

Knowledge

THROUGH THE LENS OF GENDER

5.1 POINT OF VIEW

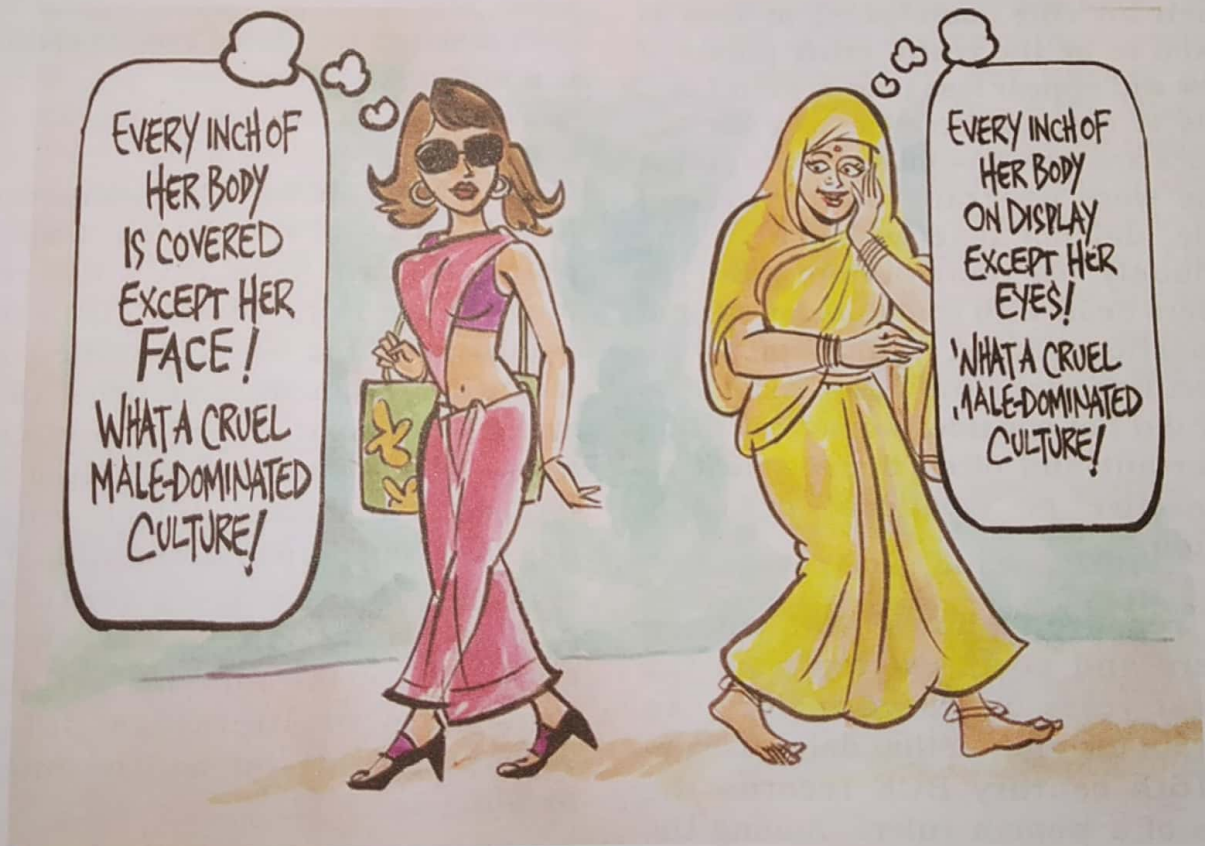
Sensitivity to questions of gender has resulted in important developments in academic disciplines, ranging from anthropology to zoology. For example, as early as the 1970s and 1980s, women scholars pointed out that the authors generally prescribed for study in the literature syllabus were men—and that too, men from elite groups. The word “elite” suggests a privileged, upper class or caste person.

Elite men represent an extremely small part of society. Literature written by such men depicted the world as they saw it—from their point of view. We should remember that “point of view” here has two meanings. It refers to the position from which a person looks and what can be seen (or cannot be seen) from that position. The second

meaning refers to that person's interests (sometimes described as self-interests). In other words, we choose to see the world in a manner that suits us best.

