Chapter - VI

Women in Religious Organisations

Apart from Hindu social reforms, some prominent male Muslim reformers also started social reformation in India in the last decades of 19th century. The most prominent among them was Sir Syed Ahmed Khan who pioneered Muslim higher education and founded a M.A.O. College at Aligarh in 1875. This result oriented effort later on came out in the form of Muhammedan Educational Conference in 1886 resulted into Muslim University movement launched in 1898. And, thereafter, the Muslim League in 1906 observing the reluctance of Muslim to go in for western education as responsible for their decline. In his own journal *Thzib-ul-Akhlaq* he not only opposed polygamy, *purdah* and other orthodox practices in Islam but also staunchly advocated the need of Western education for both the boys and girls.

Before further discussion on the religious organizations prevalent in the Hindu, and Sikh social orders namely Hindu Maha Sabha and Shiromani Gurdawara Parbandhan Committee, it can be said that women folk was not allowed to be there members either for the social reforms or for political activities. Only the political and social organizations of Muslims and Hindus did allow them to be the part and parcel of their movements waged during the colonial rule in India.

Besides Syed Ahmed, other prominent Muslim reformer was Badruddin Tyabji, a Bombay based Lawyer, who launched a campaign against *purdah* system and Syed Imam of Patna engaged in financing a Muslim girl's school at Patna and Hydari, a writer,
also stood for the similar cause\textsuperscript{2}. Later on, the formation of educational institutions got accelerated among western-educated Muslims at the desire of having educated wives.

Sheikh Abdullah, a converted Kashmiri Brahmin, founded a primary school for Muslim girls in 1908 at Aligarh and just after one year, he had started an Urdu journal for women *Khatun* at Aligarh in 1905\textsuperscript{3}.

Some attempts were made for female education by Muslim women themselves. Amina Tyabji, wife of Badruddin Tyabji, started a Muslim girls' school in 1895 and Begum Abdullah managed a similar school at Aligarh in 1906. This school later on became a women's college affiliated to the Aligarh Muslim University. The members of the Tyabji family such as Begum Nawab Misra founded on orphanage and Shareefa Hamid Ali began nursing centres\textsuperscript{4}. Further, women's association was founded by upper-class Muslim women in several cities at local level engaged in upliftment of women. For example, women of Shafi family started an association in Lahore and Begum of Bhopal also actively played a similar role.

All India Muslim Women's Conference was founded in 1916 by her efforts candid and many papers on Socio-Cultural aspects were read and resolutions passed by the Conference. Similarly in 1917, Abru Begum, sister of Abdul Kalam Azad proposed a resolution against polygamy that provoked opposition from the Muslims\textsuperscript{5}.

**The All India Muslim Ladies' Conference**

*(Anjuman-i-Khawatin -i- Islam)*

The All India Muslim women's Conference was founded on 1March, 1914 at Aligarh by the sole efforts of Sheikh Abdullah.
Prominent Muslim women from all over India had participated in the Conference under the Presidentship of Begum of Bhopal. In addition to Begum Abdullah, the wives of other Aligarh luminaries were also present in the conference including Begum Aftab Ahmad Khan and Nafis Dulhan Sherwani, whose husbands were both local trustees of Aligarh College, and Begum Sayyid Muham, widow of the son of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan etc. Begum Mian Muhammad Safi, whose husband was a leading member of the Muslim League, came from Lahore. Safi was Education and Law Minister in the Government of India, and her sister Begum Shahdin, wife of Justice in the Punjab High Court also attended the conference. From Bombay, came the Fyzee sisters Zohra and Atiya, who had been educated in England, thrown off the veil and become active in women's social and educational causes.

Fatima Arzu Begum, Private Secretary to the Begum of Bhopal and sister of the well-known Urdu journalist, Abdul Kalam Azad (who became Education Minister in Nehru's Cabinet) was also there. Besides, there were a number of women active in Urdu journalism who had soft corner for socio-cultural upliftment of Muslims Women. These included Waheeda Begum Yaqub, editor of Tahzib - i- Niswan of Lahore and Fatima Begum, editor of Sharif Bibi, another journal published from Lahore exclusively for the women's cause.

