Marc Galanter, John and Rylla Bosshard Professor of Law and Professor of South Asian Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and LSE Centennial Professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

A good start.

This week, LawCrossing speaks with law professor Marc Galanter, the author of a new book dealing with the increasingly popular and hostile lawyer jokes, about his career as a professor, writer, and expert in Indian law.

In Lowering the Bar: Lawyer Jokes & Legal Culture, law professor Marc Galanter documents and analyzes legal jokes, which he says have become more prevalent and biting since the mid 1980s. With the rise of technology and increasing numbers of lawyers, Galanter said there is often a public perception about lawyers being greedy or too powerful. He said that attorneys should try not to take the jokes personally.

Because some people would give more regard to a snake than to an attorney, he said that people in the legal profession should work to change the negative perception.

So why exactly have lawyer jokes become so popular?

“I’ve always liked jokes. These jokes are a part of our world, but we really don’t quite understand why,” he said.

“Figuring this out is very, very gratifying. It was a fun project to do—to take a piece of the world that you’ve never really questioned or focused on very much, to figure out a pattern.”

Galanter, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has been collecting legal jokes for about 15 years, and Lowering the Bar is just one of the many books he has written.

Considered one of the leading American experts on Indian law, Galanter went to India on a Fulbright scholarship after graduating from the University of Chicago Law School in 1956.

“I was always interested in India; and back then, there was [former Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal] Nehru. It was an exciting time,” he said.

“Going to India is like shifting from black and white to Technicolor. It’s the incredible vividness of everything, and what the Indians have accomplished by creating constitutional liberty and rule of law is one of the greatest legal accomplishments of our time.”

Galanter said he became the leading American expert on Indian law because “no one else was interested at the time.” Still, he thinks that the increasing interest in India will create much closer ties between India and the United States. He also served as a legal adviser to the Indian government for litigation surrounding the Bhopal gas disaster in 1984.

Galanter’s expertise goes beyond India and joke books. He is a prolific writer and teaches various courses in civil procedure, contracts, dispute settlement, and the sociology of law. He is a passionate student of litigation, lawyers, and legal culture.

Originally from Philadelphia, Galanter studied philosophy as an undergraduate student at the University of Chicago and only decided to go to law school once he realized he did not want to become a philosopher. Galanter’s published studies include “Why the ‘Haves’ Come Out Ahead: Speculations on the Limits of Legal Change,” an oft-cited article in legal literature. Along with Thomas Palay, he co-authored Tournament of Lawyers, which chronicles and explains the growth and transformation of large law firms in the United States.

His books on India include Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India and Law and Society in Modern India. Galanter is also an honorary professor of the National Law School of India, and he served as advisor to the Ford Foundation on legal services and human rights programs in India.

For attorneys interested in a career in academia, Galanter advises that they not wait too long to start publishing articles.

“I write a lot, and that’s what I love to do,” he said.

“When practitioners come to a law school the question is, ‘Are they going to be able to produce academic writing?’”

“Even though they’ve written a lot of briefs and so forth, it’s still a question. I would say faculties hate not giving tenure; they hate to turn someone down for tenure.”

What do you call 600 lawyers at the bottom of the ocean?
Galanter noted that faculties will want assurance that new hires will be able to produce quality writing; hence, writing is the best way to get a professorial position.

Galanter has been with the University of Wisconsin since 1975, and he also teaches at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He has also taught at the University at Buffalo Law School, the University of Chicago Law School, Columbia University School of Law, and Stanford Law School.

"People want to hire people they think will succeed, so you’ve got to show them you can do this," he said.

"I will say one thing though: Being a law professor is a really good deal. It’s a tremendous job with lots of intellectual stimulation."

Galanter said that the only downside to teaching law is the exams. Unlike professors in other postgraduate fields, law professors grade their own students’ exams and are not allowed to hire graduate students to do the work for them.

"When you’re teaching a big class, reading a three-hour exam for 120 people can kill your winter vacation," he said.

He also said that another perk of being a law professor is that you are often asked to comment on events in the media.

"Society sort of tolerates law professors mouthing off as experts on anything. People expect them to be able to. Law professors really get a free pass to talk about all kinds of issues as if they were experts," he said.

"No, they’re not experts; they’re kind of generalists. I’m sure they’re experts about some things, but they get to talk about all kinds of things."

Galanter said that although he is often asked to comment on the litigation explosion or general topics about the legal profession, he is rarely asked about India.