Point of view and interests

Different points of view are welcome in a free society. They can make us think. They can even make us change our minds. Look at the cartoon below. A large number of people think that women who cover their faces and heads live in a male-dominated society while other women are free to dress as they please. But as you can see from this cartoon there are other points of view. If we think seriously about what the woman on the right is saying, we may actually change our minds about freedom.



Points to discuss:

1. Why does the woman on the left think the woman who covers her head lives in a male-dominated society?

2. And why does the covered-up woman think the woman in a stylish sari lives in a male-dominated society?

3. Who is right?

It soon becomes apparent to the viewer that both are right. Male domination works very subtly. The cartoonist clearly thinks that both these women dress according to the demands of men! The cartoon also shows that domination often makes a person believe they are doing things "freely" or on their own.

Women writers, women's worlds

Gender-sensitive scholars point out that when an elite/male point of view is taken to be the truth, other points of view will appear less true or even false. This is the main reason why literary critics and syllabus-makers, who at that time were generally both elite and male, did not take women's writing seriously. In their opinion, women writers dealt with trivial, personal and domestic matters, while men wrote about important universal issues. So they did not consider women's writing important and often dismissed it as "subjective" or "emotional" or "badly written."

New research shows that women writers and poets existed from the earliest years of known history. An Egyptian inscription that dates back to the 15th century BCE records the edicts of a woman ruler. Among the

earliest women poets in India were Buddhist bhikkunis (5th-6th century BCE) whose poetry is collected in the Therigatha. The poem in the box below is by Bhikkuni Mutta. She seeks freedom from being locked into the repetitive grind of kitchen work and from the domination of her "twisted" husband. And she finds what she is looking for in the liberation preached by the Buddha. **We should note here that Buddhist scholars and thinkers not only valued Bhikkuni Mutta's poem enough to place it in a collection, but also that in doing so, they show an acceptance of her idea of freedom.**

Bhikkuni Mutta

So free!
So gloriously free,
Free from three petty things:
From mortar, from pestle,
and from my twisted lord.
Freed from rebirth and death I am.
All that has held me down
is hurled away.

Translated by Uma Chakravarthi
and Kumkum Roy.

Mutta's poem shows that an important idea such as liberation (spiritual or political) can have very different meanings. For women (half the population of the world) liberation may mean liberation from endless, tiring and unappreciated (unpaid) kitchen work; from sexually demanding and tyrannical husbands. In fact, writings like these open up areas of human life that did not receive attention in modern scholarship. But when they chose material for the syllabus, professors of literature did not understand this—or had no interest in doing so.

UNIT 5

Why? We can understand why women writers, their experience, their worlds, their ideas were not considered important only when we ask:

- Who had the power to judge literature—the power to decide what was good, bad, important, and unimportant?
- Whose worldview, values and interests, was taken as universal, worth studying, even objective?

From this we can see that it is not possible to merely "add women" to existing knowledge formations or disciplines. The exclusion of women is connected with the powers that structure and control disciplines.

However, and this is very important to note here, making disciplines aware of women and accountable to women's interests requires fundamental changes—in ways of thinking, in education, in universities and work places, in the family and in public life. In fact, gender studies is not a separate discipline. It is a critical perspective on all disciplines.

The account that follows is of an Urdu writer who, in the 1940s and 50s, wrote about gender issues in ways that even today we would find bold and progressive. Her work was labeled as "controversial" and she was criticized as not attending enough to the art of writing. Decades later, readers who were interested in gender issues began speaking of her as a leading writer of her time. We hope you also like Shankar Pamarthy's drawing of her.

Ismat Chughtai (1915 – 1991)

When scholars began searching for writers sidelined in elite literary evaluation, they soon found rebellious gems like Ismat Chughtai. Chughtai wrote about topics that were considered taboo. But more disturbing than her themes was her attitude and style. She cut through social pretensions and her

stories flashed with irreverent humour. This outspoken (and therefore also controversial) style of writing made her an inspiration for the younger generation of writers, readers and intellectuals. Her witty realism makes for irresistible reading. Some of her stories, and the novel *Tehri Lakir*, have now been translated from Urdu into English as well as Telugu.



