



Opening Doors: The Untold Story of Cornelia Sorabji - Reformer, Lawyer and Champion of Women's Rights in India

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When I was nine, my Aunt Cornelia invited me to Lincoln's Inn as part of her campaign to make me become a lawyer. Her campaigns were pretty formidable. She took me to lunch and in front of all the judges and barristers, she said, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" and I am afraid I gave the wrong answer. I said that I was going to be a teacher. She did not give up, but then took me to a court with quite a distinguished judge. He had tried the case of the assassin who had assassinated the Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab for supporting the Amritsar massacre. Still aged nine, I went to listen to a trial, and he came up afterwards and asked, "Did you believe that man?" and I said, "No," and he said, "Oh, what a relief - neither did I!" So, even that failed to work, so then she took my sister and I to tea to meet this judge when he came to Oxford, where we lived. He told us in the grandest house in Oxford, the Judge's lodgings, the most wonderful murder stories. If anything could have persuaded me into wanting to become a lawyer, those stories would have done, and I did see the use of the law and the interest of the law, but I am afraid I still stuck to being a teacher.

She wore the most wonderfully brilliant saris and dangling jewellery, of great length, and I thought of her and her sisters as the brightest thing in London during the blackout of the 1940s, when I first knew them, or I knew four of them, at any rate. She wrote her own autobiography called "India Calling" but what I found out is that about 50% of what happened, she had to conceal because it was too sensitive, and so I have called my book "The Untold Story".

She wrote an account of her life in up to three versions every day for 50 years. I have read every single word and a lot of the official papers too. Many of them were sent to the British Library, passed through my mother's hands, and hence to a great friend, Eleanor. However, when I cannot find them in the British Library, I find them in my attic, because not all of them got through to the Library.

It is a story of a life of cliff-hangers. She never knew whether it was going to be triumph or failure next, and indeed, this continued for the whole of her life. This story of cliff-hangers is set against the background of huge movements which were going on in India. I am not pretending to be a historian who can explain what was going on in India, but I have to be conscious of the background all the time.

Her father, my grandfather, was born in 1823 in Bombay. He was born a Zoroastrian by religion, but in the 1840s, there were some conversions of Zoroastrian boys. The first two were very aggressive conversions, with the Christians saying that this was Satan's religion or was not even a religion at all, and so the Zoroastrian community was very incensed by the first two conversions. My grandfather, as a 16 year old, was writing against the Christians, but he did need to improve his English for business purposes. He was the apple of his family's eye, and was meant to carry on, or succeed in business, and support his six sisters, so he thought he needed to improve his English. To this end, he went to a different school, not the school that had been banned by the Zoroastrians, and one day, he was sent for punishment to his headmaster, and he went in defiance because he thought he had been wrongly accused. However, instead of beating him, his headmaster simply told him about the Sermon on the Mount, and he was so absolutely astonished that he converted on the spot.

His family were absolutely horrified! He was their pride and joy, and, over the next two years, three attempts were made to murder him. These were rather thorough efforts: they cast him out to sea on a boat without any provisions, but he was washed up three days later, and eventually was ordained.

My grandmother was a Hindu but had been brought up by Christian missionaries because her mother died very shortly after her birth. She married my grandfather and they moved to Pune and, by great chance, I went with my daughter, also called Cornelia, 16 months ago, and we found the family home, with all the original furniture. There was the grandfather clock of which there is a picture in the book. There was the grand piano and all the same pictures on the walls. There were the beds they all slept in. There was the family carriage, for a horse of course. It remained intact because it was sold 100 years ago, to a hotel, which had two careful owners who thought that this was the furniture that would attract guests, so they kept it.

My Grandmother founded four schools. The two big ones were actually in the house, or rather, they built over the garden, and they are still there. When they first started in 1876, there was room in the house to have just a few children, but they had to cover every inch of the garden before they had finished. They then had to build two schools elsewhere: one school was a free school, for very poor Hindus, with Marathi as the language; another was an Urdu-speaking school, for poor Muslims; and then the main school was English-speaking, mostly for Zoroastrians; and then there was an infant school, again, mostly for Zoroastrians, who had not yet learnt English, but they would have to learn English if they wanted to be successful. She was a very strong character, very proud of having so many daughters - seven daughters to one son, my father - and very much outgoing to all communities, absolutely regardless of race or religion.

