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150-year-old Anjuman takes leap of faith, creates women's cricket team

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Taking to the podium at the recent inauguration of Anjuman-I-Islam's T20 Inter-College Competition named after its alumnus-cricketer Salim Durrani, India's first captain in Women's One Day Internationals (ODIs) Diana Edulji looked admiringly at a group of girls. They were gathered in the heritage building's Karimi Library's balcony. "We have great hopes from these young girls," enthused feisty Edulji.

The girls Edulji has pinned hopes on are part of Anjuman's women's cricket team, first in the history of the over 150-year-old institution, its legacy steeped in secularism and inclusivity. Breaking yet another barrier, the women's cricket team is also a strong statement in Anjuman's attempt to attain gender equality in facilities it provides. Celebrated for producing several famous cricketers, including Durrani, Wasim Jaffer, Ghulam Parkar and Yashasvi Jaiswal, Anjuman has now opened a new window for its female students.

"Our strong legacy in cricket is known to have produced Indian and Ranji cricketers. We recently completed a hatrick of titles in the Harish Shield organised by the Mumbai School Sports Association (MSSA). Our girls have been excelling at sports like karate and basketball. We did not want to deprive them of opportunities to excel in cricket as well," informs Anjuman's president and noted radiologist Padmashree Dr Zahir Kazi.

Dr Kazi, along with Fauzia Ansari, principal of Anjuman-I-Islam's Begum Sharifa Girls' English School at Belassis

Road in Central Mumbai, inspect the facility being created for the "turf cricket" in the school compound.

"The girls needed to play without any inhibition," explains Ansari. Perhaps the girls, many from conservative families, were uncomfortable practicing at the grassy pitch Dr Kazi and his team have put together at the Anjuman's heritage campus near CST. So a separate turf has been laid out exclusively for them.
Initially, adds Ansari, many parents were reluctant to allow their daughters to play cricket.
They would say it is the boys' game suggesting that they had no problem as long as the girls played badminton or karate. Now the parents approach the principal with requests to enlist their daughters in the cricket team.
"Many parents now come to watch their daughters play cricket," says Ansari.

Drawn from the Belassis Road school, Anjuman-I-Islam's Abdul Azeem Khatkhatay English Secondary School, Vashi and a few other Anjuman-run girls' schools, the cricket team explains the rising aspirations of the girl students.

"Our student Sehar Khokhara was part of the children who played gully cricket with Prince William, Princess Kate and Sachin Tendulkar on Nov 16 in the city. We feel proud that our girl represented us at the widely-covered event," says Zulekha Siddiqui, principal of the Anjuman's Vashi school.

Zikra Khan, a 10th standard student from Madanpura, is first girl in her family to hold a cricket ball and bat. "My father wants me to play cricket and excel at it," says Khan.

Dr Kazi provides a perspective. "IPL matches have opened a new window for youngsters to make a career in cricket. We thought if our boys can earn so much by playing in the IPL matches, why can't our girls? Soon you will see some of these girls scaling the cricketing heights," hopes Dr Kazi.

Principals, coaches and PT teachers applaud NGO The Right Pitch (TRP) for encouraging girls to participate in the inter-school cricket tournaments. Anjuman’s team has even excelled at matches held by District Sports Organisation (DSO), winning third prize in such a tournament last year.

“The girls are very enthusiastic and regularly attend practice,” applaud PT teacher Meenakshi Patil at the Belassis Road school.

Tenth standard student and Worli resident Iqra Khan says that it is her grandfather who backs her to the hilt. “My grandfather is my biggest motivator. We watch cricket matches together on Television,” smiles Khan.

Community leaders appreciate the move. “This is good that Anjuman has created its women’s cricket team. Let us hope some of them bring laurels to Anjuman,” says Sohail Khandwani, managing trustee of Haji Ali and Mahim Dargahs.