

Harini Iyengar



Harini is a barrister and is also on the steering committee of the Temple Women's Forum, and mentor to young women in her field. She recently gave an inspiring talk to Brasenose's Peerless Women's Network. Harini read Law at Brasenose and matriculated in 1993.

Rosie Thomas: *What would you say is a particularly memorable thing that stands out from your time at Brasenose that shows how much things have changed?*

Harini Iyengar: There was going to be a JCR meeting with a motion proposed to ban the rugby team from stripping in the bar and my tutor asked me to come and have a sherry with him in his room and said. "As your tutor I'm telling you not to go to this debate, and don't speak for the motion. You'll be made a figurehead and you'll be thrown to the wolves." As he was my tutor who was about to write all my references I had to do what he said. I have a scrapbook at home all about this and one point there was a gossip column in the Daily Telegraph, about 'radical feminists at Brasenose College trying to spoil this tradition.'

RT: *Knowing what college is like now, that is incredible because that would just never happen!*

HI: I'm so happy to hear that. It was quite a torrid time but after 5 years I had got to the end of my patience and the discussions went on for several weeks, and I was threatening to run a workshop on harassment where I'd let people know their rights about harassment under UK law. Interestingly there were three members of the rugby team who came to see me secretly to say, "I'm so glad you're doing this, they force me to drink shots and I hate it, but we can't say anything."

RT: *What was the gender balance like in your year?*

HI: Around 20% women. It was not 50:50 in any of the years. Having more women in the college makes a big difference. A lot of the boys who were there had been to single sex schools and a lot of them didn't know how to interact with females!

RT: *You were at Brasenose for an undergrad and a masters in the 1990s - did you see it change much in that time?*

HI: I got more bolshy!

RT: *Excellent. Apart from being a radical feminist and standing up to the boys what sort of other extra-curricular activities did you get involved in?*

HI: Politics. I was elected in the Oxford Union in my first year and after that was an officer of the Labour Club. I was minister without a portfolio because I didn't want to run for women's officer.

RT: *Are there any particular experiences apart from the anecdotes which you've already mentioned which have influenced your views on gender, race and discrimination?*

HI: I went to a very feminist girls school, Manchester High School for Girls, and I think the first woman who was called to the Bar at Gray's Inn went to my school, as did the first ever British female solicitor, Carrie Morrison. And the Pankhurst daughters all went there too. So I was brought up in a very Northern, bolshy tradition. And then I found myself at a very conservative, very traditional, very establishment College.

RT: *Do you think you stood out compared to the other girls?*

HI: They were maybe more southern. When Bill came to take the photo I tweeted about it and one of the other portrait subjects, who is a different age and in a different job tweeted back and we ended up having a little dialogue about it so I'm starting to realise that there are lots of other female alumni of lots of different generations who I would be very interested to meet.

RT: *I'm amazed by how much change there has been in such a relatively short period of time since you were here. Did Brasenose feel very old fashioned compared to some of the other colleges?*

HI: I mean maybe we felt frustrated because it felt old fashioned compared to the rest of society and the rest of Oxford! I mean Brasenose has always had a great reputation as a law college and I have benefitted from having it on my CV. But I never had a tutorial with another woman and that would have been nice!

RT: *So how did Oxford in the 1990s prepare you for life afterwards, beyond what you studied?*

HI: I don't want to be disloyal and awful, but I found once I got to the Bar that I was a lot more respected as a woman. When I arrived at Brasenose I was really shocked that people who had good A levels did not believe that men and women were equal, but I'd come from a very progressive school and it took me a long time to accept that there are people in society who just don't get it!

RT: *Can we talk about your photo?*

HI: I had a long conversation with the photographer about images of women and what object to have in the portrait. I had spoken to some colleagues beforehand about whether to wear the wig or not, and had quite an interesting discussion with our senior clerk and our marketing manager – who are both women with children – about whether to wear the wig or not, as some people can assume that you're not a barrister if you're a woman. Though it's happened to me less as I've got older I still don't like people assuming I'm in a different job to the one I'm in because of my gender.

RT: *Have you always had an interest in employment that has led to your current specialism?*

HI: No, I actually wanted to do public law, my thesis was on freedom of assembly, so I wanted to do human rights law. But then we had to look at the different chambers and they all did public law and something else - public and commercial, public

and employment, and I did my pupillage here and so had to do the employment too. In my early years I was always trying to do more judicial review and the employment law would just keep coming in because of the reputation of chambers. I didn't realise how lucky I was when I was younger that we got so much good work. Then after five years it was like falling in love with your best friend, it was that kind of experience with employment law! I suddenly thought, why am I chasing after this other kind of law when there is so much good, interesting work technically and factually, with the different relationships people have at work. A lot of people spend more time at work than they do at home, so there's a lot of human interest with employment law both sides feel intensely about it. And I love cross examining!