My grandfather pressed very hard to get his two oldest daughters into Bombay University, but they were refused on the grounds that no woman had ever been to university. However, with Cornelia, he finally succeeded in having her admitted and she matriculated at the age of 16. Six years later, she came out top of her college in English Literature. Her college was in Pune, which was a branch of Bombay University, one of the only four first class degrees of that year. She managed this despite most of the boys slamming the lecture doors in her face, trying to prevent her going to lectures. They were so unused to a woman that they simply did not know how to handle it.

Having done so extremely well, she had very good reason to think she might get a scholarship to come to England and continue her studies. The scholarship was refused on the sole ground that she was a woman, and a question was raised in the House of Commons, by an old man with a beard. This was Sir John Kennaway, who had an enormous beard, and it is thought that he inspired Edward Lear's poem "There was an old man with a beard". He asked the question of whether a woman had been refused in the British Empire a scholarship to an English university, on the grounds that she was a woman. The Secretary of State for India said the answer was yes but, meanwhile, some ladies, including Florence Nightingale, got together the money anyhow, out of their own pockets, to create a scholarship for her to come to Oxford. In order to raise the scholarship, they had her photograph in the Queen, which was certainly one of the society magazines, and had been the society magazine, with a description of her, and so, when she arrived, as a young student from a remote town in India she thought nobody would ever have heard of her but she was actually a celebrity. She thought people were pulling her leg when she arrived in Somerville College Oxford which was only 10 years old, and said, "Now, we've asked senior people in Oxford to come and meet you." She was very used to being teased and she assumed this was a continuation of that. Actually, some of the most distinguished people in Oxford wanted to meet this celebrity.

The first head of Somerville, Miss Shaw-Lefevre, had supported her coming to Somerville, but she had known about the schools of her mother, my grandmother, and been a great admirer of these schools. A new head of Somerville had just been appointed, a rather glamorous lady, aged 40 called Miss Maitland. Miss Maitland had to be Cornelia's chaperone everywhere. If Cornelia went to have tea with my father or with one of my father's friends, a chaperone had to go there because this was 1889. Miss Maitland, the head of Somerville, was the chaperone

However, she was told that, nonetheless, as she was a woman, she could only read English Literature. Law was not an option open to women. However, in the first term, the most influential academic in the country, a very close friend of Gladstone, was the philosopher Benjamin Jowett. He called into Somerville especially to see her, and he invited her, with Miss Maitland as chaperone, to the concerts of which he was so proud, because he had founded the Balliol concerts that are going on to this day.

He had actually given Balliol College a second organ. There was an organ in the chapel, obviously, but he had paid for a second organ, in the dining hall, so that there could be first class concerts. He started bringing her, on his arm, or, later, he on her arm, to those concerts, about five times a term, as his special guest, having first introduced her to the leading figures of Victorian society. At one point, he sent her to meet Florence Nightingale, who was one of her benefactors.

At another point, he sent Cornelia and my father to see Tennyson, in his last days. Tennyson had just written his last poem, not published it, and under oath of secrecy, he read them his last poem about Akbar the Great and he wanted two young Indians to advise him about whether he had made any mistakes. Very shortly afterwards, Cornelia was asked to the very moving funeral service for Tennyson in Westminster Abbey, in which "Crossing the Bar" was read, which was about the soul going out into the next life.

Jowett was not the only person who introduced her to major figures of Victorian society. She became directly a great friend of Max Muller, the most prominent Sanskritist. I am not saying whether or not he was the best scholar of Sanskrit - there were certainly, in his predecessors, there was at least one much better scholar - but he is certainly the most famous, because he had a tremendous character - which was very boyish and romantic. Cornelia was invited to a party in All Souls, into the Law Library, which is a very august place and practically sacred. Max Muller played hide and seek with her during this party, and took her up in the book stacks, out of sight, until he got to the very top storey, and then he appeared with her to the guests below. That was the sort of man Max Muller was, but at that very same party, the head of All Souls invited her to become the first woman ever allowed to read in that Library so she was the first woman, by many decades, to be allowed into that Library to read.

Not only did Jowett help her in that way, but he arranged that she could read Law, and he had a special Law course devised for her. Eventually, he arranged that she could sit the examination for the degree of Bachelor of Civil Law which is a postgraduate degree, very difficult to get, and she tried to do this in two years. Usually, it was done by people who had already become barristers in London as well as doing a degree, and had had at least five years training.

