

Hameedah Begum – The Woman Behind the Great Dr. A.H. Khan

On Her 90th Birth Anniversary

A Tribute by Nasim Yousaf

Behind Every Great Man, There is a Great Woman

Hameedah Begum was born to a pre-eminent political leader of South Asia, Allama Mashraqi, and later became wife of globally acclaimed Dr. Akhtar Hameed Khan. She was the eldest daughter of Mashraqi and his first wife (Walayat Begum). She was unpretentious, strong, and selfless, as is evident by her way of life.

Hameedah Begum was born in Peshawar on December 25, 1920. She was good in her studies and like her father, she was very good in Mathematics and completed her education with distinction. This was a great achievement at the time, when women were hardly encouraged to acquire an education.

I learned many things about Hameedah Begum (my aunt) from my beloved mother (Masuda Yousaf). According to my mother, Hameedah Begum (along with her family) took keen interest in her father's political life and participated in her father's Khaksar Movement's activities. She being the eldest was among the top confidants of Mashraqi. During the freedom struggle, when the family's activities and home were under constant surveillance by plain clothed detectives of C.I.D. and Mashraqi was imprisoned, Hameedah Begum maintained her demeanor and kept up the morale of her younger siblings. My mother used to tell us stories of this time; speaking of police raids, she said, "most police raids were held at night when the family would be fast asleep. The armed men would surround the house and would take positions on the roof and walls. The sounds of heavy boots would generally wake us up. Police breaking into the house in the darkness used to be very scary but none of us were intimidated by police actions." Furthermore, "Your grandfather used to be under close watch all the time by intelligence agencies and threat messages were a regular feature, but we never bothered about them." In the face of such difficult and tense times, Hameedah Begum as the eldest child stood firm and never lost her courage.

Towards the end of 1939 (after Mashraqi's release from Lucknow jail), *Nikkah* between Hameedah Begum and Dr. Akhtar Hameed Khan was solemnized in Ichhra. However, *Rukhsati* (departure from her parents' house) was to take place at a later date. Unfortunately, the *Rukhsati* was delayed as, in March 1940, Mashraqi was imprisoned. Hameedah Begum was highly saddened that the Government refused to release her father, even for a few hours, to attend her marriage and send the newly married couple off with his blessings. In addition, a dowry could not be given at the time as the Government refused to release Mashraqi's bank account to draw money for it. This however was not a concern for Hameedah Begum and later, when a dowry was presented to them, Hameedah Begum and Dr. Khan donated it.

In 1943, Hameedah Begum was distressed by the Bengal Famine, which took an estimated three million lives (death toll higher than the two World Wars); she and her husband were disappointed by the overall handling of the situation by the Government to help the suffering masses. With his wife's support, Dr. Khan decided to resign and become a laborer, in order to find solutions to poverty by embracing the lifestyle of the poor. This was a turning point in their lives. All of a sudden, Hameedah Begum went from being the wife of a powerful ICS officer to a completely different lifestyle. People resorted to backbiting, but Hameedah Begum paid no attention to this and stood behind Dr. Khan's decision.

Soon the couple's house became a laboratory to find solutions to change the destiny of their fellow countrymen. Alongside her husband, Hameedah Begum got a chance to see poverty closely, but she never complained of the hard times they went through and never pushed Dr. Khan to quit the experiment and get a job, which would have been easy for him given his credentials. The experiment continued until 1947, when Dr. Zakir Hussain (who later became President of India) then head of Jamia Millia Islamia (Delhi) persuaded Dr. Khan to join his educational institution.

While the couple was in Delhi, Ch. Muhammad Ali (who later became Prime Minister of Pakistan) asked Dr. Khan to move to Karachi. In 1950, the couple moved to Karachi and in the same year to Comilla. Upon arrival, Hameedah Begum witnessed poverty stricken Bengalis and refugees. Dr. Khan engaged himself in changing the lives of people and later succeeded in founding the renowned Bangladesh (previously Pakistan) Academy for Rural Development. Dr. Khan's hard work received world acclamation and he could not have attained this success without his wife. She had sacrificed herself alongside him, did not demand his time, and in his absence, took care of their children; importantly she gave him the peace of mind Dr. Khan needed to meet his dream.

In addition to supporting her husband's mission, many are unaware of the fact that Hameedah Begum provided working capital and set up a factory (cottage industry) in the compound of her house, so that the local poor could earn and live comfortably. The factory was named, *Mrs. Khan Printing & Weaving Factory*. Here, about twenty Bengalis and *Muhajirs* (refugees) produced silk *Banarsi* and cotton *Sarees* (wrap-arounds) and cotton *Chaddars* (shawls); cotton *Sarees* and *Chaddars* were then block-printed. In addition, Hameedah Begum sacrificed a room of her house for an artist who needed small working capital and a place to work; he handcrafted and painted Asian wooden figurines. All the products produced in these units were sold in the market and the income was distributed among the workers; no income was retained by Hameedah Begum. She and Dr. Khan would sometimes laugh that her factory generated more income to feed twenty families than what Dr. Khan was drawing as a salary.

Throughout, Hameedah Begum led an unadorned life. According to her daughter, Amina Khan "she would not wear jewelry or fashionable outfits. She was not picky and ate all kinds of food; she loved desserts and drinking *lassi* and *skanjbeen*." Even though her husband was entitled to a higher salary, luxury house, and fancy car as the top man of the Academy, neither he took this benefit nor did she push him to. She was content with what they had. Further, she never sought glorification, e.g. when President Ayub Khan offered Dr. Khan the positions of Governorship, Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University, or Advisor to the President. And she never used Mashraqi or her husband's name to seek the limelight. This was a woman who was born with a silver spoon in her mouth and in her childhood had been looked after by a Nanny and British governess (at the time, Mashraqi led a high profile life); yet she preferred and led an unassuming life. She was down to earth and above worldly possessions.

At a time when unfortunately women did not have as much public power, Hameedah Begum stood strong behind her father and husband to support the elevation of her fellow countrymen. She actively participated in her father's movement to bring freedom to the country. With her husband, she committed to leading a selfless life and demonstrated, through her own projects as well as support of her husband's work, her commitment to helping the poor. Dr. Khan could not have accomplished his goals and earned many awards including nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize, if Hameedah Begum had resisted Dr. Khan's resignation as an ICS officer and forced him to lead a conventional life. Throughout all this, she also dedicated herself to her children. In Amina Khan's words, "My mother was a great human being and she always cared for the people. Though she lived a short life, she was an accomplished woman."

On May 16, 1966, while on a trip to the then West Pakistan, Hameedah Begum died at her father's house in Ichhra (Lahore). She was suffering from acute diabetes. She was buried at Miani Sahib grave yard. On her death, Dr. Khan dedicated a poem, *Hameedah Begum*.

Though Hameedah Begum passed away, she left behind an exemplary model for women, particularly in developing nations, to follow. Mothers in these nations need to guide their children, as Hameedah Begum stood behind her husband, to seek *real success* – success that is not defined by short term goals of owning a fancy car and/or possessing a luxury house but real success that strives to make innovative contributions toward the good of humankind. Mothers need to encourage their children to bring forward ground-breaking discoveries/inventions and act selflessly, as such contributions can only revolutionize Pakistan and its poor image for the better.

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