RT: *You speak out in the media quite a lot with regards to race and gender and employment law. Why do you think that the case against discrimination needs to be defended so much?*

HI: You don't have the equality in practice that you have on paper in this country. Which is interesting because I don't think that law is the best instrument for change. Most quarrels people resolve themselves. One good thing about this government is that they have enacted section 78 of the Equality Act which I think is good because it takes a feminist issue on pay gaps and makes it a regulatory issue.

RT: *How do you prove there has been discrimination?*

HI: It's very hard. The burden of proof used to be on the employees but a lot of improvements in equal opportunity law have come from Europe. In a sophisticated company there will be very little open abuse so you used to have to ask the tribunal to infer discrimination. Now the burden of proof has shifted, so if you have facts from which you could infer there was discrimination then the burden of proof shifts to the employer to show that there was not discrimination. The good thing is that most employers don't want anyone to be discriminated against. When you start monitoring data and presenting it to them then people become more active.

RT: *How do you rate the legal profession as a career for those leaving university at the moment?*

HI: I think the Bar is shrinking and we have become very specialised and there's a lot of movement. Unfortunately there's a lot of people leaving. In the Temple Women's Forum we give training to encourage women to stay in the profession and we ran one by common request called "Crossing Boundaries: alternative careers" for women who are thinking of leaving the Bar to show them how they could use their legal skills in a different career. It is a very grim time. But saying that, we're also running one called 'A survivor's guide to staying at the Bar' for those who are left!

RT: *I really enjoy your twitter feed @Harini_lyengar and I wondered why you had decided to set one up?*

HI: I never wanted to be on social media because I'm quite private but in 2012 I was going to write a book and one of my senior clerks came to see me and said 'Don't do it! It takes up a lot of time you could spend looking for work and building up a practice and you won't get any money from it and you could do

much better going on Twitter'. And he was right, it has been good for business. What surprised me was how enjoyable it is! You have to be careful as lawyers have strict professional rules and you could do something professionally inappropriate if you're not careful. I kept it totally to do with work at the start then after a few months I realised it was really boring so put a few personal posts on. If you have a slightly different voice on something like Twitter that makes you stand out which is a very charming inversion of the norm.

RT: *I've seen you've done a few pieces on Sky News - how did you get contacted by them to speak on various legal issues?*

HI: In previous years to put myself forward for things but didn't really get anywhere. Our marketing director sent a few emails out to different organisations saying that we had expertise on these issues and would be willing to speak about them if needed, and Sky News got back in touch inviting her to their studio in Millbank and told her what things they were interested. I think Sky have a target of 30% women experts which is really radical. When the Nigel Farage Claridge's breastfeeding story came up I thought, "well if I don't do it now I never will", so I did, and have been on three times now, and did something for The Independent and have been on LBC radio twice. I went to an event a few months ago about women experts and the Sky News business editor was there so I went over to thank her.

RT: *What sort of resources should young women be tapping into in order to help them early on in their careers?*

HI: Professional women's networks are now pretty mainstream and most organisations have embraced it. Also do as much training as you can and take any mentoring opportunity because we used to say that the old boys' network was the way people used to hear about things. Now I think women need to network too. Even my school has started having a dinner in London and it's great to meet women from lots of different jobs and generations and I think the college should start doing dinners for women too. I suspect I'm not the only woman who's not very attracted to come back to Brasenose to spend time with old boys but there must be lots of interesting women out there and my interest has definitely been piqued now! I went to the launch of the First 100 Years project in the House of Lords a few weeks ago and I met Alexandra Marks and there were two other women and she gathered us all and said 'We're all Brasenose alumni'. That was really interesting because I was attracted to Brasenose because of its reputation in law. I think it will be very fruitful for us to meet and keep in touch at the event on May 2nd at Brasenose.

RT: *So why were you interested in coming back to get involved in OUSU?*

HI: Well because I had felt disenchanting with Brasenose and frankly alienated and then in 2013 I thought about going back to a gaudy, and the Development Office encouraged me to go back, emphasising that it was my institution too. So I went back and things *have* changed. It also made me realise that it is an ancient institution that we just pass through, but that I am part of that institution as much as that gang of boys that happened

to be dominating while I was there. They were just passing through; they are not the institution. So I thought I should reconnect with it and be proud of being part of that institution. I was invited to address the Peerless Women's Network and then thought that I could do something useful as an external trustee of OUSU, and that's where I am now!

RT: That seems like a great place to end it - thank you very much, and I look forward to seeing you on the second of May!

Rosie is in her third and final year, and studies Philosophy, Politics and Economics.

