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Role of Women in Pakistan: A case Study of Begum Shaista Ikramullah

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Role of Women in Pakistan: A case Study of Begum Shaista Ikramullah

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Abstract

This research analyzed the great personality of Begum Shaista Ikramullah and her services for the Muslim women. She belonged to elite family and her family were very prominent in politics. Her cousin Huseyn Shabeed Subrawardy also remained prime minister of Pakistan. Begum Shaista Subrawardy Ikramullah was a Pakistani author, politician, diplomat and social-activist whose life bridges the late colonial and post-colonial phases of South Asian history. Her biography illustrates the discursive pressures shaping the lives of upper and intermediate class men and women of her generation, particularly as manifested in the unquestioned tropes of modernization theory. However, the same life reveals that her notion of the tradition-modernity dichotomy does not extend to the equation of Islam with tradition. The secular-religious divide, in fact, does not feature in her thought or activism at all. The latter activism also problematizes the assumption that Muslim women, any more of less than non-Muslims, are marginal or peripheral players in the history of the twentieth century. She was one among the two women of first Constitution Assembly of Pakistan. Begum Shaista stood for the reservation of seats for women. The earliest post-independence women's agitation was to secure economic rights for women which led by Jahanara Shah Nawaz, Shaista Ikramullah and other thousands of women marches to the assembly in 1948. But the role of Shaista Ikramullah for the women made her an ideal figure. Shaista's work became the cause of emancipation of Muslim women. In every society, women played a very important role. This thesis is exploring the role of women in politics, especially in the context of Begum Shaista Ikramullah. Begum Shaista Ikramullah has been known politician

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and leader in the social welfare. Thesis additionally plates the different organization which had started of women during freedom movement. Very few works on the Pakistan movement have analyzed the efforts of women in the freedom struggle. Further, available works highlights services of women in the elite section of societies. This research is an attempt to bring to light the process of developing political consciousness among women belonging to all section of society. It also elaborates their services and sacrifices which they rendered during the Pakistan movement.

Keywords: Shaista Ikramullah, Pakistani Women Leaders, Colonial and Post-Colonial Politics, Gender and Nationalism, Islamic Modernity

Introduction

The history of the twentieth century is marked by profound movements and revolutions advocating liberty, equality, freedom, and democracy, with women's issues emerging as a significant global phenomenon during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Traditionally, women were largely excluded from political leadership, yet their role in these transformative periods proved pivotal. Women's activism evolved through distinct phases, reflecting broader societal changes. In the early nineteenth century, figures like Raja Ram Mohan Rai began challenging oppressive social practices such as Sati, widow remarriage, and child marriage. This era was characterized by a focus on social reform, aiming to address the injustices faced by women through rational and humanitarian criteria. The subsequent phase, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, emphasized women's education, marking a significant shift towards recognizing the importance of educating women as essential for societal progress. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women's political engagement entered its third phase, transforming their activism from a niche ideal into a broader political crusade. The involvement of women in political and social movements was not confined to mere symbolic gestures but was integral to the struggles for independence and societal transformation. In colonial India, the intertwining of feminism and nationalism became evident, with the pursuit of independence uniting men and women in a common cause. British colonialism brought about significant changes, including the infiltration of liberal ideas into the educated classes, particularly concerning the role of



women. Within Muslim communities, reformers like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan advocated for women's education and social participation, gradually shifting attitudes towards women's roles. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this movement gained momentum, with women from aristocratic families increasingly participating in public life and politics. In Pakistan, a country shaped by patriarchal and feudal structures, women's participation in politics faced considerable obstacles.² The male-dominated political landscape, reinforced by socio-cultural barriers and practices like purdah, severely restricted women's roles in public and political spheres. Despite these challenges, women began to assert their rights more forcefully, supported by emerging feminist movements and liberation struggles. Figures like Sarojini Naidu, who made politics her full-time occupation, exemplify the critical role women played in the freedom struggle against British rule. During the Quit India Movement of 1942, women continued political activism despite the absence of top leaders, organizing protests, strikes, and meetings. In the context of the Muslim movement in undivided India, women traditionally occupied roles as mothers and homemakers. However, efforts by reformers like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan led to increased educational opportunities for women, particularly from aristocratic families. Many of these women later emerged as leaders in the Pakistan movement, contributing significantly to public life and political activities. Among them, Begum Shaista Ikramullah stands out as a notable figure. Her contributions to the Pakistan movement and her advocacy for women's rights were instrumental in shaping the political landscape of the time. Shaista Ikramullah's eloquence and leadership in promoting the All India Muslim League significantly mobilized support among women, demonstrating her vital role in the movement.³

Shaista Ikramullah's life and work challenge traditional dichotomies of Eastern tradition versus Western modernity. Her autobiography and public life reflect a hybrid post-colonial identity, blending various influences to address societal issues. She integrated modernity with tradition, presenting Islam as inherently modern rather than adhering to a rigid secular-religious divide. This nuanced

² Lajpat Rai, *A History of Arya Samaj*, quoted in Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's rights and feminism in India, 1800-1990*, (New Delhi: Kali for women, 1993), p21

³ Azra Asghar Ali *The emergence of Feminism Among Indian Muslim Women 1920-1947*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p2-3.



perspective underscores her impact on shaping contemporary views on tradition and modernity. Following the creation of Pakistan in 1947, Shaista Ikramullah, along with other prominent women, played crucial roles in the Constituent Assembly, advocating for women's rights and representation. In 1946, she, alongside Jahanara, was elected to the Central Constituent Assembly of India and continued her service in the Pakistan Constituent Assembly post-independence. Their efforts led to the reservation of seats for women in both East and West Pakistan, marking a significant achievement in the early years of Pakistan's formation. Despite political challenges and attempts to marginalize her, Shaista Ikramullah's advocacy ensured that women's issues remained a focal point in legislative agendas. In 1949, the founding of the All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA), with Begum Liaquat Ali Khan as its president, represented a formal effort to address women's welfare and education in post-independence Pakistan. Shaista Ikramullah's advocacy led to the reservation of women's seats in the 1956 constitution, reflecting her commitment to women's representation. Her involvement in Ayub Khan's constitutional commission further demonstrated her dedication to advancing women's rights. Despite the limited representation of women in the Pakistani parliament, Shaista Ikramullah's contributions were invaluable. Her political activism and commitment to women's rights set a precedent for future generations. The biographies of influential figures like Begum Shaista Ikramullah highlight the significant impact of women in shaping historical and political narratives. Her life and work exemplify the blending of tradition and modernity and underscore the importance of recognizing women's roles in both local and global contexts.⁴

