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The Building of a Nation **A Conversation with Begum Kaniz Sakina Wajid Khan**

By Leena Z. Khan

JULY, 2002

KARACHI, Pakistan—As I was finalizing my preparations to leave Pakistan and return to the states in May of this year, I was feeling anxious. I decided to return to the U.S. following the bomb blast outside of the Karachi Sheraton that killed 11 French engineers. The Sheraton car bombing took place just a few miles away from my home. A few weeks later another car bomb exploded — this time outside the most heavily guarded buildings in Karachi — the U.S. Consulate. I was quite familiar with the U.S. Consulate — I had gone there to register when I first arrived in Karachi. These bomb blasts were different from those in previous months — they took place on familiar roads I traveled daily.

I had given myself just under one month to pack, sell my car and furniture and say goodbye to family and friends. My anxiety over selling my belongings and finding a new tenant for my flat was compounded by daily violence. Each time a bomb would explode, an eerie calm would envelop the city. Although rangers and police with machine guns would be deployed on every street corner, the situation did not seem under control. Karachiites were becoming panicky and gloomy. Everyone I spoke with had lost all faith in the corruption-ridden law force. I packed my belongings with a sense of resignation and silently hoped for a turnaround in events, that the terrorists within Pakistan's borders would be caught and brought to justice and the government would treat sectarianism with an iron hand. I desperately wanted to believe that I could keep writing and interviewing women and maintain my low profile. But it was not to be. I decided to err on the side of caution and return to the U.S.

During those frenzied weeks before my departure, I was able to interview Begum¹ Kaniz Sakina Wajid Khan (Begum Wajid) — one of the oldest living social workers in Pakistan. Begum Wajid works at the NASRA School² — an extensive network of schools providing low-cost education to over 7,500 middle-income children in Karachi. Since 1980, she has held the position of general secretary of the school's education trust. My first impression of Begum Wajid was that of a reserved woman who might not be very easy to talk to. Her face was weathered and wrinkled; her silvery-white hair was tied neatly in a bun. As soon as she invited me to sit down in her office, she handed me five pages titled: *Curriculum Vitae of Kaniz Sakina Wajid Khan*. "This is my life. If you still want to learn more, you can ask me questions," she said dryly.

I was both puzzled and intrigued by her comment. That night I read her neatly encapsulated résumé. I was interested in learning about the life of this *begum*. The

¹ *Begum* is Urdu for a married woman.

² Named for its founder, Mrs. Nasra Wazir Ali.



Begum Wajid in her office at the Nasra School

term *begum* conjured up an image in my mind of a wealthy woman used to a life of luxury and comfort. Somehow, Begum Wajid seemed different from the other *begums* I had met who were married to bureaucrats and dignitaries and dabbled in social work as a pastime.

Although Begum Wajid did come from a privileged family background and engaged in social work, her story is not typical. When I met her for the second time at her office she was sitting at her desk reading something. This time she smiled and offered me the customary *chai*. As she began to lead me back into the corridors of Pakistan's history, I realized I was in the presence of a living legend.

Her life reads like a fairy tale. Begum Wajid was born in 1920 in the north Indian princely state of Kotwara. Her father, a *taluqdar* (commissioner) passed away when she was only three. Her mother died two years later. Circumstances thrust the young Kaniz and her brother into the arms of the Indian Court of Wards. She was sent off to Cainville House, an English boarding school in the hill-station of Mussourie where she spent a significant portion of her childhood and adolescent life. In this environment she adopted British manners and etiquette. While other children returned to their homes for vacations, Kaniz remained in Mussourie with her adopted family. She says the first years of boarding school were lonely and traumatic. "Human beings are very resilient, you

know. I had to learn to rely on myself from an early age for company and developed a sort of independence," she said. "I spent all my time at boarding school, even summer vacations. As I got older, I never felt the need to visit my relatives."

Kaniz returned to Kotwara from Mussourie after completing her Senior Cambridge³. Her brother, Syed Sajid Hussain, had recently completed his academic tenure a Edinburgh University in Scotland and had married Princess Selma Sultan, the granddaughter of the Ottoman Caliph, Sultan Murad V. In 1937 Princess Selma arranged Kaniz's marriage to Dr. Sahibzada Wajid Khan, a western-educated civil servant who was a widower with three children and 20 years her senior.

