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## Begum Qudsia Rasul: The Remarkable Life of the Only Muslim Woman in the Constituent Assembly

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### Abstract

This paper examines the life and constitutional contributions of Begum Qudsia Aizaz Rasul, the only Muslim woman member of the Indian Constituent Assembly. Tracing her journey from aristocratic upbringing and early political participation in colonial India to her decisive role in constitution-making, the study highlights her commitment to secularism, gender equality, and national integration. Special attention is given to her courageous stance against separate communal electorates, her advocacy for fundamental rights, linguistic and minority protections, and her ability to build cross-community alliances in a deeply polarized post-Partition context. Drawing primarily on Constituent Assembly debates and her own writings, the paper argues that Begum Qudsia Rasul played a pivotal yet under-recognized role in shaping India's constitutional vision of equal citizenship. Her life illustrates how principled leadership, supported by inter-communal cooperation, helped lay the foundations of a secular democratic republic.

**Keywords:** Begum Qudsia Rasul, Constituent Assembly of India, Muslim women leadership, Minority rights, Indian constitutional history

### Early Life and Background

Begum Qudsia Aizaz Rasul (often simply called Begum Qudsia Rasul) was born on April 2, 1909, into an aristocratic Muslim family in Punjab, during the late British Raj. Her father, Sir Zulfiqar Ali Khan, hailed from the princely state of Malerkotla, and her mother was the daughter of the Nawab of Loharu-lineage that ensured young Qudsia was exposed to politics and public affairs early in life. Unlike many girls of her time, Qudsia received education and accompanied her father to political meetings, even serving as his unofficial secretary in her youth. This upbringing instilled in her both *modern* ideals and a respect for tradition. She defied orthodox norms like *purdah* (veiling) that confined women; in fact, she formally discarded the *purdah* in 1937 when she entered electoral politics. Her family's progressive outlook and the support of enlightened mentors (including British administrator Sir Malcolm Hailey, who arranged her marriage) helped prepare her to enter the male-dominated political arena.

In 1929, at age 20, she married Nawab Aizaz Rasul, a landed taluqdar of Oudh (in present-day Uttar Pradesh). Thereafter she became known publicly as Begum Aizaz Rasul. Her marital home was supportive of her political ambitions. Though she was a Muslim woman in a conservative milieu, her Hindu and Muslim contemporaries alike would eventually recognize her capabilities and assist in her rise. This cross-community goodwill became one secret of her success.

### Breaking Barriers in Colonial Politics

Begum Rasul's first foray into politics was *historic*. In the 1937 elections under the Government of India Act 1935, she ran for a seat in the United Provinces Legislative Assembly. She was not a beneficiary of any reserved quota for women-she contested a general

seat on her own merit and won. This made her one of *very few* Indian women to win an election in that era without affirmative action. Her victory was remarkable not only because she was a woman, but also because she was standing in a Muslim electorate and faced opposition from conservative elements of her own community. There was even "much propaganda against me, specially a *fatwa* by the Ulemas that it was un-Islamic to vote for a non-purdah Muslim woman," she later recalled (Rasul, 2001). Yet, many ordinary Muslims-and even open-minded Hindus who encouraged women's participation-rallied behind her, defying the orthodox edict. Her win thus owed partly to progressive Hindu colleagues and voters who believed in gender equality, showing a rare solidarity across communal lines at that time.

