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Women Personalities in Hyderabad State under the Nizams: Literature, Education, Healthcare and Social Reform – A Study

Aruna Etikala
Lecturer in History, Telangana Tribal Welfare Residential Degree College (Girls), Mahabubabad, Mahabubabad Dist. Telangana

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Abstract

The history of Hyderabad State under the Asaf Jahi rulers witnessed the emergence of several remarkable women who contributed to literature, education, healthcare, philanthropy, and social reform. Although women's lives were shaped by patriarchal customs, unequal access to education, purdah, early marriage, and social hierarchies, a number of them established important public roles through intellectual achievement, institutional leadership, and community service. Personalities such as Mah Laqa Bai Chanda, Lutifunnisa Imtiyaz Aurangabadi, Sugra Humayun Mirza, Masuma Begum, Constance Gibbs, Shantabai Kirloskar, Katta Ramakka, Gul Chinoy, Princess Niloufer, and Princess Durru Shehvar illustrate the diverse forms of women's agency in Hyderabad's social and cultural history. Rani Saraladevi and Kumudini Devi further demonstrate the contribution of women to regional leadership and educational philanthropy. This article examines their achievements within the historical context of Hyderabad State, focusing on the relationship between social position, education, gender restrictions, and public participation. It argues that women's advancement did not follow a single trajectory: royal patronage, professional education, community organizations, and individual initiatives created different opportunities for women from different backgrounds. By recovering these lives, the study contributes to a more inclusive understanding of Hyderabad's history and highlights the importance of examining women as historical actors rather than merely as beneficiaries of reform.

Keywords: Hyderabad State, Nizams, women's history, Mah Laqa Bai Chanda, women's education, social reform, philanthropy, gender, Telangana.

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Introduction:

The history of Hyderabad State under the Asaf Jahi dynasty has generally been studied through the political authority of the Nizams, administrative reforms, aristocratic culture, economic development, and relations with British India. While these subjects remain essential to understanding the State, the historical experiences and contributions of women also deserve systematic investigation. Women participated in literary production, cultural patronage, education, healthcare, voluntary organizations, and community welfare. Their activities reveal dimensions of Hyderabad's social transformation that cannot be adequately understood through the history of rulers and officials alone.

Women's experiences in Hyderabad were neither uniform nor static. Royal women, aristocratic women, educated professionals, social workers, and women from marginalized communities encountered different opportunities and restrictions. Wealth and social connections sometimes enabled women to receive education, patronize artistic activities, establish charitable institutions, and participate in public events. At the same time, prevailing gender conventions restricted women's mobility and access to formal education and professional employment. Purdah, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and the unequal distribution of educational facilities continued to shape women's lives.

The emergence of women personalities must therefore be understood within the interaction between social constraints and individual initiative. Their achievements were important not simply because they occupied prominent positions, but because some used those positions to support education, improve healthcare, promote literary culture, and expand opportunities for other women.

The women discussed in this article represent different historical periods and social locations. Mah Laqa Bai Chanda and Lutifunnisa Imtiyaz Aurangabadi illustrate the literary achievements of women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Sugra Humayun Mirza and Masuma Begum represent the development of women's education and organized social activity during the twentieth century. Constance Gibbs contributed to women's higher education, while Shantabai Kirloskar advanced women's healthcare. Katta Ramakka's work among Dalit children highlights the significance of education beyond elite circles. Princess Niloufer and Princess Durru Shehvar demonstrate the role of royal women in welfare and philanthropy. Together, these lives provide a framework for understanding women's contributions to the transformation of Hyderabad society.

Women, Society, and Public Life in Hyderabad State:

Hyderabad was a culturally diverse princely State in which Persianate literary traditions, Urdu culture, regional languages, religious institutions, and modern educational initiatives interacted over time. Women's opportunities developed within this complex environment. The

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growth of formal schooling, women's associations, professional education, and philanthropic institutions created new spaces for women's participation, particularly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

However, institutional development did not automatically produce social equality. Access to education remained influenced by family income, urban residence, community practices, caste, and social status. Girls from privileged families could sometimes obtain private instruction or attend established schools, whereas many girls from poorer households faced financial difficulties, domestic responsibilities, and limited access to educational institutions.

