

Quaid-i-Azam on the Role of Women in Society

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Muslim women of the Indian subcontinent observed strict *purdah* or seclusion well into the twentieth century. They spent their lives confined to the four walls of their homes. Reformers had advocated their education and a better treatment, but no one had asked for their emancipation. Nazir Ahmed had persuasively argued in his novels in favour of educating Muslim women, but within their homes.¹ Altaf Hussain Hali had used the powerful vehicle of his poetry to criticise the treatment meted out to women.² Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, the most important Muslim reformer of the 19th century, had argued that Muslim women's education must wait till the Muslim men had been given modern education.³

It was not till the launching of the movement of Anjuman-e Khuddam-e Ka'abah in 1913, that Muslim women began to get involved in any kind of public activity, although it seems to have been restricted to raising funds. It was the Khilafat movement and the imprisonment of the Ali brothers in 1917, which brought their mother, Bi Amman, out. She addressed large gatherings from behind *purdah*, which she continued to observe. However, Bi Amman and her daughter-in-law Amjadi Begum's contribution,

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1. Dushka H. Saiyid, *Muslim Women of the British Punjab: From Seclusion to Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 76-78.
2. See Altaf Hussain Hali's "Chup ki Daad", *Kulyat-e Nazm-e Hali* (Lahore: Majlise Taraqqi Adab), p.46.
3. Sarfraz Hussain Mirza, *Muslim Women's Role in the Pakistan Movement* (Lahore: University of the Punjab, 1969) p. 9.

significant though it was, did not bring out Muslim women in any substantial numbers.

It was the Quaid-i-Azam who broke away from the accepted and traditional view of the role of Muslim women in society, and brought about a radical transformation in it. The Quaid was responding to a change that was sweeping the world, and had gained momentum in the post-First World War period. The Suffragette movement and the women's struggle for emancipation, was an important element of the social and political changes taking place in the west. In the Indian sub-continent its expression could be seen in the sudden outburst of women's magazines that began to be published from different parts of India, in the decade before the outbreak of the Great War.

The Quaid seems to have been aware that Muslim women had been left far behind in the march towards progress as compared to Hindu women, and he made deliberate effort to undo this backwardness. Hindu women had been active in the Indian National Congress since 1889, and had participated in the movement against the partition of Bengal in 1905. At the meeting of the Muslim League at Lucknow in 1937, a women's section was formed with Begum Mohammed Ali as its President.⁴ However, it was not till the Patna session in December 1938 that an All-India Muslim Women's Sub-Committee was formed. Thus began the serious involvement of women in the activities of the Muslim League. The All-India Muslim Women's Sub-Committee's purpose was the organization of provincial and district women's sub-committees. Amongst the objectives of this Sub-Committee was "to carry out intensive propaganda amongst the Muslim women throughout India in order to create in them a sense of greater political consciousness".⁵

The Quaid's take-over of the Party leadership in 1934 not only brought Muslim women into the fold of the party and helped organize them all over the country, but also mobilized the students and youth. The Quaid made a special effort to visit girls' schools

4. Dushka H. Saiyid, p. 87.

5. Text of Resolutions passed at the Twenty-Sixth Annual Session of the All India Muslim League, 26-29 December 1938, at Patna, *Freedom Movement Archives*, vol. 191, p. 40.

and colleges, an unprecedented step. Fatima Begum, the Principal of the Islamia College for Women, Lahore, invited him to come and address the students.⁶ In his ringing voice he is quoted to have addressed the audience saying:

... I am glad to see that not only Muslim men but Muslim women and children also have understood the Pakistan scheme. No nation can make any progress without the co-operation of its women. If Muslim women support their men, as they did in the day of the Prophet of Islam, we should soon realize our goal.⁷

He made his most definitive statement on the role that he envisaged for women in the country he was struggling to create. He said, "...no nation is capable of remaining a strong nation, unless and until its men and women do not struggle together for the achievement of its goals." He went on to tell his female audience that they were faced with a great political movement and asked them to participate in the struggle till it met with success.⁸

The Quaid had set the tone for the freedom struggle of Pakistan. He had stated in categorical terms that in the achievement and struggle for Pakistan, Muslim women were to participate as equal partners. That he practised what he preached was demonstrated by the presence of his sister by his side in almost all public activities. This was a period when the norm was women to be in seclusion and housebound.

It is therefore, not surprising, that a general militancy and radicalism spread through the ranks of the women activists of the movement for Pakistan. A young student of the Lahore College for women, addressing a meeting at the Town Hall in honour of the Quaid, called upon the Muslim men to educate Muslim women so that they could take their rightful place alongside men for the achievement of Pakistan. She argued that Islamic history was replete with instances when Muslim women had fought the battles of Islam side by side with men, and the ideal of Pakistan would become a reality once the Muslim women were also involved in the struggle.⁹

6. *Eastern Times*, 28 October 1942.