Life and Role of Shaista Ikramullah in Pre-Partition India

This chapter explores the formative years of Begum Shaista Ikramullah, a significant figure whose astute political insight and commitment to socialism laid the groundwork for the advancement of Muslim women. Shaista was among the foremost leaders whose farsightedness and statesmanship led to societal betterment. Her accomplishments as an emancipator of women and as a sagacious leader stand as a testament to her legacy. As one of the few Muslim women to actively participate in the Pakistan Movement, her contributions cannot be understated. In the early 1940s, the Muslim women of Delhi remembered Shaista as a young, well-educated, and talented woman in her twenties, who spoke confidently about the "All India Muslim League." Her

⁴ Shahida Lateef, *Muslim women in india: political and private realities 1890-1980*, 34.



oratory, marked by logic and fluency, drew many young and old women to join the League, making her a frequent speaker at meetings in the Muslim neighborhoods of Delhi. Her autobiography presents Islam as inherently modern, challenging the secular-religious divide in modernization theory. She was not merely a subject of global forces but played a pivotal role in shaping the world she lived in, proving that a Muslim woman could hold significant local and global influence. Shaista's political training began at home, where her father and male relatives were involved in the Khilafat Non-Cooperation Movement after World War I and were elected to various legislatures once the limited franchise was granted. Shaista Ikramullah was born on July 22, 1915, in Calcutta, the largest city of British India at its zenith. She belonged to the distinguished Suhrawardy family of Bengal, known for its contributions to education and politics. Her father, Hassan Suhrawardy, was a brilliant surgeon who became the Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University. He was the second Muslim from the subcontinent to receive the FRCS degree from London. Shaista's paternal grandfather, Ubaidullah al-Ubaidi Suhrawardy, was a prominent Sufi scholar who later embraced English education, becoming the principal of Dhaka Madrasa, the first British-style grammar school in the city. Shaista's family emphasized education, with her aunt Khuijsta Akhtar Bano Suhrawardy Begum being a notable figure in promoting women's education in Bengal. Shaista's early education was rooted in traditional and Western disciplines, reflecting her parents' contrasting outlooks—her father was an anglophile, while her mother clung to the traditions of the Mughal court. This duality influenced Shaista's upbringing, as she navigated between the Arabian Nights world of her maternal family and the ultra-Westernized environment of her father's home. Her father, determined to provide her with the best education, enrolled her in Loreto House, an English convent school in Calcutta, despite opposition from relatives concerned about potential conversion to Christianity and the breaking of purdah.⁵ Shaista's interest in Urdu literature blossomed during this time, and she soon became well-versed in the works of prominent Urdu writers like Altaf Huseyn Hali, Mir Anis, and Assadullah Khan Ghalib. She began writing moral stories for women's magazines, which were well received, marking the beginning of her literary career. The untimely death of her eighteen-year-old brother, a victim of tuberculosis, led her family

⁵ Dr Rizwan Malik, Samina Awan, *Women Emancipation in South Asia* (Lahore: Center for South Asian Studies, university of the Punjab, 2003), 50.



to abandon objections to her pursuing higher education. She reciprocated by maintaining purdah and marrying early to ease her mother's concerns. Shaista married Mohammed Ikramullah in 1933, in a marriage arranged since she was thirteen. The wedding followed every convention of her mother's house, and Shaista, adhering to orthodox views on marriage, held no resentment towards her family for arranging it. She completed her BA in English Literature at Calcutta University just days before the ceremony. Marriage brought significant changes to Shaista's life. Ikramullah, a member of the Indian Civil Service, was posted to New Delhi shortly after their marriage. Shaista found herself in a highly British environment, with locals being few and her husband the only Muslim civil servant in the city. She eventually shed the custom of purdah, making her debut at a garden party, despite initial discomfort and the disapproval of her uncle. Though she adapted to mixed company, she found the social patterns of a civil servant's wife in New Delhi rigid and dull. However, she forged lasting friendships with select South Asians and Britons, relationships that endured through the years of anti-colonial and pro-Pakistan activism. The Ikramullahs' first child, a son named Inam, was born in Calcutta. After three years in Delhi, Ikram was transferred to London, where the family remained until 1939. During this time, two daughters, Salma and Naz, were born. Shaista rejoiced at the opportunity to further her education in England, a place she had visited before and loved. She studied journalism and literature at the University of London, and in 1939, she became the first Muslim woman to earn a Ph.D.

2.1 Achieved Ph.D. Degree:

Shaista Ikramullah was the first Muslim woman to earn a Ph.D. from the University of London. Despite having three children, she pursued further education and, in 1939, achieved the distinction of being the first Muslim woman to earn a Ph.D. from the University of London.⁶

2.2 As a Laureate and Journalist:

Shaista's dissertation explored the development of the Urdu novel and short story. Published in 1945 as Handbook of Urdu Literature: Including a Critical Survey of the Development of Urdu Literature, it remains a significant and erudite work. The book reveals much about her broader perspective, effortlessly transitioning from a history of English and European novels to Urdu literature.

⁶ Azra Asghar Ali, *The emergence of Feminism Among Indian Muslim Women 1920-1947*, p3.



