

Begum Rana Liaquat Ali Khan

by Faisal Abdulla



Dawn Photo

Begum Rana Liaquat Ali Khan was born in Almora, India in 1905. A crusader for women's rights, her first sighting of the hardships of the oppressed and downtrodden came at a very early stage in her life. Her mother used to regularly visit a sanatorium in Almora. It was there, according to Begum Liaquat, that she learned to help and care for others.

She first met her husband, Pakistan's first Prime Minister, Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan, during the time of the Simon Commission. Liaquat Ali Khan, as a member of the Legislative Assembly, had come to debate the unpopular constitutional reforms that were being introduced by the Simon Commission. As a student, Begum Liaquat went to hear the debate carrying placards of "Simon Go Home". Liaquat Ali Khan, winning the debate, became an instant hero with her friends. She later sold him a ticket to a stage show to raise funds for flood relief in Bihar. They were married in December 1932.

From the onset, Begum Liaquat proved to be Liaquat Ali Khan's constant partner and companion. She too, like her husband, was politically involved and both of them shared similar goals. She also became part of another defining moment in Pakistan's history when she accompanied her husband to Quaid's Hamstead Heath residence in London, May 1933, to request the Quaid to return to India and to resume the leadership of the Indian Muslims.

It was in 1942, when rumors of Japanese invasion were ripe, that the Quaid-e-Azam said to her "Be prepared to train the women. Islam doesn't want women to be shut up and never see fresh air." (*A Life devoted to human welfare*, Dawn, Muneeza Shamsie, 11/06/82). Begum Liaquat never looked back.

Her first opportunity to organize Muslim women presented itself in the same year, when she formed a small volunteer corps for nursing and first aid in Delhi. Then again in 1947, as the refugees poured in from across the border, amidst the most pitiable of conditions with cholera, diarrhea and small pox being common sights everywhere, she called upon women to come forward and collect food and medical supplies from government offices. The women came forward despite the resistance they faced from certain sections of society, including certain newspapers where they were attacked in the most vicious manner by elements that did not want women to come out from their 'four walls'. She firmly believed that for a society to do justice to itself it was pertinent that women played their due role in reforming society alongside the men. In this she faced many difficulties as certain sections of public opinion from time to time accused her of "leading Muslim women astray." Initially, when he was alive, Liaquat Ali Khan himself defended his wife in public. Once addressing a political rally in Karachi he said, "Where has my wife taken the people of Pakistan to? To the dance halls? No! She has taken them to work in the refugee camps. Where has my wife led the women of Pakistan? To gambling dens? No! It is to hospitals to work as nurses that she has led them." (*Begum Liaquat : A Tribute*, Dawn, 15/06/90)

During this point in Pakistan's history there weren't many nurses in Karachi, so Begum Liaquat asked the army to train women to give injections and first aid. Women were thus trained in three to six month courses and as such the Para-military forces for women were formed. During this period, girls were also personally encouraged by Begum Liaquat to take up nursing as a profession. They were also taught the rifle drill, to decode ciphers, typing and a host of other duties so they could be useful in times of national crises like the refugee crisis of 1947. It was a direct result of this crisis that the All Pakistan Women's Association, (APWA) was founded back in 1949.

As the founder and life-long president of APWA, Begum Liaquat played a pioneering role in the advancement of women in political, educational, economic and other fields. A chain of schools, colleges, industrial homes and other institutions were set up by the APWA. Gradually APWA became to be known as the main instrument in the struggle for Pakistani women's emancipation. Begum Liaquat firmly believed that education and economic independence were two of the most important factors that would help women recognize and achieve their just rights in society.

In the field of education, she [Begum Liaquat] founded Rana Liaquat Ali Khan College of Home Economics which opened home economic colleges in Karachi, Lahore and Dhaka. Other important women's bodies that she founded included the Business and Professional Women's Club, the Friends of APWA and the International Women's Club.

For the working women, she founded a string of industrial homes and working places where they could earn a respectable living. Among these institutions the prominent ones were: Rana Liaquat Model Colony for Craftsmen Karachi, Gule Rana Nusrat Industrial Community Centre Karachi, Voluntary Health and Nutrition Association and Pakistan Cottage Industries Shop." (Death of a Pioneer, Daily News, 16/06/90).

Begum Liaquat's achievements didn't just stop there. She was the first Muslim woman delegate to the UN in 1952. She was also the first woman ambassador of Pakistan, representing Pakistan in the Netherlands, Italy and Tunisia. From 1973 to 1976, she was elected Governor of Sind, once again the first Pakistani woman to hold such a post.

In recognition of her life-long struggle for women's rights, she was awarded the United Nation's Human Rights Award in 1978. Her other many awards and medals include the Jane Adam's Medal in 1950 (USA), Woman of Achievement Medal 1950 (USA), Mother of Pakistan in 1950 (USA), Nishan-I-Imtiaz in 1959, Grand Cross of Orange Nassau in 1961 (the Netherlands), International Gimbel Award 1961-62, Woman of the World in 1965 chosen by the Turkish Women's Association, Ankara and Vavaliera di Gran Croce in 1966 (Italy).

Another instance from her life which probably best sums up the kind of die-hard crusader she was for women's rights was the time she single-handedly took on Pakistan's most powerful man, General Zia-ul-Haq. It was during the 80's when she, despite her illness and old age, publicly attacked the General for passing Islamic laws that were contradictory to Islamic teachings and clearly against women. The General, out of respect for her position in society and achievements, decided to leave her alone.

Begum Liaquat died on June 13, 1990 and was buried next to her husband in the precincts of the Quaid-e-Azam's Mausoleum. With her has ended a historic period for the women and youth of Pakistan who, future generations, will no doubt seek inspiration from Begum's Liaquat's life and contributions to the emancipation of women.

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