The general aims of the Anjuman were: “to work for unity and agreement; to support those working for women's education, and to ensure that both religious education and practical training were included of child rearing, health care and health making.” Besides, the marriage of girls before age of sixteen was also disuaded by the member of the Anjuman.
The Anjuman met annually during the I World War years and passed many resolutions in favour of more educational institutions for Muslim girls. However, they wanted some sort of solution of purdah problem without hurting the ideas prescribed in Shariat on this custom. Education was impossible if women were never allowed to go beyond their veils and walls. As a consequent, a new style burqa was patronized by Anjuman on Turkish line. Members of the Anjuman were still mainly concerned with improving the lot of the Muslims. When the Women Indian Association's deputation met Montagu in 1917 to ask for franchise, some Muslim women also accompanied them as the wives of Congress Muslims, rather than representatives of Muslim women or of the Anjuman as per se.\(^\text{11}\)

Other works by the Anjuman, during the I World War years included the formation of local branches in a few towns and the setting up of small girls school. However, the participation rate of women rapidly declined at the annual meetings held at Aligarh in 1915, at Meerut in 1916, and in Delhi in 1917. Finally, in 1918, Anjuman received a new lease of life when a group of prominent Punjabi Muslim women (who had been active in educational and social activities) invited the conference at Faridkot house, Lahore, March 3–5. Among the organisers included sisters Begum Shafi and Begum Shah Din and their daughters, Begum Shah Nawaz and Begum Muhammed Rafi.\(^\text{12}\)

Around 500 women attended the conference which was double in number as compared to previous conferences. Besides local participants, women coming from Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay and Hyderabad stayed together for three days irrespective of their regional variations and thus resulted in to a sense of solidarity and enthusiasm among them.\(^\text{13}\)
Though the aspect of polygamy was oftenly demounced as per resolution in the conferences of Anjuman but couldn't gain momentum because of provoked opposition from the Muslims. The resolution infact remained only on the books and could not became subject of a campaign for legal reform until much later. In the other areas of social change and reform, the women of the Shafi family left purdah in 1920, but the Anjuman itself never went beyond saying that the kind of purdah practical in India was excessive.\(^{14}\)

The Khilafat Experience and Political Participation

The Khalifa, "Successor to the Prophat Muhammad, Commander of the faithful, the shadow of God on earth" these exalted titles convey the symbolic importance of the Khalifa to the community of Islam.\(^{15}\) The Khilafat movement sought to put pressure on the British government due to the Khalifa's spiritual and temporal powers. It also tried to mobilize the Indian Muslim community on the basis of religious and cultural symbols. The Khilafat movement gained momentum because it took place simultaneously with the non-Cooperation movement launched by the Congress against the British rule.\(^{16}\)

The Khilafat issue was, however, a religious movement but it became political in which women played an important role. The Anjuman, held several meetings at Delhi and Lucknow where Maulana Abdul Bari of *Firangi Mahal* (Lucknow) and his disciples, wives and mothers of prominent Muslims attended them. It is significant to note that *Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad* (the religious perceptor) and Ali brothers (Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali) enrolled a number of men-women in their own organization i.e. *The Anjuman -i- Kudden Kaiba* in 1913 for collection of funds in order to
maintain the house of Kaaba and other Muslim holy places and to defend them. In the meetings of this organization, Abida Banu Begum (popularly known as Bi-Aman) used to call upon the fictive sisters and daughters to support the cause of Islam by giving money and gold ornaments to help Khalifa and the holy places to withstand the onslaught of Christian Europe. Thus, such meetings basically believed in the traditional patterns but had something of change as far as the women's role was concerned.\textsuperscript{17}

Bi-Aman had appeared for the first time on a political stage at the annual meeting of the Muslim League in 1917. The credit also goes to her as first Muslim women who spoke to a mixed political gathering from behind the veil of her burqa. She, infact, delivered her speech on behalf of his son Muhammad Ali who could not preside over because he was not released from the jail then. In this way, she made her presence at national platform for political meetings acceptable for purdah-observing women. She had not defied purdah nor expressed opinions in favour of women's emancipation but her actions contributed to their end.\textsuperscript{18}

Bi-Aman graced the womanhood in the history of freedom movement when she delivered an erudite and impressive speech, against the British rule. In her presidential address at All India Women's Conference held at Ahemdabad Congress session simultaneously on December 30, 1921, she spoke on many national and women issues.\textsuperscript{19} During the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movement, Bi-Aman alongwith her daughter-in-laws Begum Muhammed Ali, Begum Harsat Mohini and other wives of Khilafat leaders toured the country. They often joined the Hindu women leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Smt. Sarla Devi Chaudhurani (Lahore) and Basanti Devi (Calcutta) who continued to exhort
women to actively participate and support the Non-Cooperation movement. They also urged the women for their contributions in form of gift, cash or gold bangles, anklets, ear rings etc. for the Khilafat movement and Tilak Swaraj Fund.20

The Khilafat movement had brought about the defeat of loyalism in Muslim politics but Muslims who believed in collaboration with the government for their position of influence in the educational conferences and the women’s Anjuman whose headquarters was at Aligarh. Local branches of the Anjuman supported girls’ schools in their localities whether they still acknowledged their connection to the All-India Anjuman or not. Members whose political views differed from those of the Aligarh clique went their own way politically. A number of Muslim women who discarded the purdah became active when the All-India Women’s Conference was founded in 1927.

