CHAPTER 1
CORNELIA SORABJI: “CALLED” BY INDIA?

I am a Parsee by nationality (Sorabji, India Calling 12).

...Our parents conceived, and built upon, a unity which did not at the time exist in India; and which was also (and indeed till fifty years later) outside even the conception of the body which came, in the fullness of time to represent Political India (Sorabji, India Calling 15).

Cornelia Sorabji, almost entirely missing from nationalist historiography in India, or even from English missionary histories of the period, has been revived by feminist scholarship in the late 20th century. While K. Lalitha and Susie Tharu declare her to be “both a fighter and a victim of her times” (299), Vera Brittain represents an early wave of interest in her by declaring that she “chose the wrong direction at an important moment in history, and was repudiated by the currents of her time with a completeness which tends to withhold from her the status that is due to her” (85). Chandani Lokuge’s extensive “Introduction” to Sorabji’s India Calling bears testimony to Sorabji’s increasing interest for postcolonial scholarship, which sees her as “celebrating an Indian-Parsee identity that is cosmopolitan, embracing connections rather than distance, avoiding the binary categories of self and other for a more regenerative space of cultural exchange and growth”, but is also an aware exploiter of the political implications of this “racial, religious, and cultural hybridity” (xiv).

The bare outline of her life reveals why the question of identity is so fraught for Cornelia Sorabji. Born in Nasik, in the Bombay Presidency, in 1866 to a mixed Parsi-Christian heritage, she studied at the Victoria High School, Poona, entering Deccan College in 1883. A brilliant academic record won her a Government of India scholarship to a university in England, which she had to forfeit due to gender discrimination, settling for a short-term teaching fellowship at the Gujarat College, Ahmedabad. In 1889, she was offered a “substituted scholarship” to Oxford University to study medicine, but on the suggestions of her sponsors, had to settle for reading literature as a preparation for a more appropriately lady-like career in teaching. While at Somerville Hall, Oxford, she appealed to read law, was refused,
finally gaining permission for the BCL in the Honour School of Law at Oxford. Though she passed the BCL in 1892, she was not admitted to the degree and returned to India in 1894, starting a legal career with the Maharaja of Baroda who invited her to write a Blue-Book on Education in the state. That eventful year, in which she lost her father, she also began representing *pardahnashin* wards (mostly royalty) of the British Government, in the Agency Courts of Indore and Rajkot. Recognized officially in 1904 as a woman *zenana* official in the Court of Wards in Bengal, she graduated to full-time gazetted office three years later. Admitted to the Rolls of the Allahabad High Court in the politically turbulent year of 1919, she was rewarded with the *Kaiser-i-Hind* Medal of the First Class for Public Service in India. 1923 saw her return to England to finally receive her BCL and to take membership of Lincoln’s Inn, but she returned in 1924 and enrolled in Calcutta High Court. In 1929 she revisited England, also launching a propaganda campaign for British rule of India starting at the Institute of Politics in the USA. With deteriorating physical health, specifically the threat of blindness, she returned in 1944 to England to continue work connected with the *pardahnashins*. By the next year her mental health deteriorated and she died, quite lonely, in 1954 in England. Through this journeying – geographical, educational and vocational – she regularly corresponded with her family and friends, especially with her first sponsor in England, Lady Elena Hobhouse and with Harrison Faulkner Blair, judge at Allahabad, with whom she had a close friendship that lasted until her death, the closest she came to marriage, a development rendered impossible by the fact of his being married. Besides letters and diaries, she wrote articles on socio-political issues and semi-sociological narratives – *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* (1901), *Sun Babies: Studies in the Child-Life of India* (1904), *Between the Twilights: Being Studies of Indian Women by One of Themselves* (1908) and *The Purdahnashin* (1917) being some of the best known. She was also a devoted biographer of her family – her parents, “*Therefore*”: *An Impression of Sorabji Kharsedji Langrana and His Wife Franscina* (1924), her sister, *Susie Sorabji: Christian-Parsee Educationist of Western India, A Memoir* (1932), and herself, *India Calling: The Memories of Cornelia Sorabji* (1934), and *India Recalled* (1936).
Identity is at the centre of Cornelia Sorabji’s autobiography in very specific ways. *India Calling* draws attention, in its very naming, to the writer’s location and vocation. The subtitle further specifies the contours of that location, at least of the writer’s self-conscious projection of it: “The Memoirs of India’s First Woman Barrister”. Gender, vocation, and a place in a national history thus form the triple nodes of this location, even as the generic specificity of this text, as a memoir rather than history, suggests the subjectivity that is at play in the telling of the story. The individual is very much at the centre of this narrative: as an achiever of a historical goal, a narrator and, not least, as the respondent to the call of the place called India.

India, emphatically invoked twice in the title, emerges as the bone of political and vocational contention in the narrative, refracted through Sorabji’s subjective lens. The larger historical narrative of contentiousness around its identity as a British colony, working its way to political independence, gets inevitably woven into her telling of her story, given her vocal advocacy of the British empire’s continued presence in India. However, Sorabji’s own location, within this larger history in the making, also introduces an element of history that is deeper than the colonial presence and wider than her individual agency and identity. Her self-conscious invocation of her distinct Parsee identity within the social and political space of India shifts attention to the advent of her ancestors. However, she is practically silent on contemporary figures like Minoo Masani and Bhaikaiji Cama, members of the Parsee community who took a different stance vis-à-vis emergent national discourse. Further complicating the question of her location is her close identification with the unit of the family, ferociously and punctually invoked by her in ways that conflict with other identifications with India and the Parsees of India. Her engagement with the outside world gets refracted via the space of the domestic in significant ways. Some of this idiosyncratic positioning is explained by the fact that this branch of the Sorabji clan had an extraordinary trajectory, marking them out as outsiders within the Parsee community, itself marginal to the mainstream of Indian society. The details and circumstances of her coming into being, as a vocationally driven daughter of a Parsee-Christian father and non- Parsee, Christian mother, confer on her life-story an
atypicality that perhaps explains the anxiety to generate and sustain the sense of belonging that is such a recurrent impulse in her work.

