

Born in British Guiana, Hasan Ara Begum, Made History in Pakistan

<http://www.nazariapak.info/pak-women/prominent.asp>

Hasan Ara Begum was born on June 7, 1887 in Georgetown, in the British Guiana where her father was running a business concern. She received the traditional education at home under the supervision of her father, Gool Mohammad Khan, founder of the Jama Masjid, Guyana.

In 1906, her parents left Guiana and settled in Calcutta. The following year, Hasan Ara was married to Muhammad Mukhlasur-Rahman Abul Hakim, a landlord of Calcutta. In 1910, she became a member of the National Indian Association Club and later took keen interest in the formation of the All-India Muslim Women's Conference, founded by the Begum of Bhopal. It was due to her untiring efforts that a branch of the Conference was established in Calcutta. In 1927, Begum Hakim joined the All-India Women's Conference.

She was the pioneer in starting female social gatherings such as meena bazars in Calcutta which gave an opportunity to purdah observing ladies to enter into conversation and parleys of personal and social nature with one another.

The Begum was the first woman honorary magistrate in Calcutta in the late twenties and performed her duties diligently mixing up with men, keeping herself in veil throughout her life.

By the 30s, she started taking part in the League activities and was taken on the Women's Central Sub-Committee in 1941 and helped in strengthening the provincial sub-committee of which she was a leading member since its formation. Two years later, she was again nominated on the central sub-committee and during this period she worked incessantly for the famine-stricken people in Bengal. She made donations, collected food, clothes, medicines etc., for the suffering people. About this time she also founded an orphanage known as Bait-ul-Afjal, at Calcutta, which was shifted to Dacca after independence.

She made a number of tours in the province popularising the League cause and helped in enrolling a large number of Muslim women in the Muslim League. In 1945, she toured the NWF Province as a delegate of the Central Sub-Committee for the League election campaign. The following year, she went to Bihar where she helped the provincial women's sub-committee in its relief work.

During partition, she supervised the women refugee relief committees working for the penniless and disabled people.

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Portraits of Two Legendary Women

By Begum Akhter Jahan Khan

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In his foreword, Mr Justice Nasir Aslam Zahid has emphasized the role of the two sisters, Mrs G.A. Wahab and Mrs H.A. Hakam, who faced trials and tribulations in the post-partition period in Calcutta and then in former East Pakistan during the traumatic days of 1970-71.

Justice Zahid pays tributes to them and to the writer Begum Akhter Jahan Khan for their perseverance, dedication and commitment to the cause of Pakistan and humanity.

It is indeed amazing that despite a conservative and conformist background as could have been expected from the Muslim society of pre-partition India, these two ladies demonstrated their scholarly knowledge, intellect, humility and the zest for a cause dear to their hearts.

Both of them were born in British Guiana, South America and were widely known for their simple living without any false starts or pretensions. They lived like dervishes leading an austere life. Their most outstanding qualities were warm affection, helpful sympathy and dedication to the cause of human happiness.

Writing about their mother and aunt Begum A.J. Khan says that their ancestral home was in a small town in Dir district which was then part of Afghanistan. Both actively participated in social welfare activities and dedicated themselves to the cause of Muslim women and Islam. Mrs Hakam was one of those few Muslim women who worked with the Quaid-i-Azam. She was the first lady honorary magistrate of Kolkata and an elected member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly.

After independence, Mrs Hakam stayed back in Kolkata because the Quaid-i-Azam asked her to do so. There were hundreds and thousands of Muslims who needed someone to guide them, to console them and to encourage them. As a result of widespread communal riots, a large number of Muslims had been rendered homeless. They needed medical help and food to sustain themselves. She migrated to Pakistan only when living in Kolkata became unbearable.

The two sisters worked without respite for the rehabilitation of the uprooted Muslims in Pakistan. Then again they faced an agonizing crisis in the former East Pakistan during 1971. As the non-Bengalis had openly supported the army action in East Pakistan, they

were termed collaborators and made targets of attacks by the local people. Thousands of injured men, women and children swarmed in Dhaka's Mohammadpur and Begum Akhter Jahan Khan took upon herself the responsibility of looking after them although she had no resources at her disposal.

Begum Khan has given a truthful account of the tragedy in the book. Elected twice to the East Pakistan Assembly she rendered great services to the people of the province. She had set up an orphanage for girls in Dhaka besides undertaking other social work projects.

The book is an honest assessment of a stormy period when history was being written in blood. It includes a number of rare photographs depicting various phases of the Pakistan movement in which the brave ladies were involved.

Through this book an important part of the history of the Pakistan movement has been documented and preserved. — *Akhtar Payami*