The importance of individual women must be assessed against this uneven social landscape. Some worked through patronage and charitable initiatives; others entered teaching, medicine, and educational administration. Still others promoted girls' education through voluntary associations and community-based schools. Their activities reveal that women's advancement in Hyderabad was not the result of government policy alone. It also depended on the initiatives of individuals, families, professional networks, and voluntary organizations.

Mah Laqa Bai Chanda:

Mah Laqa Bai Chanda (1768–1824) occupies a distinctive place in the literary and cultural history of Hyderabad. She was a celebrated poet associated with Persian and Urdu literary traditions and maintained relationships with influential figures at the Hyderabad court. The Asaf Jah II, Rukn-ud-Daulah, Arastu Jah, Mir Alam, Maharaja Chandu Lal, Raja Rao Rambha, and the British Resident among the people with whom she maintained connections.

Her literary achievement is significant because women's participation in the formal literary culture of the period was constrained by prevailing social conventions. Her work demonstrates that women could participate in intellectual life and develop relationships with influential literary and political circles. Her identity as a poet also challenges the assumption that women in the aristocratic environment of Hyderabad were exclusively confined to domestic and ceremonial roles.

Mah Laqa Bai's importance extended beyond poetry. Her association with cultural patronage illustrates the role women could play in sustaining literary and artistic traditions. Her social position provided access to influential networks, but her literary reputation also depended on her own intellectual accomplishments. A critical assessment must nevertheless distinguish elite female agency from wider social emancipation. Mah Laqa Bai's achievements did not necessarily transform the educational opportunities available to ordinary women. Rather, her life demonstrates that women could exercise cultural authority within a society structured by gendered inequalities. Her career is therefore an important starting point for a history of women in Hyderabad, revealing the intersection of literary creativity, patronage, social position, and gender.

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Lutifunnisa Imtiyaz Aurangabadi:

Lutifunnisa Imtiyaz Aurangabadi is another notable literary figure. She was the wife of the poet Asad Ali Khan Tamanna Aurangabadi and composed an Urdu *Diwan* in Hyderabad in 1797. The manuscript attributes to her proficiency in Persian and Urdu and identifies several poetic forms in which she wrote, including *qasida*, *ghazal*, *mathnawi*, *rubai*, *qita*, and *musaddas*. Her literary production demonstrates the intellectual capabilities of women who participated in the multilingual literary culture of the Deccan. The ability to compose poetry across established literary forms required familiarity with sophisticated conventions of language, metre, imagery, and literary expression. Her work is therefore relevant to understanding women's intellectual participation in the cultural life of Hyderabad.

The manuscript records that her literary career was brief and that she died in 1798. The short duration of her career also highlights a problem in women's literary history: many women's writings and intellectual contributions survive only fragmentarily, and their biographies are often less fully documented than those of male contemporaries. Lutifunnisa's example underlines the need to examine manuscripts, literary collections, and contemporary accounts to reconstruct the contributions of women writers. Recovering such histories would broaden our understanding of the literary traditions of Hyderabad and the place of women within them.

Sugra Humayun Mirza:

Sugra Humayun Mirza was an important advocate of women's education and social advancement in Hyderabad. She was born in 1884 and received instruction in Persian and Urdu at home. Her literary and educational interests developed within a social environment in which access to formal education for girls remained limited. In 1930, she became secretary of Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam, an organization concerned with the welfare and education of Muslim women. Her involvement in organized women's activity indicates a movement beyond individual achievement toward collective efforts to improve women's circumstances.

Women's associations offered important platforms for discussing educational opportunities, social welfare, and the responsibilities of families and communities toward girls. Such organizations could help mobilize resources, encourage educational participation, and create networks among women who might otherwise have remained confined to private domestic settings. Sugra Humayun Mirza's significance lies in the relationship between literary activity, education, and organized social reform. Her work suggests that women's advancement increasingly depended on collective institutions as well as individual determination. The history of women's education in Hyderabad must therefore include the activities of women who organized associations, advocated reform, and helped establish a public language of women's welfare.