This particularity of her family history emerges in her correspondence as both a source of a unique strength and an occasion for defiant defensiveness, on behalf of the family and herself. In her autobiography, this narrative of achievement and heroic service bordering on martyrdom is presented with much greater assurance, the doubts ironed out to produce a public document confirming a confident and cohesive sense of her own location. The ambiguity of the family’s location in the India of the period is at the heart of this careful construction of a life devoted to isolated and isolating work, carried out in a spirit of selflessness, service to ‘India’ its only reward. Even as her life-trajectory marks a geographical movement outwards, if not an ideological one, from this primary location of home, Sorabji’s own life-story mirrors the tensions of this positioning. In fact, it could be argued that she carries her ‘home’ rather literally with her on her journey to England in the form of her siblings whose passage to higher education she clears. Conversely, England is, already and always, her cultural/ideological ‘home’. The narrative of return that the title suggests is worked out literally, in her self-styled heroic return to work for her country, and be home with her people – all words invoked with great frequency and emphasis.

Sorabji’s definition of ‘country’, ‘home’ and ‘self’, the related terms ‘progress’, ‘work’ and ‘freedom’, and the intersections of these definitions with other discourses of nation-building not represented fully in her narratives, but available in and through other contemporaneous narratives of belonging and unbelonging, yields mutually illuminating comparisons and contrasts. Locating her writing within a larger history of tradition, progress and freedom – individual and societal, personal and national – provides a critical insight into her claims. Further, the parallel exercise of closely reading her autobiography against the backdrop of the larger Cornelia Sorabji archive, of her unpublished private letters and diaries and her more self-consciously polemical or literary works, considerably nuances our understanding of her positions on issues of nationalism, religion, and gender. The fissures and fractures these reveal challenge any reductive monochromatic version of her place in history and her position on these key issues. They reveal a divided persona caught between often
conflicting and contradictory desires, negotiating the ambiguities of her position with a range of strategies. Accidents of history – she never intended to study or practice law, medicine being her primary aim – get rendered as achievements in a linear narrative shorn of conflict. Visible public success coexists with private tensions and a sense of failure that are shared with family alone.

**Manifest destiny: the Sorabji family and the construction of a ‘national’ mission**

Narratives of women’s achievements in the field of education and work have, for rather obvious reasons, included the family as a key factor, occasionally as a facilitator but more often as an impediment. In the case of India, specifically, the two characteristics overlap in interesting ways. Class and caste privilege might render the woman more confident and aware as an agent of her destiny, even as it might become an impediment in her breaking the subtler bonds of ‘womanly decorum’ often more rigidly adhered to in the upper castes and classes. Privilege can also act as another element of patriarchal suppression of the woman’s agency when the expectation (especially in the late 19th century reform-oriented families in India) to modernize in accordance with an ‘enlightened’, often Western-educated, male’s agenda demands such feats of cross-cultural adjustment that the ‘progress’ is actually resisted or perceived as a burden.

Despite a supportive family, Cornelia Sorabji’s determined struggle to enter a hitherto all-male preserve in education in England and to be able to practice law, was replete with a looming anxiety about being labeled a “feminist”. Her position against woman’s suffrage, her investment in a decorous self-construction as a lady, and her assertive defense of the a gradualist approach to reform, especially for the *purdah*womanly decorum, was of a piece with her virulent imperialism which condemned the Indian movement for independence as a disease, Indian nationalist-reformers as misleading Westernised figures ignorant of “the real India,” and Gandhi as a misguided zealot under whose guidance “illiterate and orthodox Hindu families were given poisonous and misleading literature in the vernacular” (Sorabji, *India Calling* 189).
Expectedly, such a positioning resulted in considerable internal contradictions and maneuvers to overcome them. Religion, family, progress, reform, country, and ‘the good of India’ were the oft-deployed phrases in this discourse, all of them redefined in very particular ways to suit the contours of her chosen location. On the question of women, these themes criss-crossed her varied oeuvre in ways that challenge a simplistic binary model of progress vs. reform, as they show a female agent caught in the flux of complex negotiations with questions of identity and power. Central to this narrative of achievement was Sorabji’s outward journey to England, to acquire a professional education to serve India. This fundamental narrative determined how she wrote her family history, with which *India Calling* begins.

The pre-history of her becoming also received independent attention from her in the form of her biography of her parents, aptly titled *Therefore*, underscoring the thematics of causation. Reading these two works in conjunction with her regular letters home (she was an expansive and devoted correspondent) yields a formidable, and often internally contradictory, archive for understanding her self-construction. While the autobiography reveals a very public persona — the zealot of imperialism who aligns herself with the Westernized Parsees and posits herself as a privileged witness to the mysteries of the *zenana* which is her work-space — her correspondence is altogether more involved with personal doubts, anxieties, and often contradicts the strident imperialism of the autobiography. *Therefore* is an altogether different genre of writing that romanticizes personal history and draws attention to the centrality of the family in Cornelia Sorabji’s self-construction.

*Therefore* is a lyrical narrative of her family’s history that tells the tale using tropes derived from fairy-tale, legend and epic. It displays all the tendencies towards “the picturesque,” “the too luxuriant diction” that her future tutor at Oxford would attempt to wean her away from (Letter 17/12/1889, MSS/2). This rhetorical mode, far from being a predilection for redundant embellishment, was central to the design of her book. Sorabji deployed it to make of her parents’ story a romance with a mythicised India, which is the object of vocational commitment. Along the way, her father’s conversion to Christianity and the resultant hostility from the community of his birth, the Parsees of India, got rendered with a rhetorical finesse that built upon
and sustained the idea of Christian martyrdom even as it tried to keep intact a sense of a Parsee identity. The elegiac and romantic mode, enabling a brushing aside of the historical in favor of the quasi-allegorical, aided this construction.

