

Quaid-i-Azam and the Politico-Legal Empowerment of Muslim Women

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Abstract

Tell your young girls, I am a progressive Muslim leader and Pakistan will be progressive country in the building of which women will be set working should to shoulder with their men (Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah).

This paper aims to discuss the deep and continuous concern of Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah regarding the social, political and legal upliftment of Muslim women. The traditional role of Muslim women was readdressed by Quaid to meet the challenges of Muslim society, particularly, during the seconds half of the twentieth century. As a member of Legislative Assembly from the Bombay Constituency, he raised his voice for the enforcement of those social measures, which were aimed at the removal of the social disabilities of women. The question of women upliftment as understood by the Quaid and his the contemporaries was betterment of Muslim society as a whole. The vision of Jinnah about the political participation of women will also be pointed out in the paper as a negation of all misinterpretation and misconception through which the picture of Muslim society was painted as a rigid and static entity.

Regarding the legal and political status of women in British India, it is generally assumed that it was the essential result of those movements and changes, which were introduced to redefine the social role of Indian society in changing circumstances. These developments and changes were also largely accommodated by the different social groups of Indian Muslims, according their needs and desires and within their own cultural framework. Before coming to the topic, it is necessary to analyze the situation in

which the legal and political role and status of Muslim women was redefined and reassessed both by the government and social reformers of that time.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have witnessed far-reaching changes for Muslims of India. Faced with the assault of Western power and values, many Indian Muslims found themselves grappling with the problems of whether or not, or how, to reform their own societies in order to strengthen themselves under these changes circumstances. With political power slowly but constantly, slipping out of their control, they turned their attention to the so-called private world as the focus for their reforming urges. Muslim women and their lives became crucial to this new process of reform.

These changes that led the Muslims of India to construct their own cultural identity popularly known as 'Sharif Culture'. The subject of women as central of this sharif culture as it was generally assumed that the position of women provided an excellent indicator of the health and progress of Muslim society in India. The shift within sharif culture in the early twentieth century away from localized traditional norms to largely shared values, meant that it sought to expand its ideological discourse into the realm of the common middle class or new 'bourgeois class'. As a result, the social reforms debate at the turn of twentieth generated an awareness of women's issues and a call for legal and political changes in the status of women. It was argued very often that as compared to Gandhi, the efforts of Jinnah for the upliftments of Muslim women were mainly revolved around his political agenda rather than a manifesto of change in their social status. Minault has also observed in one of her writing she says:

This is not to suggest that Jinnah's political career was mainly associated with the movement for Muslim women's reform. He was however, able to articulate issues raised by

those interlocking movements within a political and legislative context.

In fact Jinnah had deep and continuous concern for the Muslim women. He wanted to educate them, emancipate them from the thrall of *purdah*, put them side by side with their men folk and make them true comrades and companion in the battle of life. The nature of relationship between the Quaid i-Azam and his sister Fatima Jinnah can be cited as a best example in this regard. The sister provided peaceful environment to her brother who devoted his energies to prepare Muslim of India for the struggle for Pakistan. Their relations were based on personal sacrifice, mature trust, fellow feelings and intellectual understanding that lasted till the last days of the Quaid and even after his death kept alive by the sorrowful sister in all the circumstances. Fatima Jinnah used every available opportunity to propagate the message of her brother among the masses and classes of Pakistan.

As a husband too, Jinnah treated his wife Rati, very generously. Dwarkadas explain their love in the following words:

He found in her a great source of inspiration. His personal, political and social life was always with Ruttie. She was always with him and though she was so much younger than he, she without his realizing it, looked after him and made his life in all its aspects, pleasant, carefree and well worth living.

In fact, Quaid wanted to make women good mothers, wives, daughters and sister and above all, a good person by raising their social status. In one of his speeches he said:

I believe that it is absolutely essential for us to give every opportunity to our women to participate in our great struggle of life and death. They are shut up within the four walls of the house like prisoners and closely confined in the

veil when out. The condition of our women is a crime against humanity.

The efforts of Jinnah for the social uplift of women might be seen through his legal and political agenda, which he propagated, as a member of Legislative Assembly as well as an active leader of Muslim League.

