autobiography is that Vikram Seth's maternal grandmother used to show him daily the photograph of Premo and Leila Seth, so that he doesn't forget who his actual parents are. The book also highlights the innocence of the child by sharing an incident. When Vikram was asked once by his father's friend 'what is your mother tongue?' he replied in English 'my mother tongue is Hindi but my mother's tongue is English'.

Second part of the book deals with her journey from Bar to Bench. It elaborately records her balancing her working life and domestic life. She has written that pursuing law was not on her career's wish list. It was only after reading the article 'How to become a successful Barrister' in Career's Encyclopedia, that she enrolled in the course. She had topped the bar examination and 'Star Newspaper' had titled the news as – 'Mother in Law' because at that time she had her second child, Shantum, who was an infant at that time. This part of the book is an interesting read. In a patriarchal society where woman are considered 'fit' for certain roles, Leila Seth has written her accounts and has shared her experience in the tough world of practice at the Bar, where people raised eyebrows looking at her in the courtroom, where in Delhi she was rejected the membership of the Gymkhana Club because she was a 'lady judge' and the membership was only for male judges, accounts when she was demotivated for practicing as an advocate. However, her fighting against odd spirit made her breach the glass-ceiling.

When she returned back to India with her family, her first thought was to find a senior barrister in whose chambers she could acquire a professional technique of the court. She met Mr. Ahmed, the Registrar of the Calcutta High Court and then he suggested her to join the chamber of Mr. Sachin Chaudhari. Recollecting the experience with Mr. Sachin Chaudhari she has written, "He asked me, 'Why?' in this grave and gruff manner. After I told him, he said, 'Instead of joining the legal profession, young woman, go and get married'. I replied, 'But Sir, I am already married.' 'Then go and have a child,' He advised. I responded, 'I have a child.' 'It is not fair to the child to be alone, so, young lady, you should have a second child.' I replied, 'Mr. Chaudhari, I already have two children.' "Taken aback by her persistence, he finally let her join his chambers.

In 1959 she started her independent practice in the High Court of Patna, there were only two female advocates, Dharmshila Lal and Leila Seth. On 26th June, 1975 when emergency was proclaimed, the author has called it a blot on our democratic system. The aftermath of it was felt by her on the personal front also when Premo was suspended from Bata on false charges. To be elevated from the Bar to the Bench, the then Chief Justice of India, Honorable Justice Y.V. Chandrachud had advised her to send her bio-data for consideration as a judge of Delhi High Court to the then Chief Justice of High Court of Delhi. On 25th July 1978 she took oath

as the first woman judge of the High Court of Delhi (Anna Chandy was the first female judge of high court in India).

She has also criticized the mode of appointment of the judges in the Honorable Supreme Court of India. She was shattered, the way Justice Fatima Beevi was appointed as the first female judge of the Supreme Court of India on the basis of politics and lobbying. She realized that instead of merit, much weightage was given to the political connections. It seems to appear that as a bargain or to keep her silent she was appointed as the Chief Justice of Himachal Pradesh. Had she wanted, she could continue as a judge of the High Court of Delhi but she also accepted in becoming the first female Chief Justice of a State High Court. After her successful tenure of fifteen months as Chief Justice, she retired on 20th October 1992 from office.

In the third part, she talks about life post retirement, when she felt a sense of freedom. Due to her indomitable spirit she continued to work with full vigor at her Noida's residence. For her love for law she even completed her diploma in the Environmental Law from World Wide Fund for Nature. She was a part of the 15th Law Commission of India from 1997 to 2000 and is one of the contributors in bringing the revolutionary change in the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, where daughters were given equal rights in the joint family property and were entitled to become coparceners. She has been brave enough to shed inhibitions about Vikram being gay in the book. In fact after Suresh Kumar Koushal's judgment of Supreme Court of India on Section 377 IPC, that criminalises homosexual relationships, Leila Seth in an interview with The Times of India said, 'I remember reading a book called The Well of Loneliness about two lesbians, and I remember it moved me. Love is such a beautiful thing...'. This autobiography has been written with intricate balance. It gives a glimpse of introspection of not only of the author but even to the reader. This book encapsulates the story of an ordinary woman who juggled peacefully with the struggle that came across her life. She never took the world for granted nor tried to change its modalities but now wants to bring some refined changes harmoniously. The book is inspiring, creative and the humor makes it more fluid to read. She has kept her life completely in open in the court of readers without hiding her failures and the challenges. This book is highly recommended. This autobiography stands on the same footing to that of Mahatma Gandhi, Charlie Chaplin, Picasso, Nirad C. Chaudhary, Simone De Beauvoir. The language of the book is also simple and readable in one sitting.