The title Therefore is taken from the book’s epigraph: “Therefore I believe, and go out into the Light and the Life”. Ascribed to an “Early Eastern Inscription”, it underscores, in equal parts, the family’s Christian faith, missionary purpose, and its eastern origin while creating a chain of inspiration: as her parents are so inspired, so is the daughter by the parents’ lives. The dedication on the next page: “To Friendship between England and India and between the far-scattered Children of God in all worlds”, indicate a global Christian brotherhood combined with a specific stance towards the imperial power figured as a ‘friend’ to one’s ‘own’ country. In the interstices of the universal exists an insistence of the specificity of ‘the Eastern’, a geographical marker that is replete with cultural suggestions. The contradictory contours of this location make for an important element in Cornelia Sorabji’s self-fashioning, originating here but finding its chronological extension in subsequent writings.

Made to kiss the Baby Image of Jesus Christ by a solicitous mother, as a precious lone male child, Sorabji Kharsedji was, somewhat ecumenically, further safeguarded from all imagined harm by taking recourse to “Faquirs, wandering priests, Hindoo and Moslem, with their charms” (12). But “for his soul” he was to learn Phelvi, Zend, as well as Persian, and “cleave to his nationality, in this land of many nations, as of many faiths. With tales of early Persia must his imagination be barricaded; and with the tales of his immediate family” (12). That he would break this barricade by embracing Christianity became a complex matter for Cornelia Sorabji to represent, having built up an emotive case for the Persian legacy. She solved this by representing her father as creating a seamless continuum between the Zoroastrian and the Christian traditions, so that the Christian story of the Three Wise Men from Persia forecasts the conversion of the Parsees to Christianity, to “be followers in name and truth of The Child, whom all unknowing their ancestors had worshipped” (17).

This move is symptomatic of Sorabji’s representation of her own move to England and a higher education. Simultaneously holding on to a sense of origins, which includes the idea of a ‘national’ identity, she dovetails her personal ambitions and rebellions into an altogether conservative narrative of a dutiful daughter and sister.
furthering a family tradition. The narrative of *Therefore* builds up the father’s life as one “called to the highest of all callings” (40) discovered in early boyhood, like “a story of the early Christian Church” (31). In 1844, Sorabji is “attached to the staff of Bishop Carr, the Bishop of Bombay, as interpreter on the tours which he made through his diocese” (38). The Bishop’s “ready sympathy” for the rural poor, combined with Sorabji’s reformist zeal, resulted in this missionary becoming one of the building blocks, along with the doctor and the engineer, of the then emergent Christian colony in the new industrial settlement at Nasik. Sorabji’s career echoes this – she toured extensively in the course of her legal practice in India among the zenana women for whom she acted as an interpreter of the law, while she interpreted ‘Indian culture’ to the British Raj in her capacity as native informant. In Calcutta, her social work followed the lines of the workshops for poor Christians that her father set up. Further, the gender specificity of her role, as the representative of the rights of the orthodox Hindu woman, brought highlighted her mother’s role as ideal and inspiration.

The fairytale mode dominates the Cinderella-like outlines of the mother’s life. Born into a Christian (tribal?) family specified only in terms of a geographical location, and raised “among the wild growing things in that beautiful region known as the Neilghirries” (42) by an “unkind stepmother”, she is naturally blessed with a Wordsworthian “gift of sympathy.” Unsurprisingly for the allegorical logic of the story embodied in the book’s dedication, her destined spiritual parents arrived “from far ways in the county of Kent, in England”, a Sir Francis Ford and “his beautiful wife” who “saw and fell in love with the bright-eyed lonely child, Franscina Santya, and …adopted her straightway” (42). The mother’s perfect blend of ‘Eastern’ nature and ‘Western’ culture is expressed through a quintessentially Indian analogy:

> It will never be known how much of her own sympathy with every sort of person in every possible circumstance related back to her Eastern temperament, how much to the character and influence of the most cultured of Englishwoman….certain it is that no ‘join’ showed in any of the influences of her life.

The Jumna and the Ganges flow in one stream at Prayag – there is no mark to show where the one joins the other…. (43).
This extraordinary symbiosis: “while being given the best that the West had to give, she was made proud of India and of her Indian parentage” (43), is a sentiment that Cornelia, who was named after Lady Cornelia Ford, repeats about herself in her autobiography. Sorabji contrasts her mother’s “extraordinary disregard of boundaries between one created soul and any other, between one race and another” (43), with the “fierce nationalism in its aggressive form” of “modern Indians…who come to Great Britain for education” (44). Her own higher education in Great Britain thus becomes a testing ground for a heroic refusal to fall into this trap. The terms of the mother’s idealization indicate some of the contours of Sorabji’s projected self-construction – a version of assimilative Parsee identity devoid of any possibility of displacing the authority of the British Raj. Sorabji Kharsedji, a convert “with persecution snarling at him whenever it got a chance” (46) met and married Franscina and though he had to forfeit by his conversion his entire inheritance, their home in Nasik was “surely among the busiest and happiest in all India” (47).

In that conflation of busy-ness with happiness lies the germ of Sorabji’s vocational inheritance, combining the Protestant work ethic with a kind of nationalism. The mother, who was “a ‘mother’ to the whole village” (49), “conceived a kindergarten which was Indian” (48), unlike the “misfits” that were imported. On being commiserated with for having the “ill luck” to be a mother to daughters alone, she argued back that “her daughters should be sons, and should work for India” (53).

Whose India they were to work for was indicated by the nature of their indoctrination. The children were often told the tale of “the rebel known as Tantia Topee in the Mutiny” as someone who “deserved to be delivered into [the police’s] hands” (53). By introducing their English friends to “their Hindoo, Moslem and Parsee friends”, we are told, “Mr. And Mrs. Sorabji [came to be] among the most unifying of influences in the country” (55). This model of genteel reform and propaganda for unification (under the British Raj) informs Cornelia Sorabji’s ideal of “working for India”. The acquisition of specific vocational skills (whether medicine as she originally intended, or Law as she later settled for) seems marginal to this larger pattern of lady-like labour and public service within the imperial framework. But the contradiction between this projected ideal and her actual attitudes and tactics
reveals much more than the temperamental difference between the mother and daughter; it exposes in its rawness the conflicts and violence kept decorously under control by a deeply internalized ideal of what it means to be a lady, conflicts exacerbated by the daughter’s greater exposure to the world of the ‘other’.

