

# Tahir Sarkar

Words: Nathalie Tidman; Portrait: Brendan Lea

**I grew up in the Midlands in the '80s.** It was hard hit by the recession. My dad lost his job as an engineer, working for Smiths Industries, which supplied the car industry. It was the deindustrialisation of large parts of the UK. My father was a businessman and entrepreneurial. He became self-employed, started his own printing business, but it was certainly not stable.

**I became a lawyer because I wanted a regular job.** There were no lawyers in our family. It wasn't a profession that was accessible or easy to understand from my background. Growing up in the ethnic community in Birmingham, second generation, the only other options on the table were being a doctor, a dentist or a pharmacist and I definitely didn't want to be any of those!

**My cousin decided to do law at Sheffield and become a barrister. I thought: 'That sounds alright.'** We were the first educated bunch in our community. Most didn't have a university education and came over on boats from India. The main thing was getting an education that led to a full-time, stable job. That's what led me to read law at Manchester.

**It's all fortuitous. I went home to Birmingham because my Nan was ill,** and even though I had a training contract in London, I decided to go to Pinsents. It worked out completely by chance but I'm glad I spent that time with my family in Birmingham.

**The first few transactions I did as an associate at Slaughter and May were related to the disentanglement of Cable & Wireless.** At the time, they were the biggest deals in the UK. It was quite a baptism of fire! Literally, it was go to a smoke-filled room of 40 people where all those clichés were present – guys in braces and pinstripe suits – all that stuff! Some of the people I met on that transaction I still know today. It was very complicated, a tough opening, and it went on forever! It was a real learning experience for me; working with Jeff Twentyman and Nigel Boardman was interesting – it could be pretty brutal. That's where I met some Cleary partners for the first time. Ed Greene and Ash Qureshi. They were much more informal than the rest of the room.

**When I got to Cleary in 2003, we had a bunch of really entrepreneurial Americans** who I was mentored by and learned a lot from. They were all leading players in their field but we were a small outfit and we were just starting our English law practice here. We were going through a boom time

in the noughties, so there was a lot to do and quickly I was up on my own two feet.

**I was one of the first wave of English lawyers to join US firms.** There was no set way of doing things, no set clients to service, it was quite open. There was a lot of entrepreneurial spirit, excitement, a lot of flying around. The Middle East was opening up and I got very involved in that practice, and the emerging markets generally. You were able to develop an area by yourself without any parameters, or being boxed in.

**I've been on the executive committee since July. I've learned a lot about the firm.** Like all partners, I obviously thought I knew it all! The business is so dependent on partners, personalities and their contacts. Because we're a full-equity partnership, we're relatively stable compared to some others. It can be difficult when you're a much bigger firm. Everyone in management still fee-earns and that's really important.

**Different strokes for different folks.** That's something I've learned from partners I've worked with closely over the years. The good ones have the ability to adapt to the style of the client and resonate with them. It may only be a three-month period, but it's a pretty intense three months and you're spending a lot of time with these people. Ultimately, you've got to get on, align in views and values. You can only do that by getting to know them.

**We were doing the privatisation of Jordan Telecom** and normally Jordan is quite safe from terrorists. We were going to a hotel where there was a terrorist attack happening at that moment. I was sitting in a car full of Goldman Sachs bankers and one received a call from their security firm saying: 'Where are you? Stay put, don't move!' Then others' phones started going off in order of seniority. Finally, one turned to me and said: 'Well Tahir, nobody has phoned you. This is where we kick out the lawyer! We're getting out of Jordan right now!'

**One of my partners rang about three hours later from the UK when he saw what was going on.** It was classic. He said: 'Tahir, are you in Amman? Did you hear about these bombs? Do you know where Ash is?' I'm sitting there going: 'No don't worry, I'm fine!' The next day the government insisted that we stay because they wouldn't bow to terrorism, so we

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had the meetings and it was an incredible show of fortitude. We had the whole government in the room, it was lunchtime and everybody was out on the streets protesting against the attacks. They sent out some people to get lunch and they came back and the only place they could find open was Kentucky Fried Chicken. So the cabinet, the government, Goldman Sachs, Cleary and France Telecom started eating fried chicken around the meeting table. One of the Goldman guys said: 'This is finger lickin' good!' and nobody got the joke.

