

Cornelia Sorabji and the Zenana Missionary Society

Ben Richardson

At Salisbury Hall in 1928, Cornelia Sorabji gave a public address to the Leamington branch of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society.¹ *Zenana* refers to the women's quarters in a Hindu home and the aim of the Society was to reach into this domestic sphere and help convert Indian and other Asian women to Christianity. Sorabji was the perfect person to help inspire support for this cause. Her parents, Christian converts themselves, supported the education of girls and Sorabji excelled at school, becoming the first female graduate of Bombay University and the first female *and* first Indian to study law at Oxford University. She then returned to India to practice law, serving as a legal advisor until she became a barrister once women were allowed into the profession in 1923. She was also a social reformer and campaigned for girls' education, the abolition of child marriage, legal rights for women subject to seclusion (*pardah*) and protection for widows.² So when she came to England to assist the work of the Society, she did so from a position of authority and authenticity.

In her 1928 address on "India's Women", Sorabji emphasised the need for female medics in India and hoped that some of the women who had been mobilised as nurses during World War I could accompany the missionaries being sent out by the Church of England.³ For her part then, and despite her own Christian upbringing, Sorabji's support for the Society seemed to rest more on the political and financial support it could provide for women's welfare than on its religious evangelisation. Leamington was an important contributor in this regard. When she visited Leamington in 1917 to give her first talk to the Society, it was reported that the local branch had submitted £169 (around £12,000 today) to the Society's headquarters in London; the largest amount by a single town.⁴

The Leamington branch had been in existence since 1880 – the year the Zenana Missionary Society was officially launched – and was from the beginning designated as "ladies' work".⁵ Although clergymen presided at meetings, the presentations about the work the Society was doing overseas were typically given by women returning from their missions.⁶ Moreover, it was local women who attended meetings, coordinated networks, organised exhibitions and led fundraising efforts. One such person in Leamington was Miss Harriet Lloyd of 16 Russell Terrace.⁷

During the Indian famine of 1876-1878, Lloyd had encouraged donations to Britain's official relief fund, exhorting readers of the *Indian Female Evangelist* to "spare something to minister to the greater needs of our perishing Indian 'neighbours'. Our converts, pupils, school-children, teachers, servants, Bible-women, etc. etc. must all terribly need our help".⁸ In 1880 she became the Central Association Secretary of the Zenana Missionary Society and first editor of its magazine *India's Women*. Among other things the magazine featured correspondence from the English schoolgirls that Lloyd had recruited as members of a Christian Union to support missionary activity and help "bring the blessed Gospel light into those sad dark homes" of Hindu India.⁹

Many of the articles and speeches on the plight of India's women now appear moralistic in their tone, even condescending. For example, at one of the Society's early meetings, which were held at the former Public Hall on Windsor Street, the Chairman Rev. J. Bradley of St Paul's Church spoke of the

¹ This article was inspired by Beck Hemsley's account of the visit of Cornelia Sorabji to Leamington on the Our Warwickshire website.

² Sorabji studied for the Bachelor of Civil Law (BCL). See Oxford University Faculty of Law (no date) 'Alumna: Cornelia Sorabji'. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/content/alumna-cornelia-sorabji-1866-1954>

³ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 2 November 1928, p. 7.

⁴ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 19 October 1917, p. 3.

⁵ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 16 October 1880, p. 4.

⁶ In 1882 it was reported that the Zenana Missionary Society had 52 women missionaries in India across 24 stations. *Leamington Spa Courier*, 30 September 1882, p. 4.

⁷ Lloyd also wrote a book in 1882 called *Hindu Women: With Glimpses into their Life and Zenanas*.

⁸ *Indian Female Evangelist*, 3: 24, 1 October 1877, p. 361.

⁹ *Indian Female Evangelist*, 5: 33, 1 January 1800, p. 64. See also *India's Women* (1881) 1: 1, pp. 48-52.

“ignorance, superstition, and degradation of the poor women of India” and argued that “if we could only train up the native girls in the truth and principles of our holy Christianity, then we should have the best and brightest prospects for the future”.¹⁰

It can be argued that the work of the Society not only helped to define Indian women in the minds of its members, but in upholding the righteousness of their own religion and political views, reinforced their own sense of identity as compassionate English women doing God’s work. In this way, the Society was also tied up with a justification of British imperialism as a means of spreading Christianity and enabling spiritual enlightenment. We can see this too in Cornelia Sorabji’s views, which were opposed to the independence movement.¹¹ Whilst rejecting the idea that the British legal code should be transplanted to India, she nevertheless saw the British Raj as a progressive development that had provided equality under the law, basic education and healthcare, and greater freedom for women. As she told her audience in Leamington: “We in India *love* British rule”.¹²

The Leamington branch of the Zenana Missionary Society met continually from 1880 to 1948, the year after India gained independence from Britain. The formal decolonisation of India brought about the end of the Society as its infrastructure and activities were absorbed into the overarching Church Mission Society. But the legacy of the *zenana* missionaries lived on. As one of the many Protestant missions sent to India from Europe from the nineteenth century onwards, they made an important contribution to the spread of the Christian faith. Indeed, after Hinduism and Islam, Christianity is now the third largest religion in India with over 27 million followers – roughly equivalent to the number of Christians in England.¹³

¹⁰ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 3 October 1885, p. 6.

¹¹ Mossman, MaryJane (2020) ‘Cornelia Sorabji (1866–1954): A Pioneer Woman Lawyer in Britain and India’, *Women’s History Review*, 29: 4, pp. 737-747.

¹² *Leamington Spa Courier*, 19 October 1917, p. 3.

¹³ Data taken from 2011 census in India. In the 2011 census in England & Wales, 59 per cent of the population said they were Christian (around 31 million people in England) though this is expected to fall further in the 2021 census results.