Sorabji’s autobiography and letters, shorn of much of the romantic haze that characterizes ‘Therefore’, display each of the ‘negative’ traits her mother is said to avoid—“hatred” for the other in her encounters with the Arabs on her sea journey, for the French in their own land, for some of the racist British missionaries in England and India, and for Indian nationalists in general, in keeping with her “fierce” loyalty to her family’s interests and to “anything English” (Letter 12/10/27, MSS 42), which more accurately translates as loyalty to the British crown. The act of ideological slippage occurs in her occasional acknowledgement of the threats she faces in living up to this ideal, though, more often than not, her writing shows a stupendous self-confidence that is largely a function of privilege and patronage.

**Self-Project(ion) in England: Winston Churchill in a saree?**

Cornelia Sorabji’s visit, stay, and education in England were sponsored by English benefactors. Some of them treated her with an arrogance that she tolerated in public while chafing against it in private. Her loyalty towards empire was reinforced by her social contact with the conservatives at Oxford, with the likes of Max Mueller making for an Orientalist idealization of the ‘otherness’ of the East. A shrill loyalty to the Raj coupled with a self-exoticisation reflected in such sartorial choices as a sari account for two telling instances of mis-identification she suffers from while in England.

On one occasion, towards the later part of her life, she had to actually clarify that her position was not as rigid as to win her the comparison with Winston Churchill, as one of her close associates mistakenly suggested: “A.(sic), not knowing I expect, seems to have quoted me to American and English inquirers or friends met by her - as an “Indian die-hard” and they took that to mean that I was “an Indian Winston Churchill!!” In the same letter she described her political stance as
“progressive self-government within the Empire” (Letter 19/11/1931, MSS 13). On another, much earlier occasion, she amusingly recalled how she was mistaken for exotic royalty due to her rich Indian costume in the French countryside where she went traveling as a tourist: “the people evidently thought I was an Indian Princess for they all bared their heads and made low bows: it was very comic…” (Letter 19/4/1892, MSS 6). Both ‘mistakes’ indicate two significant aspects of her self-projection — as a culturally ‘authentic’ Indian who was virulently anti-nationalist. In the ‘Afterword’ to India Calling, Richard Sorabji writes that his aunts, the Sorabji sisters, enlivened the “drab London scene” by descending upon it in their “brilliant orange and green saris”, thus opening up an important theme in Sorabji’s self-construction (213). Her clothing suggests the picturesque Orient, with her as a supplicant supplier of ‘local color’ and tamed exoticism. Her choice of costume is consistent with her identification with the traditional India that she claims as her special domain of work, the orthodox woman being the endangered species who must be saved from the reforming progressives, who also just happened to be nationalists. To speak for the real India, Sorabji needed to invest in her ‘Indianness,’ in terms of attire and access to the ‘vernacular’, which as we see, also helped distinguish the Sorabjis from the British missionary women and ‘England-returned’ Indian reformers who were their vocational competitors.

Her letters from England between 1889 and 1894 as well as the autobiography indicate a complex sense of self, rife with contradictions. While she roots for Oxford in sports, she must also lay claim to a “sun-burnt heart,” more given to emotional excess than the English stiff-upper lip. Her lady-like reticence strains against private outpourings of rage at the racist attitudes of the Missionary Society. Chafing against the discrimination she felt unfairly meted out to her family’s schemes of social work in India, her genteel self came into dangerous collision with the material understanding of the realities of patronage. Legal education gave her an understanding of rights and privileges that militated against the pacifist Christian discourse of forgiveness and harmony she claimed as the family’s legacy.

She wrote angry letters home describing her fury at the missionary women’s rudenesses and injustices to her personally, and vows to fight for her family’s
monetary rights to Missionary Society funding which she felt was consistently denied
due to their being ‘Indian’. The ‘other’ that she so violently banished constantly
threatened to break through the carefully constructed, continuously asserted, but
nevertheless precariously held together self.

However, what remained constant through these vacillations and fluctuations
was an unswerving opposition to the nationalist cause, a feat Cornelia Sorabji
managed by dint of a juggling of the categories of the private and the public, the
individual and the collective. Her outrage at British racism was restricted to the
private domain, on behalf of her family and herself, who are carefully marked out as
Indians, albeit Indians with a unique legacy within that geographical space. English in
their dedication to hard work, and ‘rooted’ enough to understand and translate the
needs of ‘the Indian’, they were chosen for their mission. By contrast to them, the
missionary women were upstarts who enjoyed an unfair advantage due to their skin-
colour. The only category of British racism that won her disapproval for its
implications for the larger India outside the charmed circle of the Sorabji clan was
when one missionary woman justified missionary work by attacking the ‘Indian
woman’ as lacking in ‘morality’. Interestingly, the sins of this early, and entirely
private, expression of outrage on behalf of the purdahnashin woman, whom she
claims to know and speak for authentically, were washed off in her later public
support for Katherine Mayo’s Mother India, famously described by Gandhi as a drain
inspector’s report for its caricature of Indian society. While privately criticizing some
of the excesses of Mayo’s generalizations, her stout public support for Mother India
as a true account of India reveals her increasingly hysterical loyalty to the now
beleaguered imperial cause.

Her criticism of the English (and the American) thus smacked largely of a
family quarrel or, at most, of a personal sense of wrong experienced by a loyal native
who felt cheated that the accident of color kept her dutiful imperial labors from being
recognized and rewarded. The creation of and identification with the category called
‘workers for India’, white or black, but all equally committed to the Raj, demands that
the nationalists be excluded from this imagined community. ‘India’ thus became a
geographical space, a colony under a benevolent rule, which needed to be saved both
from its orthodox past and its ‘modern’ nationalist present. In pitting this old picturesque India against the new modern one, for her the bigger evil was the modern, where she saw the roots of the urge for rapid reform and political independence. The picturesque India was also, expectedly, the India of the traditional ruling classes, the petty *rajas* and princelings whose education was the special concern of her sister Susie Sorabji’s school and whose fortunes and ‘cultural’ interests the *Raj* protected in return for their loyalty. The aesthetic domain of the ‘picturesque’, the celebration of which permeated the style and substance of Sorabji’s writing and self-fashioning, thus supports a naked political configuration.