Because her husband was also the Secretary to the Chamber of Princes, she soon found herself rubbing shoulders with the viceroys and the belles of Delhi society, such as the Maharaja of Jaipur, his wife and other princes and princesses of the time. "I now found myself being called a *begum*. I never liked that word. All the *begums* I knew ordered their servants around and never lifted a finger. You would never hear me saying '*bua zara pandaan tho lao*' (maid bring me the container of beetle-leaf and spices). Even after my marriage, I did things for myself. I was never impressed with a person's status. Money, clothes and jewelry never

³ Education based on the British system; Senior Cambridge is the equivalent of high school in the U.S.

really interested me," she said nonchalantly.

Begum Wajid said that of all her encounters with the "top brass" of the times, her most cherished was with Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Jinnah had returned to India after 14 years of self-imposed exile in London to command the helm of the Muslim League. In March 1940, Jinnah presented his two-nation theory in an address at the annual meeting of the Muslim League in Lahore. This later became known as the Lahore Resolutions, which demanded an independent Muslim state on the basis that Hindus and Muslims belong to: "two different religious philosophies, social customs, literatures...they belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions...They have different epics, different heroes and different episodes...Musalmans [Muslims] are a nation according to any definition...and they must have their homelands, their territory and their state."⁴

Begum Wajid said that Jinnah focused equally on women and men in his efforts to mobilize Indian Muslims. He supported equality of the sexes, deplored the oppression of women at his public rallies and encouraged the development of a women's wing of the Muslim League in every major city. As a symbolic gesture, Jinnah took his sister, Fatima, along with him everywhere he went.⁵

The Begum's first meeting with Jinnah was at a Muslim League meeting in Delhi. "At a party hosted by Jinnah, my husband had remarked to him, 'Sir, I am sorry I cannot join the Muslim League, but my wife is your ardent supporter.' Jinnah responded without any hesitation, 'Then we are happy to have your better half!' Jinnah was very sharp and had a wonderful sense of humor." Begum Wajid's face lit up as she told me about the incident. She described Jinnah as a graceful man who conversed at ease with fellow guests and paid ladies elegant compliments.

"Liaquat⁶ [Ali Khan, first prime minister of Pakistan] and Jinnah were very close and had a lot in common," she continued. "Both studied law abroad and had the same vision for Pakistan — that of a modern, secular state. Jinnah came from a business background, whereas Liaquat came from a landed elite background. Liaquat gave up everything when he joined politics. Jinnah referred to the new state as the 'Republic of Pakistan.' It was only after his death under the 1956 constitution that it was referred to as the *Islamic Republic of Pakistan*. Jinnah said over and

over again that religion was no business of the state."

Begum Wajid's passions were ignited by the Pakistan Movement. Women who were moved in this direction were encouraged to put all their energies into relief work and social welfare. She soon found herself drawn to helping orphans and the uplifting of women. "I entered social work in 1938 in Delhi when Aruna Asif Ali, a well-known political and social worker, took me to squatter villages to work with the poor." A year later Begum Wajid moved to the central Indian state of Johra, where her husband was appointed prime minister. There she became the chairperson of the Central Indian Red Cross to organize relief work for the war⁷ effort.

After India gained its independence from England in 1947, Begum Raana⁸ asked her to organize the Women's National Guard in Rajshahi, East Pakistan (modern-day Bangladesh). Begum Wajid said that the Women's National Guard signified a break with tradition for many women — many were stepping out of their homes for the first time. Women in the National Guard violated the rules of *purdah* (seclusion of women) by appearing in public and interacting with strangers to collect funds, selling patriotic badges and propagating the idea of Pakistan.

Begum Wajid, like most women of her generation, holds Begum Raana in high esteem. With the launching of the All-Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) in 1947, Begum Raana mobilized thousands of women to help with the resettlement of Muslim refugees into Pakistan. APWA actively encouraged and trained refugee widows to perform income-generating activities such as embroidery and sewing. APWA received full government support. This was evident from the fact that in each province, the governor's wife was almost always appointed as the chief of the local wing of the organization.

"Begum Raana took the lead in appealing women to come forward," said Begum Wajid. "It was her idea that civil-defense training for women be introduced in the newly created Pakistan. The concept of women being trained to be independent, to use weapons and to be a part of the defense system of the country was bold and unprecedented. She was very much ahead for the times." Following Partition, a time when there was an ever-present fear that Pakistan would be attacked by India, Begum Raana said that in the event of another conflict, the women of Pakistan would have to be prepared to fight till the end. As part of this campaign, Begum Wajid

⁴Anwar Syed, *Pakistan, Islam and National Solidarity* p. 51.