Just before the exam one of the examiners refused to examine her. So Benjamin Jowett, who was the most senior person at Oxford, called together Oxford's University Council, to debate the motion that Oxford University should accept Cornelia Sorabji, and it was passed. So, the night before, she knew she could sit the examination. However, the examiner who had refused to examine her was absolutely beastly and we have a letter in which she describes how beastly he was. Cornelia turned round at the end and damned his book as 'something that some people say but it is wrong'. He gave her a much lower class than she had hoped for - a third, and she was absolutely devastated. Even so, she had passed although no woman could collect the degree for another 30 years.

Jowett was absolutely wonderful to her. He was so good at providing comfort. He also took my father, and regardless of subject, he sent an essay to all his students and asked them to read it. They were absolutely terrified of him. All other students, other than Cornelia, were terrified of him. I am not sure that my father was exactly terrified, but other students told her they were absolutely terrified of Jowett and could hardly believe that a student was going into the concert on his arm.

Cornelia had a year in London with a solicitors firm, Lee & Pemberton in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Lord Hophouse, the husband of one of the aristocratic women who had organised the scholarship for her, took her and got her allowed to read in the Library in Lincoln's Inn. I imagine she must have been the first woman allowed to read in the Lincoln's Inn Library. He also did for her what she did for me as a little boy: took her to a major trial, though this was a trial in the Chief Justice's Court. He also took her to barristers' mess in Lincoln's Inn and many other things. All the things she did for me had been done for her by Lord Hophouse.

Therefore, while in England she had practised in a solicitors' office and had passed the Bachelors of Law. When she went back to India, she hoped to do good for women as a barrister. However, when she went back in 1894, the Chief Justice in Bombay told the solicitors not to employ a woman, so the job that she had been offered as a solicitor was rejected.

After that, she thought that she would do better if she took the undergraduate degree in Law at Bombay. After all, she had a postgraduate degree from Oxford, so she sat the undergraduate degree in Bombay, and they failed her. She then found that, although the British were not prepared to have a woman as a lawyer in Bombay, the Maharajas were more than happy, so she spent the best part of five years attempting indeed to be a barrister and working for Maharajas. However, she found it unsatisfactory, not

because the Maharajas were not friendly and perfectly willing to help a woman, but because they gave her only frivolous cases.

The most frivolous case was when she was asked to defend an elephant against somebody who had removed its banana grove. So there she appeared, in the palace, by six white horses with outriders and drawn swords and found that the culprit who had taken the groves was the Maharaja himself. Then it turned out that the judge was also the Maharaja! He said that he was sitting on a swing, and he was playing with a gramophone beside him, 'Champagne Charlie is my Name', was the tune, and he said, 'Your case is won.' She replied, as a young woman, 'I do not want my case to be won - you have not heard it! I'm going to give you my case!' He said, 'Well, give it if you like, but this case is won.' So, she delivered her speech, and was ushered out by the Prime Minister, and she said, 'What's going on?' The Prime Minister replied that, 'Well, his Highness decided a long time ago that he would never understand the law, so he has a very simple rule: if the dog likes the lawyer, the case is won; if the dog does not like the lawyer, the case is lost.' The dog had licked Cornelia when she arrived and she felt this was frivolous. She was an ambitious young woman and she hated these practices.

Also, it was very difficult in the princely states, where the Maharajas ruled, with only a British veto on what they did. A third of India was governed by the Princes, not directly by the British. She found that, in these princely states, it was very difficult to get evidence to support women, because males just would not speak. It was only in British-run India that the British had enough power to compel men to give evidence, and so she found that she was not able to help women. Therefore, she tried setting up a brother and sister team in Allahabad, which soon became the centre of Indian law.

There were other big legal centres, like Bombay, but Allahabad became the centre of the great future nationalist, Motilal Nehru, the father of the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. She hoped that she could help my father prepare cases and would eventually be allowed to be a barrister, and they agreed providing she learnt these foreign languages. Well, she learnt the foreign languages and passed quite easily, and then they said, 'Oh, we didn't mean those foreign languages - we meant these foreign languages!' So she learnt those and passed those, and then they said, 'Oh, well, we did not actually mean any foreign languages at all.'

