

# First female Indian Barrister Cornelia Sorabji's 150th birth anniversary celebrated

Rani Singh & Rupanjana Dutta

The High Commission of India in the UK organised an event to commemorate the 150th birth anniversary of Cornelia Sorabji, the very first woman of any nationality to study law at Oxford, and also the first female Indian Barrister. The event was organised in collaboration with Somerville College, Oxford, where Ms. Sorabji did her law studies.

The event was very well attended with participation of senior judges, legal practitioners, faculty and students from law schools, representatives from some of the most eminent legal firms in the UK, entrepreneurs, historians, writers, editors and media personnel. Some of the key attendees and speakers included British Indian entrepreneur and life peer Lord Bilimoria (who is also the nominated representative of the Government of India for the Indira Gandhi Scholarships at Somerville College), Dr Alice Prochaska (Principal, Somerville College), Prof. Anne Davies and Prof. Timothy Endicott Deans of Oxford Law Faculty, Lady Hazel Fox, QC, Judge Rabinder Singh (the first full-time high court judge from Asia), Judge Deborah Taylor, Malcolm Deboo, (President of the Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe), Prof. Sir Richard Sorabji (official biographer of Ms. Cornelia Sorabji) and Dr Kusoom Vadgama, historian and editor of 'An Indian Portia: Selected Writings of Cornelia Sorabji'.



Acting Indian High Commissioner HE Dinesh Patnaik addressing the gathered audience

The nephew of Cornelia, Professor Sir Richard Sorabji told Asian Voice, "Well, I think it's so important that Indian law is now being given scholarships to come to Somerville which has such a tradition in law and in women lawyers. I think Indian law is extremely interesting. I think it's constitution is very impressive. I think it's amazing how much British law they were willing to accept but reinterpreted. So this came out very differently, in effect."

The Acting High Commissioner, Mr. Dinesh K. Patnaik and other speakers spoke in detail about the exemplary life of Ms. Sorabji who overcame all odds to become the first woman to study at Bombay University, where she won first-class honours. She came to Oxford with the help of a subscription raised by members of the British liberal establishment and later became the first woman of any nationality to study Law at Oxford. Cornelia Sorabji went on to serve as legal advisor to the Bengal Court

and the audience had moved over to the Nehru Hall for a sumptuous dinner, Acting High Commissioner, His Excellency Mr Dinesh K. Patnaik stood outside the halls in the central area on the first floor and spoke to us. He said, "We were talking about a personality who opened doors in the world. She was a first woman lawyer to study in Oxford. In India, she fought against things when everybody tried to stop her. She got a scholarship to come here when the UK wanted to deny her a scholarship, she got to study in Oxford and Oxford refused her. So she is somebody who always has broken values. But today was not a celebration of the woman Cornelia

of Wards, serving sequestered women, and their families, fighting for their education and legal rights.

The event also highlighted the postgraduate law scholarships for Indian students launched this year at Oxford India Centre for Sustainable Development Somerville College, in mem-

Somerville in future as we do already to our Oxford India Centre for Sustainable Development. And of the things really great about our scheme is that we expect our scholars to return to India. So we've had the support of the government of India and we are looking for more support for people in India with the expectation that what the students do and learn in Oxford will go back to India and help to develop law, to develop society there as well."

Dr Kusoom Vadgama, speaking to Asian Voice said, "Lived with this woman for 30 years. She decided to go to the most deprived people and help them in a way only she could. She has shown her courage against all odds. She always used to say, 'my heart beats with two pulses; once for India, once for Britain.'"

### The Cornelia Sorabji Law Programme

Cornelia Sorabji, the first female law student at Oxford in 1889 continues to provide a pioneering link between India and the University of Oxford. Cornelia Sorabji was not only Somerville College's first Indian student, but was also the first Indian woman to study at any British University.

On her return to her home country, Cornelia Sorabji became the first



Divya Sharma, Dr Alice Prochaska, Lord Karan Bilimoria and Navya Jannu

by continuing the great tradition of pioneering Indian women by establishing the scholarship for Indian law students at Somerville College. I very much hope that we will be able to bring many more Indians to

woman to practice law in India and worked on behalf of women living in purdah. Her lifetime's work as a social reformer centred on support for the poor and for women at every level of society.



### Divya Sharma

Divya graduated from the National Law Institute University, Bhopal, in 2012 palling first in a cohort of 85 students. Before Somerville, Divya was practicing corporate law in India for four years and after completing BCL, Divya intends to return to India to resume practising as a transactional lawyer.

"Cornelia Sorabji is a celebrated figure in India. She is a source of inspiration for many young lawyer, including me. Many of my Indian friends and seniors from college have studied in Oxford and a majority of them are from Somerville. I had heard wonderful stories about the College from them and was very excited when I got an offer to study here. I want to go into academia and am hoping that this course will gear me with the requisite knowledge and skills that I need to become a good academic."

"I have wanted to pursue a career in Law from a very young age. I hail from a family full of lawyers and judges and was especially inspired by my grandfathers- one was a lawyer and the other was a High Judge in India. As I grew up, I became more determined to follow their legacy."