A chapter on women authors highlights her view that their works were more polished than those of male authors in the second generation of Urdu novelists. However, she lamented that the spread of English education stymied further development of Urdu literature. Shaista argued that before Western influence, Urdu literature had reached a dead end, its language polished to the point that nothing original could be done. She critiqued the fatalistic attitudes expressed in traditional Urdu literature, contrasting it with the modern, Western-influenced ideals of struggle, adventure, and realism. The rise of Urdu prose was, in her view, a natural complement to the realistic attitude that Western influence brought. Shaista's later works, such as her autobiography written in the 1950s and *Behind the Veil* (1953), continued to explore the tradition-modernity dichotomy. *Behind the Veil* was written to show her Western friends a glimpse of Muslim life, particularly the late-Mughal or Nawabi culture experienced by women in purdah. The book dispels Western misconceptions of Muslim women's lives as dull and drab, painting a picture of peace, security, and charm. Though nostalgic and somewhat exaggerated, Shaista hoped that Pakistanis would never lose the magic and color of the 'East.' Her works, including *Letters to Neena* and *Behind the Veil*, made significant contributions to shaping Pakistan's cultural identity. *Letters to Neena* addressed the reasons for the creation of Pakistan and the challenges it faced, while *Behind the Veil* revived interest in traditional customs. Her literary activities included writing on women and social issues in magazines like *Tehzib-e-Niswan*, *Ismat*, and *Humayun*. Her books, including *From Purdah to Parliament* (1963) and *Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy: A Biography* (1991), remain important works in understanding the history of colonial India, Pakistan, and the Muslim world. Shaista's dual existence, embracing both modernity and tradition, reflects the time and place in which she lived. She maintained a nostalgia for her mother's world behind purdah but found the modern life of a sovereign Parliament more rewarding. She imagined herself as a member of a Muslim nation, contributing to the shaping of South Asian history and enacting aspects of Islamic law as a member of Pakistan's highest legislative body. Her writings fused various influences, undermining the notion that Islam and the Muslim world are uniformly at odds with Western values.⁷

As a Political Leader:

⁷ Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya, *The Awakening of Indian Women*, (Madras:Every men Press, 1939),p8- 9.



Shaista Ikramullah was never far from politics, particularly as she matured. Her father and male family members had participated in the Khilafat Non-Cooperation Movement and were elected to various legislatures. Their circle of friends included leading members of the Indian National Congress and All-India Muslim League. Shaista was aware of the rising tide of anti-colonial nationalism from the 1920s, even though she was too young to understand the issues fully. Her first overtly political act came in 1931, as a university student in purdah. She attended a meeting called by her mother's friends to discuss the fate of two teenage Muslim boys sentenced to death for killing the Hindu author of an anti-Muslim tract. Shaista made her first speech, proposing a motion of censure on the execution, which she viewed as a criticism of the colonial government. Although deeply stirred, her mother disapproved and never took her to another such meeting. In the 1946 Constituent Assembly, at least fourteen women were given representation, including Shaista Ikramullah. She was an experienced political leader who had campaigned for Muslim League candidates in the 1945-46 elections and was elected to the Constituent Assembly of India on the Muslim League ticket. At the time of independence, she became an elected member of the Assembly, actively participating in the events that shaped Pakistan's early history. In her book *From Purdah to Parliament*, Shaista expressed the challenges of being a woman politician in a time when most women were confined to their homes. She acknowledged that while she often longed for the peace of her days in purdah, there could be no turning back from the richer, fuller life of public service.

2.4 Social welfare projects; Role in freedom movement:

Begum Shaista Ikramullah's political activism played a pivotal role in emancipating Indian women during the freedom movement. Her patriotism and devotion to the national cause gave women newfound freedom, enabling them to step into the public sphere as volunteers, pickets, and politicians. In her autobiography, Shaista reflected on how the political struggle brought women to the forefront of public life, sweeping away prejudices and taboos. She passionately advocated for the restoration of women's political rights, emphasizing that any man who obstructed these rights was hindering his country's progress. Shaista also highlighted the significant contributions of women in history, pointing out that early Arab civilization was built on the cooperation and equality of both sexes.⁸ She referenced a feminist conference

⁸ Azra Asghar, *The emergence of Feminism Among Indian Muslim Women 1920-1979*, p7



that culminated in the creation of the Arab Feminist Union (AFU) in late 1944 or early 1945, a few months before the establishment of the male-dominated Arab League. Though Shaista did not live to see Egyptian women gain the right to vote, the AFU's legacy persisted, eventually evolving into the Huda Shaarawi Association, dedicated to social services. Shaista's involvement in politics deepened in 1940 when she joined the Muslim League, working tirelessly to popularize its aims. As a member of the Women's Sub-Committee, her contributions were highly valued. Her return to Delhi in 1939 marked a significant change in the city's atmosphere, particularly the growing rift between Hindus and Muslims. She observed how the actions of the Indian National Congress further alienated Muslims, passing laws that forced Muslim children to attend government schools with a distinctly Hindu tone and participate in activities that offended Muslim sentiments.

A trivial yet telling incident highlighted the growing communal tensions: Shaista's use of the title "Begum" instead of "Mrs." at a party invitation sparked criticism from a Hindu friend, who saw it as emphasizing religious differences. This confrontation made Shaista acutely aware of the deepening communal divide, ultimately leading her to become more involved with the Muslim League. The League's Lahore Resolution of 1940, which called for sovereign Muslim states, resonated with her growing awareness of the need to preserve Muslim identity and rights. Shaista's first meeting with Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah in 1941 further solidified her commitment to the Muslim League. Contrary to the negative propaganda she had heard, Jinnah engaged with her thoughtfully and respectfully, discussing political matters in great detail. This encounter, along with her interactions with Jinnah's sister, Fatima Jinnah, drew Shaista closer to the Muslim League's cause. Despite initial resistance from her husband, who was a government official skeptical of the League, Shaista's dedication to the movement never wavered. Her role expanded further when Fatima Jinnah encouraged her to help establish a Muslim Women's Student Federation. With guidance from the Secretary of the Muslim Students Federation, Muhammad Numen, Shaista became the Convener of the newly formed organization. Despite her husband's advice to refrain from such political activities due to his government position, Shaista understood the critical need for dedicated workers in the Muslim League and pressed on with her efforts.