In Chughtai's time, girls were raised to cook, sew and excel at a variety of homely skills, but Ismat preferred books—much to the irritation of her mother. Her father, however, encouraged her studies. Also, she grew up in the company of her brothers. This, she says, is the source of the openness and frankness in her nature and writing. She was the first Muslim woman in the then-undivided India to get a BA degree. Before she married the film director Shahid Latif, she told him: "I'm a troublesome woman... I have broken all the chains in my life and I would never be able to stay bound in them. To be an obedient wife is a role not suited to me."

Among her best-known stories are: "Chouthi Ka Joda," "Choti Apa," "Lihaaf," "Homemaker," "Sacred Duty," and "Scent of the Body." Many of these are available on the internet—in translation and in the original Urdu. A selection has also been translated into Telugu (*Ismat Chughtai Kathalu*).

5.2 GENDER AND THE STRUCTURE OF KNOWLEDGE

(Other social groups (dalits, minorities, disabled people) have also asked these questions to expose the limitations and biases of existing academic disciplines. Students of English Literature, for instance, pointed out that the writers that they studied were all white men, most of them upper class—and dead. In India until very recently an “upper” caste point of view was dominant. Some of you may have heard about the “Boosa Chaluvali.”

The Boosa Chaluvali and the rise of the Dalita Sangarsh Samithi (DSS)

This famous movement began in 1974 when Basavalingaiah, a well-educated and popular Dalit minister in the Karnataka government, said: “We should have Kannada pride, speak Kannada, strive to make it grow; but we get ideas, independent thinking and patriotic feeling by reading English.” He went on to say that Kannada literature, which at that time was dominated by the upper castes, was mostly boosa (chaff/cattle feed). This was because it did not contain democratic values and attitudes; it did not foster real nationalism which should be based on the equality of citizens. His statements enraged professors, critics and established writers as well as students from these elite sections, who took to the streets demanding his resignation. At one point the uproar was so strong that it looked as though the government may fall. Basavalingaiah was forced to resign. **The elite represent a very small percentage of the population. But when it is supported by political, economic and cultural power, it can**

control a discipline or field of knowledge in subtle and deep-seated ways.¹

Happily there is another side to the Boosa story. The controversy led to the formation of the Dalita Sangarsh Samithi (DSS) and the flowering of Dalit Literature in Kannada in the The Dalits are Here

The dalits are coming, step aside—
hand over the reins, let them rule.
Minds burning with countless
dreams,
slogans like thunder and lightning,
in the language of earthquakes,
here comes the dalit procession,
writing [history] with their feet.
....

For the thorn bushes of caste and
religion,
they were as thorns in the side.
They became the sky that looked
down at
the seven seas that swallowed
them.
Since Rama's time and Krishna's
time
unto the time of the Gandhis,
They had bowed low with folded
hands.
Now they have risen in struggle
....

Under the flag of dalit India
stood the farmers and workers.
Flowers bloom in every forest,
thousands of birds take flight,
the eastern sky turned red,
morning broke for the poor.
The dalits are coming, step aside
The dalits have come, give it up!

Translated by M Madhava Prasad

¹ Read on the website <https://dissensus-testimonies.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/dissensus-catalogue.pdf> for an illustrated account of the Boosa controversy that was curated in 2015 by students at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

1980s. Dalit writers and intellectuals credit Basavalingappa for having lit the spark that led to the birth of a new literature. The poem “Dalits are Coming” by Siddalingaiah, who was a student living in a social welfare hostel at the time and is now a leading scholar and poet, can also be understood as a statement about dalits (and others) staking a claim in the field of knowledge. Their claim over knowledge leads onto their claim, as equals, over the nation that has hitherto been in the hands of the elite.

As many of you would know, feminist and dalit writers, as well as writers from Telangana, have similarly challenged the dominant form of Telugu literature.