### Navya Jannu

Through the generosity of Mr Hemant Sahai of New Delhi, the College has also launched the HSA Advocates Award to another Indian BCL student, Navya Jannu, under Cornelia Sorabji law programme.

Navya graduated from Jindal Global Law School in August 2016. She wanted to become a lawyer from a very young age and has had a diverse array of internship experiences in the Indian law sector. After the BCL, Navya aspires to become a practitioner and legal academic in India in the area of public, energy and environmental law.

"In the first semester of my undergraduate year, the first book I picked up was Cornelia Sorabji's autobiography. To now be studying at her alma mater and on a law programme in her name is very special to me. India's first female lawyer and first female prime minister came from Somerville and to be a part of that legacy of strong Indian women is something that is really encouraging and inspires me."

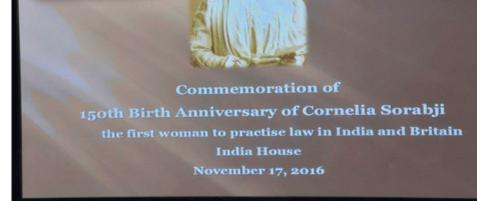
"I feel that India is at a stage where it needs intellectual leadership to inform the development of laws, in particular in the realm of renewable energy. Here the energy-environment binary,



Navya Jannu talking to Dr Kusoom Vadgama

as true in most developing countries, depicts a collision between aspirations of an ambiguous government, anxieties of vulnerable groups and environmental concerns flagged by social agents. Law plays a balancing role in this chaotic paradigm. I am grateful to follow in their footsteps."

The college is now campaigning for it to eventually become a fully-funded endowment to support bright Indian students who often win admission to Oxford University but are unable



ful to Mr Hemant Sahai for his support in realising my aspirations and remain encouraged by our shared interest in the same law."

### Launch of the programme

Prof Alice Prochaska, principal of Somerville College during the launch of the programme said, "Cornelia Sorabji was a woman of tremendous spirit and



HE Dinesh Patnaik, Timothy Endicott with a guest

courage and someone who paved the way for many Indian students, including (former Prime Minister) Indira Gandhi at Somerville. India is a key part of our college and this scholarship will pave the way for more gradu-

ates to follow in their footsteps."

The initiative is backed by Dr Kusoom Vadgama, historian and editor of 'An Indian Portia: Selected Writings of Cornelia Sorabji'.

The Cornelia Sorabji Law Programme is housed at the Oxford India Centre and provides a thriving postgraduate and postdoctoral programme for talented Indian graduate students who seek to lead change on their return to India. The holder of the scholarship will belong to the Faculty of Law and the Oxford India Centre for Sustainable Development at Somerville College.

The Centre was established three years ago as a result of a grant of 3 million pounds from the Indian Ministry of Human Resource Development, matched by Somerville College and the University of Oxford.

It offers five permanently endowed scholarships for Indian graduate students and six students have already benefitted from those scholarships since they started in 2013.

From its inception in 1879, Somerville College, founded as one of the first two institutions at the University of Oxford to admit women, had been dedicated to inclusion, explicitly welcoming students from all social backgrounds, any kind of cultural and religious beliefs, and all nationalities. Cornelia Sorabji actually came to Oxford with the help of a subscription raised by progressive British men and women including Madeleine Shaw Lefevre, the first Principal of Somerville.

At graduate level there are currently 26 law students from India. Each year, a significant number of India students who meet the high standards for entry to Oxford to study law do not take up their places because of lack of funds.

The College is actively seeking funding support for future recipients of the scholarship. For further details please contact Development Director Sara Kalim at Sara.Kalim@some.ox.ac.uk.

**Lord Karan Bilimoria**  
Co-founder and Chairman, Cobra Beer



## Cornelia Sorabji

17th November was International Students' Day and how serendipitous it was that, on that very day, the Indian High Commission hosted an event to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Cornelia Sorabji's birth.

Cornelia Sorabji was an Indian Parsi student who became the first woman ever to read law at the University of Oxford, studying at Somerville College. She graduated in 1892, the same year that Dadabhai Naoroji, another Parsi, became the first Indian to be elected as a Member of Parliament in Westminster. I was so proud to follow in his footsteps as the first Zoroastrian Parsi to enter the House of Lords, a little over ten years ago.

Cornelia Sorabji's story is truly inspirational. She shattered glass ceilings and opened doors, against all the odds and prejudice at the time. Her story is one of determination, it was ten years after obtaining her law degree that the British Government finally allow her to become a Barrister, and she never gave up, representing and taking up women's causes in India.

This event wonderfully highlighted the links between Oxford University and India. Somerville College is of course famous for being Indira Gandhi's College, as well as Margaret Thatcher's, and perfectly highlights the links between the UK and India. The links showcase the huge importance of international students to the UK. Not only do they bring £14bn to UK economy, they enrich the experience of domestic students and help develop generational links - I am the third generation, on both sides, of my family to be educated in the UK and now my son is studying at a British university - the fourth generation. The bridge that Cornelia Sorabji built over a century ago has inspired so many Indian students, and Indian women, to study in Britain, to the benefit of both of our countries.



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