The formation of the Women's Students Federation reflected the growing estrangement felt by Muslims at the time. Shaista noted the challenges faced by Muslim students in predominantly Hindu institutions, where their cultural and religious identities were often suppressed. The students' frustration with these experiences culminated in the Federation's resolution in favor of Pakistan, asserting their desire to preserve their separate, independent, religious, and cultural existence. They feared that the economically and technically superior Hindus would dominate them, underscoring the importance of political power in safeguarding their identity. Shaista Ikramullah's journey from social activism to political leadership illustrates the vital role women played in the freedom movement, as well as the broader struggle for Muslim rights in India. Her story is a testament to the power of dedication, the influence of key figures like Jinnah and Fatima, and the impact of grassroots mobilization in shaping the course of history.⁹

2.5 As a Bengali Woman: Role in Freedom Struggle

Begum Shaista Ikramullah was a highly qualified woman with a Ph.D. from London, her doctoral dissertation focusing on *The Development of the Urdu Novel and Short Story*. Born into the prominent Suhrawardy family of Bengal, her lineage was influential in the educational and social uplift of Bengali Muslims. Her father, Sir Hasan Suhrawardy, served as the Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University. Her uncles, Sir Abdullah Suhrawardy and Sir Zahid Suhrawardy, were notable figures in Muslim social and political spheres. Her cousin, Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy, gained significant prominence in politics, serving as the Chief Minister of undivided Bengal and later as the Prime Minister of Pakistan (1956-57). Shaista married an ICS officer, Ikramullah, in September 1932, who later became Pakistan's first Foreign Secretary. Initially a housewife, Shaista emerged from purdah after her marriage and, despite an early interest in politics in the 1920s, did not join the Muslim League until 1940. When the Muslim League launched its movement for Pakistan, Shaista became actively involved in politics, passionately supporting the League. In her autobiography,

⁹ Hussain Mirza, *Women's Role in the Pakistan Movement* also see Sharif al Mujahid, *Muslim League Documents*(Karachi:Quaid-i- Azam Academy,1990),p39-40 41



she noted that the political struggle generated enthusiasm and offered women the opportunity to step into public life.¹⁰

2.5.1 Bengali Muslim Politics and the Role of Women

The history of Bengali women's involvement in the freedom struggle is marked by significant sacrifice and revolutionary activities against the British government. Women, including teenage girls, participated actively. For example, in 1931, Shanti and Suniti assassinated the District Magistrate of Comilla and were subsequently arrested and executed. Another brave woman, Beena Das, attempted to assassinate the Governor of Bengal, Sir Stanley Jackson, during a convocation address. Many revolutionary women worked with Subhas Chandra Bose, the General Officer Commanding of the Chhatri Sangh established in 1920, in preparing bombs and engaging in wartime activities. Figures like Kalpana, Preeti, Beena, Kalyani, Shanti, and Suniti left their families, schools, and colleges to support Bose's efforts. Susheela Devi mutilated her fingers in support of Tilak, Batukeshwar Dutt, and Bhagat Singh. Durga Devi, at the age of sixteen, also fought alongside Bhagat Singh and later became the President of the Delhi Congress Committee in 1938. The spirit of the freedom movement extended beyond India, reaching South-East Asia, including Thailand, Malaya, and Malaysia. In Kuala Lumpur in 1942, women organized an Indian Independence League to support the freedom movement from abroad. Subhas Chandra Bose actively encouraged women to join the struggle, leading to the formation of the 'Rani of Jhansi Regiment' by Laxmi Sehgal. Women's political participation and aspirations for high political status were evident in their demands for voting rights, comparable to those of men. In 1917, Annie Besant, Smt. Sarojini Naidu, Hirabai Tata, and Mithiben Tatan represented women's interests to the Secretary of State. They demanded that women with graduate degrees or property qualifications be granted the right to vote. The Indian National Congress also supported this cause in a Bombay meeting, passing a resolution in favor of women's voting rights. The Southborough Committee, tasked with determining women's voting rights, was influenced by the prevailing social status of women in India. Eventually, Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy became the first female member of the Madras Legislative Council and later served as its Deputy Speaker. By 1926, most provinces had granted women unconditional voting rights. The Government of India Act 1935 further ensured

¹⁰ Ikramullah, Shaista Suhrawardy. Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah Ki Muntakhah Tahriren.44



equal voting rights for men and women. In the 1937 elections, eight women were elected from general constituencies, and six women were appointed as ministers.¹¹

2.5.2 Bengali Muslims and the Demand for Pakistan

The period saw a shift in socio-cultural norms as Western ideas began replacing traditional orthodoxies. The Western socio-cultural notions of humanism and individualism provided Indian Muslims an opportunity to break away from social authorities. The ideals of progress, freedom, and equality became central themes, fostering a public space for women and leading to societal regeneration within the colonial context. The introduction of modern political institutions, education systems, and legal reforms contributed to the development of a distinct Indian identity. British efforts to implement social reforms among Muslims further raised awareness of political rights. In the 1946 Constituent Assembly, fourteen women were represented, including Ammu Swaminathan, Dakshayani Velayudhan, and Durgabai from Madras; Hansa Mehta from Bombay; Malti Chaudhary from Orissa; Sucheta Kriplani, Vijaya Laxmi Pandit, Purnima Banerjee, Kamala Chaudhary, and Begum Azaz Rasul from U.P.; Sarojini Naidu from Bihar; Begum Jahanara Shah Nawaz from Punjab; Lila Roy and Begum Shaista Ikramullah from Bengal. This representation underscores the significant participation of women in the freedom struggle, influenced by family members, local leaders, the contemporary political environment, and Mahatma Gandhi's compelling call for involvement.