7. *Ibid.*, 22 November 1942.

8. *Inquilab*, 3 April 1940.

9. *Ibid.*, 26 November, 1942.

Women and girl students were involved in the freedom movement to an unprecedented degree after 1940. The elections of 1946 led to more activism by the Muslim League women supporters, and they travelled to different parts of the country, mobilizing women of such far-flung areas as the North West Frontier. They also helped in the polling stations.¹⁰ When despite winning a majority of the seats it did not result in the formation of a Muslim League government, the Muslim League acquired more militant tactics and the women took to the streets. The women's participation in agitation and demonstrations and public meetings only increased in 1947. According to one report, over a thousand women attended an annual session of the Frontier Provincial Women's Muslim League held in Peshawar on 2 February 1947.¹¹

When the Quaid got an invitation in 1946 from the International Herald Tribune to send two of his representatives to the Tribune Forum, he nominated M.A.H. Ispahani and Begum Shahnawaz. Ispahani writes that the Quaid told him that he "would ask Begum Shahnawaz to accompany me to the USA to counter-act the Hindu propaganda that the Muslims were reactionaries and their women were neither politically awake nor exercised any rights and, therefore, if Pakistan were founded, it would be an intolerant and theocratic State".¹²

Much before the Quaid's impact in Muslim League politics was felt, he had already made a major contribution in strengthening women's legal position through social reform legislation. The main beneficiary of the Child Marriage Act of 1929 and the Shariat Act of 1937 were Muslim women. Initially the Child Marriage Bill had been moved by Rai Sahib Habirlas Sarda to eradicate this social evil amongst the Hindus, but was later made applicable to all the nationals of British India.¹³ The orthodox sections of both Hindu and Muslim leadership opposed the Bill arguing that the government was reneging on its promise

10. *Punjab Police Abstract of Intelligence* (Lahore: 9 February 1946), p. 68.

11. *CID Report*, 10 February 1947, in *ibid.*

12. M.A.H. Ispahani, *Quaid-i-Azam As I Knew Him* (Karachi: Elite Publishers, 1976), p. 231.

13. *Proceedings of the Council of the Governor-General*, 5 September 1929, p. 356.

not to interfere in the personal laws of the communities living in India.

The Quaid was clearly in favour of the legislation which would protect the health of young girls, who were married off when still children. To counter the orthodox opinion the Quaid said, "Sir, I am convinced in my mind that there is nothing in the Qoran, there is nothing in Islam, which prevents us from destroying this evil".¹⁴ The Quaid lived up-to his reputation of taking strong positions on issues he considered important for the weal of the people he represented. While discussing the Child Marriage Bill he declared:

But, Sir, I make bold to say that if my constituency is so backward as to disapprove of a measure like this, then I say... 'You had better ask somebody else to represent you'... and if we are going to allow ourselves to be influenced by the public opinion that can be created in the name of religion when we know that religion has nothing whatever to do with the matter, I think we must have the courage to say 'No we are not going to be frightened by that'.

He also lauded the government policy of not staying aloof from carrying out pressing social reform.

The Quaid played an important role in guiding the Shariat Act of 1937 through the Central Legislative Assembly. In certain parts of India where the personal law of the Muslims was customary law, there was a demand to replace it by the Shariat (the Muslim religious law). In Punjab, for instance, the law of primogeniture applied in inheritance, and women did not inherit any property. The Quaid made clear as to why he regarded the replacement of customary law by the Shariat to be of such great import. He said:

...the principle underlying this Bill is to secure to the female heirs their due shares according to Muhammadan Law. According to the customs and usages that have prevailed, the position of the female heirs has been a very precarious one. ...I submit that the Islamic code of law is most just because the shares are defined there, namely the daughter gets half the share of the son, and similar is the position of the female heirs.... even today the economic position of woman is the

14. *Ibid.*, p. 385.

foundation of her being recognised as equal of man and share the life of man to the fullest extent.¹⁵

Quaid-i-Azam spelt out his views on women repeatedly in his speeches and statements, leaving no room for ambiguity. It was not a theoretical position but a belief that he translated into action by empowering women and girls through the Muslim League. He successfully unleashed their energies, and so they were able to play a major role in the Pakistan Movement. He supported or initiated legislation, which would improve women's legal position. Such was the courage of his convictions that he was willing to resign rather than succumb to popular pressure against social reform. This is the legacy that the Quaid has left for us.

15. Muslim Personal Law (Shariat Application Act, 1937) (Delhi: Government Printing Press, 1938); M.A. Jinnah, 9 September 1937, p. 1445.