⁵It is important to note that not all Muslims were united on the call for an independent Pakistan. The supporters of the movement generally adhered to the Sir Syed school of thought. The trend initiated by Sir Syed was to evolve a socially progressive ethos which was particularly relevant for women. It is among Sir Syed's followers that we find the first advocates of women's education. (See LZK-2 for more on Sir Syed Ahmad Khan). Those in opposition were typically the *ulema* (religious scholars) and the socially conservative Islamic parties. Both schools of thought are believed to have played a role in raising the consciousness of Indian Muslims.

⁶Liaquat Ali Khan denounced the *ulema* as being 'the enemies of Islam who meant only to disrupt and destroy Pakistan'.

⁷War for Independence from England.

⁸Begum Raana was the wife of Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan.

learned how to use a rifle and trained other women how to do so.

Begum Wajid recalled one of the darkest periods in the sub-continent's history — when bitter communal tensions were continually erupting between Hindus and Muslims. "Jinnah called for a 'direct action day' in 1946 in Calcutta. Muslims were becoming very passionate and decided stage a protest procession. A group of Hindus had prepared caldrons of boiling water and milk, which they threw on the procession. In those days hundreds of Muslims were being killed. Subsequently Muslims would react and kill Hindus."

The Hindu-Muslim clashes made Begum Wajid conscious of her own Muslim identity. "I'll give you an example of what was happening all over the country," she said. "My husband and I were traveling to Calcutta from the city of Mushidabad by train. A man began knocking at our compartment door and asking me whether I had a servant on board. I replied yes. 'Well they are killing him,' he said. I left the compartment in panic to see what was going on and saw that my servant had been thrown out of the train and was being attacked by an angry mob on the platform. They were trying to kill him. Without having time to think, I pushed my way through and somehow managed to pull him out. I shoved him back into the train compartment just as the train was about to pull away. A man came cursing and running after me as I climbed onto the train. I had to kick him away to close the door. My husband was still in the compartment and had no idea what was happening. The mob outside started throwing stones at our window. Glass was shattering all around us. I never prayed so hard in my life. I couldn't stop shaking until we reached the next station. Feelings were so high back then that people would get worked up over nothing. My servant was a Kashmiri Muslim so he must have said something that offended the Hindus. Anyhow, I saved his life."

As Begum Wajid related this incident, I could see chilling parallels between the Hindu-Muslim riots of pre-partition India and those that took place earlier this year in the Indian province of Gujarat. The violence in Gujarat began after a Muslim mob attacked two train carriages carrying Hindu activists. The activists were supporters of a campaign led by the World Hindu Council, which has been attempting to construct a temple to the Hindu god Ram on the site of a 16th century mosque in Ayodha. Following the mosque's destruction by Hindu militants in 1992, Hindu-Muslim violence has claimed thousands of lives. Since February of this year, police and officials of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party or Indian People's Party) have been directly involved in the killings of hundreds of Muslims in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. In some cases,

the police has been known to have led the charge of murderous mobs to Muslim homes and villages. The government is now said to be engineering a massive cover-up of the state's involvement in the violence.⁹

* * * * *

Most of APWA's activities were concentrated in the urban areas of Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi and Peshawar. In 1949 Begum Wajid's husband was posted in Rawalpindi as the Minister for Kashmiri Affairs. In that year she founded the first APWA branch in the same city. Because she lost her own parents at a young age, it is easy to understand why she established a special program for orphans. The program encouraged families to sponsor children living in camps and orphanages. Social workers were sensitized to understand the psyche of orphans. This program later developed into the first legalized child-placement program in Pakistan for abandoned babies.

Urban women belonging to the middle and upper classes joined APWA in large numbers. For many of APWA's members, it represented the only opportunity to participate in activities outside the home. Women who could afford to do so opened schools, health centers and industrial homes that trained women with income-generating skills and trades. "In those days, everything needed to be done," said Begum Wajid. "Those who could afford to help did so. We were so proud that we had a country and were willing to do everything it took to build a nation."