As far as the legal empowerment of women is concerned, one can easily conclude that customary laws and social taboos have always dominated the scene. Whereas, the purpose of various legislative measures were however, to protect the rights and interest of women besides protecting them against social discrimination and gender differentiation. Although, both the Hindu and Muslim social reformers had the similar discourse towards these social disabilities of women, yet they looked to different textual sources for their inspiration. For Muslims as argued by Minault "changes or changes-whether external or internal had to be met by arguing for a relation to a pristine Islam as it secures all the social rights and legislations through which women would be able to spend their social life in a better ways. As a result, the introduction of legislative measure by the Government was mainly seen in the light of Islamic teachings and their far-reaching impact on Muslim society. There were three main pieces of social legislation through which the dynamic efforts of Quaid can be visualized. These were:

1. Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929.
2. Muslim Shariat Application Bill of 1937.
3. Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act 1939.

The campaign against Child Marriage was started as Bill for Hindus and then converted into one for all communities. The Bill was opposed by a significant section of the Muslim representatives of the Legislative Assembly. However, the more progressive representation including Shahnawaz and Muhammad Ali Jinnah not only supported the Bill but also favored the social

legislation to carry out social reforms. Jinnah also called it welcome change in the traditional policy of government. On September 11, 1929, the Legislative Assembly resumed the consideration of Bill as reported by the Select Committee. Speaking on Bill, Jinnah Said:

“Sir, the first and foremost question that I put to myself as member of the Legislative is whether child marriage is an evil in this country or not; is a crying evil or not? Is it inhuman that thousand and millions of girls should be married at a very tender age, which must sap their womanhood? Sir! I do not think whatever, may be the controversy on this point, on the plea of humanity that there is a single member in this house who can contemplate with quantity and would not deplore and condemn that evil and inhuman practices, which are daily taking place in this country, is it or is it not a fact? Sir! I entirely agree with my friend Shahnawaz, I was my self unaware of the extent and the degree of evil that existed among the Musalman.”

Many evidences were also from Muslims describing child marriage as an unmitigated evil destroying the health as well as the progress of the nation. Muhammad Ali Jinnah noted “that to begin with, people always looked upon these semi-religious usages and practices as the very foundation of their society and any country like India, he suggested, where public opinion was not so developed, reforming agencies should not allow themselves to be influenced by public opinion which could resent social reform in the name of religion. On the other hand, he said. Muslims had to have the courage to say ‘no’ we are not going to be frightened that. In the same way Jinnah was also every active in passing of the Shariat Act of 1973. It was the general consensus of Muslim leadership that the Shariat would improve the right of women. The Shariat Bill as pointed by Dushka was not only an expansion of the movement to improve the lot of women but also symbolized

the movement of Islamic revival among the Indian Muslim. In one of his speeches in Legislative Assembly Jinnah said as:

"Sir as I said, the principle underlying this bill is to secure the female share according to Muhammad Law. According to the customs and usages that have prevailed, the position of female has been a very precarious one. If a man dies his widow is only entitled to maintenance. When the question arises as to what maintenance she is entitled to is always a very difficult question to decide because when a son or a male succeeds to a large estate, he tell the widow that Rs 1000 is quite enough for her, although , it may be an estate of ten or twenty or thirty lacks.

Regarding the political empowerment, the campaign for Indian women's suffrage, which began after the enactment of the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919, sought to bring about radical changes in the role of women in public life? Central to this new development was the idea of sex-equality as symbolized by the vote. This in turn, went on to influence their own perception of themselves, encouraging women to determine their personal arena, their national role, their interests and their activities. It also provided them with a platform from which they could influence both the Government as well as political parties to support their cause. Moreover, it increasing, led to the realization as the Report of Indian Statutory Commission in 1930 noted "that India could not reach the position to which it aspired in the world until its women played their due part as educated citizen.

