

In Memory of Zakia Khatib - Social Worker, Educationist and Activist

1930- 2016

Zakia Khatib or Zakia aunty as I called her, as she had been my late mother's friend passed away on 30th May 2016. Her death seemed like an end of an era of those pioneering and courageous Muslim women, who not only broke traditional barriers of a patriarchal society but were also committed to improve the lot of women and children from their community by endeavoring to educate and train girls and women from the under privileged sections of their community to become self-reliant. My mother and Zakia Khatib were both born in 1930, both came from traditional Muslim families and semi urban setups with few educational facilities: my mother was from Yeotmal and Zakia aunty from Kalyan .But both had enlightened fathers who wanted their bright and gifted daughters to get the same educational opportunities as their sons. My mother was the first post-graduate in her family and took to social work and teaching after her marriage. When she died, a friend of the family, considered her to be an institution herself .But Zakia aunty went a little further: She left behind an institution , the NGO Bazm-e-Niswan Maharashtra which she founded in 1955 to carry on her work of upliftment of the underprivileged, and it was through the Bazm-e-Niswan, she tried to continue one of my mother's initiatives, an annual function to celebrate the Prophets Birthday by instituting in 1994 (the year my mother died) an annual Razia Nizamuddin Memorial talk on the life and character of the Prophet. It was her association with my mother that brought me in contact with Zakia aunty and I found her a gentle, caring, affectionate and an inspirational personality.

Though belonging to one of the prestigious families of Bhiwandi -the Faquihs, Zakia's life was not easy; the family was in financial straits and with eleven children (seven daughters and four sons), the pressure on the meager income was considerable . But her father Moinuddin Faquih's resolve to support his talented daughter's aspirations despite the opposition from the village elders was actualized through her mother and sister Aasia's struggle: they sewed and stitched clothes and prepared and sold Konkani delicacies. Aasia had stayed at home after 4th standard since there was no girl's school in Kalyan after the 4th standard. But Zakia, next in line was too bright to be overlooked and she was sent to the Anglo Urdu High School Pune. After Zakia, the way was open to the younger siblings, for acquiring higher education.

Zakia did her graduation from Sophia College and her Masters from Bombay University in History and Political Science .Immediately after her graduation she decided to work towards realizing her dream: making education accessible to girls and women of her community. She strove to get a girls section opened in Raees school in Bhiwandi which she headed in its formative years and it was through her encouragement and efforts that made it acceptable to the town folk to send their daughters .The other purpose in her life was to set up an organization managed by women for improving the lives of women and children. In pursuance of this goal she set up the Bazm-e-Niswan Maharashtra in Bhiwandi in 1955 with the following objectives:

Promoting the education of women and preschool children; promoting the social and economic progress of women and children; providing healthy and interesting entertainment to them as also taking care of their health and well-being.

The Bazm also sought to promote and guide other charitable institutions with similar objective and thereby build a network of such organizations for larger coverage of the under privileged sections.

In 1956, Zakia got married to Dr Zamiruddin Khatib who was practicing medicine in Bombay .Consequently the Head office of the Bazm shifted to Bombay in1958/59 (functioning for some years in Dr Khatib's clinic), by which time the Bazm had set up a number of branches in various towns of Konkan such as Ratnagiri, Murud, Janjira, Thana and Kalyan where it had started nursery and sewing classes.

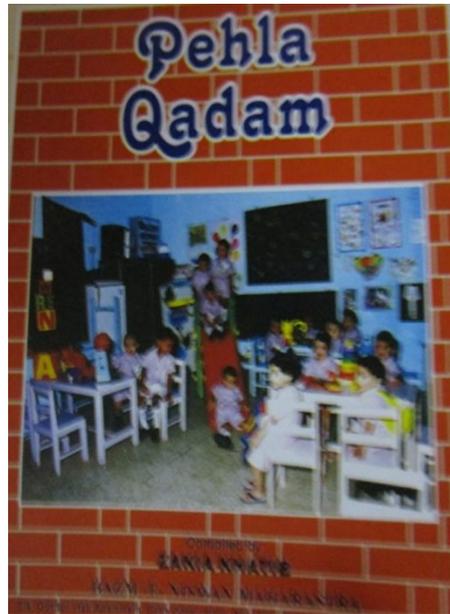


Kamila Tyabji, Founder of WIT with Zakia Khatib and Birjis Faquih, now President of the Bazm

The shift to Bombay provided Zakia greater scope to network with other social workers and activist such as Kamila Tyabji with whom she founded the Women India Trust (WIT). Marriage and children brought in greater domestic responsibilities. But according to Nafeesa, her eldest daughter who is now associated with the Bazm her mother never let her social work affect her family life.

“I don't remember a single occasion when my mother was not present at home when we returned from school .She organized and planned her social activities to fit in with her husband and children's schedule.”

It was in 1962 that the Bazm was registered as a Trust and in the following year the organization set up a branch at Panvel and in 1971 at Murud, Janjira .It soon acquired its own place in Bhiwandi and in Bombay. In the meantime its activities increased .It organized dramatic competitions, Tafseer ul Quran classes, a uniform making center and a tailoring unit at the head office in Gordon Hall and also conducted aerobic classes .It instituted a number of prizes and awards in the memory of prominent educationist and community workers such as Mrs. Rafia Khanzada Prize, Mrs Sharifa Qureshi Memorial Prize, Bazm- e - Niswan Merit prize.



Pehla Kadam, the Nursery Reader which won the State Award

The organizations activities grew, and Zakia Khatib's contribution was recognized .In 1982, she received a special prize for the Nursery reader Pehla Qadam prepared by her from the Government of Maharashtra .She became a member of the Maharashtra State Women's Council, of the State Family and Child Welfare Board and Chairperson of the Girls Board of Anjuman e-Islam .She was felicitated by her Alma Mater, Sophia College for her contribution towards women's education.



Mrs. Zakia Khatib receiving the Women's Achievement Award

In 2010, in recognition of 60 years of service towards upliftment of women and children from underprivileged sections of society through education and employment, she was awarded the women achievers award by the Konkan Muslim Education Society. For the past few years, failing health made it difficult for her to be physically active, but she continued to supervise and monitor the functioning of the Bazm from home. I last met her in February at the bi - annual Craft fair which the Bazm organized to provide women and girls from underprivileged sections an opportunity to earn some money through sale of their products and handicrafts. She was attending it after a gap of nearly three years and seemed delighted to be among her co workers and friends: she looked radiant. None of us realize that this would be the last time she would participate in the activities of the Bazm. She became serious in April and passed away on May 30th deeply mourned by family, friends and the beneficiaries of her dedicated service. But with her death, her work will not come to an end. Her legacy in the institution of the Bazm and a team of co-workers will continue her work to improve the life of the underprivileged members of her community.



Mrs. Zakia Khatib at the Craft Fair organized by the Bazm