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Masuma Begum:

Masuma Begum, born in Hyderabad on 7 October 1901. She studied at Mahbubia Girls' School and reportedly demonstrated considerable proficiency in Urdu. The manuscript also notes her knowledge of French, Hindi, Telugu, and Persian. Her multilingual education was particularly significant in a society characterized by linguistic diversity. Knowledge of several languages could facilitate communication across educational, cultural, and administrative settings, while also providing access to a wider range of literary traditions.

The manuscript records that Masuma Begum served on the Board of Studies at Osmania University from 1934 for nearly ten years. It also identifies her work with Anjuman-e-Khawatin and her involvement in managing the Anjuman Primary School for Girls. These activities illustrate the growing participation of women in educational administration and organized welfare. Her contribution should be understood in two related ways. First, she represented the possibilities created by the expansion of girls' education. Second, her involvement in educational organizations helped extend the benefits of schooling beyond her own generation and social circle. The participation of women in university-level academic bodies was particularly important because it indicated a gradual shift from viewing women solely as recipients of education to recognizing them as contributors to educational planning and administration.

Constance Gibbs:

Constance Gibbs occupies an important place in the history of women's higher education in Hyderabad. She studied at Maharani College in Bangalore and St Hugh's College, Oxford, and subsequently joined the Hyderabad Education Service. She became associated with the development of Osmania College for Women and worked to encourage families to send their daughters to college. According to the manuscript, she visited households to persuade families to support women's higher education despite restrictions associated with purdah and prevailing social conventions.

This work highlights an important dimension of educational reform: establishing an institution was not sufficient by itself. Girls' access to education also depended on family attitudes, social expectations, transport, accommodation, financial resources, and the availability of suitable educational environments. Gibbs's contribution therefore involved both institutional development and social persuasion. Her work illustrates how educational administrators could act as intermediaries between government policy and the everyday decisions of families.

The establishment and development of women's colleges represented a significant stage in the expansion of educational opportunities. Such institutions helped create pathways toward professional employment, teaching, intellectual activity, and greater public participation. Nevertheless, the history of women's higher education should not be reduced to the achievements of a single administrator. Institutional expansion depended on government support, teachers,

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students, families, reformers, and the broader educational environment. Gibbs's career is best understood as one important part of this wider process.

Shantabai Kirloskar:

Shantabai Kirloskar represents the growing role of professionally educated women in healthcare. She studied medicine at Lady Hardinge College in Delhi and subsequently worked in the Nizam's dominions. It states that she served as a civil assistant surgeon at King Edward's Memorial Hospital, Secunderabad, between 1929 and 1936 and opened a private maternity hospital in the King Koti area in 1936. Her career was significant in a period when women's access to professional education and employment was still restricted. A woman physician could contribute not only to the treatment of individual patients but also to the development of medical services for women who might face social or cultural barriers when seeking treatment from male practitioners.

Maternity services were particularly important in a society where pregnancy and childbirth often involved substantial medical risks. The provision of professional care could improve access to treatment and help establish public confidence in modern medical institutions. The manuscript also associates Shantabai with the Indian Medical Association and the Society for Women and Child Welfare. These affiliations suggest that her work extended beyond private practice to professional and welfare networks. Her contribution demonstrates how women's professional education could generate broader social benefits. At the same time, a fuller assessment of her impact would require institutional records, contemporary medical reports, and evidence concerning the services offered by her hospital.

Katta Ramakka:

Katta Ramakka's work is especially significant because it shifts attention from elite institutions to community-based education. She was a widow who devoted herself to the education of Dalit children, particularly girls, and established the Payal School for Dalit Girls in Kalva Basti. The account describes the school as beginning on a small scale near her home, where she taught children from the surrounding neighbourhood. The institution subsequently attracted more students and became known for providing elementary education to marginalized communities in Secunderabad. Her initiative demonstrates the importance of locally organized educational work. Unlike elite institutions that often-served families with greater economic and social resources, a neighbourhood school could address the needs of children whose access to formal education was constrained by poverty and social exclusion.

