

*Begum Shaista Ikramullah:
A Woman Who Dared
(1915-2000)*

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In early forties of twentieth century, Muslim women of Delhi remembered a young girl in her twenties, well educated and talented, explaining to them about "All India Muslim League" — its motives and why it had become necessary for Indian Muslims to join it to achieve an independent Muslim State. She spoke so fluently and with such confidence and logic that flock after flock of young and old women joined Muslim League because of her oratory. It was mainly for her oratory that she became a frequent speaker in all the meetings arranged by the League in *mohallahs* and lanes of Delhi where majority of Muslim resided.

Shaista Ikramullah belonged to a family who claimed to be the descendants of Shaykh Shahab al-din Suharawardy, and well known for its significant contribution to the field of education. She was born in July 1915 in Calcutta. Her father, Hasan Suharawardy, was a brilliant surgeon. Khujista Akhtar Bano, the eldest sister of her father, is a prominent name among the pioneers of woman education. In order to translate her movement into reality she founded two girls' schools and wrote several books on women related issues.

Shaista received her early education in the traditional environment of her home where after completing the reading of the Qur'an, she was taught Persian, 'Arabic and Urdu. At the age of

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twelve, she was admitted to a Convent school named Loreto House. Her admission into a Christian missionary school was not welcomed by some of her relatives. But her father successfully resisted this opposition because he wanted his daughter to get the best education available in Calcutta. Probably he knew that sooner or later everyone would be compelled to go to the English schools to obtain a prominent place in the changing society. But this does not mean that the family had lost all contacts with their own culture and literature. At home her father and brother developed in her the taste for Urdu literature. Shaista's interest in Urdu literature continued to grow and very soon she became well versed in the works of Altaf Husayn Hali, Mir Anis, Assadullah Khan Ghalib and other Urdu writers. Having achieved enough command on the Urdu language and literature, she decided to test her literary skills by writing moral stories in women magazines of India. To her pleasant surprise these stories received more than expected appreciation from the readers.

Her interest in social activities also started at a very young age. At the age of 15, she became a member of "Delhi Women League". patronised by Arona Asif Ali. In late 1920's she got herself acknowledged as a public speaker when she attended the meeting arranged by the Muslim women in Delhi. It was here that she articulated Muslim point of view on the unpardonable issue *Rangila Rasul*. This was her maiden public speech that was greatly appreciated by the ladies.

In April 1933, she was married to Mohammed Ikramullah, Deputy Commissioner who later rose to the position of Under-Secretary at Imperial Secretariat in Delhi. After marriage she settled in Delhi where she got ample opportunities to meet the wives of Indian Civil Servants. In 1937 Ikramullah was transferred to London for a period of three years. She availed the opportunity and did her Ph.D. on "Development of the Urdu novel and Short Stories" from the King's College London in 1940. It was a great honour for her to be the first South Asian woman to get a Ph.D. degree in Urdu literature from any British University.

In late 1940 on the request of Mohtarma Fatima Jinnah, Shaista began to organize Muslim girls into a pro-Muslim group. Appreciating her tremendous efforts in this regard, Raja Sahib of

Mahmudabad appointed her as Convenor of Muslim Women Students Federation. Her husband, being a civil servant, advised her to refrain from it, as it was not allowed to the government employees. But she refused to comply because she knew that the Muslim League was in serious need of dedicated and devoted workers. The preference she gave to her nation's call further determined her to work for the League. Thereafter, she became an active member of the League Sub-Committees. It was through this platform that she presented before her audience the case of Pakistan at the *mohallah* level. Her convincing arguments, presented fluently in Urdu and English made a lot of sense to her audience and lured them into joining the League. This success was not without trials. A severely critical article published in "Hindustan Times" highly disturbed her. It was her first taste of criticism. She became very upset and went to Quaid-i-Azam for sympathy. He consoled her by saying that: "Every day the newspapers say much worse things about me. What would happen if I let it upset me? This is to be expected". When she rose to leave he added, "You must not let small things upset you". In later years when she encountered meanness and malice, she remembered those considerate words of the Quaid.

1946 Provincial Elections were very important for Muslims of India, as it was to determine their future course of action. Shaista Ikramullah was fully aware of it. She went from house to house to ask even the housewives to come out and vote for the League. Under her command and leadership women worked shoulder to shoulder along with their husbands in towns and villages at every strata of society. The men seemed to be grateful to her for making them forget their centuries old conservatism and enabling them enter in a new era with a much-satisfied heart.

The main election battle was fought in Liaquat Ali Khan's constituency in United Provinces. The Congress felt that his defeat would mean the defeat of League that is why they fought against him with all their strength and Muslims fought back with equal zeal. To Hindu's dismay, Liaquat Ali Khan won the election. Shaista also won the election but she could not join the Assembly as a policy matter because the League had decided not to join Indian Legislative Assembly.

After the establishment of Pakistan she shifted from Delhi to Karachi, her husband was appointed as Secretary in the Department of Foreign Affairs. She worked with other ladies for the rehabilitation of refugees. She helped women in establishing industrial homes, educational and other welfare centres for the benefit of poor women.

In the first Legislative Assembly of Pakistan there were only two elected women representatives, Shaista Ikramullah and Begum Jahan Ara Shahnawaz. Even at this forum she continued to work for the betterment of women especially the destitute ones. Her efforts were significantly rewarded through an allotment incorporated in the budget for development programmes for women. Besides her very busy schedule as a parliamentarian, she started served in All Pakistan Women Association (APWA), Red Cross and many other welfare societies. She also had the honour of becoming member of National Urdu Board together with other luminaries like Josh Malihabadi, Shanul Haq Haqqi and Jamiluddin Aali. But very soon she lost interest in the working of the Board and resigned because the Board had spent so many years on Urdu *Lughat* (Dictionary) alone.

In 1948, she represented Pakistan in the United Nations at Paris. In 1951, she went to the US and explained struggle for Pakistan to Americans. In 1956, again she was member of a delegation to the United Nations. There she effectively countered the Indian propaganda by refuting the typical anti-Pakistan views expressed by Mr. Krishna Menon. During Ayub era she was appointed as Pakistan's Ambassador to Morocco. At the Casablanca Conference she was able to get a resolution passed with a margin of 13 to 11, condemning Indian aggression in 1965 war and upholding Pakistan's just stand on Kashmir.

With the passage of time, she had become an established writer. She wrote regularly for *Ismat*, *Tehzeeb-e Niswan*, *Humayun*, *Pakistan Times*, *Sindh Observer*, *Dawn* and *Morning News*, which established her reputation as a writer both in English and Urdu. She wrote interesting books like *Letters to Nina*, *Behind the Veils*, and *From Purdah to Parliament*. The last book she wrote is on *Hussein Shaheed Suhrawardy: A Biography*. Her Urdu novels include *Koshish-i Nat Tamam* and *Safarnamah*. Little before her

death she completed English translation of *Meerat-ul-Uroos* and an Urdu volume on *Kahawat and Muhavarey*, both are under publication.

Shaista being a very liberal and broad-minded Muslim woman has left a message for us through an advice to her daughters that as:

... modern Muslim woman, it did not mean that we had to behave in an indecent fashion to assert that modernity. Yes, it was perhaps essential to get rid of *burqa* it was a big hurdle toward emancipation, but we did not have to compromise our modesty, nor our demeanour.

Having lived a full and satisfied life, the lady who dared to do what very few women did in South Asia, she died on 11th December 2000, in Karachi.