**Gender/ Privilege/ Work: a Zenana Lady amongst the Suffragists?**

Sorabji’s investment in the idea of the lady had a peculiar relation to work. While her mother had no ‘vocational’ training, being ‘naturally’ endowed and socially fortunate in possessing the skills and temperament necessary for the task of being an Indian missionary’s wife, Cornelia Sorabji’s next generation project was to go into the world and acquire training in a profession that was hitherto held exclusively by men. By all accounts she received the full cooperation of her family – morally and financially – in this enterprise. In fact, she invested the journey to England with a significance that was of value to the family - it was manifestly a matter of family pride, to be followed up by more such pioneering efforts on the part of her siblings. Displaying a militant competitiveness on this issue, she expresses alarm that others from India might challenge the family’s claim to being the first in their chosen fields of study and work. Her domain of work in England thus extends to tending to the family’s projects, especially the school run by her mother, for which funding was decreed by the Missionary Society.

Her own plans for studying medicine had to be abandoned due to a number of logistical reasons (it was too expensive for her sponsors and arduous for a woman, she was told by her benefactors). She was a somewhat reluctant student of Law. Moved by the plight of a suffering widow who came to her mother for help, she claims, she was inspired at the tender age of eight to study law in order to ameliorate the plight of the legally dispossessed Indian woman. That this plight affected not the poorest of the
poor, but women with property, typically dowager queens, and that she would get her first employment under the royalty of Baroda to gather testimony of purdah women, were convenient coincidences for Cornelia Sorabji, befitting in the class and political configurations within which this world operated. The failed ambition of studying medicine was to be carried on by proxy by her sister whom she groomed for this vocational enterprise, even as she organized and oversaw her brother’s education at Oxford. The journey outward was thus shorn of any rebellion or breaking out of the familiar, it was in fact a case of the familial conjoining the vocational.

Cornelia Sorabji’s conservative approach to the woman’s question meant that her indubitable act of infringement on an erstwhile all-male preserve was presented as a logical extension of genteel lady-like work. This self-representation was, however, at odds with the recurrence in her letters of references to hard work, steely determination, barely controlled aggression, and isolated effort. However, the enormous cushioning effect of patronage ensured that she received preferential treatment in her studies to enable her to continue without violating decorum: “They are all very kind”, she wrote of her tutors, “for they all came and interviewed me instead of my going to them – about my work I mean, and to settle which College and Lectures I shall attend…. I believe I am the only student so favoured” (Letters 10/10/1890, MSS/EUR 3). A kind of late-Victorian purdah observed in the English classrooms does not win her critique or even comment as she acquiesces without protest: “and there the ladies sit in a little room by themselves outside the Lecture Hall”, she tells us, whenever lectures are held at any of the men’s colleges (Letter 20/10/1890, MSS 2).

Her encounters with Rakmabai (spelt ‘Rukhmabai’ by Sorabji), a contemporary from Bombay, a child bride who left her husband and who was subsequently ‘rescued’ to England, indicate her social conservatism. Competitive in her ‘social work’ schemes on behalf of her family and herself, she reports home overhearing a conversation between Rakmabai and a Lord Hariss about ‘a scheme’ for ‘female education’ to which he replied: “Make them philosophers and forsakers of domestic duties – is that your desire?” I did not hear any more but Rakmabai has been granted an interview. She is certainly most energetic in that way but I could not pester
anyone for a hearing for a vague unformed scheme” (Letter 26/1/1890, MSS 2). Later criticizing Rakmabai for her ‘indecorous’ public sightings with a young ‘fop’ in London, Cornelia Sorabji establishes a self-image as a puritanical devotee of the duty to educate herself for the altruistic goal of serving Indian women. The lucrative possibilities and outright patronage within which this sacrificial journey is carried out: “Lady Hobhouse has written to the Nawab ab[ou]t the legal Commissionership, and if I work steadily I shall be ready for it by June …. Ain’t it scrumptious? (Letter 4/3/1890, MSS 2) is supported by her letter barely a year later, by when the initial hiccups in her studying Law are ironed out: “my dear B.C.L. is still mine to strive after - nothing human can separate us now - thank Heaven - it was only when I really gave it up that it was really mine. Oh! Me…so wedded am I to it that sometimes I feel I am a monomaniac too…” (Letter 16/2/1891, MSS 3).

Receiving a steady exposure to ‘Society,’ presented at drawing rooms of the ruling class of the time, she proudly records how she is congratulated for her views on society and politics. Combined with a stated antipathy to Suffragists, this confirms her public alignment with all that was conservative in British society and politics. This is how this status-quoist ‘revolutionary’, who speaks of her “inherent dislike of Liberals” (Letter 29/4/91, MSS 4, emphasis original) presents her vocational future: “I have to lay…before the India Office the sort of app[ointmen]t I should like in India…I want to know if it would be at all possible to combine the Educational and Legal. I don’t want to agitate about pleading in the Courts. I hate agitation: it is the bane of India” (Letters 1/4/91, MSS 4). Starting work as an articled clerk on Sept 14, 1892 at Lincoln’s Inn Fields, with “that excellent Lee and Pemberton”, she enjoys her feminine privilege unabashedly: “… in one small room hoisted on stools eight feet high before huge desks I saw my fellow victims looking shy and miserable and dull, and I did not envy them their sex. If I’d been a man clerk, I’d have fared likewise” (Letter 22/9/1892, MSS 7).