However growing communalism between Muslim and Hindus had critical consequences for the women's movement in the country. The fact that Muslims were in a minority in India went over, to mould the very character of the socio-political reforms that began to be introduced in the early twentieth century. Western educated Muslims were increasingly concerned about the implication of this status for their political future and community

interests. They stressed on the necessity of communal safeguards to protect them from the sheer numerical predominance of Hindus. Under the dynamic leadership of Quaid, the Muslim League now began to organize and involve women in politics. In 1938 the League established an all India Muslim Women's Sub-Committee which aimed to co-opt Muslim women to organize them for its cause. In his presidential address of the meeting of Muslim League in 1938, Muhammad Ali Jinnah said:

"You may remember that we appointed a committee of ladies at the Patna Session. It is of very great importance to us, 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 within their homes even in purdah. We appointed a committee with a view to enable them to participate in the work of League".

In 1940 when the League passed the Pakistan Resolution at Lahore. One remarkable feature of the session was the unprecedented number of women who attended it. In 1941 another step to extend the activities of Muslims women was taken through the formation of the Muslim Girl Students Federation. Lady Abdul Qadir, Shaista Ikramullah, Fatima Begum and Miss. M. Qureshi launched the Federation under the patronage of the League.

In 1942 Jinnah took direct interest in women's committees and during the course of his tours across the country, he addressed a large gathering of women. At that time the participation of women in Pakistan movement was in full swing. Women composed songs usually, saying 'Pakistan is our birth-right; we will pass through many storms and we will live or die for Pakistan.

The presence of the newly formed Women National Guard in 1943 further signified the acceptance of an entirely new role for

Muslim Women. They were no longer bound to remain at home in isolation under heavy protection. In wearing the uniform of white *pajama*, white *kurta* and green *dupatta*, the women of the National Guard collected funds, sold bags and propagated the idea of Pakistan.

In the same way, the election of 1946 was important because they were the test of Muslim League's claim of being representative of Muslims women. The women members of the League who toured the countryside canvassing for the League also took up this challenge and in this way, they proved themselves as a powerful potential source of political activity. The Muslim League won all the major seats of the Central Assembly. Students from Alighrah to Lahore had shown great zeal, and the female students played major role.

In the Quaid acted as Duskhya has noted, in the tradition of a whole host of Muslim intellectuals and thinker, who before him had been calling for the education and emancipation of Muslim Women. However, he was the first to actively promote their participation in politics and the Muslim League. His message was loud and clear: women should come out of their confinement and be equal partners in the social and political life of the country.

Muhammd Ali Jinnah was also of the view that it was the women who could form the character of their children. In case of ignorance and illiteracy it would not be possible for a nation to get rid of its evil customs and social prejudices. Begum Geti ara Bashir, a political activist from Lahore and the daughter of Muhammad Shafi, once wrote a letter to Quaid-i-Azam in which she put the question about the future foundation of the Pakistan whether it would be a conservative or progressive state. Quaid wrote to her:

"Tell your younger girls, I am a progressive Muslim leader and Pakistan will be a progressive country in the building

of which women will be set working shoulder to shoulder with their men.

It is interesting to note that many leading Muslim Women took active part in politics under the leadership of Quaid-i-Azam. Prominent among them were: Lady Abdullah Haroon, Begum Jahanara Shahnawaz, Lady Ghulam Hussain Hidayat-ullah, Begum Shaista Ikramullah and Begum Viqar-un-Nisa Noon. Above all, we cannot ignore the historical and splendid role of Fatima Jinnah, the great sister of great brother. She proved herself as a source of inspiration for those Muslim women who were seeking guidance and lines of direction from Madar Millat.

In conclusion we can say that it was the Quaid who had the vision to emancipate the Muslim women from their old taboos and social prejudices. As a member of Legislative Assembly, he raised his voice for the enforcement of those social measures, which were meant to introduce the removal of the social disabilities of women. The Quaid increasingly saw the issue of women rights with the prospects of the entire Muslim community in India. The social upliftment of women means as understood by Jinnah like the other contemporaries was the betterment of society as a whole. In the same way political participation of women, in his view was the negation of all misinterpretation and misconception through which the picture of Muslim society was painted as a rigid and static entity. Under the leadership of Jinnah as pointed by Jalal open a fresh chapter in the politics of Muslim India. The League's resounding success in the crucial 1945-46 election owed much to enthusiastic campaigning by its women wing and above all to those thousands of *burqa-clad* Muslim women who stepped out of the four walls for the first time in their lives to cast votes for the partition.

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