The Begum of Bhopal presided over the second annual All-India Women’s Conference in Delhi in 1928. In her Presidential speech, she called upon all the women gathered there to avoid the religious divisions and bickering which had been affecting the Indian political life for a long period. The Begum and some other women had joined the All-India Women’s Conference and considered a group apart within it.21

The Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam faded into oblivion. It was evidently noticed in 1924 when the first All-India Muslim Ladies Conference was held at Hyderabad after four years wherein only a half-dozen women from elsewhere attended it. Nafis Dulhan who had been re-elected Secretary for a third time consequently for five year term in 1923 offered to resign but no one was agreed to take
over. The Anjuman later on, failed to provide its monthly grant to Aligarh Girls College in 1930 because of the withdrawal of financial support by the Begum of Bhopal. In 1931, Nafis Dulhan, reported that there were only three branches of Anjuman in Poona, Berar and Calcutta, in addition to headquarter at Aligarh.22

The last session of Anjuman on All-India basis was held at Madras. The efforts of Rahmatula Nissa, Secretary of Madras Muslim Ladies Association, however, continued its state based activities only in Madras. The Madras Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam infact, continued to grow under the leadership of Rahmatula Nissa Begum. Similarly, the Punjab branch too, which had always maintained an autonomous existence under the energetic direction of Begum Shah Nawaz, remained active. In 1936, the Punjab Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam transformed itself into women's branch of the Punjab Muslim League. Their main issues earlier were Socio-Cultural but, later on, Shariat Billm 1937 and demand of Pakistan became prominent due to having pressure of Muslim League.23

Communal Divide and the women's Movement

The words 'Communal' would ordinarily denote 'for common use of the community' and communalism' would stand for the principal of communal organization. In India, both the terms communal and communalism stand to denote separatism or the opposite of togetherness.24 It was the colonial masters who conducted their first major exercise in fomenting the division among the Hindu-Muslim communities by partitioning Bengal into two provinces in 1905 and with the introduction of separate electorates for Muslims in the provincial legislative council in 1909. The
communal sentiments were greatly exploited by the British who pampered Muslims against Hindus. This became evident for the first time in 1906 when Bengal Provincial Conference was held at Barisal. The reason in this controversy was the singing of Bande Mataram (the banned song which was composed by Begali Novelist Bankim Chander Chatterji) in order to hail the mother goddess.25

Thereafter by 1938, M.A. Jinnah who had begun his political career as a nationalist Muslim became an exponent of two nation theory. Keeping the sentiments of Muslims in view, the Congress Working Committee dropped only first stanzas from the poem, Bande Mataram in its meeting held on 28 October, 1937. Both these stanzas had no religious overtones and could be sung anywhere and on any platform.26

Purdah and Role of Political Franchise

The main plank of the British was to create separation among Indian Muslim in order to weaken the national movement and they invoked the Muslim custom of purdah (adopted by some Hindu families also in the North) to deny Indian women the right to vote. While in purdah as a practical difficulty in justification, the Southbrough Committee did not approve the demand of franchise for women. Sarojini Naidu’s bold witness before the committee of the British parliament in regard to government of India Bill 1919 went in vain.27

As a result, Government of India Bill, 1919, women were excluded from the vote but the statute allowed provincial assemblies to drop the exclusion clause if they so wished the right to vote in 1921, Bombay and U.P gave the right of vote in 1923, while in
Bengal the right was given in 1929. Among the Indian States, it was Travancore State which gave right to vote in 1920 and its example was later on followed by many other states such as Mysore and Cochin. Having won the right to vote, some women entered the provincial legislatures.28

The case of representation to Indian Women was duly discussed in detail during the Round Table Conferences in London. The British government intended to release the anguisness of the Indians shown during the visit of Simon Commission29 in India to examine the working of 1919 Act. The two women representatives namely Begum Shah Nawaz and Mrs. P. Subbarayan demanded the reservation of seats for women30 but were opposed by those women who were lobbying the issue on feminist as well as nationalist ground. The London branch of the Women’s Indian Association, while taking a lead in such an opposition, even wrote a letter to Lord Snell, Under Secretary to State for India, in the same context.31

The criticism over the demand of reservation for women went on during Second Round Table Conference also (held in 1932 before Ghandi – Irwin Pact) where Sarojini Naidu, the president of AIWC participated alongwith both earlier representative viz. Begum Shah Nawaz and Mrs. Subbarayan in the conference.32

This time the Muslim League, however, changed its tone and presented a joint memorandum to the British Government on behalf of nationalist women. Any form of preferential treatment, they warned, would be to violate the integrity of the universal demand of Indian women for absolute equality of political status.33 To keep the issue at the centre of political debate they also referred another joint memorandum which was endorsed by the three Indian women
association in August 1931, and demanded the rights and obligations of all citizen without any discrimination of 'sex, disability, religion, caste, or creed in regard to public employment, office, power, honour and the exercise of any trade or calling'.