Notably, many of these women were uneducated or barely literate, and the participation of scheduled caste women and Muslim women was minimal. The inspiring letters and autobiographies of Mahatma Gandhi, along with the influence of leading patriot families like those of Motilal Nehru, C.R. Das, Jamuna Lal Bajaj, and Lajpat Rai, were pivotal in the political awakening of women. Initially, urban middle-class women dominated the movement, but over time, women from poorer, less educated backgrounds joined the political arena. Women from various communities, including Muslims and Parsis, also participated. Prominent activists like Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kriplani, and Usha Mehta engaged in underground activities. The sacrifices made by women during the freedom struggle—enduring torture, starvation, and imprisonment—highlight their indelible contribution to India's history. Begum Shaista

¹¹ Women's Role in the freedom Movement, by Begum Shaista Ikramullah.



Suhrawardy Ikramullah's experiences, including her family's final moments, demonstrate her commitment to separating personal relationships from political and communal identities. Despite objections, she ensured that her family received compassionate care from a hospital staff primarily composed of Hindus, reflecting her enduring belief in humane and non-sectarian values. Her experiences and writings reveal a profound social and political consciousness that shaped her contributions to the freedom movement.¹²

3.1 Life and Role of Shaista Ikramullah in Pakistan

This chapter explores the life and contributions of Shaista Ikramullah in Pakistan. Raised in a strict yet liberal family environment that upheld women's status according to Islamic teachings, Shaista Ikramullah's role as an ambassador and a member of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan is highlighted. Her tenure as Pakistan's ambassador to Morocco from 1947 to 1964, her contributions as a delegate to the United Nations, and her notable authorship are examined. Shaista Ikramullah's early involvement in social activities and her significant role in the All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) are also discussed.¹³ In the early 1950s, when women's representation in provincial legislative assemblies was minimal, with only two female members—Begum Jahanara Shahnawaz and Begum Shaista Ikramullah—their commitment to women's rights was evident. They successfully included women's rights in the agenda of the Constituent Assembly and contributed actively to the formulation of laws promoting women's rights and participation in national affairs. Both women, hailing from prominent political families and having been politically active before 1947, played crucial roles during the transition to Pakistan.

Shaista Ikramullah, while in New Delhi in February 1947, experienced the announcement of the British withdrawal from India with a mix of excitement and anxiety, particularly due to her personal circumstances. After her father's death and her daughter's illness, she arrived in Pakistan on September 17, 1947, missing the last phases of the transfer of power but eventually settled in Karachi. As one of the only two women elected to the Constituent Assembly, she played a pivotal role in shaping Pakistan's foundational legal and political framework.

3.1.2 Constitutional Development, Women's Rights, and Begum Shaista Ikramullah as a Member of Parliament

¹² Shaista S. Ikramullah, *From Purdah to Parliament*, London, 1963, p17-19.

¹³ Ibid. 30.



3.3. Performance in the Parliament

On August 14, 1947, Muhammad Ali Jinnah became the Governor-General of Pakistan, and his first cabinet was appointed on August 15 under Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan. This cabinet, although inclusive of various regional leaders, notably sidelined experienced Bengali leaders, resulting in a cabinet criticized for its lack of experienced personnel. During 1947-69, women had minimal representation in the early parliaments (1955-56 and 1956-58). Despite their small numbers, women like Begum Shahnawaz and Begum Shaista Ikramullah made significant contributions, participating in debates on national issues, budget discussions, and committee work, demonstrating their active engagement in parliamentary affairs.¹⁴

3.1.2 Nature of Women's Participation

The Constituent Assembly had two primary roles: legislative functions and constitution framing. Women's participation in parliament varied, including debates on the annual budgets, bill discussions, amendments, and committee work. Both Begum Shahnawaz and Begum Shaista Ikramullah were active members of several committees and contributed meaningfully to parliamentary proceedings. The introduction of the Objective Resolution by Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan on March 7, 1949, led to significant debate. The resolution, which emphasized sovereignty belonging to Allah and mandated that laws conform to Islamic principles, faced opposition from various quarters, including Hindu members and some Muslims. Despite criticism, the resolution passed and became a cornerstone of Pakistan's constitutional framework. Begum Shaista Ikramullah was involved in various legislative and advisory roles. In 1948, she was appointed to the central executive committee of the Pakistan National Tuberculosis Association. By 1949, she was on the Basic Principles Committee (BPC) and its sub-committees, contributing to the formation of an Islamic constitution. Despite challenges, including debates on the role of women, Shaista Ikramullah's efforts were pivotal in shaping constitutional provisions. The BPC's reports and constitutional drafts evolved, with significant contributions from women like Begum Jahanara Shahnawaz, who advocated for reserved seats for women. The 1956 constitution incorporated some of these recommendations, including provisions for women's equality. However, political instability and subsequent military interventions impacted the implementation of these reforms. In 1962, the constitution reserved seats for

¹⁴ Ikramullah, From Purdah to Parliament, p. 50



women, though not indefinitely. The debate on women's representation continued, with figures like Begum Roqya Anwar advocating for increased representation. The political environment, including opposition to women's leadership by some religious groups, further complicated the issue. Under the Zia regime, women's political participation faced setbacks, but the return of Benazir Bhutto marked a significant achievement, as she became the first female head of government in a Muslim country. This progress reflected the enduring struggle for women's rights and representation in Pakistan's political landscape.¹⁵

3.1.3 Political issues:

In the first parliament, Begum Shaista Ikramullah and Begum Shah Nawaz supported the government's move to grant more powers to the center as proposed in the Government of India Bill. This amendment aimed to address the refugee problem, as 'refugee rehabilitation' was listed under provincial subjects, leaving refugees dependent on provincial governments. While A.M. Malik, a Bengali member, supported the proposal, Khwaja Nazimuddin opposed it. Begum Ikramullah later proposed that the subject of development should also fall under central jurisdiction. When Liaquat Ali Khan introduced the Objective Resolution in March 1949, Begum Ikramullah supported it, stating, "In the declaration of this Objectives Resolution, we have undertaken a tremendous task of great personality. My declaration that Muslims will be enabled to order their lives in accordance with the teachings of Islam as set out in the Holy Quran and Sunnah is not a great achievement until translated into practice." She lamented that the promises made during the Pakistan movement had not yet been fulfilled. Begum Shah Nawaz raised issues concerning women's rights related to property, marriages, and family laws, arguing that Muslim women were not receiving their rights according to Islam. She also demanded the establishment of special courts for women, with female judges, and the appointment of a legislative commission to repeal laws in line with Islamic injunctions. Begum Jahan Ara, an active member of the APWA, supported these demands. In 1955, during the Bogart government, a commission was appointed, including Begum Jahan Ara, to examine existing laws on marriage, divorce, and child custody. Although the commission's report faced opposition from Maulana Ihteshamul Haq and was not made public, it was a step towards

