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Notable Judges of India’s High Courts

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One Delhi High Court ruling in 2009 decriminalized homosexuality across all of India, years before the Supreme Court weighed in. This article covers notable judges of India’s High Courts, and the landmark moments they created.

> **First Indian CJ, Bombay HC** M.C. Chagla, 1947
> **First woman CJ, any HC** Leila Seth, Himachal Pradesh, 1991
> **Naz Foundation ruling** Delhi HC, 2009, under A.P. Shah
> **High Courts today** 25 across India

1 M.C. Chagla: The First Indian Chief Justice of a High Court

First

Bombay High Court, 1947

The appointment

M.C. Chagla became the first Indian Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court on 15 August 1947, the same day India became independent. He served for over eleven years, until 1958.

A judge who decided fast, with an example

Chagla reserved judgment in only two cases during his entire 17-year career as a judge. In almost every other case, he dictated his ruling immediately after arguments ended. For example, a lawyer arguing

before Chagla could expect a decision the same day, rather than waiting weeks for a written judgment to arrive later.

Life after the bench

Chagla later became a diplomat and a cabinet minister, showing how a High Court judgeship can lead into other forms of public service.

2 Leila Seth: Firsts That Built on Each Other

First

The first woman to lead any Indian High Court

Chief Justice, Himachal Pradesh, 1991

Leila Seth became Chief Justice of the Himachal Pradesh High Court in 1991, the first woman to become Chief Justice of any Indian High Court. She was also the first woman judge of the Delhi High Court, appointed earlier in her career.

Firsts that compound, with an example

Seth's earlier firsts opened the door to later ones. For example, she was the first woman to top the London Bar exams. She later became the first woman senior counsel to practice before the Supreme Court of India. Each first made the next a little more possible.

Legacy beyond the bench

Seth later helped reform India's inheritance laws, giving daughters equal rights to ancestral property. The effect was concrete: a daughter could now inherit family land on the same terms as a son.

3 A.P. Shah and the Naz Foundation Ruling

Landmark Ruling

Decriminalizing homosexuality, a decade before the Supreme Court

What the Delhi High Court decided

In 2009, a Delhi High Court bench led by Chief Justice A.P. Shah ruled in **Naz Foundation v. Government of NCT of Delhi**. It held that Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, as applied to consenting adults, violated fundamental rights.

Where the case came from, with an example

The case was brought by the Naz Foundation, an NGO working on HIV/AIDS outreach. For example, the NGO's own staff faced discriminatory treatment while trying to reach at-risk communities. That is what pushed it to file the original petition in 2001.

A ruling that got reversed, then restored

The 2009 ruling was not the end of the story. In 2013, the Supreme Court's **Suresh Kumar Koushal** judgment overturned it and reinstated Section 377. It took until 2018, in **Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India**, for a five-judge Supreme Court bench to overturn Koushal and restore decriminalisation for good.

> **Think it through: why does a High Court ruling matter if the Supreme Court can just reverse it?**
>
> Even a reversed ruling leaves a record other courts can build on later. The Naz Foundation judgment's own reasoning survived the 2013 setback, and the 2018 Supreme Court bench leaned heavily on it. A High Court's job is not always to have the final word; sometimes it is to make the first strong argument.

4 Twenty-Five High Courts, and Why the Story Doesn't End

Scale

Every High Court has its own history

India has **25 High Courts** today. Each has produced its own notable judges and landmark rulings. The Naz Foundation case shows how a High Court can set national legal precedent, years before the Supreme Court even rules on the same question.

5 Exam Point of View

Exam Pattern

Same landmark case, two different angles

Exams test the Naz Foundation case from both directions: the ruling's substance and the petitioner's identity. Know both angles, not just one, since a question can quote either fact as the trap.

> **Quick check 1.** The 2009 Naz Foundation ruling was the final word on Section 377, with no later reversal. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

6 Great to Know: Confidence, and Life After the Bench

Pattern

Judges who go on to other public roles

Notable High Court judges often move on to other public roles after their time on the bench. Chagla became a diplomat and cabinet minister. Seth chaired law reform committees. Both show how judicial experience can carry directly into other kinds of public service.

> **Quick check 2.** M.C. Chagla typically reserved judgment for weeks before ruling on a case. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Practice MCQs

1. Who became the first Indian Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court in 1947?

A. Leila Seth

B. M.C. Chagla

C. A.P. Shah

D. S.P. Kotval

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** M.C. Chagla became the first Indian Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court on 15 August 1947. ↑ Q1

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2

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