The Muslim League fully supported the idea that women should be qualified to vote on the basis of their property and education and not on the basis of their husbands or other relatives. So far as the changing behavior of the League towards women in political status was concerned, it seems that it might be the outcome of a specific assurance of the Muslim share of power that was provided in the Communal Award. More women's right to vote would add to the numerical strength of Muslim community in India.

Separate Electorate for Muslim Women

The Government of India Act of 1935 made a way for six million women to become illegible to vote, as against 29 million men. However, the objectionable features that had been cirticised by the women's conference were retained. Accordingly, the seats were reserved for women on a communal basis – though women could contest election from any general constituencies. A delimitation committee was to identify the constituencies to be reserved for women. In these, both men and women could vote, except in the case of Muslim constituencies where the electors would be women only. On the top of all this, the procedures followed by the provincial authorities for the registration of women voters were arbitrary and cumbrous.

Muslim women in Community Politics

The communalization of female political identity started after the Act of 1935. The key to this was the general dissatisfaction of
Muslims with the Nehru (Moti Lal Nehru as Chairman) Report of 1928. Despite of full support of nationalist Muslim, the Report had denied the right of Muslim to separate electorates and their constituent status at the centre as equal to Hindu. The Muslim leaders, in fact, started to realize after formal rejection of their demand at Calcutta convention that they had failed to convince Congress to arrive at some communal statement. It was also testified from the speech of Muhammad Hussain who spoke as Chairman of Reception Committee of Muslim League at its 21 session held at Allahabad in 1930.

The hollowness of Congress’s claim to speak on behalf of the entire Indian people further provided a space to League to show its political strength and worth of its political claims as a ‘representative organisation’ of Indian Muslims. It was owing to the rise of such anti-Hindu sentiments among Muslim that the strategical formulation of ‘fourteen points’ by Muhammad Ali Jinnah’ drafted after consulting several Muslim leaders, started to be seen as a directive principle for the political future of the majority of India Muslims on behalf of the League.

The same strategy was further evoked to arouse the pro-Muslim feelings in the Presidential Address of Muhammad Iqbal who made it in the twenty – first session of the Muslim League held at Allahabad in 1930. While speaking, he called for a Muslim India within India, a state in the north-west consisting of the Muslim majority region of the Punjab, N.W.F.P, Sindh and Baluchistan. The creation of autonomous Muslim states in his view would be in the best interests of India and Islam.

Though the communal award of 1932 which was incorporated in the Government of India Act, 1935 allowed separate seats for
Muslim but Muslim League failed to prove itself as a 'popular representative organisation' of Indian Muslims as it won only 105 seats out of total 485 Muslim seats in the general election of 1937. So far as the role of Muslim women in the community politics was concerned, it was made possible only in 1937 when the reorganization of the League was undertaken by Jinnah under his Presidentship. Before this, matter of women's mainly concentrated on their social upliftment as mentioned earlier. In this long run, however, women could not escape from the emergence of separate nationalism.

It is not worthy that the growing rift between the two communities which had fostered an entirely different environment would have adversely effected the women area also. It is testified in Shaista Ikramullah experience who noted how tension was growing daily and communal feeling even poisoned social relations also. Several of her Hindu friends dropped her completely and relationships with other became strained and difficult. In this situation, the only way to survival seemed to be the consolidation of community and its interests.

