

## ROLE OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE PAKISTAN MOVEMENT

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### Abstract

*"Without the co-operation of their women, no nation can progress". The founder of Pakistan, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, claimed this. Both man and woman play an equally productive role in the political and social development of a society. Within the scope of their respective roles, they contribute for the development of political and social integration. In present times, women are actively performing diversified roles in the spheres of politics, leadership and social service. This research paper encompasses the political and social efforts and struggle of women in the achievement of Pakistan. This research is to assess and explain the struggle by Muslim women of the Indo-Pak sub-Continent, since five decades before creation of Pakistan, which motivated them to understand the importance of political participation and to initiate a movement for a free homeland. The educational, social and political endeavours contributed by these women turned the dream of Pakistan into a reality and their sincere efforts continued even after independence.*

A review of history would reveal that Muslim women had to be highly active for the struggle aimed at the preservation of their identity. These women, whose responsibilities and freedom were limited merely to their household errands, trained their young generation in such a manner that this generation in the coming years became so bold and strong that for the sake of their freedom and rights, they stood eye to eye against the British who were by that time considered the strongest rulers of the world and under whose rule the sun never set. At that time women had involved in education and some schools for girls and other educational institutions were opened "A women's section of the Mohammadan Educational Conference was found in 1896, followed three years later with the opening of the first teacher training school for girls."<sup>1</sup> From the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century the Muslim press raised the voice for the opening of Muslim Women Conference which later made an organisation called All India Muslim Conference. After some time another organisation Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam was formed. "The Muslim character of the Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam was visible in both the demands that it made and the protest meetings it organised to condemn the destruction of a portion of the Kanpur Mosque in 1913."<sup>2</sup> In fact as exemplified by the activities of the Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam for Muslim women the dividing line between women's rights, social welfare activities and politics remained blurred from the beginning. "In the 20<sup>th</sup> century politics

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1. Abida Samiudin, R. Khanum, Muslim Feminism and Feminist Movement, South Asia, Global Vision Publishing House, Dehli, India, Vol-2, p.4
  2. Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed, Historical Roots of the Women's Movement in Pakistan, 1896 to 1947, An Article in "Finding Our Way", ed. Fareeha Zafar, ASR Publications, Lahore Pakistan, 1991, p.13



of the sub continent, it is first recorded instance of a woman becoming politically significant.”<sup>3</sup> Starting with the Khilafat Movement, a large scale mobilisation of women was to take place in the context of general politics. Among these courageous women, the name of Bi Amman can be quoted as the best instance. “She used to frequently advise her son Muhammad Ali Johar to sacrifice his life for the sake of Khilafat.”<sup>4</sup> This voice got stronger and a time came when it shuffled the British government and its supporters. “The Khilafat Movement of the 1920 had been the first instance when Muslim women had made their presence felt. With Maulana Shaukat Ali and Moulana Mohammed Ali in jail, their mother, Bi Amman, had taken up the cudgels against British imperialism. Her daughter-in-law assisted her. It took an old lady to strike the first blow at seclusion. She addressed meetings from behind the purdah of a sheet, and travelled to various parts of India to whip up support. Women came to hear her, and they were motivated to meet in various mohallas to raise funds. It was an old custom in the subcontinent that women sold their jewellery when the family was faced with a financial crisis.”<sup>5</sup> At that point the Muslim women started their struggle for the social progress and political participation on individual and collective levels. This voice echoed in all parts of India, inspiring every conscious woman to play her productive role in the struggle for freedom and social progress. “When the Khilafat Movement demanded contributions from its supporters, the women came forward and gave up their jewellery, that being their only worldly possession. This would have been the first time that they made such a gesture for a political cause. However all this was short-lived and so with the demise of the Khilafat Movement women reverted to the strict seclusion of their homes and their domestic world”<sup>6</sup>. The Muslim women in the subcontinent performed an active role in the Khilafat movement after that, women began participating politically as well as socially setting an example for others. “Egyptian women were greatly impressed by Bi Amma’s practical role in politics.”<sup>7</sup> This courageous struggle was made at a time when the circumstances offered no favour to them. Despite all difficulty and hardships, they succeeded in winning their right of vote, for acquiring education and for their share in properties. In all their endeavours, these women exhibited their abilities, which proved of great worth in their social and political activation, in collection of funds for meetings and processions and in providing help and relief to the victims of violence. Their instrumental assistance in the political movement was duly recognised by men and they made appropriate use of it in the freedom struggle. The political struggle of these Muslim women of the Sub-Continent Indo-Pak was focused on acquisition of national identity and freedom from colonialism. In the process of getting into the political field, these women had to set aside their traditional norms and restrictions including strict observance of veil and remaining within the boundaries of their homes. They also courageously faced their opponents and the police. All this was not so easy as they had to sacrifice their honour, their property, their husbands, brothers and sons and everything for their nation.