This was in 1899, and she had spent five years trying to become a barrister. She decided that this was not the way forward, so she spent the next five years devising a role. She thought that she should become a legal advisor to the British Government on the state of secluded women, who could never see a lawyer because all lawyers were men. These secluded women, who were suffering, needed a female because they could never be interviewed so long as all lawyers were male.

These were women who were child brides. They were married off, occasionally in infancy, but very commonly at four, certainly by eight, and, with a lot of warnings by 11. Once they had been married off, a lot of them never saw the outside world again. They certainly could not speak to any male other than their husband. If they were widowed, they could not speak to any male at all. Their education stopped when they were married, so naturally, they knew nothing about the law - they had no education whatever. However, they were a very wealthy class of women, and they were guardians, if they were widowed, of huge estates stretching hundreds of square miles for their male heirs. They also had rights, above those of any English women at the time, to use the property so long as the heirs were alive. Nothing could be kept for after their death, but they could use the property while the heirs were alive. So, naturally, these women, who might be widows by thirteen - some of them of course were older widows, but some of them were only 13, they were pretty defenceless. They could not see any lawyers and people were trying to get their estates. People were trying to get their money by fraud, about which they knew nothing, or by murder of the children, and this was very common.

For five years, Cornelia tried to persuade the British they needed at least one woman, steeped in the law. Well, it was a very uphill struggle. She wrote and asked people whether they thought a woman was needed. She tended to get the answer that a woman was needed but not in that province. She also got answers such as, 'Well, we can't say, we're British - you'd have to ask the Indians,' or 'We can't say, we're Indians - you'd have to ask the British' She only received four letters of very strong support..

She almost wrecked the whole thing when it was only partway through. She had had an absolute rule, when she was a student at Oxford that she would not go out with younger men. She had seen what had happened to her older sisters who had not got into university - they got married, but one of them had had two affairs. I do not know quite whether they were affairs but they were scandals anyhow. In the eyes of the family, they were scandals, and she was determined not to have a scandal; she was going to have a

career. Even the second sister, the one I remember, was very unlucky to be widowed twice and had a few escapades in between her husbands. Therefore, Cornelia was determined that this would not happen to her, so she took this rule, not a safe rule - only go out with older men, because younger men were dangerous.

Well, this rule worked very well, with people like Benjamin Jowett and some of the former Governors of Bombay, who had been her friends in England, but it did not work in Allahabad, because she fell in love with a distinguished English judge. I found his picture, of he with her, just when my father, as a young barrister, was appearing before this judge and while the fellow's wife was entertaining them both out of kindness. My father did not, at first, know what was going on. When my father found out, he was absolutely outraged, and, with family backing, he exiled her to England, from India. Actually, she was happier continuing the love affair by letter. The letters were absolutely wonderful. There was no gush, because the endearments were all in code anyhow, in case they were read by somebody else, and it is terribly interesting because she tells him about her life. I think it really was a good thing for her, because although her professional career meant she could not really ever get married, she did know reciprocated love once in her life, and once she was actually separated, I think it was, in a certain way, happy. He died in her arms after punting on the River Cherwell in 1907. They had met in 1898. She had some leave and he had retired, and they met with chaperons in Oxford, went punting on a rainy day, and he was taken fatally ill and died in her arms in the Hospital in Oxford. I think the affair did wreck the distinguished judge's chances of becoming chief judge of Allahabad, which the Privy Council had expected, but it did not wreck Cornelia.

In 1902, her campaign reached a culmination. On the same day, the Times published a letter from her about the need for a woman to help secluded widows in India, and had a leader supporting her. Almost the next day, a question was asked in the House of Commons about whether the Government was doing anything to provide for the needs of these secluded women by appointing a woman, and the Secretary of State for India said it was being looked into.

Then, in 1904, the final thing happened. The head of Merton College, Oxford, had always asked Cornelia to dinner to entertain his lawyer friends from the City, because she was very good company. His brother, who was then called Lord Broderick, was appointed Secretary of State for India, the one person who was superior to the Viceroy. He overrode Lord Curzon, and said he wanted a woman appointed as advisor to women who were secluded. Curzon had refused twice, indirectly, through his aides, to consider the matter.

So, in 1904, she went out, and she was interviewed in Bengal, and given a large part of North-East India to be legal advisor - sometimes called advisor to the British, sometimes called advisor to the secluded women. It was tremendous trouble: five years trying to be a barrister, five years trying to get this post of legal advisor, and now she had succeeded, and it was a stunning success for 18 years, not without some opposition, but it was the most successful part of her life.

