

## **CORNELIA SORABJI-THE CAMPAIGNER'S CONTRIBUTION TO FEMINISM AND INDIAN ENGLISH INGENIOUS WRITING**

**Dr. A.V.V.V.MALLESWARAMMA**  
**Lecturer in English,**  
**V.S.R. Govt. Degree College,**  
**MOVVA,**  
**Krishna Dt. Andhra Pradesh.**

### **Abstract**

Cornelia Sorabji (15 November 1866 – 6 July 1954) was the first Indian Woman graduate from Bombay University. She was the first woman to study law at Somerville College, Oxford University (1889) and the first female advocate in India. She was the earliest woman to practice law in India and Britain. As a social worker she championed the cause of women's education and liberation. She returned to India in 1894, and implicated in social and advisory work on behalf of the *purdah* women, women who were banned to converse with the exterior male world. In many cases, these women owned considerable property, yet had no access to the basic legal proficiency to defend it. Sorabji was given unusual consent to enter pleas on their behalf before British agents of Kathiawar and Indore principalities, but she was incapable to defend them in court. As a woman, she did not hold qualified status in the Indian legal system. Though she joined her younger brother Dick in a brother-sister law practice in Allahabad 1897, she was recognised finally as a barrister in 1923 due to change in Law.

**Key Words:** culture, Indian society, independence, patriarchy, prominence, status, women

### **Introduction**

Later Sorabji was concerned with social reforms. She was allied with the Bengal branch of the National Council for Women in India, the Federation of University Women, and the Bengal League of Social Service for Women. For her services to the Indian nation, she was awarded the Kaisar-i-Hind Gold Medal in 1909. Although an Anglophile, Sorabji had no wish to make out the extensive imposition of a British legal system on Indian society. Early in her career, Sorabji had supported the drive for Indian Independence, relating women's rights to the capacity for self-government. Though she shored up traditional Indian life and culture, Sorabji propped up restructuring of Hindu laws concerning child marriage and Sati by widows.

She frequently worked alongside fellow reformer and friend Pandita Ramabai. Still, she assumed that the factual power at the back of social amend was education and that until the mainstream women continue uneducated there wouldn't be any transform in their position. During her 20 yrs of her lawyer practice she helped over 600 women and orphans fight legal battles. She sometimes served them without taking any fee.

Mary Jane Mossman in her article 'Gender and Professionalism in Law: The Challenge of (Women's) Biography' writes :

Cornelia Sorabji achieved prominence as a woman pioneer in the legal profession, who provided legal services to women clients in northern India, the *Purdahnashins*. Sorabji's experiences as a woman in law were often similar to the stories of other first women lawyers in a number of different jurisdictions at the end of the nineteenth century: all of these women had to overcome gender barriers to gain admission to the legal professions, and they were often the only woman in law in their jurisdictions for many years. Yet, as Sorabji's story reveals, while ideas about gender and the culture of legal

professionalism could present formidable barriers for aspiring women lawyers, these ideas sometimes intersected in paradoxical ways to offer new opportunities for women to become legal professionals.<sup>1</sup>

By the late 1920s, Sorabji had adopted a staunch anti-nationalist outlook. She supposed that the British rule was crucial to India to facilitate oppose Hindu dominance. By 1927, she was vigorously concerned in sponsoring support for the Empire and protecting the British Raj. She favourably viewed the hostile attack on Indian autonomy in Katherine Mayo's book *Mother India* (1927), and criticised Mahatma Gandhi's campaign of civil disobedience. She travelled around India and the United States to promulgate her political outlook.