Many years later, in 1919, she would be writing wistfully of the Parliament as a possible place for women to work in, carefully modulating her political stance towards the suffragists:
I don’t know what moves me like the House. I long to see R. K. S. [her brother, Richard] in it. The impression of power at-ease which it gives you is marvelous. And to think that women may some day sit on those benches! It makes me a suffragist almost, to think how nice that would be! But it is a shame that in the Women’s Gallery opposite, they still stand behind not a grill window- but almost as bad, behind high panels with a hole at the top. They will have to change that (Letter 4/2/1919, MSS 11 - diary).

She visits the Fabian Society’s rooms “where the Inter-allied Women’s Suffrage Societies were hearing the Report of what was done in Paris….Meanwhile the Fr[ench]. Unofficial women’s bodies ask any woman interested to go out and join them. There is no election necessary. I c[oul]d go tomorrow if I had a passport” (Letter 8/3/1919, MSS - diary). But this was the limit of her identification with the woman’s cause, her ‘normal’ mode being an indifference interspersed with a kind of misogyny, as the following telling anecdote of her visit “to hear Miss Normanton debate on the opening of the Legal Profession to women” reveals:

The debate was in Lincoln’s inn…. Ms N is evidently a Hist[ory] student fr[om] Cambridge…She applied to the Temple for admission as a student. Her reputation rests on the refusal to accept her or her fees. She has evidently not yet studied the Law…. In her summing up Miss N s[ai]d that it was splendid that Miss S. had been able to do as she wished, referring to my having legal work in India but that she hoped that they w[oul]d consider how wrong it was to give to a Foreigner what was refused to an Englishman! I said that I had never made to Lincoln’s Inn an application similar to that made by Ms N to the Temple: and that the cases were not similar: and I hoped she w[oul]d not consider the question as an English v. Indian question. There was no thought of competition, we stood together. But I did think her a mean sneak! She was entitled to use me as a precedent but not as a provocateur. It proved what one objector s[ai]d that women are not “gentlemanly” to each other…. Ms N was not nice to me. I think she resented my opportunity: but it is equally open to her, if she will try and work without a label (Letter 9/4/1919, MSS 11 - Diary).
This disingenuous argument is belied by the fact that she used the “label” of India to her full advantage as a student. She is certainly no feminist here (if one reads the “we stood together” as implying a female solidarity) in her faithful rehearsal of the tired misogynistic cliché that women are not “gentlemanly to each other”.

This attitude of a ‘grown’ Cornelia Sorabji reveals the pulls and pressures that her student letters reveal. Juggling a hectic study schedule with quite as hectic socializing, hers is an educational career that involves peculiar contradictions: genteel poverty along with social privilege, interfering well-wishers along with enabling benefactors, ‘pioneering’ initiative along with often complicit subjection to the desires and designs of others. She is, finally, as incorporated into imperialism as she is into patriarchy.

**Race, Empire and the Loyal Self: Privilege and Peril**

*The place was a large public affair and to my great annoyance I saw I had been placarded about. I hate this publicity. ...I object to Miss Lewis talking of the impurity of Indian women. It is a side I have never seen, nor have most I am sure, why then present it as the only one, and let Mission work in India seem rescue work. Miss ....is a capital beggar but rather too much of one...*(Letter 2/4/1890, MSS 2 emphases original).

The above description of a meeting with missionary women at London is a private expression of Sorabji’s annoyance at specific groups of the English – especially English missionary – women. That annoyance extended to her benefactors who replicated many of the tropes of ‘rescue’ that she, in the above quote, seems to be resenting *on behalf* of the Indian woman. However, as we shall see later, the annoyance expressed here is less at the denigration of Indian womanhood, as at the assumed ‘knowledge’ of the Indian woman that the missionary women erroneously claimed in order to marginalize the agency of Indian translators of that culture, such as Sorabji herself. The battle was one over terrain, with her claims to equality being constantly undercut by racism latent in her benefactors or those responsible for funding the family’s social work schemes. She was cannily aware of the value of her
Indianness for the Missionary Society: “…if they dare to cut down the grant to the V.H.S.[her mother’s school] I shall show them what I think about it…. I shall speak for them next holidays…& when they are under obligation to me, for the happy fact that I am an Indian is an advertisement in itself…” (Letters 3/10/1889, MSS 1).

Here, a self-awareness as to her racial difference enters an otherwise celebratory embrace of the West. Introduced by Lady Hobhouse as a young woman of “pure Indian birth” (Letter to the London Times, 13/4/1888 MSS 1), she played the part faithfully but had to suffer the discriminatory treatment which she resented especially when it affected the family’s material interests. Thus, certain crucial decisions, including the central educational and vocational one, the one that was to define her very identity in her own eyes, were taken for her by her benefactors. Her choices restricted by related factors (the social ‘appropriateness’ of certain courses of study, the logistical difficulties –real or imagined – of a woman’s pursuit of medicine, as well as the fact of her monetary dependence) helped define the course she was to follow academically, even as her social course was determined by an equally solicitous group of benefactors. Central to this play of privilege and its denial was the fact of her ‘difference’ – of her identification with the East. The following quote from her early correspondence regarding the denial to her of the post of teacher in a school in Mysore, captures the embattled space within her that personal ambition, ‘national’ identity, family interest, ‘Christian tolerance’ and a visceral desire for ‘justice’ occupied:

Miss Manning [her chief benefactor in England]

prevented my having the find. She told them an English lady would be best for so high a post. I charged her with this, and she owned up adding as an extenuating circumstance that she did not know it was I who was suggested…. Miss M. though a good woman - is still greedy for her own nationality to have the first place on all occasions. She is curiously unjust too – when there was talk of that Legal Commissionership in Hyderabad she said I would not do because I did not know the language - and yet none of these ladies she sends out know anything about India much less a language. I think unconsciously she more than once wronged us …. However, the best
of women and men are but imperfect. It is in this largely will consist I daresay our joy and satisfaction when that which is Perfect has come. I am going to have it out with Miss Manning some day (Letter to her family 27/1/1892, MSS 6).