Across the academy

In other parts of this Course you will learn why economics must take into account the importance of housework, child-rearing and home nursing of the sick and the aged (all work that women do for free), if it is to understand the workings of the national economy. Since political theory and law treated the family as private, until very recently, domestic violence was not officially recognized as violence. You will also learn how gender sensitivity has helped us think beyond the biological idea of two genders. Today we see that all forms of knowledge have been transformed by movements (race, class, caste, gender, sexuality, disability) that have questioned them. If you ask your teachers they will most probably be able to give you more examples of how the gender question has changed their own disciplines.

² Yakshagana is a theater form that combines dance, music, dialogue, costume, make-up, and stage techniques in a unique style and form. Different versions of it were practiced all over South India.

The profile that follows is of a skilled and talented performance artist, Chindu Yellamma. Read it to get a sense of what is lost when the importance of artists like these is not appreciated enough. This woman artist's skill at performing male as well as female roles should draw our attention to the social and cultural (as against physical or biological) nature of gender identities. The photograph on the next page is of her as Narasimha avatara.

Chindu Yellamma

The Chindu Bhagotam is an ancient rural performing art (Yakshagana)². It has a unique reputation among Indian art forms. It celebrates rural life, economy and culture, all of which are crucial for the survival of the rural community. Villagers of different classes develop a love for their village because the Bhagotam gives life to the village in their imagination. When people have to live away from their village they experience a sense of loss. This sense of loss is intense in Telangana.

In our time, the village, its natural resources and surroundings are being transformed by industrialization and urbanization. People are moving away from villages to towns. The village's cultural base is also being eroded - by the new Hindu festivals like Ganesh and Varalakshmi puja. In this context, Chindu Yakshagana is ignored and the tradition is neglected. It lies in ruins in the village today. Yet, its traces continue in modern culture.

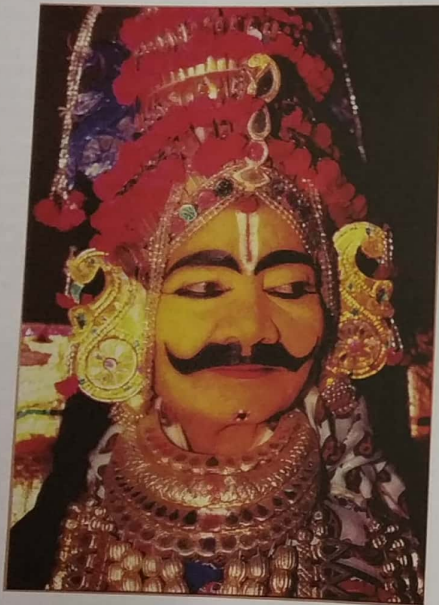
We know that NT Rama Rao and many Telugu films familiarized people with the physical appearance of Rama, Krishna, and other gods. The eminent Chindu artiste Gaddam Sammayya says

UNIT 5

that Rama Rao and the film industry were actually introduced to these figures by Chindu troupes. In fact, these gods and goddesses were first made visible as figures and images in the Chindu narratives. The Chindu community has worked hard, and over generations, to create these much-loved representations. They went into the forests, collected plants, leaves, roots, stems, and so on; they invented

the performers make an entrance, accompanied by drums, music, dance, and fill the stage vigorously dancing to the music, the audience is entranced. The world of the gods descends in their midst.

Based on a study of its visual art, dance, song, music, theme and structure, researchers have established that the Chindu form is a very ancient one.



the paints, ornaments, crowns, weapons, and musical instruments used in the performances. Adorned with make-up and ornaments, carrying appropriate weapons, they appear on the stage in the village square in costumes that sparkle like gold. When

Some speculate that the Chindu Yakshagana dates back to the Sindhu (Indus) civilization. They point out that the shells that are used as ornaments, the make-up (maipootha) of deities like Jambavanthudu and Yellamma in the Chindu performance can also be found

72

UNIT 5

in the Indus valley civilization. Chindu is like a vast lake. Kuchipudi, Bharatanatyam and Veedhi Bhagavatam are rivulets that flow out of this lake. Chindu Yellamma was the beloved daughter of this oceanic art form.