Ramakka's work also reveals the intersection of gender and caste. Girls from Dalit communities could face multiple disadvantages arising from social discrimination, limited family resources, and unequal access to educational institutions. A school specifically directed toward marginalized children could help reduce some of these barriers. Her contribution must therefore be

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understood as more than an act of charity. It represented a practical intervention into unequal access to education. By teaching children directly and building a school around local needs, she helped expand educational opportunities for groups that were often inadequately served by mainstream institutions. Katta Ramakka's example is essential to a more inclusive history of women in Hyderabad. It demonstrates that women's agency was not restricted to royal courts, literary circles, or formal professional careers. It could also emerge through grassroots initiatives that challenged social exclusion.

Gul Chinoy:

Gul Chinoy, also referred to as Gul Chenoy was associated with a philanthropic family in Hyderabad. The manuscript identifies her parents, Nadirsha Chinoy and Jeroo Chinoy, as supporters of charitable activities and records her involvement in several organizations. Her work included participation in the All India Women's Conference, where she reportedly began as joint secretary in 1928 and later became president. The manuscript also records her involvement with the Lady Burton Recreation Club, the Hyderabad Bharat Scouts and Guides District Association, the Zoroastrian Stree Mandal, and Key's High School for Girls in Secunderabad. These associations illustrate the variety of organizational spaces through which women contributed to public life. Educational institutions, women's associations, recreational clubs, and youth organizations created opportunities for leadership, fundraising, community service, and collective action.

Philanthropy played an important role in Hyderabad's social development, particularly where private contributions supported services that were not equally accessible to all communities. However, philanthropy should also be examined critically. Charitable initiatives could relieve immediate social needs without necessarily addressing the structural causes of poverty, caste discrimination, or gender inequality. Gul Chinoy's activities nonetheless reveal the importance of women's organizational leadership. Her career suggests that voluntary associations were important sites through which women developed public responsibilities and contributed to educational and social welfare.

Princess Niloufer:

Princess Niloufer Khanum Sultana, born in Istanbul in 1916, became a prominent figure in Hyderabad after marrying Prince Moazzam Jah, the second son of the Seventh Nizam, Mir Osman Ali Khan, in 1931. Her significance in Hyderabad's history rests partly on her involvement in medical and welfare initiatives. She worked with Nawab Mehdi Nawaz Jung in establishing the Hyderabad Women and Children's Medical Aid Society in 1943, an initiative associated with the founding of Niloufer Hospital.

The development of specialized medical services for women and children was an important social intervention. Such institutions could expand access to professional healthcare and

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provide a public framework for addressing maternal and child health needs. Princess Niloufer was also associated with the Hyderabad Women's Association for Educational and Social Advancement and participated in women's voluntary activities during the Second World War. The manuscript notes that she presided over the Hyderabad State Women's Conference in 1938.

Her public role illustrates how royal status could be used to attract attention, resources, and institutional support for welfare initiatives. Yet her work should not be interpreted as representative of the experiences of all women in Hyderabad. Her social position gave her access to resources and networks unavailable to most of the population. The historical importance of Princess Niloufer lies in the way she used her public standing to support medical and social welfare initiatives. Her career also demonstrates the value of studying princely women as participants in institutional development rather than treating them only as members of royal households.

Princess Durru Shehvar:

Princess Durru Shehvar, another prominent royal woman associated with Hyderabad, was known for her education, cultural interests, and philanthropic work. She had interest in the arts and her involvement in teaching charcoal painting to young students. It also associates her with the establishment of a hospital for women and children at Purani Haveli that bore her name. Her activities suggest a combination of cultural engagement and social service. The promotion of artistic skills contributed to cultural life, while support for medical facilities addressed practical welfare needs.

Princess Durru Shehvar's example is important because it shows that the public contributions of royal women could extend beyond ceremonial responsibilities. Through philanthropy, cultural activities, and educational interests, they could participate in initiatives that affected the wider community. Nevertheless, the influence of royal women should be examined within the broader structures of princely power and philanthropy. Charitable institutions could provide important services, but their existence did not remove the social inequalities that shaped access to education and healthcare. A balanced historical assessment should recognize both the material benefits of such initiatives and the limits of philanthropy as a mechanism for structural social change.

