



WOMEN'S ROLE IN THE LIBERATION MOVEMENTS OF HYDERABAD STATE UNDER THE NIZAM

Dr. Nazia Rahaman, Assistant Professor of History, Government Degree College for Women (A),
Karimnagar

Abstract

This study explores the multifaceted and transformative roles played by women in the liberation movements of Hyderabad State during the late colonial and early postcolonial period. Women were not confined to passive or supportive roles; rather, they actively participated in both reformist and militant struggles. Their involvement ranged from educational initiatives, social reform campaigns, and satyagraha movements under the Hyderabad State Congress to armed resistance in the Telangana Peasant Struggle (1946–1951).

Drawing upon historical writings, feminist interpretations, oral traditions, and political narratives, this paper argues that women's participation represented a dual struggle—against feudal exploitation and patriarchal oppression. In confronting both class-based and gender-based inequalities, women redefined their social identities and asserted their agency in public and political spheres.

The study further highlights how women's contributions were crucial in sustaining resistance against Razakar violence through underground networks, intelligence sharing, and community mobilization. Their participation embedded gender emancipation within broader struggles for agrarian justice and democratic governance. Ultimately, this paper positions women not as peripheral actors but as central figures in shaping the socio-political transformation of Hyderabad and Telangana.

Keywords: *Hyderabad State, Nizam, Women, Telangana Struggle, Razakars, Liberation Movements, Gender, Agrarian Resistance*

1. Introduction

Hyderabad State, the largest princely state in British India, was ruled by the Asaf Jahi dynasty under the Nizam. Until its integration into the Indian Union in 1948, the region was characterized by autocratic governance, limited civil liberties, and a deeply entrenched feudal system. Landlords, known as *doralu*, exercised considerable control over agrarian production and rural life, leading to widespread socio-economic inequalities.

Discontent against this system emerged gradually. The 1930s witnessed the rise of reformist associations advocating education and social reform. By 1938, political mobilization intensified with the establishment of the Hyderabad State Congress, which demanded responsible government. This phase eventually culminated in the Telangana Peasant Armed Struggle (1946–1951), one of the most significant agrarian movements in modern Indian history.

Within this broader political transformation, women played a remarkable role. Their participation challenged traditional norms such as purdah and gender segregation, enabling them to enter public life in unprecedented ways. Women not only supported nationalist and agrarian movements but also became active agents of resistance.

This paper situates women's participation within the intersection of gender, class, and political struggle. It argues that women's involvement in Hyderabad's liberation movements contributed significantly to redefining both political resistance and gender identity in the region.

2. Review of Literature

The role of women in liberation movements across South Asia has received increasing scholarly attention. However, focused studies on Hyderabad remain relatively limited.

Early works such as P. Reddy's *The Telangana People's Struggle and Its Lessons* (1989) primarily emphasized the agrarian and class-based dimensions of the movement, though it acknowledged the symbolic importance of women leaders like Chityala Ailamma and Mallu Swarajyam. Similarly, P.V. Rao (1972) documented the historical evolution of Telangana, highlighting institutions like Andhra Mahasabha that contributed to early reformist mobilization.

Feminist scholars, notably Gail Omvedt (1993), expanded the analysis by emphasizing the dual nature of women's struggle—against both feudal oppression and patriarchal constraints. Omvedt's work highlights how women's participation in revolutionary movements reshaped gender relations.

Taylor Sherman (2007) provides insight into the authoritarian nature of the Nizam's rule and state violence, while A.G. Noorani (2013) documents the role of Razakar militias and the violence faced by civilians, particularly women.

Despite these contributions, much of the literature treats women as secondary actors within broader political movements. This paper seeks to address this gap by placing women at the center of Hyderabad's liberation struggles, recognizing their roles as leaders, organizers, and fighters.

3. Reformist Foundations and Early Mobilization

The roots of women's participation in Hyderabad's liberation movements can be traced to early reformist initiatives. Organizations such as the Andhra Mahasabha and Andhra Mahila Sabha played a significant role in promoting female education and social reform.