On the national level, the work was taken in hand by Begum Muhammad Ali Johar, a member of the Central Working Committee of the League. She also presided over the women's annual meetings held under the auspices of the League in different parts of India. 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. The objects of the Sub-Committee, discussed in the twenty-sixth session of the league, held at Patna in 1938 were as (I) "To organize Provincial and District women's Sub-committee under the Muslim League; (II) to enlist a large number of women to
the membership of the League; (III) to carry on an intensive propaganda among Muslim women throughout India in order to create in them a sense of great political consciousness; (IV) to advise and guide them in all such matters as mainly rest on them for the uplift of the Muslim society. Most of the pioneer women who were nominated for All India Muslim Sub-Committee were the sisters and wives of the League's politicians of various provinces.42

These women political workers successfully accomplished their mission so far as the consciousness among the Muslims women was concerned. 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 as a consequent of efforts made by all such women workers. On 18 June, 1940 a demonstration was carried out both by the men and women at Lahore in regard to the arrest of Muslim leaders and the banning of Khaksar Party. These leaders led a procession in support of Pakistan movement at Lahore.43 The police tried to stop it but when they refused to do so, they were arrested while the women were asked to return to their homes. The women refused to do so and hence for the first time, women were arrested for their political activism.44

In 1941, another step to extend the activities of Muslim women was taken through the formation of the Muslim Girls Students Federations. Before this, Federation for Boys was already working under the Presidentship of the Raja of Mahmudabad. However, in the presence of purdah and other social restrictions, it was found necessary to. In 1941, the formation of Muslim Girls Students Federation by the efforts of lady Abdul Qadir, Shaista Ikramullah, Fatima Begum, and Miss M- Qureshi was to seek
support for the idea of Pakistan and create awareness among the college girls of the muslims Community.\textsuperscript{45}

In February 1942, a session of the Federation was organized in Delhi at the Anglo-Arabic College. In the conference, there was a large participation of unmarried girls coming from different cities. It is important to note that the girls stayed in a place with people unknown to their families. It was indeed, a revolutionary development.\textsuperscript{46} The Girls Federation became the vanguard of the women's sub-committee touring the countryside holding public meetings and spreading the League's message for Muslim movement there.\textsuperscript{47}

In 1942, Jinnah took a direct interest in women's committees addressing large gatherings of the women. By this time, the participation of women for the Pakistan movement was in full swing. They composed songs usually along many storms; we will live or die for Pakistan.\textsuperscript{48} In this way, the movement that freed the country also freed the women from the bondage of the four walls of the house and they were accepted as members of a society which so far had exclusively belonged to men.

The elections of 1946 were very important because these were the test of Muslim League's claim of being the sole representative of the Muslim of British India. In Bengal, the Muslim League was able to secure absolute majority in the legislature. During the election much of the work was done by students and women. It was the first time where Muslim women took part in political activity. Women worked in towns and village among every stardom of society and tried to get votes for the Muslim League.\textsuperscript{49} Soon after the elections, the League was formed a Bengal under Hussain Shaheet
Suhrawardy. On the other hand, in the Punjab, the League had still not done enough to form a government. When the League was not able to form the ministry there, League supporters continued their campaign in the streets. As a result, various League leaders including Begum Shah Nawaz arrested. On hearing it, their arrest in a large number of Muslim women came out into the streets where they faced lathi Charges and tear gas.\textsuperscript{50}

The Muslim League organised a Direct Action Day on 16 August 1946 in Calcutta with the provincial government headed by the Muslim League. About 5,000 persons were killed. This set off a chain reaction of Hindu-Muslim riots across the northern India. The congress accepted reluctantly the partition plan proposed by the new Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, which was announced by the British government on 3 June 1947, since it appeared to be the only alternative to civil war.

The partition of India was terrible in which millions of Hindus and Sikhs abandoned their homes, lands and livelihood in the area that were to became Pakistan, and fled to India, while millions of Muslims similarly moved out from India. According to a British Official, the mutual killings of members of different religious communities totalled about 25,000. In addition there was the living death of the abduction and rape suffered by an unknown number of women who became the victim of man's brutality in times of chaos when brute force reigned unrestrained.\textsuperscript{51}
Reference and Notes

1. Minault, Gail (ed.), *The Extended Family, Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan*, p. 87.
5. Ibid.
8. Begaum Yaqub was the daughter of the first marriage of Sayyid Mumtaz Ali, who founded *Tahzib –i– Niswan* in 1898. Mumtaz Ali was the second wife and Muhammadi Begum had been the editor of *Tahzib* until her untimely death in 1908.
9. Fatima Begum was the daughter of Maulvi Mahbub Alam who was the editor of *Paisa Akhbar*, one of the most popular urdu newspapers in the Punjab.
12. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid, p. 223.
32. Ibid, pp. 175 – 176.
33. Ibid, p. 177.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid, p. 178.
37. Kaura Uma, Muslim and Indian Nationalism: The Emergence of the Demand for India's Partition 1928-40, p. 165.
39. Ibid.

42. *Ibid.*


48. Begum Salma Tasadduque Husain, 'Saviour of Muslim Women', *Quaid-i-Azam and Muslim Women*, pp. 20 – 33.