Though she enjoyed the special attention (“My costume is a great success so please don’t reproach yourself or anyone for advising it. The silk saris are not wasted” (Letters 23/10/1889, MSS 2), she continually complained of being made public property by the press in London: “‘The Gentlewoman’ wanted an interview…I hate being public property and so refused…. If I once give myself into the hands of such people I shall not be able to breathe without the Editorial watch being produced to count the seconds…” (Letters 7/1/1893, MSS 8). She was euphoric about the English in England: “Nobody here is the smallest bit snobbish or vulgar or anything but perfectly easy – How I shall hate the vulgarity and priggishness of the English at home” (Letters 18/8/1892, MSS 7). However, the ghettoisation of her early attempts to publish her fiction undercut this optimism:

The Spectator I see is one of the adverse critics of my little Urmi- They cannot understand the Indian language naturally- and I think perhaps they are a bit angry about an Indian getting into so good a Magazine. They wish “if Indians are to take a part in our literature that they would do something separate”- Bosh! What red-tapeism – as if we contaminate them thru (sic) literature. They say too it is “hardly local”- because any woman might feel the same. I daresay they fancy that because Indian women are not English they can’t have any nice feelings as to their ties to their husbands or to their children” (Letter 7/1/1893, MSS 8).

Her loyalty (greater than that of the British) clashed with family interest as in the following excerpt:

We talked India politics…Sir William made my mental hair bristle with his wild projects. He proposes doing away with Indian Civil Servants altogether as an English importation- and these are the beginnings of a Home Rule Scheme laid down in nicely veiled
language. When I suggested that Indians were not ready – he said he knew it was, that those odious bureaucrats of English officials kept back Indian Talent in order to enrich themselves - and this I could not wonder at, and silent remembering how that horrid brainless “Docee” has eaten Mary’s [Sorabji’s sister] due for 6 years, simply because she is a Euro [Eurasian] (Letters 31/8/1892, MSS 7).

Much later, in India, she repeated these sentiments vis-à-vis the perceived violation of the principle of meritocracy, coming even closer to an open acknowledgement of racial discrimination:

The fact is that the superiority about ‘skin’ has grown in India since the ability of the Indian to make good in work and service and things that matter have been demonstrated. ‘We’ll taunt them in what they cannot alter and put a value of birth and capability and culture upon that!’ is what these people… seem to say. And Missionaries are often the worst offenders. It’s quite wrong and helps to widen the gulf which hatred and political agitation began to dig… What a lot there is to be done in India. And oh! How few workers there are! (Letter 26/4/1928, MSS 42).

These fissures in the armour of loyal British citizenhood that Cornelia Sorabji donned did not take the further turn they took with someone like Stokes or Gandhi who were able to distinguish between the goodness of individual Westerners and the systemic oppression of an imperial regime. They made the further leap into identifications with larger political collectivities of the dispossessed of other races, and of “Indians” as a political body. Cornelia Sorabji confined her sense of being wronged to her family’s suffering, thus making the private an alibi for not establishing a homology with larger practices of racism, and as she refused to see the structured violence latent in colonialism, the focus on the private unit of the family served a dual purpose. It marked the family out as a separate unit within the entity called India, as special citizens who have a unique pedigree. Simultaneously, she claimed for this family a true Indianness in order to lend authority to her generalizations regarding the British presence in India. Her individual perception of a lack of any larger scale injustice (these annoying incidents were constructed as local matters largely having to
do with the pettiness of small groups of English men and women) thus became an act of “speaking for” India. This double move is revealed in its contradictions in the following English encounter she recorded early on in her letters to her family, describing a conversation between Max Muller, Behramji Malabari (a Parsee reformer), a Miss Frurus, and herself over tea:

Mr. Malabari is more than ever disheartened about India. When will it reach this height he says. Prof. Max said “But it was India who was entertaining you”! (meaning me of course) and what do you think he said “Ah- but that is one - and then she is a Christian- that makes all the difference.” Prof. Max was saying he (Mr. Malabari) sees now that for India to be truly refined in all senses & in the highest [way?] it must be Christian. Is that not happy? – For orthodox Mr. Malabari to have come to that conclusion (Letter 4/6/1890, MSS 2).

Here, her identification with India is taken as granted, confirmed by the legendary Orientalist Max Mueller. But the terms of that Indianness are special, and exclude, for instance, the orthodox purdahnashin, whose legal voice Sorabji would later claim to be. In a further claim on authentic Indianness, her autobiography asserts that those who support the Raj are the real Indians, all else, including, and especially the swarajists, are deceiving fakes. The future of India is safe only in the hands of Sorabji and Christianity. In identifying with a Christian future for India, Sorabji was at odds with a Gandhi, who, despite his openness to that faith, was against conversion. The statement highlights an altogether more sectarian model of the faith, even as it identifies with “India” a person whose affirmed loyalty to the Raj puts her at the other end of the political spectrum from the one to which Gandhi was steadily moving.

As the agitation for the rights to Indians to self-representation gathered force in the 20s, Cornelia Sorabji found herself in the unenviable position of being marginalized precisely because she was not perceived as being ‘Indian’ enough. As English women in a women’s Council in Calcutta began resigning their posts in an attempt to mollify the rising nationalist sentiment, Sorabji opposed this on the grounds of meritocracy and a rhetoric of ‘work’ that was completely shorn of the political. She attempted a redefinition of what it means to be Indian:
What we sh[oul]d do in the Council is not to count Eng[lish] and Indian heads - ‘National’ is only a geographical distinction in our Councils: but to claim that all who come inside the Councils are Indians! I’d like to invent some ceremony of “giving the freedom of the Council” to folk- admitting them as of one Family of whatever race....All who work for India are Indians.... These English women [by saying] ‘I’ll resign my post in favour of all Indians’ [create]... two camps instantly...and the door is open to patronage...It’s so bad for the Indians: and all wrong on principle. And it’s bad for the Eng[lish] becaus[es] they know it’s a farce, that the Indians can’t do without them....And ...it’s a farce becaus[es] If they find a really capable Indian—they do all they can to exclude her. It’s the bad policy wh[ich] is wrecking us politically, applied to our social work in the Council (Letter to Elena Rathbone 10/3/27, MSS 42).

