

Transcript of Dr Priya Atwal's Oxford and Empire Network podcast on Princesses Bamba and Catherine Duleep Singh.

Hi. I'm Dr Priya Atwal and I'm a historian. I was born and brought up in nearby Buckinghamshire, but I studied for my Undergraduate and Masters' degrees in History at Oriel College from 2008 to 2011 and then again for my Doctorate at Lady Margaret Hall from 2012 to 2017.

But I'm not actually going to talk about those colleges. I'm standing in the Lodge or entrance of Somerville College on Woodstock Road. Somerville was built from 1879 so has more of a red brick feel than many of Oxford's other colleges. It's slightly away from the hustle and bustle of the high street, but there are still plenty of buses and bikes going up and down the road connecting North Oxford with the city. Like Lady Margaret Hall, Somerville was set up to be the first of Oxford's colleges to admit women as students. However, because Somerville was nondenominational it allowed for women of diverse religious but also ethnic and cultural backgrounds to join from quite early on in its history.

What fascinates me most about the college is how it was home to the first Indian female students, from the late 1880s onwards. This included no less than two princesses: Bamba and Catherine Duleep Singh, both sisters. The father of these two was Maharaja Sir Duleep Singh the last ruler of the Sikh Empire. Now I'm British Asian and Sikh myself, but I only learned about the existence of this empire from a talk that I attended at Oxford Student Sikh Society when I was in my first year at University.

This kingdom was once spread across the Punjab in the nineteenth century but is today divided between Indian and Pakistan. I was shocked to learn as an undergraduate that it was taken over by the East India Company in 1849 when Duleep Singh was just ten years old, after two wars between the British and the Sikhs. The man who was responsible for taking it over was also an Oxford graduate, Lord Dalhousie, who studied at Christ Church. As an exiled Maharaja, Duleep Singh went on to make life for himself in Britain and was one of the first Indian settlers in the UK. He had six children with his first wife of whom Bamba and Catherine were the two eldest daughters. Born in 1869 and 1871.

By the time the princesses became teenagers, however, their father was deeply in debt and increasingly embittered against the British imperial government. In 1886 he embarked upon a desperate, dramatic rebellion against the government to fight for the restoration of his kingdom. Duleep Singh attempted to take his family with him to India but was blocked from doing so. So Bamba and Catherine ended up returning to England. Tragically though their mother died within a year of that happening so they were left in the care of their guardians, Arthur Oliphant and his wife.

The princesses spent an unhappy three years at Folkestone where they were homeschooled by Mrs Oliphant. It was clear that their education had dramatically suffered as a result of the turmoil

in their family. But it was in the Spring of 1890 that they were enrolled to study at Somerville Hall, as the college was then known. Bamba was about twenty-one and Catherine was nineteen. Really the girls were nowhere near ready enough to study at an institution like Oxford. But my research in the Somerville college archives and at the Royal Archives in Windsor Castle show that they were sent to University for predominantly political reasons. Bamba in particular was considered to be a troubled soul. She felt that her family had suffered a great injustice and was inwardly supporting her father's rebellion. Catherine was a calmer sort of person, but Arthur Oliphant was worried that the two sisters together might have a bad influence on their younger siblings and so was keen to send the girls away for the rest of their education. There was also considerable pressure on all of the children to become accomplished young adults since their prominent aristocratic status meant that one day they would have to be presented at the court of Queen Victoria, and no one really wanted them to turn out like their father in British high society. And so the two princesses were packed off to Oxford to "increase their stock of learning" as Oliphant put it.

Now I was eighteen when I got my offer to study at Oxford. I remember being a bit worried at the time that as an Asian girl I'd be a minority at Oxford and that I really wouldn't fit in. Luckily the Sikh society was a home away from home for me in my first year or so. But I cannot imagine what it must have been like for Bamba and Catherine when they first arrived at Somerville. Then there was just one other Indian female student at their college, Cornelia Sorabji, who was actually the first-ever Indian woman to study at Oxford.

Cornelia helpfully left behind a letter in which she wrote about their anticipated arrival. It gives a fascinating insight into the rather awkward welcome that Bamba and Catherine received. She notes the special treatment that was to be given to the sisters. Most unusually they were to be accompanied by their governess, who was going to stay with them throughout the duration of their studies. I reckon this is because their education wasn't quite up to par when they go to Oxford. But what most annoyed the Somerville girls was the other important thing mentioned by Cornelia. That everyone was expected to refer to them as princesses.

Unfortunately, we do not know much about what Bamba and Catherine themselves made of their time in Oxford. They didn't do all that well in their studies and only Catherine achieved a third in modern languages. However, they do seem to have joined in with college life more than perhaps even Cornelia expected. There were photos in the Somerville College archives that tell us that they played in the college hockey team and also that they became friends with Cornelia. They are sitting next to her in other college pictures and her later letters tell us that they continued to meet up for lunch much later in life.

These two princesses would go on to have quite difficult lives as adults. Princess Bamba would eventually marry and settle in Lahore, which was the former capital of her family kingdom, and Catherine would actually form a relationship with her governess and live together as a Lesbian couple in Germany during World War Two. Their story is admittedly one of privilege but also of imperial politics and tragic cultural displacement.

It was so inspiring as an undergraduate student to learn and stumble upon really the story of these two women of colour who had managed against all odds and in great difficulty to make a place for themselves at Oxford and to make friends.