After the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, Begum Wajid worked with Abdul Sattar Edhi on the resettlement and rehabilitation of Behari¹⁰ refugees in Karachi. Edhi later became the founder of the Edhi Foundation — the largest social-welfare system in Pakistan today. The Foundation provides rehabilitation of drug addicts, free pre-funeral shrouding, family planning services, an extensive chain of free hospitals, burial of the unclaimed dead and shelters for orphans and the disabled. "Today the Edhi Foundation is doing a very good job finding homes for orphans," she said. "People trust Edhi, which is why they give him so much money. He is getting donations of helicopters, planes and ambulances from all over the world. No matter where there is an accident in this city, an Edhi ambulance will be there within minutes. If there is someone sick in your house, you call Edhi, not the hospital." Today, Edhi is known internationally and has been called the Mother Teresa of Pakistan.¹¹

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Through APWA's efforts, the Family Laws Ordinance

⁹ 'We Have No Orders to Save You: State Participation and Complicity in Communal Violence in Gujarat.' Human Rights Watch report, Vol. 14, No. 3 (c) April, 2002.

¹⁰ A large number of *Beharis* or Urdu-speaking refugees from Bangladesh, migrated to Pakistan in 1971.

¹¹ For more on the Edhi Foundation, see website at www.paks.net/edhi-foundation



was enacted in 1961. The Ordinance was a significant piece of legislation for women and is still considered by many as the first step towards the protection of married women in Pakistan. The Ordinance discouraged polygamy and regulated divorce by providing procedures for both. It stipulated that a man who wanted to have more than one wife would first have to obtain the consent of his wife and present his request in front of an 'arbitration council,' which consisted of a representative from each party and the chairman of the local council.

The Ordinance also eliminated the customary and much abused practice of declaring divorce by repudiation. Declaration-by-repudiation divorce has been abused in Islamic countries, whereby a divorce is deemed valid after the husband pronounces the word *talaq* (divorce) three times. Under the Ordinance the husband was now required by law to send a written notice to the chairman of the local council and to his wife. The written notification by mail started a 90-day period during which an arbitration council was set up to try to reconcile the parties. If no reconciliation was reached, the divorce became

effective at the end of the 90-day period.¹²

Another significant clause of the Ordinance was the introduction of the *nikah-nama* or marriage contract, and the compulsory registration of all marriages. The standard *nikah-nama* contains a clause, which if agreed upon by the parties at the time of marriage, protects the position of the woman by delegating the right of divorce to the wife. The clause, known as the *talaq-e-tafwid*, gives the wife the ability to dissolve the marriage without going to court. She still must send a notice of dissolution to the chairman of the local council. In other words, the Ordinance stipulated that both marriages and divorces now had to be registered in order to be recognized before a court of law.

The practical application of the *nikah-nama*, however, was limited. In most cases, the clause stipulating favorable conditions for the wife were left either blank or crossed out with a pen by the male members of the family. I was amazed to discover that this practice occurs even in urban, educated families. A large number of educated

¹² If the wife was pregnant, the divorce became effective after delivery.



Placards encouraging people to go out and vote 'Yes' for President Musharraf. Signs like these were plastered all over the city in the weeks leading up to the election. The government claimed that over 90 percent of the votes cast were 'Yes'. This meant another five years in office for the general.

married woman I spoke to either did not know that there was a clause granting a woman the right to a divorce or have chosen to leave it blank to avoid a confrontation with the groom's family at the time of the marriage ceremony. Those women who did avail themselves of the protective conditions in the *nikah-nama* said they were able to do so, not out their own accord, but because they had far-sighted and enlightened male relatives.

Though welcomed by women activists as a step in the right direction, the Ordinance was also criticized for not being strong enough. It was considered to be moderate in comparison with the reforms in family law in other Muslim countries such as Iran and Turkey — which had already outlawed polygamy, declared extra-judicial divorce invalid and had given the same rights of divorce to men and women.¹³

Predictably, the *ulema* criticized the Ordinance for being totally un-Islamic. All over Pakistan, *ulema* opposed

the measure, condemning it as an attempt to tamper with the *Qur'an*. Maulana Maudoodi, a right-wing conservative religious leader, argued that taking on another wife was a man's right in Islam. The Ordinance, he said, would encourage men to take on mistresses and girlfriends. Women understandably responded by giving speeches and holding demonstrations. Begum Wajid recalled a march in Lahore organized by a group of women that culminated in the burning of an effigy of Maulana Maudoodi in front of the Punjab assembly.