Every Chindu performance begins with a ritual where the artistes pray to the leather worker's curing tank (*Madiga landa*), the blacksmith's furnace (*kammari kolimi*), the potter's kiln (*kummari aamu*), and the carpenter's plane (*vaddla badishe*). Chindu Yellamma describes this ritual in her own verse:

We should raise our hands in salute
to the beloved kammari who
gives us the knife, because
we madigas have given the
kammari
his bellow. This is why.
The kammari and the vaddlas
have made the blade and handle
of the crane-neck knife that rests
in the goddess Yellamma's hand.

Artisanal occupations survive with self-respect today partly because the Chindu artistes keep the rural tradition alive by describing the living links between these communities. The performance stresses the value of productive implements and celebrates the importance of the working castes for agriculture and for the food security of the world. The relationships between these communities are orally narrated in the "Jambavapuram" and the "Yellammakatha". It also always tells stories which represent the history and past of all the other productive communities in the village.

One actor has played protagonist (both male and female) in major compositions, dazzled the world and mesmerized audiences in this art. If we asked who this was, the name on

everyone's lips would be: Chindu Yellamma. Chindu Yellamma went deep into the hearts of viewers and roused them to dance. She stepped forth on the stage in the role of the child Krishna at the tender age of four. By eleven she was performing the female roles of Ramba, Chenchulakshmi, Savitri and Sita, as well as male roles like Vali, Kushala, Narayanamurthy and Dharmangadha.

Her father Pillella Nabisab and mother Yellamma, even as they encouraged her art, got her married to a person called Saidulu at the age of fifteen. By then Yellamma the performer was already a celebrity, and for this reason, the father Nabisab hesitated. However, when Saidulu agreed to live in Nabisab's house, the latter couldn't refuse. Yellamma, who was deeply immersed in her stage craft, gave her younger sister Ramavva in marriage to Saidulu, left him and devoted her life to her art.

She took the Chindu Yakshagana from the village square outside the bungalows of the powerful landlords to important auditoriums in Hyderabad and all the way to Delhi. The Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh T Anjaiah praised her after a performance in Ravindra Bharati in 1980. When Indira Gandhi came to Nizamabad, she saw Yellamma perform, joined her in dance and asked if she could join her troupe! In 1986, she was sent by NTR to participate in the national folk art festival (Apna Utsav) at Delhi. At that time, the President Shankar Dayal Sharma, the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi praised and honoured her. In 1999, she was awarded the Kala Ratna by the state government. In 2004, she won the Rajiv merit award. The famous dancer Nataraja Ramakrishna, who revived the tenth century art form Perini

73



Sivatandavam, said about her when she died:

When I think of Yellamma, my grief knows no bounds. The spirit of her performance (abhinaya) appears before my eyes as I speak. When we first met at Armoor, she performed, along with her troupe, two stories—Sarangadhara, and Chenchulakshmi. Her performance as Chitrangi in Sarangadhara was wonderful. Just as I thought to myself, "It is getting dark I have to get home," she said, "Ramakrishna garu, two minutes" went backstage and returned in the form of Narasimhaswamy. Her performance as Narasimhaswamy, in the love scene after his marriage to Chenchulakshmi, where he gives her betel leaves

(*tamalapaku*) mesmerized me. I have never seen any other actor play both masculine and feminine roles in quick succession with such expertise.

The sad thing is that, even as she performed the roles of Rama and Krishna, she could not escape the poverty that shadows untouchability. In spite of her fame, she was ignored till the end. She tells of her distress as follows:

It has even become difficult for me to live. How can the Chindu art survive? Give me two bighas of land. It doesn't matter even if you don't give me ten thousand rupees, awards, rewards. This will be a life support for me.

She died of starvation on November 9th 2005 in her small, dilapidated hut.