Sorabji was instinctively a *modus operandi* to the advancement of feminist movement in India like Pandita Rama Bai, Sattianadhan and Sarojini Naidu with her militancy and her tussle for deprecated women in Indian society. She fought her battles through both weapons i.e. Profession of Law and through her literary works. She was a prolific writer with a canon of 10 different genres to her credit. Besides her work as a social reformer and legal activist, Sorabji wrote a number of books, short stories and articles. They are: 1. *Love and Life Beyond the Purdah* (1901) short stories concerning life in the Zenana, as well as other aspects of life in India under colonial rule. 2. *Sun-Babies: studies in the child-life of India* (1904). 3. *Between the Twilights: Being studies of India women by one of themselves* (1908)- details many of her legal cases while working for the Court of Wards. 4. *Indian Tales of the Great Ones Among Men, Women and Bird-People* (1916)- legends and folk tales. 5. *The Purdahnashin* (1917)- works on women in purdah. 6. *Therefore: An Impression of Sorabji Kharshedji Langrana and His Wife Francina* (1924), which is a memoir of her parents' lives. 7. *Gold Mohur: Time to Remember* (1930)-a play. 8. *Susie Sorabji, Christian-Parsee Educationist of Western India: A Memoir* (1932) -a biography of her educationist sister, Susie Sorabji. 9. *India Calling: The Memories of Cornelia Sorabji* (1936)-Autobiography. 10. *India Recalled* (1936)-autobiography. It is recognized that she contributed to *Queen Mary's Book of India* (1943), which had contributions from such authors as T. S. Eliot and Dorothy L. Sayers. She contributed to a number of periodicals, including *The Asiatic Review*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Calcutta Review*, *The Englishman*, *Macmillan's Magazine*, *The Statesman* and *The Times*.

Sorabji was a libertarian, who sought social reform within social practices that limited one from contentment and independence. She pioneers the tradition of Indian-Parsee women's literature in English. She is also one of the earliest women in India to fictionalize the Indian woman in the English language. Her first collection of short stories, '*Love and Life Behind the Purdah*' deals with the lives of Purdahnashins, Zoroastrian women and Indian rural women, whom she come across in her life. Most of the stories are real in this collection. Harriot Dufferin and Ava in their review comment: The aim and ambition of Miss Sorabji's life has been to benefit and to serve her country women, and in these pages will be found evidences of her deep sympathy and affection for them (*Love and Life Behind the Purdah* 8).<sup>2</sup>

Sorabji's first narrative in *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* is "The Pestilence of Noonday" (1901). In it she defines the task of an orthodox Hindu wife pursuant to society. The isolation she faces is apparent since she is a woman, while the men are able to move freely.

The opening of the story is a chat amid a husband and wife, as she persists that he will not recall her when he goes out. He states:

"Yes! 'tis not unlikely." was the response. "I shall have many things to interest me: knowledge to acquire, the world to sample, a name to make. How, then, will there be room for thought of women, and petting, and such like? But when I am tired of it all I'll come back to this forgotten little spot, and I'll find you just the same, sitting here among the lotuses and marigolds, and with a heart full of love

for me as it is now— rather fuller, perhaps, with the forced repression!” (Love and Life Behind the Purdah 14)<sup>3</sup>

These lines illustrate the disparity between a man and woman concerning free will and the penchant of preference a woman is ordained to opt for.

In “The Fire is Quenched!-A sketch in Indian Ink” from the same collection she writes about Zoroastrian religious views on a dead body and their ideas of worship. She describes the daughters and wives of priesthood praying at six in the evening. They pray for all the future generations turning the sacred cord *Kusthi*, inspite of the religious boundaries and societal norms they face and contradict. Sorabji depicts the cruelty and oppression forced on many Indian women in “A Living Sacrifice” (84). In “Greater Love” introduces a series of different types of Hindu women in society introducing the character Kamala. Chandani Lokuge comments that the stories in this collection:

‘encapsulate themes of child-marriage and barrenness, sati, purdah, and various other highly controversial women’s issues of early nineteenth-century India. Interwoven is Sorabji’s concern for her beautiful and lonely women protagonists, and her frustrated ambitions to liberate them from their enforced and often self-willed surrender to role identities and an inflexible patriarchy’.<sup>4</sup>

