

AUSTRALIAN LAW JOURNAL

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A distinguished Indian lawyer, Soli Jahangir Sorabjee, Senior Advocate, died in New Delhi on 30 April 2021 at the age of 91, reportedly of exposure to the COVID-19 virus. He was Attorney-General for India twice (1989-90) and (1998-2004) and earlier served as Solicitor-General (1979-80).

During the Emergency (1975-77), he protested at what he saw as grave departures from the *Indian Constitution*. He provided legal services to political prisoners without fee. It was a testing time for the judiciary and legal profession. Then and later Soli Sorabjee set a fine example.

He participated as counsel in many leading cases including the important constitutional case of *Kasavananda Bharati v State of Kerala* (1973) 4 SCC 225. In that case the Supreme Court of India held that it was not open to the Indian Parliament to “amend” the “basic structure” of the *Indian Constitution*, including by purported legislation removing the facility of judicial review. He appeared in many cases of constitutional significance and was noted for the brilliance and wit of his submissions. Court rooms were commonly crowded

with observers when he was addressing the court. His advocacy usually relied on brief notes and a prodigious memory.

Some of India's finest legal minds were trained in Adv. Sorabjee's chambers. On his death, a leading Indian lawyer, Sanjay Hegde, said of him: "He was a personality so warm and vibrant, a career so versatile and glittering". He told the *New York Times*: "He was a spectacular performer. And he enjoyed every bit of attention".

Soli Sorabjee was born in Bombay on 9 March 1930 into a wealthy Parsi family. He studied at St Xavier's College, Bombay where (amongst other things) he learned to play the clarinet. He took his law degree at the Government Law College in Bombay. He later, by accident, became a fan of American jazz music, and he became first president of Jazz India. He asserted that advocates must be nimble in presenting arguments, likening the skill to jazz improvisation.

Adv. Soli Sorabjee had many friends in the legal profession in Australia. In 2002, India honoured him with the award of Padma Vibhushan for his defence of freedom of expression and the protection of human rights. In 2006, Australia conferred on him appointment as an honorary Member of the Order of Australia "for service to Australia/India bilateral legal relations".

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