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3. Ibid, p-15.

4. Noor-us-Saba Begum, *Tehrik-e-Pakistan aur Khawateen*, Sheikh Ghulam Ali & Sons Publishers Ltd., Lahore, p.36

5. Dr. Dushka. H. Saiyid, *Women’s Role in Pakistan Movement*, Quaid-e-Azam University Islamabad, An Article in <http://www.dawn.com>, 23 March 1999, p.1

6. Ibid.

7. Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza, *Muslim Women’s Role in the Pakistan Movement*, Research Society of Pakistan, University of Punjab, Lahore 1969, p.33



## Struggle for National Identity and National Movement

The struggle of the women had two dimensions. One was the national movement and national identity and the other was for their own rights as women. Their struggle however did not mean to compete with men. Rather, they concentrated on acquisition of education and they disseminated education among other women so that this education could awaken their consciousness and inspire them to realise the importance of their social and political rights in the society. Awareness through education helped them distinguish between right and wrong as well as what to accept and what to reject.

After 1920 women demanded for their right to vote and Congress and Muslim League supported them and they succeeded in getting their political rights. "By 1925 all the provinces except Orissa and Bihar had followed suit. In 1928 women in India had the same voting rights as men. Persons, male or female, were allowed to vote."<sup>8</sup> At every level of their demonstrations and organised struggle, they proved themselves an inseparable segment of the Pakistan movement.

## Pre-partition Struggle by Muslim Women of Sub-continent

A glance at the history of Pakistan movement would reveal that our brave women performed splendid feats along with men both in times of peace and war. Prior to Pakistan Movement, Bi Amman was the first lady to have stepped into the field of politics. "Bi Amma proved to be a brave soldier of the struggle against the British Government who at the age of 73 made a powerful appeal to the drooping spirit of the Indian masses."<sup>9</sup> Others to follow were his daughter-in-law (wife of Maulana Muhammad Ali Johar) and wife of Maulana Hasrat Mohani. Sincere and devoted services of these ladies opened new avenues in the struggle for Pakistan. They set great examples for other women to follow them in politics. Poetesses, women editors and writers supported the Pakistan movement through their scripts and columns in the newspapers and journals. These women were aware of the demands of the society hence, by virtue of their academic skills and awareness about their cultural complexities; they brought about an ideological revolution. Prior to becoming the President of All India Muslim League Women's Wing, wife of Maulana Muhammad Ali Johar had joined the Muslim League as a party worker. She was not educated in any formal educational institution. She observed *Purdah* and participated in Muslim League meetings wearing a *Burqa*. Yet she was filled with a passion for her nation and was devoted to its progress. Using simple and very comprehensive language, she would make speeches in the meetings. "Begum Maulana Mohammed Ali Johar was the first Muslim woman who was arrested in 1915 because the government blamed her that she was inflaming the Muslim women against the English rule."<sup>10</sup> She organised the Muslim women of the Sub-Continent as well as set up Muslim Girls Students Federation. These women devoted themselves for an independent state and in this wake they inspired a number of other women to join this

8. Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed, Op.Cit., p.14

9. Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza, Op. Cit., p.31

10. Rahmat Farrukh Abidi, Muhammad Ali Jouhar aur Muqadma-e-Baghawat, Oxford University Press, 2005, p.87



movement. Keeping aside their comforts, they engaged themselves with this movement with full devotion under the leadership of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Likewise, wife of Maulana Hasrat Mohani represented Muslim women in the Freedom Movement at a time when the Muslim women were far behind from the women of other nations in terms of education and politics. "In 1917 a delegation of various women organisations from all over India, including a Muslim woman Begum Hasrat Mohani, met secretary of state E. S. Montague to demand increased educational facilities, improved health and maternity services and equal franchise for women as being guaranteed to men in the forth coming reforms."<sup>11</sup> In the first round table conference only one Muslim woman Begum Jahan Ara Shah Nawaz (Daughter of Muhammad Shafi) represented the Muslim women of the subcontinent when she demanded the rights for all people without any discrimination which was sported by the Muslim League. The result was that women of the subcontinent got reserved seats "In 1935 the Government of India Act enfranchised six million women and for the first time reserved seats for women were allocated in both the council of state and in the assembly (6/150 and 9/250 respectively)."<sup>12</sup>

The first political appearance of women was observed on the occasion of the provincial elections of 1937 wherein they were given the right to vote. Special seats for Muslim women were also announced in these elections and from the platform of Muslim League, Begum Shahnawaz (Punjab), Begum Hukm (Bengal), Begum Ezaz Rasool and Begum Habibullah (Lucknow), Begum Kaleem (Behar) and other Muslim women won seats. The victory of these women became the source of an important change. Not only common families started considering female education essential but after acquiring political awareness and civic status, these women played their constructive role in the form of women's wing of the Muslim League towards achieving objectives of the League. No doubt these efforts were of no less value than those made by men. On various occasions, the Quaid-e-Azam praised the political role of these women and not only gave them a chance to work side by side with men but also encourage their efforts. The Quaid had seen increasing participation of women in the Congress, his parent party and he realised the need to have Muslim women's participation in the Muslim League, which he had begun to re-organise. It was at Lucknow in 1937 that he called for the creation of a women's Wing of the Muslim League, but it remained dormant till the Patna session of the Muslim League in 1938."<sup>13</sup>

The year of 1938 was marked with participation of women in politics when women's wing of the Muslim League was established in December 1938 at the request of Begum Hafiz-ud-din in Patna. "Begum Hafiz-ud-din, wife of the Nawab of Surat, took up the responsibility of organising Muslim women under the Muslim League. She approached Quaid-e-Azam who welcomed the proposal and assured her that a section of Muslim women under the Muslim League would soon be set up."<sup>14</sup> That was the time the Muslim League opened a new channel in the struggle for independence. The same year Fatima Jinnah entered politics at the advice of her brother that proved to be a strong source of

11. Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed, *Op. Cit.*, p.14

12. *Ibid.* p.15

13. Dr. Dushka. H. Saiyid, *Op. Cit.*, p.1

14. Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza, *Op. Cit.*, p.40



encouragement to Muslim women. Accordingly, women wings of Muslim League were established both at the Centre and in all the provinces. "Quaid-e-Azam instructions were that there should be a recruitment drive through each and every district of India, and women should be made two-ana members of the Muslim League."<sup>15</sup> Right from their establishment, these wings became highly active to organise themselves by way of visits and co-ordination campaigns. Women of various cities and provinces not only kept contacts with one another but their delegates also visited different areas. "Within two years of the Patna session political consciousness had begun to spread to all groups and classes of Muslim women, and on March 23, 1940, the women section of All India Muslim League held its annual session at the Islamia College for Girls, Lahore."<sup>16</sup> Here the All India Muslim Women's League called Muslim women to come out of their secluded life and organise themselves under the League banner. "Two resolutions were passed at this session. The first pertaining to the Muslim League called for women to work amongst their friends and acquaintances and rally them to the Muslim League platform and help the party organise sub-committees in towns and rural areas. The second resolution called on Muslim men to help Muslim women get their legal rights which were rightfully theirs under the Shariat, but which they had been denied."<sup>17</sup> In response Muslim women and leaders of women section of league went and arranged the meetings in remote areas where league had not been formed till that time and they succeeded to convey the message of the league and arranged offices and meetings all over the state. On the occasion of annual session of Muslim league in 1940 at Lahore Quaid-e-Azam pointed out the importance of women's role in the League saying "I believe that it is absolutely essential for us to give every opportunity to our women to participate in our struggle of life and death. Women can do a great deal with in their homes even under *purdah*. I am glad to say that they have started their work seriously and earnestly. I have no doubt that when we come to deal with their report of work done we shall really feel grateful to them for all the services that they have rendered to the Muslim League."<sup>18</sup> The women's section of the Muslim League organised mushairas and get-togethers and the movement for Pakistan spread to girls' schools and colleges and was tied up with women's demands for the implementation of Shariat, as that would increase their rights under the law.