¹⁵ Nabeela Afzal, *women and Parliament in pakistan* (Lahore: Pakistan Study Center, University of the Punjab, 1999)p66-67



addressing these issues. Begum Shaista also criticized elaborate marriage ceremonies and emphasized simple, inexpensive marriages in accordance with Islam. She advocated for women's education and highlighted the insufficiency of existing educational institutions. She proposed establishing more schools and colleges for women, ensuring equal job opportunities, and eliminating gender discrimination in employment. Begum Shaista also suggested a ministry of social services, though her proposal was rejected.¹⁶

3.1.4 Social and Economic Issues

Begum Shaista Ikramullah actively contributed to social, economic, and political issues. In 1948, she was appointed to the central executive committee of the Pakistan National Tuberculosis Association and various educational commissions. She believed education was crucial for national development and was a member of the Central Board of Education. Her focus was on establishing schools and colleges and providing scholarships to deserving students. At that time, the literacy rate was only ten percent.¹⁷ Begum Shaista advocated for the allocation of maximum funds to education and support for reducing illiteracy. Post-independence, there were 292 hospitals and 722 dispensaries in Pakistan. During the 1950 Budget session, she emphasized the need for health centers focusing on maternal mortality and childbirth rates. She proposed building All-Pakistan Health Schools, fixing doctors' fees by the government, and encouraging foreign doctors to practice in Pakistan. Additionally, she supported the rehabilitation of female refugees by granting land for cultivation. Begum Shaista believed that only an Islamic economic system (Zakat, Baitul Mal, and inheritance laws) could transform Pakistan's economy. She recommended establishing an economic experts' commission and emphasized mechanized farming and agricultural research institutes. In her 1950 Budget speech, she proposed establishing employment exchanges and training centers for skilled labor, advocating for fixed daily wages and minimum salaries for lower-income classes. She also suggested creating a ministry of social services with central and provincial offices, but her proposal was rejected. Despite her efforts, she observed that Pakistani society was male-dominated and indifferent to women's issues. Nevertheless, women in politics faced challenges but were determined to resist and advance their positions. In her autobiography, Begum Shaista Ikramullah reflects on the significant changes in her life as a politician,

¹⁶ Ikramullah, *From Purdah to Parliament*, p. 70.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 80.



transitioning from a protected, aristocratic background to an active political role. As one of the first women elected to the National Assembly in 1946, alongside Begum Jahan Ara Shahnawaz, she worked tirelessly for women's betterment. Despite facing numerous challenges, including resistance from male colleagues, her efforts led to significant achievements, such as securing women's rights to inheritance through the 'Muslim Personal Law of Shariat' (1951) and advocating for women's representation and equal opportunities. Despite her criticisms of the Objectives Resolution due to its implications for religious minorities, she made notable contributions to women's rights and legislative reforms.¹⁸

3.2 Important Women Political Figures of Pakistani Politics

Following Pakistan's creation, women's organizations played a crucial role in refugee rehabilitation. The All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) was formed in 1949, with Begum Liaquat Ali Khan as founder-president and Fatima Jinnah and Begum Nazim-ud-Din as patrons. APWA, with over 20,000 members, is one of Pakistan's largest women's organizations. Jahanara Shahnawaz, born in 1896, was a pioneering figure in women's political participation and ensured the inclusion of women's rights in Pakistan's constitution. Madar-e-Millat, Fatima Jinnah, Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah's sister, played a vital role in the Pakistan movement and founded the Women's Relief Committee, which evolved into APWA. In 1964, she was nominated for the presidency by the Combined Opposition Parties (COP), marking a significant step in women's political empowerment. Begum Rana Liaquat Ali Khan, the first Pakistani woman governor, was actively involved in the Pakistan movement and women's political consciousness. Besides these prominent figures, others like Begum Salma Tasadduq Hussain, Fehmida Mirza, and Begum Nasim Wali Khan also made significant contributions.

3.3 As an Ambassador; Shaista as a delegation to the U.N.O:

In 1948, Shaista was included in several international delegations to the United Nations Organization (U.N.O). Later, in 1956, she was appointed deputy leader of the Pakistan delegation to the U.N. Her involvement in international diplomacy began while she was still a member of the Constituent Assembly, with her appointment to Pakistan's delegation to the U.N.O in 1948. This role

¹⁸ The work was reprinted as Shaista Akhtar Ikramullah, Handbook of Urdu Literature: Including a Critical Survey of the Development of Urdu Literature (New Delhi: Indigo Books, 2003)



brought her into contact with Eleanor Roosevelt, alongside whom she was the only other woman and the sole Muslim involved in drafting the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights,' serving as a member of the Third Committee. She was also part of the Fifth Committee working on the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. However, Shaista expressed frustration and disappointment with the final drafts passed by the General Assembly in Paris in December 1948.¹⁹ In particular, provisions regarding non-discrimination on racial and national grounds were deleted from the Declaration, reflecting the reactionary attitudes of many Western nations. Such deletions and other disagreements highlighted the reluctance of nations to concede any infringement on their sovereignty, making the Convention on Genocide virtually ineffective. Shaista criticized the removal of references to an independent body with the authority to prosecute offenders, including states, parties, and individuals. This, she argued, rendered the Convention nearly useless. The omission of sections concerning cultural genocide, which she associated with the experience of Muslims in South Asia, and the rejection of an amendment defining grounds for prosecution, underscored her disappointment. Despite these setbacks, Shaista believed that the Declaration and Convention represented a significant advance, albeit with limited practical impact. Shaista returned to the U.N.O General Assembly in 1956 as head of the Pakistan delegation and again as a delegate in 1982. Her contributions to the 1948 Declaration and Convention illustrate how a seemingly marginalized individual, particularly a Muslim woman, can make substantial contributions to global history. This underscores the need to reconsider assumptions about the presence and influence of Muslim women in modern history and the notion that Islamic societies are uniformly opposed to women's representation. Unlike Saudi Arabia, which abstained from voting on the Declaration, Shaista, a woman advocating for Islamic legislation in Pakistan, showed that even in a state created in the name of Islam, there was no inherent contradiction with the 1948 Declaration. This reflects the diversity of interpretations within the Muslim world.