In her autobiography ‘*India Calling*’ Sorabji writes about Purdahnashins, whom she helped through defending hundreds of their cases. She said that ‘I was ready to take any specific criminal work which might come my way, but I wanted to be able to help Purdahnashins in relations to their property and the disabilities connected with their statuses. (*India Calling* 52) Betsy George asserts in her article that ‘Some cases she dealt with the betrayal of the “man-of-business” or the trusted family man who are supposed to help these women attain their properties, end up forging the papers and receiving the properties of the Purdahnashins. Since the Purdahnashins were unable to read and write they were often easily deceived. On the other hand, a Purdahnashin could not be present in a court room that was filled with men, so on their behalf Sorabji was their voice.’ This was a subject of topmost significance to Sorabji, for she knew it was the right of women to hold such property. Sorabji opines:

It is loosely said that Hindu women have no rights to property. This is not correct. Hindu women have absolute rights in the property known as stridhen, i.e. property which descends in the female line, and is secure from the manipulation of males. They have also when childless what is called a “life interest”... (*India Calling* 67)<sup>5</sup>

Sorabji made Law a tool to help these women. In her ‘*India Calling*’, she writes about her ‘stay in London and how she would receive many letters from the Purdahnashins seeking her help. Sorabji knew she was the only one who could help them and these cases were rather filled with complexity. Purdahnashin women, being victims to the man-of-business, would often lose everything they once owned. They were indeed alone and needed a woman who would fight for justice.’ Sorabji had a profound compassion for these women. She said:

There was nothing for it but to pack up, and take the first boat out—the winter 1924. And it seemed to me that maybe it was my duty to sample work at the Calcutta Bar, so as to make it easier for the women who would follow after. I therefore got enrolled in that High Court, and sailed forth, as before, from Headquarters at Calcutta at the call of my Purdahnashins. (*India Calling* 203)<sup>6</sup>

Sorabji devoted her life to helping women, who depended on their properties in order to have shelter. Sorabji’s life is the motivation to her texts, the base to her beliefs. She was extremely mixed up in the lives of many helpless Indian women. Her factual life stories became the stories of her books. She became the combatant for many women, fighting battles of injustice to save these women.

Lord Hobhouse, one of the eminent personalities like Florence Nightingale, who assisted her financially to pursue her Law Studies, wrote to Sorabji:

You, at any rate, are doing what you can to promote it—partly by holding up phases of Indian society to view, mainly by offering in your own person an instance of a lady competent to act as a “man-of-business” if only she can obtain the requisite position and the requisite recognition of her usefulness. And so you may prosper. (Letter from Hobhouse, October 1901)<sup>7</sup>

Starting from intertwining cruel social custom into her texts, to creating a podium of attentiveness for Purdahnashin women, Sorabji symbolizes the designation of a feminist. ‘From attending a school with only men and creating a new world for women to study law in India, to acquiring the rightful land of the Purdahnashins and freeing the innocent, she was a hero. Her real life accounts and her stories share many connections, and allows readers to understand this incredible woman’s journey for justice and equality’. (Betsy George:2016)

## **References**

1. Mary Jane Mossman, *Gender and Professionalism in Law: The Challenge of (Women ’s) Biography*. Osgoode Hall Law School of York University:2009. Vol.27 (1) p.21  
[digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca > cgi > viewcontent > article=2554](https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/cgi/viewcontent?article=2554)
2. Cornelia Sorabji, *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* (London: Fremantle & Co.) 1901.
3. Ibid
4. Chandani Lokuge . ed. *Love and Life Behind the Purdah-Exotic India* Oxford University Press, New Delhi: 2003
5. Betsy George ,*The Evolution of Feminism in India through Women Writers of the Colonial Period: Krupabai Satthianadhan, Cornelia Sorabji, and Sarojini Naidu*, CUNY City College 05/09/16  
[https://academicworks.cuny.edu > cgi > viewcontent](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent)
6. Sorabji, Cornelia. *India Calling: The Memories of Cornelia Sorabji, India's First Woman Barrister*. Ed. Chandani Lokugé. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2001..
7. Quoted. Betsy George ,*The Evolution of Feminism in India through Women Writers of the Colonial Period: Krupabai Satthianadhan, Cornelia Sorabji, and Sarojini Naidu*, CUNY City College 05/09/16  
[https://academicworks.cuny.edu >](https://academicworks.cuny.edu)