Rani Saraladevi:

Rani Saraladevi is a prominent woman associated with Wanaparthy Samsthan. She assumed leadership following the death of her husband, Sri Krishna Devaraya. The manuscript also connects her legacy with the Sarala Sagar reservoir and records her interest in promoting education, particularly girls' education. Her significance lies in the relationship between regional authority and social development. The history of Hyderabad State included several subordinate principalities and local ruling establishments whose activities contributed to the wider social and

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political landscape. Women who exercised authority within these settings could use their positions to support educational and developmental initiatives.

The promotion of girls' education was particularly consequential because it challenged the assumption that formal learning was primarily a male domain. Encouraging education for girls could contribute to the development of literacy, social participation, and opportunities beyond domestic responsibilities. However, the specific policies and achievements attributed to Rani Saraladevi require further examination through local records, institutional histories, and contemporary accounts. The construction of infrastructure, the provision of educational support, and the implementation of social reforms should be documented separately wherever possible. Her inclusion in the history of women's public life is nevertheless important because it expands the geographical scope of the discussion beyond Hyderabad city and draws attention to women's roles in regional institutions.

Kumudini Devi:

Kumudini Devi, associatedwith Waddepally in Warangal district, represents another dimension of women's philanthropic activity. The manuscript records that she received an education at St George's Grammar School and acquired skills such as riding, fencing, shooting, and driving, which were not commonly encouraged among girls in that period. It further associates her with the Seva Samajam Balika Nilayam, established in 1958, and the Nizamia Hyderabad Women's Association Trust. Her activities reportedly focused on providing educational opportunities to women from economically disadvantaged sections of the old city.

Her career raises an important chronological consideration. The establishment of the Seva Samajam Balika Nilayam in 1958 falls after the integration of Hyderabad State into the Indian Union in 1948. Her work should therefore be treated as part of the post-princely continuation of women's educational and philanthropic activity rather than attributed entirely to the period of Nizam rule. This distinction is historically important. The social initiatives that developed during the princely period did not end in 1948; many women continued their work in changed political and administrative circumstances. Kumudini Devi's activities help illustrate the continuity between the social institutions of late princely Hyderabad and the subsequent history of women's welfare. Her example also highlights the importance of studying the long-term legacy of women's philanthropy rather than limiting historical analysis to the political end of the princely State.

Conclusion:

The women personalities associated with Hyderabad State under the Nizams made significant contributions to literature, education, healthcare, philanthropy, and social reform. Mah Laqa Bai Chanda and Lutifunnisa Imtiyaz Aurangabadi demonstrate women's participation in literary culture. Sugra Humayun Mirza and Masuma Begum illustrate the growth of women's educational and organizational activity. Constance Gibbs contributed to women's higher

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education, while Shantabai Kirloskar advanced professional healthcare. Katta Ramakka's work among Dalit children highlights the importance of grassroots educational initiatives. Gul Chinoy, Princess Niloufer, Princess Durru Shehvar, and Rani Saraladevi reveal different forms of philanthropic and institutional engagement. These women did not share identical experiences, social positions, or objectives. Some benefited from aristocratic and royal connections; others developed professional careers or worked through voluntary organizations. Katta Ramakka's work, in particular, demonstrates why women's history must extend beyond elite biographies to include initiatives directed toward marginalized communities.

The historical significance of these personalities lies not only in their individual achievements but also in the broader questions their lives raise about education, social mobility, gender, caste, class, and public participation. Their careers reveal that the transformation of Hyderabad society depended on women's intellectual, professional, and organizational contributions, even as the benefits of change remained unevenly distributed. A comprehensive history of Hyderabad State must therefore treat women as active participants in social and cultural transformation. Recovering their lives from archival records, institutional histories, literary collections, and oral testimony will help create a more inclusive and critically grounded account of the region's past.

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