Participation of women of the Sub-Continent in the Pakistan Movement itself guaranteed its success in the struggle for independence. In 1941 it was decided that a Muslim Girls' Student Federation should be formed. The Muslim Student Federation for boys had already been created. "The girls' federation was proposed and launched by Lady Abdul Qadir, Fatima Begum and Miss M. Qureshi. Miss Qureshi was particularly active and went from college to college to spread awareness and to muster support for the idea of Pakistan."<sup>19</sup> While In February 1941, an All India Muslim Women Students Federation was inaugurated at Delhi by Begum Shaista Ikramullah. The first session of this conference was held in the Anglo-Arabic Girls College, Delhi. In this conference the

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15. Dr. Dushka. H. Saiyid, Op. Cit., p.1

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza, Muslim Women's Role in the Pakistan Movement, Lahore 1969, pp. 45-46

19. Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed, Op. Cit., p.18



contribution of Fatima Begum was greatly praised. By that time women were in the full swing of the Pakistan movement and continued their work of pushing the movement forward. "As a result a sub-committee was formed from amongst the women of the Muslim League's Central Committee for the express purpose of drafting a programme for the social, economic and cultural uplift of women."<sup>20</sup> Political participation of women played an important role in turning several stages of hardships into convenience. In the 1946 elections two Muslim women stood as candidates, Begum Salma Tassadduque Hussain and Begum Shah Nawaz. These elections were important, not just because there were two women candidates. The challenge was taken up by the women who toured the countryside relentlessly canvassing for the League. In the provincial elections the Muslim League emerged as the representative of the majority of Muslim Indians. "When, in spite of winning 79 out of the 175 seats, the Muslim League was not allowed to form a Ministry, 500 women in Lahore led a demonstration in protest. When resistance was offered, various leaders, including Begum Nawaz, were arrested. On hearing of arrest of Begum Shah Nawaz, other women arrived at the office and decided to express their solidarity by also courting arrest. Finally lots were drawn to choose one woman to be arrested and Begum Kamal-ud-din Ahmad from the Frontier Province won the draw and was taken to the Women Jail in Lahore. The following day a large number of women come out on the streets. They were baton charged and tear-gassed."<sup>21</sup> There were occasions when these ladies offered great resistance to the government of the time through their protests. "A young girl showed extraordinary courage by quietly climbing the building and hoisted the League flag in place of Union Jack."<sup>22</sup> It was a spectacular event and a courageous deed by women removing the Union Jack and replacing it with the crescent on top of the Governor's office amidst fire shots and strict security. Several ladies got wounded by baton charge and tear gas shelling, and many were arrested during their protest against the Congress ministries. Apart from this, these Muslim women offered devoted and selfless services both in social and economic terms for the society. When Muslim men were wounded during the Hindu-Muslim and Sikh-Muslim riots before and after independence of Pakistan, these women worked voluntarily day and night to provide them with first aid, food, shelter, medicines and hospitality not caring that families of many of these women themselves suffered during their voluntary services. Muslim women faced this challenge with a commendable sense of national spirit. Irrespective of caste and creed, age and status they resolved to face these heavy odds."<sup>23</sup>

### **Contribution of Muslim Women at the Provincial Level**

Although women from all over sub-continent served during the Pakistan struggle, but Punjab and NWFP had an edge in this regard as the women of these provinces not only actively participated in the organisational affairs, political meetings and processions and inter-provincial co-ordination but these were the women to have faced the abusive

