Reckoning with Remembrance: The life of Rupa Bai Furloonji
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Born in the princely state of Hyderabad, during the rule of the sixth Nawab Mir Ali Mehboob Khan, Rupa Bai Furloonji belonged to a Parsi family. In 1885, she was one of the five women to be admitted to Hyderabad Medical School. The next four years there proved formative to her life, allowing her to forge connections that brought her to the University of Edinburgh.

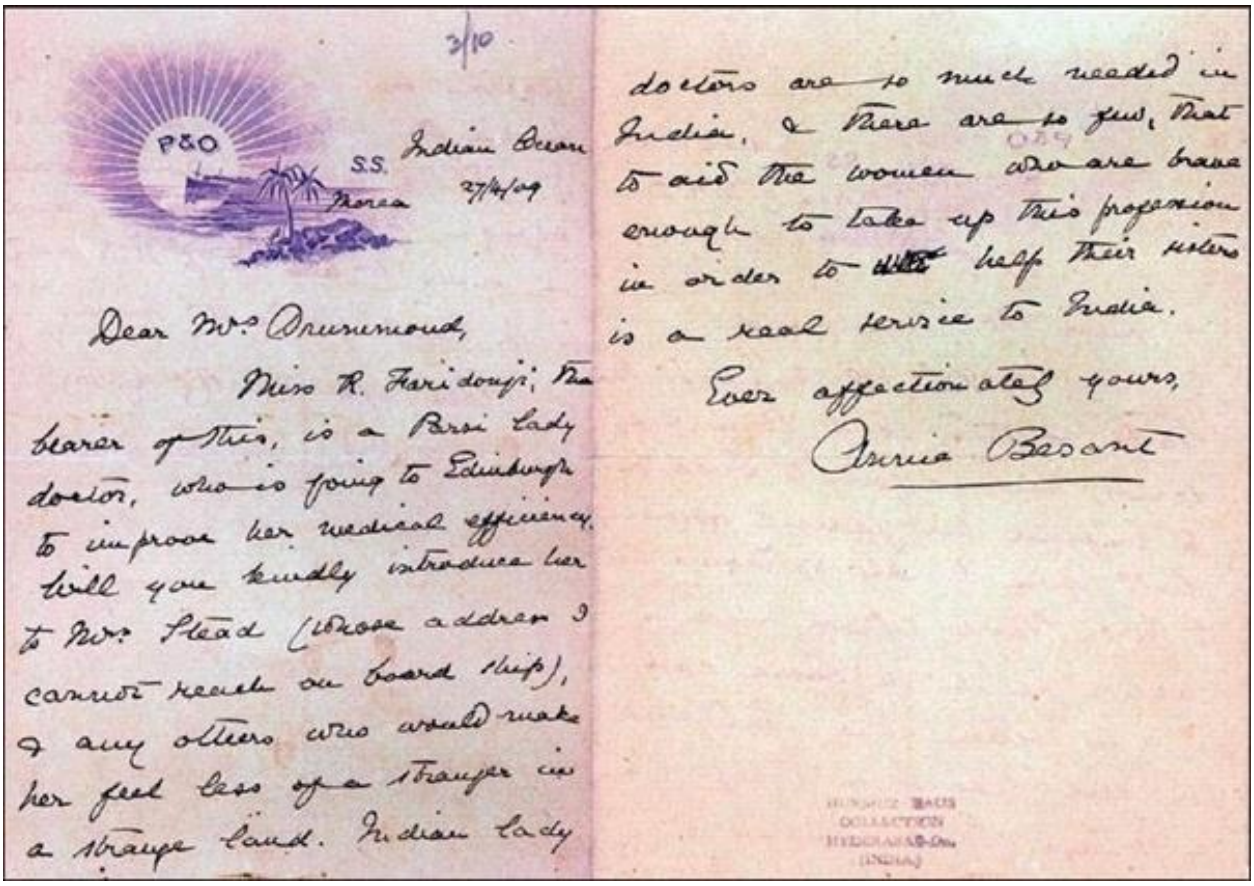
Rupa Bai's connections to Edinburgh

The photo above shows us Rupa Bai Furloonji sitting amidst Edward Laurie and Sir Thomas Lauder Brunton during the Hyderabad Chloroform Commission of 1891. In many ways, it symbolizes the manner in which Rupa Bai was entangled in the debate raging in Britain and across the Empire at the time around the use of chloroform. The use of chloroform had comme under close scrutiny in Britain due to a high number of recorded deaths, resulting in the creation of various commissions to investigate its efficacy as an anaesthetic. Laurie and Brunton, both doctors trained in Edinburgh, were influential advocates for the use of chloroform, following in the footsteps of their teacher – James Syme, a leading Edinburgh-based surgeon. In particular, Edward Laurie vehemently defended the 'Edinburgh school' method of administering chloroform and spent most of his career engaging in public polemics against those who criticized its use.