Once in the U.P. Legislative Council, Begum Rasul quickly proved her mettle. She served as Deputy President of the Council from 1937 to 1940 and later, after Independence, became Leader of the Opposition there (1950–1952). Notably, she was the first woman in India-and reportedly the first Muslim woman in the world-to lead the opposition in a legislature. Her tenure in provincial politics was marked by bold, sometimes unorthodox positions. Despite hailing from a feudal landowning family, Begum Rasul emerged as an outspoken critic of the *zamindari* system (landlordism). As a member of the U.P. Tenancy Reform Committee, she worked for agrarian reforms. In 1939, when a landmark bill to abolish zamindari was debated, she shocked many elite peers by championing tenants' rights over landlords' privileges. She urged fellow zamindars not to oppose the reform: "*The bill should not be opposed... Zamindars should see the writing on the wall and graciously give these rights to the tenants who toil and sweat. If they did not, their land would be forcibly taken away from them,*" she warned in the legislature (Rasul, 2001). Many landlords were aghast at such candor from one of their

own; indeed, Begum Rasul later believed her advocacy for peasants cost her re-election in 1940, as offended aristocrats worked to defeat her. Nonetheless, her principled stand earned her respect across the political spectrum. It was evident that *whether on social issues or communal issues*, she put nation and justice above narrow self-interest, a quality that would define her role in constitution-making.

By the mid-1940s, Begum Qudsia Rasul had established herself as a prominent political figure in U.P. She had initially been aligned with the All-India Muslim League, which she and her husband joined in the late 1930s. However, unlike some League leaders, she was never an separatist at heart. In a telling encounter, she met Muhammad Ali Jinnah in the summer of 1941; Jinnah pressed her on why she had not fully embraced the League when “people in thousands were flocking to join.” Begum Rasul politely demurred-the idea of Pakistan, a separate nation carved on religious lines, *did not convince her*. She was committed to the idea that Muslims could thrive in a united, independent India. This conviction would guide her actions during the momentous events to come.

### **The Only Muslim Woman in the Constituent Assembly**

#### **Joining the Constituent Assembly**

In July 1946, elections were held for the Constituent Assembly of India, the body tasked with framing the new nation’s Constitution. Begum Rasul earned a place in the Assembly as part of the Muslim League quota from U.P., one of only 28 League members who initially joined the Assembly. When the Assembly convened in December 1946, she was the sole Muslim woman among its 299 members. In fact, only 15 women in total were in that Assembly, each representing the aspirations of millions of Indian

women who until then had little voice in governance. Begum Qudsia Rasul’s presence was thus highly symbolic-she *embodied* both a religious minority and the female half of the population in that hall. The responsibility was immense, and she felt it keenly.

From the outset, Begum Rasul took her work in the Constituent Assembly very seriously. She was an active participant, not a token presence. Colleagues observed that her speeches and interjections carried clarity and conviction. Initially, the Assembly was divided-the Muslim League delegates (mostly from provinces that would become Pakistan) were in conflict with the Congress majority. But after Partition in August 1947, most League members from Pakistan areas left the Assembly, leaving only a *handful of Muslim members* from what was now India. Begum Rasul was among these who stayed. She even stepped up to greater responsibilities: when the League’s leader Chaudhry Khaliqzaman left for Pakistan, Begum Rasul succeeded him as leader of the Muslim League group in the Assembly. In that capacity, she also served as Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Assembly for a time. It was extraordinary-a young Muslim woman presiding over the remnants of a party that had mostly broken away. This was possible only because her integrity and patriotism had earned the trust of many Hindu colleagues, including stalwarts like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Rather than marginalize the few remaining Muslim League members, the Congress leadership involved them in key committees-Patel appointed Begum Rasul to the Minorities Sub-Committee that worked on minority safeguards. Such gestures by the Hindu-majority leadership helped create an atmosphere of cooperation in which Begum Rasul could contribute her best.

### **Championing Minority Rights-and Renouncing Communal Electorates**

One of Begum Rasul's most significant contributions in the Constituent Assembly was in shaping the constitutional approach to minority rights. As a Muslim representative, she was expected by some to defend separate communal interests. Instead, she surprised many by forcefully opposing the continuation of separate electorates or reserved legislative seats for religious minorities. Separate electorates—a system where Muslims could only vote for Muslim candidates and vice versa—had been introduced by the British in 1909 and expanded in subsequent reforms. While intended as a “safeguard” for minorities under colonial rule, separate electorates had, in Begum Rasul's view, deeply harmful effects on national unity.