Begum Wajid criticized the *ulema*. "During the time leading up to the creation of Pakistan, the *ulema* belonging to the Jamat-I-Islami party were opposing Jinnah and the entire concept of Pakistan. Today they are setting themselves up as great patriots. We call Jinnah the *Quaid-e-Azam*, the *ulema* referred to him as *kafir-e-Azam*.¹⁴ The *ulema* has always been vocal but not strong. When APWA started a home for abandoned babies, we were accused of encouraging women to be bad. I challenged the *ulema* by asking where is it written in the *Qur'an* that once a

¹³ Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back? Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed, Vanguard Books, 1987

¹⁴ *Quaid-e-Azam* means 'Great Leader' whereas *Kafir-e-Azam* means 'Great Infidel.'

child comes into the world it should be killed or be allowed to die? They had stupid arguments and no reply to these questions.”

In the 50s and 60s Begum Wajid worked with APWA in setting up schools in Malir and Lyari — two of the oldest slum areas in Karachi. “In Malir there were no schools or buildings, just trees and open fields. So I suggested that we use the shade of a tree as a place for teaching. Something was better than nothing. I subsequently wrote to the education department and proposed that a school be built.”

The groundwork laid by APWA led to the formation of other NGOs. Social work gave rise to activism. While each had a different role, both have been necessary. Perhaps there would have never been a Women’s Action Forum (WAF)¹⁵ if there had not been an APWA. If there had never been a WAF there would not be the countless number of NGOs today working toward the empowerment of women throughout the country. Even today, APWA is still recognized as the principal non-governmental organization in the country and has consultative status with the government of Pakistan as well as various UN agencies.

Begum Wajid believes in self-help and self-reliance. “I don’t like to stay involved in a project for very long. I delegate tasks well and I am a good organizer. I identify a problem and I look for a solution. I believe that communities should solve their own problems, so I let others take over when I’m not needed anymore. I am not doing this for the praise and adulation of others.”

My conversation with Begum Wajid took place shortly after the April 30 Referendum¹⁶. I asked her if she thought it was a good idea. “This referendum was different from referendums held in the past. The referendum of General Zia ul Hag was held in an atmosphere of ter-

ror. All political parties were banned. I didn’t agree with some of the *tamashas* [antics] being carried by the General [Perves Musharraf] to get the vote, but I still support him.”

On the day of the Referendum, I went to a Karachi polling station for women with my great-aunt, who was looking forward to voting “yes” for Musharraf. “He’s the best thing that has happened in Pakistan in a long time. People should stop being so critical of him and let him do his job,” she said passionately on our way to the polling station. Considering that the country is technically still under martial law and a military dictator, I have been struck on several occasions by the General’s relatively liberal attitude toward dissent. Throughout the country anti-Referendum rallies were held without much interference from the government.

Today, at 82, Begum Wajid drives herself to work every day and insists on living alone. She is proud of her independence: “If it had not been for boarding school I might have ended up like the other *begums* who order their maids around all day.” Her legacies are tangible — institutions that have bettered lives. She told me something in Urdu which I thought articulated her life: “*neeyat saf ho tho barkat hothee*,” or if you have pure intentions, you will get great rewards.

The timing of my interview with Begum Wajid assumed added relevance in the context of Pakistan’s current inter-Islamic feuding. She was among the vanguard of individuals who struggled for an independent Pakistan. As they pushed for a new state, these pioneers had set aside their differences and for the most part were not divided along sectarian or religious lines. To raise dangerously divisive questions now not only sabotages any chances of Islamic unity, but is in blatant contradiction of the spirit of the Pakistan Movement. □

¹⁵ For more on Women’s Action Forum or WAF, see LZK-2.

¹⁶ The April 30 referendum was the first referendum since the one held by General Zia ul Haq in 1984. The other referendum held by a military ruler in Pakistan was in 1960 under Ayub Khan. In the 1984 referendum, the people were asked whether or not they supported Zia’s Islamization policy. In this year’s current Referendum, the people are being asked whether they want General Musharraf to remain as president for another five years. The vote for Zia for 95 percent in the affirmative. Zia’s referendum was not challenged before or after it was held, but all of the major political parties have challenged Musharraf’s, including the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), the Jamaat-I-Islami, the Jamat Ulema-I-Pakistan, the Awami National Party and others. The April 30 Referendum has been upheld by the Supreme Court of Pakistan.

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