5.3 FURTHER READING: UNACKNOWLEDGED WOMEN ARTISTS OF TELANGANA

The profiles that follow, of Mahlaqa Bai and Sarojini Naidu, are of women artists from the Telangana region. Mahlaqa Bai was a poet, a dancer, a patron of the arts, and a woman involved in public life in 18th century Hyderabad. The land on which Osmania University, EFL University and the national research laboratories in the vicinity were built was gifted by her. Yet few of you would have heard of her, let alone read her poems. Sarojini Naidu is known as the nightingale of India and as a nationalist and a Gandhian. But her closeness to the Nizam of Hyderabad and her love for Hyderabad's culture and its people is rarely spoken of.

Mahlaqa Bai Chanda [Sherin B S]

Feminist scholarship takes special care to understand the varied histories and specific cultural contexts in which people live and work. It points out that we require a re-interpretation and re-signification of role and status, especially of women, from different vantage points to appreciate the significance of such voices, and their choices, from the past. Mahlaqa Bai, born Chand Bibi, was one such famous poet, composer and singer who lived in Hyderabad. She hailed from a period when tawaifs received patronage in various courts and were artists, thinkers and often, also respected patrons of art. You may not have heard about her, but she is one example of how women have engaged with patriarchal power and established themselves as writers, artists and thinkers.

The heritage activist Sajjad Shahid writes that Raj Kanwar, Chand Bibi's mother, migrated to Hyderabad in the

the 18th century. Chand Bibi was an accomplished person who soon exceeded the traditional role of a court performer to engage in state affairs and politics, write ghazals, patronize art and commission monuments, shrines and public utility buildings. She kept



company with notable intellectuals of the time. She was also influential in the court of the second and third Nizams of Hyderabad. Mahlaqa (face of the moon) is the title offered to her by the Nizam himself. She was the only woman to be given public recognition by the Hyderabad State and to participate in mushairas during her time. In addition, she was made a member of the omarah, the highest

nobility. We also know that Mahlaqa was frequently consulted by the rulers of the state on policy matters. Records say that her negotiating powers were also utilized during diplomatic negotiations with the Marathas.

Various narratives are available about her intellectual prowess, her enchanting voice, and her beauty and dancing. She was noted for her skills in composition, her command over several languages and her diction. In *Women Writing in India*, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita refer to Sameena Shaikat, who considers Mahlaqa the first woman to write poems in Urdu. Other sources cite her as the first woman to author a diwan, a complete collection of ghazals. The *Diwan-e Chanda* is a manuscript collection of 125 ghazals, compiled and calligraphed by her in 1798 and now preserved in the British Museum. The collection was published after her death in 1824 as *Gulzar-e-Mahlaqa*, and comprises 39 ghazals, each with 5 couplets. Some moving and beautifully composed letters (which give us an insight into her complex personality) addressed to her mother, her lover, and to the Sufi saint Moula Ali, whom she revered, have been reproduced by Bilkeez Latif in her book *Forgotten*.



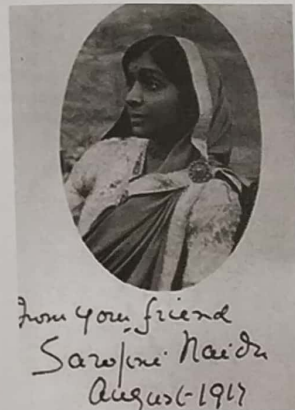
We know Mahlaqa possessed one of the finest libraries of her time. The collection contained manuscripts and books on poetry, arts and science. Her home was a reputed gathering place of intellectuals, priests, poets, writers, and musicians from all over India. She sponsored and supervised the publication of *Mahnaama*, a historical book about the revival of the Hyderabad State. It is also said that she was instrumental, like many other writers of the time, in the transformation of Dakhani to the Persianized version of Urdu. Philologists find Dakhani as influential in the development of Urdu as the dialects from north India.

Osmania University's sprawling present-day campus is set up on garden land gifted by Mahlaqa. It includes her bauli, or well, now part of the EFL University, where she received visitors and held poetry recitals. On her death in 1824, a large portion of Mahlaqa's wealth was given away to homeless women. At the foot of the huge rock on which the dargah of the sufi saint Moula Ali is located, she developed a walled compound where she frequently held mushairas and in 1792, built a tomb for her mother. Mahlaqa was buried next to her mother. Her former residence in Nampally, Hyderabad was converted into a government-aided degree college for women.