In addition to her diplomatic work, Shaista authored two significant works: *Letters to Neena* and *Behind the Veil*. *Letters to Neena*, first published in 1951 and earlier serialized in the Pakistani daily *Dawn*, was addressed to a friend named Neena and aimed to counter misconceptions about Muslims in India and

¹⁹ Frieda Hauswirth, *Purdah: The Status of Indian Women*, London, 1932, p 47.



Pakistan. Shaista defended the loyalty of Muslims and argued that their sympathies for Palestine or Turkey did not equate to disloyalty. She dismissed accusations of Muslims acting as fifth-columnists and criticized the violence against Muslims in India as an attempt to burden and destabilize Pakistan. Regarding the Kashmir conflict, Shaista acknowledged the incursion of tribesmen from Pakistan but defended their actions as independent responses to perceived injustices. She criticized India's military response to the Maharaja's accession and accused India of hypocrisy. Shaista's defiant stance was evident as she questioned who were the true invaders and who were the invaded.²⁰

Behind the Veil, first published in 1953, was written for Western audiences to provide insight into Pakistani life. Although Shaista acknowledged some exaggeration, she hoped that Pakistanis would retain the cultural charm associated with the East. The book also reflected her perspective on modernity and tradition, with Shaista herself opting for the sari over the shalwar-kamiz, which was promoted by others as national dress. Together, Letters to Neena and Behind the Veil represented significant contributions to Pakistan's national narrative. Letters to Neena played a role in shaping the international understanding of Pakistan's position on Partition and Kashmir, while Behind the Veil contributed to defining Pakistani identity domestically and abroad. Shaista's work reflects the broader political and cultural dimensions of Pakistan's early years, demonstrating her impact on both national and global scales.

3.4 As an Ambassador of Morocco: Diplomatic Services

Shaista's time in Pakistan was short-lived, as she left for Morocco in 1964 to assume the position of Pakistan's highest emissary—a post she specifically requested. By this time, Pakistan was preparing for a general election under Ayub Khan's new constitution, and it was clear that Shaista would likely oppose Ayub, particularly given Fatima Jinnah's intention to run for President. It is said that Ayub offered her the ambassadorial position to mitigate the opposition. During her meeting with the President, Shaista openly expressed her disapproval of military rule. Her relationship with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then Ayub's Foreign Minister, was also strained due to her candid views. Shaista's appointment as Morocco's first female ambassador was historic. Her previous

²⁰ Naumana Kiran, FAITMA BEGUM: A NARRATIVE OF USING HERO OF PAKISTAN MOVEMENT, (Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan volume No. 54, Issue No. 2 (July – December, 2017) p 274



visits to Morocco, assisting anti-colonial leaders and providing Pakistani passports before independence, had earned her respect. King Hassan II even descended from his throne to receive her credentials, and when the Saudi Arabian Ambassador objected to the presence of a woman at a state function, the King refused to comply with the request. Shaista's positive impressions of Morocco were reflected in her writings in the Urdu journal *Ismat*, where she expressed admiration for the country's cultural preservation.²¹ However, internal issues within the Pakistan embassy, including corruption, led to her resignation after three years. Upon returning to Pakistan in 1967, Shaista continued to hold the Arab world in high regard. The 1967 Arab-Israeli War deeply distressed her, and in a summer 1968 article, she lamented the suffering of Palestinians and the impact on Jordan, highlighting King Hussein's leadership. This sympathy for the Arab world was further reflected in her daughter Sarvath's marriage to King Hussein's brother, Crown Prince Hassan, in 1968, with the wedding featured in the second edition of *Behind the Veil*. Shaista's aristocratic roots and political experiences influenced her views on Arab nationalism and the overthrow of leaders like Farouk in Egypt and Faisal II in Iraq. Despite her admiration for Canada, where she resided from 1952 to 1953, she cautioned against emigration, particularly for intellectuals, citing the potential loss of distinctive traits. Her diplomatic career, marked by her impactful roles and contributions, demonstrates her significant influence in both Pakistani and international contexts.²²

3.5 Death and Achieved Nishan-i-Imtiaz:

Shaista's disillusionment with Pakistan's political leadership and its disinterest in her values is evident from her long absence from formal politics, which lasted nearly three decades until her death. Despite receiving due respect from various leaders, Shaista struggled to reconcile with policies she opposed, such as the anti-Ahmadi legislation introduced under Z. A. Bhutto and the broader anti-minorities and anti-women legislation enacted by his successor, General Zia ul-Haq. Although Benazir Bhutto was respectful towards her, Shaista remained distant from political involvement. It was only in 1999, at the age of 80, that she participated in a political protest against Nawaz Sharif, marking her first overtly political act in decades.

²¹ Riaz Ahmed, *Constitutional and political Developments in Pakistan 1951-54* (Publisher: Pak American, Rawalpindi: 1981), p45-56

²² Mohtarma Fatima Jinnah Papers, File 293, pp. 185.