Facing criticism from both sides, the Indian nationalist and the English who seemed to have turned upon her, Sorabji increasingly felt isolated in Calcutta and even planned to relocate to England. Her espousal of Katherine Mayo’s book Mother India further landed her in troubled waters as she again confided to Elena:  

…Miss Mayo is making trouble for me too. I really am angry with her. She goes on writing and lecturing – v. unwisely, I think – and there she refers to an Indian lady, and quotes something from a letter wh[ich] I marked confidential....the local rag drops upon this and says the Indian must be I. As if I had not enough to bear already stirring up useless animosity against me (Letter to Elena Rathbone 29/2/28, MSS 42).

As if this were not enough, her sense of wrong was further exacerbated by more specific attacks on her family pride, indicating her complex positioning vis-à-vis caste and colour. It deserves full quotation as it encompasses most of the issues – of religion, race, work and vocation, in relation to the family – that have been the defining themes of Cornelia Sorabji’s self-construction:
…Now some Margaret Wilson has written a Novel ‘Daughters of India’ wh[ich] has been sent me…. MW must be a Missionary and she writes well and describes poignantly- but she is odious so far as I’ve read her in her un-necessary ref[erences] to colour. She makes a colour scale, with the most sun-burnt labeled as the loWest caste. This of course is untrue. The sun affects us as it does you, and in one family those who expose themselves are burnt, and the stay at homes retain their complexion….. Here’s a hateful sentence talking of the Xtian Indians… “Their degradation was washed away by the baptism of water, and they sat down at the Lord’s table for Communion eating for the first time, not with high castes only, mind you, but with teachers who were the v[ery] colour of the Queen and her Government” [emphasis original].

Her sense of gathering doom, of isolated martyrdom, comes to the fore, with an explicit statement of her isolation and that of her family. Interestingly, the phrase “workers for India” recurs here, reinforcing an apolitical notion of ‘social work’:

“the achievements of the white-skinned”—in the exile and loneliness of India, are often she [Margaret Wilson] explains wrought beneath the eyes of those far away. But the achievements of Indians themselves in a large country must also be so wrought. Look at me – c[oul]ld any European or American be lonelier? They have their communities. Whom have I? Or other members of my family working in India – and there must be others also so placed. If she had said “workers for India” what a difference it would have made (Letter to Elena Rathbone 26/4/28, MSS 42).

The plaintive “Whom have I?” could well have been followed by a parallel interrogation along the lines of, “Who am I?” Some of the ‘softening’ of one who was once likened the ‘Indian Winston Churchill’ can best be glossed via the following quote from a letter dated March 3, 1931, on the Gandhi-Irwin talks:

…thank Heaven, the Viceroy’s goodness, his crystal-clear simplicity, and desire for the good of India have won even the Arch Poseur over to being natural and sincere, and to seeing reason….Sarojini… is much subdued since last April. I feel that she has no wish to retire into jail
again. She tells me that she has had to use her humour and her womanly influence to soften the men who are Gandhi’s fellows in the Congress Committee. They have been for absolute resistance…. It is easy for the people to sneer at the Viceroy’s saintliness. But he does not, like Gandhi, claim it for himself. It is the world that sees it….He has conquered where no one else could have hoped to conquer, and if the negotiations had broken down, it would have meant Revolution, and nothing less, for the Congress has its armies….and once they had the word to killing, there would have been no end. It is so easy for the Die-Hards, the Winston Churchills, and his like to yelp and accuse the Viceroy of softness…They sit comfortably 6000 miles away (MSS 13).

It is thus her location at the heart of the crumbling empire that made for her ‘moderate’ voice, even as the demonizing of Gandhi and the parallel deification of Irwin indicated her loyalties. The double loyalty of the heart that Sorabji flaunted throughout her autobiography (“My English friends have belovedly said that I have a double heartbeat – one for India and one for England”) was selective in its definition of Indianness and it is no wonder that her penultimate chapter should use the personal pronoun(s) the way it does: “my Purdahmasheen” and “our King” (India Calling 209,180). In identifying on the one hand with a privileged minority of women and the symbol of what was by now in history an empire in retreat, Cornelia Sorabji indicated her political alignments. Partial to Gokhale’s “law-abiding nationalism” whom she thought of “a true patriot without ulterior motives” and puzzled by Tagore’s 1921 speech where he was equally critical of Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement and “poured scorn” on “the West, England in particular”, Sorabji remained on the wrong side of history (Opening Doors 176-77).

The very end was to be England, where she sought retirement. “While I was in England my Government revealed to me…that I was to have no successor in my Court of Wards job…I had by that date worked thirty years in India, and it seemed to me that I might well, after the manner of the ancient Indian, seek[ing] a hermitage of thought….retire to the forest (of London) and meditate” (India Calling 202). But true to style, this retirement was actually “a second apprenticeship”, to be followed by more travel in America and Canada in 1931, where she recorded yet another, this time
deeply ironic, case of misidentification when her luggage was placed in “the pen marked G”, instead of the logical ‘C.’. The Customs man’s answer, reported without comment by Cornelia Sorabji, could not have been more ironic in the year 1931: “The Steward carried it and told me it belonged to the Indian lady”…said the man, “and told me to take care of it. I didn’t look for the mark. I took it straight to her letter. Isn’t she Mrs. Gandhi?” (India Calling 208).

That Cornelia Sorabji reported this without the usual commentary, whether annoyed or amused, to move on to write of the beauties of American nature, justifiably invites attention. This escape into nature, characteristic of many aspects of her construction of India in the florid prose of ‘Therefore’, signals here a retreat from the political. Many contemporary historiographers might agree with her nephew Richard Sorabji in his “Afterword” to the Memoir, that this fighter for the legitimacy of women’s claims in a male world, to the end of her days, could not recognize the “the greatness of Gandhi and the congress movement” (sic) as a legitimate force to reckon with (India Calling 215). In this perhaps lay her historical error, and a ringing critique of her claims to legitimacy as spokesperson both for the category of ‘Indian’ woman and for ‘India’ in general.