

A Beacon of Light

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As the Muslim freedom movement gained momentum a graceful and dignified figure began to symbolise the Muslim women. This figure was Miss Fatima Jinnah whose 96th birth anniversary is being celebrated today.

Miss Jinnah, younger sister of the Quaid-i-Azam, was born in Karachi on July 31, 1893. She received her early education at the Convent School, Bombay. Then she went on to do a diploma course in Dental Surgery from Calcutta. In 1923 after completion of the course she set up her practice in Bombay. Thus she became the first Muslim woman to enter the ranks of dental surgeons. However, in 1929 she left her practice to join the Quaid-i-Azam, and never left his side till his death in September 1948.

Miss Jinnah gave him her total support throughout the struggle for Independence. She was his companion and comforter. In fact, she was the only one who knew his inner-most feelings. She also gave an impetus to the freedom struggle by organising Muslim women and collecting them under the canopy of the Muslim League.

After 1929 Miss Jinnah accompanied the Quaid everywhere. In 1930 she accompanied him to London and participated in the first Round-Table Conference. She also attended the 1937 session of the Muslim League. After 1940 she participated in all the sessions of the League.

Once the fruits of Muslim struggle had been realised Miss Jinnah did not abandon her participation in active life.

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An educated lady, she understood the importance and value of education. For her the only path that Muslim women could follow was the path of enlightenment by acquiring knowledge.

At the time of partition very few Muslim women had entered the professional world. In fact, there were only five lady doctors in Pakistan. There was no medical college for women in Lahore, though one was being constructed by Hindus. Once they left there were some qualms in official circles whether the construction should continue. Dr. Shuja'at Ali, a prominent surgeon, approached Miss Jinnah as he was in favour of going ahead with the construction. She was in total agreement with him. She told him to go ahead with the plan and leave the official approval to her. Today Fatima Jinnah Medical College stands as a monument to her efforts.

Like her brother she was wary of mullas and obscurantists. She saw them as a hindrance to the progress and welfare of Pakistan. She said: "We are not a state run by priests or a hierarchy. We are a state organised according to Islamic principles."

She is today mostly remembered for her role in the 1964-65 elections. With her election emblem of a lantern she became a symbol of democracy. As the unanimous choice of all opposition leaders of Pakistan she rose to challenge Ayub Khan. Such was the trust they all placed in her that the fact that she belonged to the fair sex was never thought to be a stumbling block. Ulema, maulanas, veteran politicians all were at her back. And the public? They already venerated and cherished her. Now they saw her as the 'Mother of the Nation' who had come to their aid in beleaguered times to lead the country on the road to democracy as envisaged by the Quaid. They gave her the title of *Madar-i Millat*.

She toured extensively and tirelessly from one corner of the country to the other. Whenever she went mammoth crowd turned up to hear and cheer her. And women always turned up in large numbers.

Recalling one such Incident one of her workers says a public meeting had been arranged in Faisalabad, when she contracted severe cold. Many advised her to cancel the meeting. She refused to do so because a huge crowd had turned up to hear her. The meeting ground was jam-packed. There was no way to reach the

dais. But when she appeared the crowd parted quietly and she walked to the platform. Once she started to speak women standing near the dais were so choked with emotions that tears began to flow down their cheeks.

The welcome she was accorded in East Pakistan was even greater. Wherever she went crowds gathered to catch a glimpse of this great lady. Often they would lie down on rail tracks, refusing to budge till she came out and addressed them. To them she was a living reminder of their great leader. If the elections had been fair she would have had a landslide victory. She did manage to give many a sleepless night to the ruler.

Miss Jinnah breathed her last on July 9, 1967. Though its 21 years since her death, this slender, white-haired lady always clad in white shalwar kameez is still spoken of with love and respect and remembered for sincerity of her words.