These women, who were widows, all believed that it was their fault that they were widows - they must have done something in a previous incarnation which had brought about their husband's death - if they were Hindus. Funnily, their husbands did not think that they had done something in a previous incarnation to bring about their own death - that had not occurred to them! I find this interesting, as a philosopher, actually, because a lot of philosophers are at work trying to find moral principles that would be accepted by any rational being, but I think if any philosopher read about these women, they would give up the effort, because these women were absolutely rational but it would be no good walking in and telling them, 'Wait a moment, it maybe was not your fault - it might have been your husband's.' They just would not believe that. It is not true that there are moral principles that will appeal to every human being. I am afraid my philosopher colleagues and I are probably wasting our time!

For the next 18 years my aunt was carried to these fabulous palaces on a palanquin through the middle of the jungle. A palanquin is a fairly uncomfortable mode of travel because it exercises every joint in your body because the person is bobbed up and down the whole time, and they keep landing. She actually rather enjoyed these travels, and she did not merely protect the women against fraud or attempted murder. She produced reconciliations, which were much less expensive, so that people stopped quarrelling and came to her to have the disputes solved at much less cost and much more quickly. She was partly persuading the British that one or two of them were educated or clever enough to run their own estates. She looked after health, which was a major problem. Obviously, being a child bride and being pregnant at 10 or 11, was a major problem, but the children were often sickly too. She appointed tutors, both for the girls and for the boys, so that the next generation of women would be educated and understand the law,

and so that the boys would know how to run their estates. They had not learned agriculture, and yet, they were responsible for hundreds of acres of land.

She explained to the British when religious expenses were warranted and when they were not, and at what rate. A widow might escape rebirth for a thousand cycles if she made the right number of pilgrimages. This is a pretty serious matter, and the British had to be sympathetic and to enter this, even though this was not their religion. Cornelia was the go-between who explained to the British what reasonable religious requests for expenditure were.

These were women whose estates were in such dire straits that the British had, normally with their agreement, taken over. That is why they had to get permission to spend money from their own estates. Their own estates, if left alone, would have been impoverished by fraud if the British had not looked after it.

She was an expert on inheritance and adoption, which also requires very sympathetic religious knowledge. As she put it, 'Inheritance is for the sake not of descendents but of ancestors,' because the point of giving an estate to an heir, or adopting an heir to give the estate to, is so that that heir may pray for the soul of the deceased male, but he has got to be a worshiper of the right gods, otherwise the wrong gods will be listening in, and the right gods will not. So she had to know the exact details of which were the right gods for each estate.

She also had Purdah parties. Eventually, she persuaded the shops to hold Purdah days when secluded women could come and go shopping. Purdah parties were parties for these secluded women. The Purdah is a curtain - they were not just behind a little veil, they were behind a curtain. She had parties, in which even the entrance to her house was secluded, and she persuaded the Viceroys to follow this custom of having secluded parties at which no male could even see who was arriving.

One important principle she had was that it was no good, with a couple of exceptions, legislating for the improvement of women's rights unless the women had been educated and thought themselves that this was right. Therefore, one of her slogans, even from student day which featured in her very first publication while she was a student at Oxford, was 'Education before legislation'. She made two exceptions: one was Sati, the practice of Hindu widows being burnt on their husband's funeral pyre, which was banned by the British in the 1820s, but she had a case of a ward of hers successfully committing Sati in 1921. She took that as a sign that actually legislation can be ignored, even 100 years later. The other exception was child marriage. She thought it was quite good to have legislation first. However, in both cases, she legislated merely to set an ideal, not with the expectation that the law would be obeyed immediately - it would take generations for it to be obeyed, because, in her view, the education had to be done first.

She had a very unusual view on education, which I think would be very helpful in some circumstances now. She had the view that children should be educated against custom; they should be educated by using custom to modify custom.

To give an example, one 10 year old ward of hers, who had had a baby, was extremely ill. By getting doctors in, Cornelia had her life saved, and then she heard the kindly old father say, 'And now what we'll do is we'll heat this copperplate over the fire and burn her stomach with it,' just to get the gods on the right side. Cornelia said, 'How right you are to remember the sacredness of fire, but you have overlooked that water, Ganges water, is also sacred. It would be doubly effective if you would put this Ganges water into a kettle and create a hot water bottle, thereby providing both fire and Ganges water.' That was an example of her technique, which was manipulative, but successful. She totally persuaded them, and of course, the bride, having just escaped with her life, did not suffer further pain and torment.