These organizations challenged practices such as child marriage and purdah, encouraging women to engage with public life. Although initially framed as social reforms, these initiatives gradually developed into platforms for political awareness.

By the 1930s, educated women began linking social reform with political demands. They started participating in discussions about governance, rights, and national identity. This phase laid the foundation for women's active involvement in later political and militant movements.

4. Hyderabad State Congress and Women's Satyagraha

The formation of the Hyderabad State Congress in 1938 marked a shift from reformist to political mobilization. The organization demanded responsible government and greater civil liberties.

Women played a crucial role in this phase. They participated in satyagraha movements, organized protests, and acted as intermediaries between leadership and grassroots communities.

Urban middle-class women, in particular, contributed to expanding the political discourse. Their participation challenged societal norms that confined women to domestic roles. By entering public spaces, they redefined themselves as political citizens.

This phase can be seen as a turning point in women's political awakening in Hyderabad, where gender roles began to shift alongside nationalist aspirations.

5. Women in the Telangana Peasant Armed Struggle (1946–1951)

The Telangana Peasant Armed Struggle represented a radical phase in Hyderabad's liberation movements. Led by the Communist Party of India, it aimed to dismantle feudal structures and redistribute land.

Women played indispensable roles in this movement:

5.1 Military Participation: Women such as Mallu Swarajyam joined guerrilla squads and participated in armed operations. Their involvement challenged traditional perceptions of women as passive participants.

5.2 Community Defense: Women organized themselves into groups such as the *Stree Shakti Dal*, which protected villages from attacks and strengthened collective resistance.

5.3 Symbolic Resistance: Figures like Chityala Ailamma became symbols of defiance. Her resistance against landlord oppression inspired many women to join the movement.

5.4 Underground Support Networks: Women provided food, shelter, and intelligence to guerrilla fighters. Their ability to operate under the guise of domestic roles made them crucial to sustaining the movement.

Through these roles, women transformed themselves into active participants in revolutionary politics, merging gender emancipation with class struggle.

6. Resistance to Razakar Repression

The rise of the Razakars intensified violence in Hyderabad during the late 1940s. This paramilitary group targeted civilians, particularly in rural areas.

Women responded with resilience and courage. They developed networks to protect communities, hide activists, and transmit information. Their actions were not merely defensive but strategic.

In confronting violence, women redefined their roles from victims to agents of resistance. Their participation strengthened community solidarity and undermined the climate of fear created by the Razakars.

7. Notable Women Leaders and Symbolic Power

Several women emerged as iconic figures in Hyderabad's liberation movements:

1. **Chityala Ailamma** – Symbol of agrarian resistance
2. **Mallu Swarajyam** – Guerrilla leader and revolutionary figure
3. **Rama Devi, Vimalamma, Rojabai** – Grassroots organizers and community leaders

These women became symbols of courage and transformation. Their stories continue to be preserved in oral traditions, songs, and regional memory.

8. Impact and Legacy

The participation of women in Hyderabad's liberation movements had far-reaching consequences:

8.1 Political Transformation: Women entered public life and contributed to local governance and political processes.

8.2 Social Change: Traditional hierarchies based on gender, caste, and class were challenged.

8.3 Cultural Memory: Women's contributions are preserved in folklore, literature, and collective memory.

Their activism bridged the gap between nationalist, agrarian, and feminist movements, shaping the socio-political landscape of Telangana.

9. Conclusion

Women's participation in the liberation movements of Hyderabad State was both transformative and foundational. They were not merely supporters but central actors who reshaped political and social dynamics.

By engaging in reformist, nationalist, and militant movements, women challenged both feudal exploitation and patriarchal norms. Their contributions expanded the meaning of resistance and redefined gender roles.

Recognizing their role is essential for a comprehensive understanding of Hyderabad's history. It also highlights the importance of integrating gender perspectives into historical narratives.

Ultimately, women's activism in Hyderabad stands as a powerful example of how struggles for political freedom can also become movements for social and gender justice.

10. References

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