**We once went on a business trip in the Middle East and ended up sleeping next to some falcons.** The sheiks had sent their falcons onto Lahore for the hunting season and they had business class seats! We were saying: 'How are we going to get to sleep with these birds of prey next to us?' It was petrifying but entertaining! It has all been good fun and that's why I continue to do this. The transactions do put you in these circumstances, especially in the emerging markets.

**I was once in an airport lounge with Pelé.** It was the British Airways lounge and typically there were no seats available for anyone. You could see all the British looking over their newspapers. So I thought: 'What do I do? It's Pelé. It's Pelé!' I had to do something. I picked up a newspaper and said: 'Sorry Pelé, can you please sign this paper?' I'd given him a Cleary Gottlieb pencil and he looked at me and started tutting. I was thinking: 'Oh no! Pelé's an ass!', but then he opened a case and took this big black marker out. He was absolutely adamant he was going to sign it properly. I turned around and the whole lounge had queued up behind me, including the BA staff. Nobody had wanted to approach him and I was the first. They delayed the flight to São Paulo because it was Pelé! It was awesome. I've got the signed paper framed in my room.

**I would have liked a stint abroad. I've been based in London pretty much the whole time** but I've had an international career with lots of travelling. Part of me has always had that itch. Life's about timing. The US firms have done well and it has been a pleasure to be a part of that story.

**Zooms were getting long in the tooth.** I see a lot of appetite now for meeting up, particularly the clients overseas. Clients don't have to use us. A lot of it is down to personal relationships as to why they do. I'm proud that the team has grown organically. We're probably the only US firm that has a team that has all been organically promoted. That to me is unusual and shows that we're not just about getting teams from the Magic Circle. You do have a chance here if you want to be a partner.

**We're going through a change right now and Covid has accelerated that.** You're getting associates working really hard for a number of years and turning round and saying they don't want to be on the partnership track. That wouldn't have happened a few years ago. That is the challenge. How do we remain the place to attract top talent and retain it? We pride ourselves on being decent human beings and treating people well. We compensate well but we do get outbid often. We like to think we offer a stable, considered career here.

**I'm very much into tennis and play a lot. The whole family does.** I wish I was better! I would spend more time playing tennis if I could. Going to the pub with a couple of mates has always been a joy. When the executive committee are trying to find me on a Sunday evening, they just need to call the landlord at my local!

**The last book I read was Victoria Hislop's *The Island*, which was about the leper colony in Spinalonga.** We had a trip to Crete so I read it there.

I tend to read more cover-to-cover newspapers. The *FT*, *The Times* and *The Guardian*. If I have downtime at the weekend, that's what I tend to read, and then moan about most of the commentaries. I'm not a commenter, but the comments are often better than the articles themselves!

**I have different kinds of playlists but currently I'm listening a lot to the Jam and Style Council.** I'm in a Paul Weller phase again, which often happens! The Clash is another

one I play a lot. I'm into Ska and that era in the '80s because I grew up with it in Birmingham. I was massively into rap for a long time, but I don't listen to it much now. I was a big fan of N.W.A, Public Enemy and Dr Dre while at university, even though I went to Manchester in the middle of the Madchester scene. Having said that, the Happy Mondays was the best gig I ever went to!

**It is an all or nothing career and you need to devote your life to it.** You can't control the narrative and the ebbs and flows of the deals. It's intense. Once you're in the rankings, you're there but I always feel this drive, like I owe it to everyone to try and push on. I still have that ambition to do more for the firm and more for whatever I'm fighting for.

**I'm turning 49 soon. People talk about a third act.** I've done Birmingham and London. What's the third? I want to focus on the growth strategy for Cleary in London and Europe and that's my key driver. That's the good thing about the new role, you've got the chance to help shape the vision of the future. Talking to you has made me realise how fortunate I am.

*Tihir Sarkar has been a partner in Cleary Gottlieb's London corporate group since 2007 and led the team named Corporate Team of the Year at the 2021 Legal Business Awards*