I was in a discussion about contraception in India which was debating the way to get poor people to practise contraception, and although I thought it was not my part to speak - I was just a visitor allowed to observe - I did feel then that Cornelia would have known what to do. It was actually no good this very distinguished committee thinking discussing how they, as very distinguished Hindus, could impose this on a fairly poor community which was not entirely Hindu. A change of view cannot be imposed; the modifier has to be seen as somebody who basically approves of the custom of the people they are talking to, and then they will listen to change in their custom. I thought she would have known what to do, and that skill would be so useful nowadays.

Perhaps the greatest thing she did for her secluded women was this. Most of these women had never been out of their house since they married. She first, during her main career, got permission for six to be trained as nurses, still in secluded conditions, but that was a huge change, because they never thought about anybody outside their own family. They never saw anybody outside their own family from the age of

four, eight or 11. Now, these were people thinking about nursing all sorts of kinds of people, quite different from their own family, and actually going out of the house to have a trade in a public place, where they had never been before.

The most remarkable thing was in retirement when she actually got some of these women to go out to towns and villages, meeting a class of woman they had never seen - these were very wealthy women - and social workers telling them about how to look after infants, how to take care of pregnancy and so on, giving them gifts for maternity situations, and so on. She got the women themselves to go out into an environment they had never seen before to help other people.

Well, that was her main career, working for these women in remote, but lavish, palaces, with very secluded horizons.

When she had finished her main career she came back to London. 1922 was the first year that Oxford women were allowed to collect their degrees, and the first year women were called to the Bar. She was still working in India in 1922, but she came back to London and in 1923, she was called to the Bar in England, collected her degree from Oxford, and thought she could help women as a barrister.

She was appointed to a lofty rank in the so-called Indian Civil Service, which was in effect the British Civil Service, with just a few Indians in it. However, it was a very elite Service. She had a pretty good time because the people who appointed her were very good to her, and supportive, and very grateful actually, because she saved them an enormous amount of trouble by getting these reconciliations, solving these problems and stopping these murders.

She thought her next return to India, as a barrister, would be easier, now she had been recognised. She had made a mistake. She made a mistake even though she had been through the experience of two incredibly dangerous rescues of women during her main career.

The first rescue, she had undertaken on her own, in 1899, when she had been told they would never make her a barrister. She thought, at her own risk, and without a single British policeman supporting her that she would rescue this woman who was about to be murdered. She verified that the woman was really going to be murdered, as had been alleged. She found the woman that was indeed going to be murdered. She was locked up in a fort, in a very remote spot. Of course, when she went to see whether the woman was really going to be murdered, the murderers had been alerted that she might be coming back. Thus, when she did come back, the assassination party was waiting on the main road to murder them all as they returned. However, she took everybody in the very heavy palanquin - the lady insisted on the royal palanquin, which was falling to bits and very heavy - through the jungle, instead of by the main road, and she got away. That was the first escape, with no support from the British whatever. She was trying to prove to the British that they needed a woman and these women were likely to be murdered if the British did not go and rescue them.

The second one was near the end of her career, in 1922, with all the might of the British Empire at her command, and even then, it was extremely difficult, because of course, if someone violated a custom by just marching over the premises they would never see the woman or the children, and indeed, the Prime Minister said, 'Over my dead body.' She had to negotiate her way in even with all the might of the British Empire. She had to negotiate her way in, and somehow negotiate her way out with the children, and she did it. Most people would think that nothing could have been more dangerous than her travelling through the tiger-infested jungle and partaking in these rescues and so on. This was not the case. It was much more hazardous trying to be a barrister. Males did not mind a legal woman advisor. It was all done behind the scenes. She continued her role as advisor, and everything she did was acclaimed.

Her opinion on how infanticide should be treated in India was absolutely magisterial marvel. First of all, she described all European custom, in different European countries. Then, she described how different India was. The reasons for infanticide are extremely varied, but one of them, for example, is this: at that date in British India, Hindu widows were not allowed remarriage, so if, as widows, they got pregnant, their families told them, 'Get rid of the child or we will get rid of you.' These women, often in that state, as Cornelia pointed out, suffered stress that only a few people knew about in those days, certainly in the Indian Civil Service. These women, already under stress, were ordered to murder their children. The only penalties available were execution or penal servitude for life a long way from India, and she changed that. Opinions, males did not mind; what they could not bear was the idea that they might be seen in public owing their arguments to a woman.