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20. Ibid, pp.18-19

21. Ibid. P.20

22. Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza, Op. Cit., p.92

23. Ibid. p.98



designs of police force, hardships of imprisonment and detention. Through these steps, they developed political consciousness among their fellow women and convinced them to join the political movement. Muslim League acquired strength and elevation in UP only by virtue of the endeavours of the Muslim women of Delhi. In the capital city the Hindus and the British used all means to block the way of the Muslim League, but these brave women disseminated the message of the League to every Muslim family. Besides they performed administrative responsibilities as well e.g. for the annual meeting of the Muslim League and other gatherings to be held in Delhi, they played their role in effective organisation of these events. Again when it was time to establish Muslim League (Women's Wing), these women took every positive step from dissemination of the League's message to defeat the League's opponents. At the establishment of Congress government, they conducted a strong propaganda, which confused even the Hindus themselves. Muslim women of the eastern and western parts of Bengal did such splendid job in the political and educational field and promoted education in such a way that it influenced the entire country. The province of Bengal had the honour of having hosted the very first meeting of the Muslim League in its capital Dacca. Begum Shamsunnisa Mahmood, Begum Murshid and ladies of the family of Hasan Shaheed Suhrawardy managed the women wing of Muslim League quite successfully despite the strenuous work. The province of Northwest Frontier was then one of the backward areas of the Sub-Continent where ladies were confined to their homes and observed strict *Purdah*. Although in the beginning, role of these women was not significant nor could the provincial sub committee of the women's wing of the Muslim League do any notable service, yet from the elections of 1946 till the end of Congress ministries, the role of these women was in no way less than that of men. Like the Muslim women of the Punjab, they bravely faced baton charge and tear gas shelling by the police, detentions but continued with the civil disobedience movement. They depicted such enthusiasm that political restrictions became meaningless. It was these achievements that despite refusal at first, the Viceroy was constrained to meet them. The very struggle of these women disintegrated the Congress ministries, pressing the government to hold a referendum.

### **Volunteer Services & Sacrifices by Muslim Women**

When ethnic riots broke out all over the country, women helped the deprived and disaster-stricken in the camps by providing them with medical aid, food and other necessities. For acquiring these necessities, they had to make strenuous efforts as arrangement of these things was in no way an easy job. "In these circumstances women strived day and night and accepted the challenge. They made arrangements in the transit camps, which were organised, managed and supervised by them. In order to provide relief activities on a wider scale, an Employment Exchange Bureau, a Lost and Found Bureau and various other organisations were formed. Clothes, blankets, food utensils and other necessities of life were collected and distributed in the camps and relief centres."<sup>24</sup> Among the women workers, many stayed back in India even after 14<sup>th</sup> August 1947 as they were committed to taking out the Muslim families stranded in the riot-affected areas. These families were being shifted to the relief camps and taken care of by these female

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24. Ibid. p.101



workers. In the course of their services, many of these women lost their homes, properties, family members and even their honour at the hands of the anti-Muslim goons. Those who could reach Pakistan had suffered great losses, but they fulfilled their promise of "We will achieve Pakistan" (*Lay ke rahen gey Pakistan*).

In conclusion it can be said that Muslim women did not lag behind in any hour of trial during the Freedom Movement. Whenever and whatever the situation might have been, they never failed to respond to the call of the nation. With enthusiasm, devotion and spirit of unity, faith and discipline, the Muslim women worked in the provinces as well. Work carried out by the women's wing of the Muslim League at village level was admirable. It was in deed difficult to say that one province lagged behind the other in performance. Each area had its particular problems, which these workers were aware of. Some of these women belonged to the provinces with Muslim majority population or to those provinces that are a part of Pakistan now, while others came from provinces where the Muslims were in minority or such areas which were not included later in Pakistan. After independence, as soon as they arrived Pakistan, they joined hands with various women organisations and set to work for the social welfare and development. Besides, there were a number of social welfare organisations in the country, the best example of which is All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA). This association provided Pakistani women a platform for social activities. In brief, the struggle of Muslim women and their contribution for the creation of Pakistan has a remarkable history.