Sarojini Naidu — The "mulki nightingale"
[Sajjad Shahid]

Some figures are not forgotten; the problem is that they are "half-remembered". Sarojini Naidu ("Nightingale of India") is known as a poet and a charismatic nationalist leader. She married outside her caste—the ceremony was conducted by Veereshlingam Pantulu—met Gandhi in 1914 and worked with him for over thirty

years. She was the first Indian woman to be President of the Indian National Congress (in 1925, succeeding Gandhi who was president before her), a founder of the All India Women's Congress (AIWC). She was also an activist for women's suffrage (right to vote) and a Gandhian, who, in 1930 took over leadership of the Salt Satyagraha after the arrest of Gandhi and Abbas Tyabji. Though she supported the Khadi movement, unlike the others who did so, she never wore white. Little is remembered about Sarojini's long connections with Hyderabad and her love for this region. What follows is from Sajjad Shahid's biography (slightly adapted). Note his title, which is an argument with mainstream history.



A child prodigy, Sarojini Naidu showed exceptional talent in creative writing at an early age. In 1890, at the age of eleven, she wrote a poem instead of solving an assigned problem in Algebra. In 1891 she passed the Matriculation with a first class—a feat which made her famous. On being presented with a published copy of "Meher Muneer,"

written when she was thirteen, the Nizam, Mir Mahbub Ali Khan, was so impressed that he sent word to her father, Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya the founder of the Nizam College, inquiring what his daughter would like as a Royal Gift.

The outcome was a Hyderabad Government foreign study scholarship worth £300 a year with "first class passage" granted "in appreciation of her leading talent and as a kind of encouragement to literary education of women of His Highness's Dominions." Sarojini was 16 years old when this happened.



Sarojini Naidu was in her element at Hyderabad and most of her early poetry comes from this period when she blossomed into the premier English poet of the city. Her first volume of poetry, *Golden Threshold* appeared in 1905. The publication of her second collection of verse, *Bird of Time*, coincided with the death of Mahbub Ali Pasha, the "Beloved" Nizam of Hyderabad, in 1911. The event left Sarojini traumatized like so many others in the State. Writing to her publisher in London, explaining her inability to finish the final draft on time, she laments that with the loss of Mahbub, "Hyderabad will never be quite the same. The one man whose personality made it the most poetic and sumptuous of fairy tale cities is no

more." Sarojini justifies her emotions by conceding that "You will say I write foolishly. Maybe. But I write nothing but the truth and I am not writing only of my personal feelings, but as one of the millions whose sorrow is too deep for coherent words. You in Europe, what do you know of love for a sovereign as we know it, we Easterners? And I believe today to all of us the most precious thing in the world, dearer than father or mother, husband or children is the tomb, in the mosque-garden, covered with countless garlands: a place of pilgrimage—yes, even for me. How am I different from my people? I am essentially one of them."

Sarojini maintained strong ties with the people of Hyderabad. She was held in high esteem by even those who did not agree with her political views. Nawab Bahadur Yar Jung, the founder of the Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, a pro-Hyderabad State political party

of the time, shared a special relationship with her and she in turn always treated him like a son. An amusing incident that epitomizes Sarojini's bond with Hyderabad took place in 1938. When discussing the arrangements for the First Industrial Exhibition (Numaish Masnuat-e Mulki) with the officer-in-charge, Nizam Osman Ali Khan stressed the need to highlight "mulki" (indigenous) products. Sarojini, who happened to be present there, reminded him that she too was a "mulki" product!

It is said that Sarojini wept when Hyderabad was merged with the Indian Union in 1948 after the Police Action. On being chastised by Nehru, who reminded her that as an Indian she should be rejoicing, Sarojini is reported to have remarked that as an Indian she was happy that Hyderabad was now part of India, but as a Hyderabadi she had every right to mourn the loss of her beloved State.