If the men were on the other side, they did not want to be defeated in public by a woman, and that is exactly what happened with the great Supru. I say that not because he was not a great man - I think he was a great man, and he was a great man, who actually outwitted Churchill in the quest for independence for India, and so he did play a major role, but he did not go along with Gandhi either. He accepted the job from the Viceroy and refused the non-cooperation which Gandhi recommended. So he was very independent-minded, but he did a great service to India. Nonetheless, even a great man could not bear to realise that he was slowly being defeated by a woman in a court where he brought his own son as one of his six lawyers. Cornelia was alone, without any help, because the helper assigned to her had been bought by the Maharaja who was bringing the case, and she defended the first estate she ever protected from being taken over, and although she really won the case, as far as I can make out, the first time round, she did actually win it officially on appeal. The judge actually ruled against her on the first case, so she did not win it officially, but she did win it on appeal, because she had all the arguments and the great man had not done his homework because he never imagined that a woman could beat him.

She was very isolated, much more isolated than she had been working in the Civil Service, and that is why she made a terrible mistake. There was a woman who came out, called Catherine Mayo - with her famous book, 'Mother India'. It was a notorious book. It was a frontal attack on Hindus. Catherine Mayo was an American, who wanted the Americans to go on ruling the Philippines, and so she wanted the British to go on ruling India, as an excuse for the Americans to continue ruling the Philippines, and so she wanted to make out that Hindus were not fit to rule themselves. She came to see Cornelia, who was pleased that somebody was interested in her women and would help her. She had a three-day seminar in her garden in Calcutta for this woman, and Catherine Mayo pretended that her motive was to bring help to these defenceless, secluded women, and Cornelia was so solitary by that time that she wanted to believe Mayo. Catherine Mayo published the book, without ever showing Cornelia as promised, and it became clear why she had not shown Cornelia - it was a frontal attack on Hinduism. Furthermore, she identified Cornelia. Although she did not name her, it was explicit - 'a distinguished Indian woman who knows more about secluded women than anybody else and lives in Calcutta'. Her name had been damned. She had been associated with a frontal attack on Hinduism. It pretty much wrecked her legal career, because the lawyers would not cooperate with her after that.

She turned to social work and did her last wonderful thing for these secluded women, which was training them to go out to the towns and villages. I think Gandhi genuinely believed in non-violence - I am a great admirer of Gandhi - but as he was organising a tremendous nationwide campaign, he had to raise money from somewhere. He was telling people to give up work and do things for the campaign so it was obvious that they needed money to live. His followers had to get money, and of course, these were the ideal people to get money from, at gunpoint. Some of them were extremely wealthy. The spearhead of her social campaign for mill towns and villages was a very wealthy woman, relative of the Nawab of Dhaka, and at gunpoint, Gandhi's followers demanded money of her, and she actually had to move house and dared not appear in Calcutta. So that was the end of her social work.

The following year in 1932, she had an interview with Gandhi, who was visiting London. She said that as they were both lawyers, they should not take offence at each other and have a straight debate. Her feeling was that all the family's opportunities had come from the Raj. The teaching and the education and the opportunity to be a doctor and a lawyer had come from the Raj as only the Raj was strong enough to provide these opportunities. Therefore, she did not want to see the British Empire go. The rest of the family were very happy about the idea of having the sort of loose relation that Canada had - dominion status. She did not want the Raj to be all-powerful necessarily, but she could not bear the idea of the break, and I think she was more extreme than her siblings in that. Therefore, she already disagreed with Gandhi, and when autonomy was not offered promptly, he turned against any relation with the Empire.

However, more had happened of course, because her job had come to an end because of the violence - the thing Gandhi did not believe in - against her own secluded women. As a lawyer, like many Indian nationalists of the earlier period, she did not believe in civil disobedience. She believed in India going forward to independence by legal means. An awful lot of Indian nationalists of her period believed the same, and walked out of Gandhi's moment. People now accept Gandhi's achievements, which were really great, and so we are used to the idea that civil disobedience was perhaps the only thing that would have worked, but at the time, that was not obvious to many of the leading Indian nationalists, and certainly not to Cornelia.