Upon her death on December 11, 2000, Shaista had met General Pervez Musharraf, who had removed Nawaz Sharif from power. Musharraf held her in high regard and posthumously awarded her Pakistan's highest civilian honor, the Nishan-i-Imtiaz. Throughout her later years, Shaista continued to speak and write as a voice of conscience and collective memory. She authored a biography of her cousin, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (1991), and a posthumously published work, *Dilli Ki Khwateen Ki Khwateen aur Muhavare* (2005). Her final work, *Common Heritage*, published in 1997, was a collection of essays contributed by notable Indians and Pakistanis, reflecting her enduring commitment to a shared cultural legacy.²³ The biographies of figures like Begum Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah offer valuable insights into the colonial era, the history of India and Pakistan, Islam, and the broader Muslim world. Her life, bridging modernity and tradition, captures the essence of her time. Like many of her contemporaries in colonized regions, Shaista perceived the gains of modernity as outweighing the losses. Despite her nostalgia for traditional elements of her upbringing, she found the modern, sovereign Parliament more fulfilling. Her identity as a parliamentarian was marked by both her traditional attire and her legislative work, showing a blend of Eastern and Western influences. Shaista's approach to tradition and modernity was nuanced. She did not reject tradition outright but integrated it with modern values, reflecting a hybrid post-colonial identity. This fusion challenges simplistic views that equate tradition with custom and secularism with modernity. Her interpretation of Islam as inherently modern, despite occasional tensions between Islamic and Enlightenment philosophies, highlights her unique position. Rather than a strict secular-religious divide, Shaista's life and work embody a synthesis of diverse influences, contributing to both South Asian and global historical narratives.²⁴ Her role as Pakistan's representative on various U.N.O. committees and her commitment to a unitary vision for humanity underscore her impact. Her example challenges stereotypes of Islam and the Muslim world as uniformly opposed to Western or Hindu values. Shaista's biography serves as a reminder to scholars, particularly those focused on prominent figures like Muhammad Ali Jinnah and M. K. Gandhi, not to overlook the significant roles played by women in shaping local and global histories. Her life and contributions reveal

²³ Ikramullah, *From Purdah to Parliament*, pp. 88–89

²⁴ *Ibid.* 95.



the complexity and richness of the historical forces at play in the twentieth century.

Conclusion

The history of the twentieth century has witnessed numerous movements and revolutions advocating liberty, equality, freedom, and democracy. Women's issues gained global prominence during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a period when women were largely excluded from political leadership. However, the pivotal role of women in these movements is undeniable. Their involvement evolved through three distinct phases: social reform, education, and political engagement. In the early nineteenth century, reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Rai began addressing social practices such as Sati, widow remarriage, and child marriage through rational and humanitarian criteria. This marked the first phase of women's activism, focusing on social reform. The second phase, starting from the mid-nineteenth century, emphasized women's education. During this period, the importance of educating women was increasingly recognized as crucial for societal advancement. The third phase saw women stepping into the political arena, transforming women's emancipation from a niche ideal into a broader political crusade. Political upheavals and struggles for independence played a significant role in altering the status of women. In colonial India, feminism and nationalism became intertwined, with the pursuit of independence serving as a unifying goal for both men and women. The British colonial presence brought about profound changes in Indian society, including the spread of liberal ideas that began to influence the educated classes, particularly regarding women's roles. Among Muslim communities, reformers like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan advocated for women's education and social participation. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a growing demand among Muslim men for women's participation in society. Women's clubs and societies emerged, focusing on discussing and addressing issues related to Muslim women, and establishing educational institutions for girls.

In Pakistan, a male-dominated political environment, shaped by patriarchal and feudal structures, significantly restricted women's political participation. Socio-cultural barriers and practices like purdah further limited women's roles in the public and political spheres. Despite these challenges, women became increasingly assertive in their quest for rights, aided by emerging feminist movements and liberation struggles. Notable figures like Sarojini Naidu



demonstrated women's crucial role in the freedom struggle against British colonial rule. During the Quit India Movement of 1942, women continued political activism despite the absence of top leaders, organizing demonstrations, strikes, and meetings. In the context of the Muslim movement, women traditionally played roles as mothers and homemakers. However, efforts by reformers like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan led to increased educational opportunities for women, particularly from aristocratic families. Many of these women later emerged as leaders in the Pakistan movement, contributing significantly to public life and political activities. Begum Shaista Ikramullah, a key figure in this context, was among the few Muslim women who actively participated in the Pakistan movement. Her oratory skills and advocacy for the All India Muslim League were instrumental in mobilizing support among women. Shaista Ikramullah's contributions extended beyond her activism. Her autobiography challenges the dichotomy of Eastern tradition versus Western modernity. She reconciled tradition with modernity, presenting Islam as inherently modern rather than adhering to a rigid secular-religious divide. Her life exemplified a hybrid post-colonial identity, blending various influences to shape her approach to societal issues. After Pakistan's creation in 1947, Shaista Ikramullah and other women played critical roles in the Constituent Assembly, advocating for women's rights and representation. In 1946, she, along with Jahanara, was elected to the Central Constituent Assembly of India and continued to serve in the Pakistan Constituent Assembly post-independence. They successfully campaigned for reserved seats for women in both East and West Pakistan, a significant achievement in the early years of Pakistan's formation. Despite political challenges and attempts to sideline her, Shaista's efforts ensured that women's rights were on the agenda. In 1949, the All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) was founded, with Begum Liaquat Ali Khan as its president, promoting women's welfare and education. This organization marked a significant step in formalizing women's roles in post-independence Pakistan. Shaista Ikramullah's efforts led to the reservation of women's seats in the 1956 constitution, a milestone for women's representation in politics. Although women's representation in the Pakistani parliament remained limited and did not reflect their population proportion, the contributions of women like Shaista Ikramullah were invaluable. Her political activism, coupled with her commitment to women's rights, set an example for future generations. In conclusion, the biographies of influential figures such as Begum Shaista



Ikramullah highlight the significant impact of women in shaping historical and political narratives. Her life and work exemplify the intertwining of tradition and modernity, demonstrating that women's roles in political and social change are integral to understanding the broader historical context. Shaista Ikramullah's legacy as a leader and advocate for women's rights underscores the necessity of recognizing and valuing the contributions of women in both local and global spheres.

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