Rupa Bai's admittance to medical school coincided with Edward Laurie assuming the role of Surgeon General of the Hyderabad Medical School. Here, under the guidance of Laurie, she trained in administering chloroform. Following criticisms received from doctors writing in the *Lancet*, Edward Laurie persuaded the Nizam of Hyderabad to provide £1000 to fund the first Hyderabad Commission on Chloroform in 1889. The *Lancet* appointed Lauder Brunton as an expert to observe the proceedings of the Commission.

For the period of three months, the Commission conducted a series of experiments on six hundred animals, with Laurie's students, including Rupa Bai, actively involved in the experiments. In a clinical lecture by Lawrie, he references a particular operation for the removal of a sarcoma from the uterus, wherein Rupa Bai kept a patient anaesthetised singlehandedly.

Nearly 10 years after the Commission, Rupa Bai arrived in Edinburgh in 1909, where she received a diploma in physics and chemistry. As there was no formal qualification in anaesthesiology, she chose subjects that were relevant to a practising anaesthetist. Interestingly, on her journey from India to Edinburgh, Bai is known to have encountered Annie Beasant, a prominent Indian nationalist and the president of the Theosophical Society, who was journeying on the same ship. The figure below shows a letter of introduction written for Rupa Bai addressed to an acquaintance of Ms. Besant's in Edinburgh.


3/10

P&O S.S. Persia

Indian Ocean
27/4/09

Dear Mrs Drummond,

Miss R. Haridasji, the bearer of this, is a Parsi lady doctor, who is going to Edinburgh to improve her medical efficiency. Will you kindly introduce her to Mrs Stead (whose address I cannot reach on board ship), & any others who would make her feel less of a stranger in a strange land. Indian lady doctors are so much needed in India, & there are so few, that to aid the women who are brave enough to take up this profession in order to help their sisters is a real service to India.

Ever affectionately yours,
Annie Besant

Aside from this encounter, little is known about Rupa Bai's life during her time in Edinburgh. Rupa Bai returned to Hyderabad after obtaining her diploma and spent her time in the Nizam's Medical Services. She retired from the Nizam's Medical Service as the Superintendent of the Chanderghat Hospital in 1920.

Reckoning with remembrance: A reflection on sources

Attempts to reconstruct the life of Rupa Bai from the sources we've found calls for a reflection on how this process has taken shape. While a number of primary sources such as letters and certificates of Rupa Bai are housed in the Indian Institute of Medical Heritage and remain currently inaccessible, Rupa Bai has attracted the attention of scholars affiliated with the institute, who put forth the claim that Rupa Bai was the world's first qualified female anaesthetist.

While this claim itself is not verified with sufficient evidence, efforts to position Rupa Bai as the "first female anaesthetist of the world" in historical narratives pushes us to think about how the histories of women are preserved and why. Was giving her this title, irrespective of whether it's unsupported, the only way to prevent Rupa Bai from descending into oblivion? Talk about intent a bit more, who is pushing that narrative and why?

Both secondary and primary sources we have found so far paint an incomplete picture of Rupa Bai's life. Large gaps exist in her story, with her story beginning only from the time she entered medical school. Akin to many histories of women who came from various parts of the empire to Britain, her story is written primarily in relation to men like Laurie who are credited with presenting Rupa Bai with the opportunity to pursue medicine. Her voice and personal narratives of how she navigated her position within the empire may be irretrievably lost in the depths of the archive.

We are confronted then, with the significance of these acts of remembrance. While UncoverED provides an opportunity for the University to reckon with it's connections to the Empire and its present-day implications by first acknowledging the legacies of BAME alumni who came from former colonies, the path towards decolonizing the university remains long and winding. Mining the archives for histories of BAME women in science might lead us to obtain only certain parts of the puzzle, which must not be viewed in isolation.