So, she questioned Gandhi on two issues. She first asked how many followers he had, and he said 3.5 hundred million. She said, 'I'm not asking the population of India - I want to know how many followers you

have!' Well, there was a lot of debate, and she reduced his figure to 30,000. If he actually had 30,000 who really believed in non-violence I think he must have been the most wonderful man who ever lived! At any rate, she got him down quite a bit. Then she asked if he believe in the legal principle that he was responsible for his followers' violence, and he said, 'There is no violence.' Well, she got the other people in the room on her side; because Ambedkar agreed that he did not represent the whole of India. Ambedkar was the leader of the Untouchables and did not think Gandhi was doing enough for the Untouchables, as they were then called - they are now called the Dalits. Burla too had to speak on Cornelia's side, saying, 'Yes, yes, I am afraid there was violence at my own mills.' Gandhi was perhaps naïve. I am sure he was not insincere, but I think he was naïve. He was astonished to hear that there had been violence, and really rather unrealistic in believing there would not be violence, and stopping the mills producing manufactured cloth. People could understand Gandhi wanting to stop manufactured cloth from England but he was actually stopping manufactured cloth because he wanted everybody to learn to spin their own. Everybody had to have a spinning wheel. Even on trains, his followers had spinning wheels and so on.

People may have thought that she had won, but actually, what happened was as she got up to go, she dusted her hands, and Gandhi got up, frail man, very thin, bony wrists, and put his hands on her arm and said, 'No, don't go, I'm going to convert you!' and that was exactly like him. What he believed in was impartial love, especially for opponents, and I think it is an amazing thing about Gandhi, because of course, for relations with his opponents, it could sometimes be very good, but for relations in the family, it was an absolute disaster. His son became a drunkard and became Muslim, only to annoy his father. However, this was brief - the Muslims were very relieved when he left again. Of course, to have impartial love for children is absolutely the wrong thing to do. People should be partial about their children. However, in international relations, it is absolutely wonderful to try to love opponents, and I think he really did do that, and he brings to life what the Stoics said about loving all men, only they never managed to do it. Gandhi managed to do it with his opponents. He should not have tried it on his family, and unfortunately, he failed, with the division of Pakistan, which was a tragedy on the part of a great man.

In retrospect, how should Cornelia be seen? I think of her as a lovely Aunt, but what should everyone else think? She had very close friendships throughout her life. That is why there are so many letters. There was hardly any stage of her life when she did not have some very close friend to whom she wrote. I have chosen her work for the secluded women because I think it gives the unifying thread of her whole life. Even when she went back as a barrister, her successes were all on behalf of women and the estates of women. In other cases, she was cheated or her money was stolen from her, taken by some other lawyer. It was a successful thread and a unifying thread. She opened doors for these women, just as the British actually had opened doors for her. Her sisters had been denied entrance to university and she had been denied a scholarship and she was helped by the British.

I still think the idea of sometimes teaching, through custom, to modify custom, is still a valued principle.

It is unclear as to whether she saw herself as English or Indian? She oscillated rapidly. Sometimes she thought 'I am wholly English,' with justification. Everybody wanted her in the Oxford or London circles. Sometimes she thought 'I am only Indian'. Often she thought, 'I am neither - I am rejected by both sides.'

She did not fit any label. It cannot be said that she was a colonialist because her employment was from the colonial regime. She stood up to the colonialists whenever she thought they were wronging her secluded women. She was not a feminist exactly at all. If she had been a feminist, she probably would have tried to ban Purdah, which was the normal view of advanced, progressive women. She was not a typical feminist. However, I think she is quite a role model for people, because she did not come from a dominant group. She was not from a royal family; she was not from the governing family; and she was not English. She did not actually belong to any group. Due to the conversion to Christianity of her parents, she did not belong to any identifiable group. She was too brown, but she was too Christian, she was too anglicised with perfect English and perfect English manners. She did not belong to any group, so she might have been at a great disadvantage, but she got what she wanted and she did something for these women, by sheer determination. She did not succeed on the scale of Gandhi, but she had 600 wards at any time, and she took them through three generations. I think anybody who has done something really good for 600 people every year, through three generations, has done something really worthwhile, which it is actually very difficult to do so that is how I looked at her by the time I had finished collecting the information for my book.