In the Assembly's Minorities Committee and later in full debates, Begum Rasul argued that independent India must break from this colonial legacy of divide-and-rule. *“In the new set-up with joint electorates it is absolutely meaningless to have reservation of seats for any minority,”* she declared, urging minorities to instead put faith in the goodwill of the majority. At a previous session in 1947, the Assembly had initially agreed in principle to reserve a proportion of seats for Muslims, Sikhs, and others (though under a joint electorate). Begum Rasul had *spoken against it even then*. By November 1948, during the Draft Constitution debates, her stance was resolute and unambiguous: *“We have to depend upon the good-will of the majority community. Therefore speaking for the Muslims I say that to ask for reservation of seats seems to my mind quite pointless,”* she told the House, adding that if the Hindu majority promised not to discriminate, Muslims “will not ask for any reservation”. Such words were bold—she was effectively renouncing special political safeguards that many minority leaders historically thought essential.

Begum Rasul's reasoning was rooted in a long-term vision of national integration. In her view, *communal*

*reservations would only keep communities apart and perpetuate mistrust*. She famously described religion-based reservations as *“a self-destructive weapon which separates minorities from majorities for all time. It gives no chance to the minorities to win the trust of the majority”*. This vivid metaphor—calling separate communal protection a “self-destructive weapon”—encapsulated her belief that such crutches would do more harm than good to Muslims in India. She argued that true security for minorities lay not in isolation but in earning the confidence of the majority through joint democratic participation. Her words echoed the sentiment of other forward-looking Muslim members like Tajamul Hussain and Maulana Hasrat Mohani, who too maintained that *minorities must shed separatism and join the national mainstream*. Together with these colleagues (interestingly, all Muslims themselves), Begum Rasul stood in solidarity with Patel and the Congress in eliminating separate electorates and reserved seats from the Constitution.

This stance was not without backlash. Begum Rasul faced *severe criticism from sections of her community* for agreeing to abolish even the reserved representation that had been offered. Some Muslim representatives, like T.A. Khan Ismail from Madras and Syed Muhammad Saadullah from Assam, were initially unhappy with the new policy and tried to resist it in the Assembly's final sessions. Saadullah even complained that the decision in the Minorities Committee had been carried by “the solitary support of Begum Aizaz Rasul” as the only Muslim favoring it. In the Assembly on May 26, 1949, he groused that minority reservations were being given up solely at her behest. This prompted a sharp rebuttal from another member (likely Maulana Hifzur Rahman or Tajamul Hussain) who reminded Saadullah that many Muslim Assembly members had met months earlier and agreed “to do away with reservation,” so Begum Rasul was *not alone*—she had acted on behalf of a wider consensus

among nationalist Muslims. Indeed, Patel himself noted that his Advisory Committee reconsidered reservations in 1949 largely because “*members of a particular community*” (i.e. Indian Muslims) felt their interests were better served without reserved seats. Begum Rasul’s advocacy was instrumental in forming that consensus. The Constituent Assembly ultimately voted to abolish religious reservations entirely on May 26, 1949—a turning point that owed much to her leadership.

That decision did *place a burden on the Hindu majority*, as several speakers acknowledged. By giving up guaranteed seats, minorities were effectively “placing the majority on a severe test,” as Sikh member Sardar Hukam Singh put it—the onus was now on the majority to govern fairly and make minorities feel secure. Begum Rasul wholeheartedly shared this expectation. She stressed that while minorities must shed separatism, the majority must never abuse its dominant position. “*I do agree with Dr. Ambedkar that it is for the majority to realise its duty not to discriminate against any minority,*” she said, firmly adding that Muslims’ interests were identical with the nation’s interests and that she “expected” just and fair treatment in return for minorities’ trust. This mutual commitment—minorities trusting the majority, and the majority respecting minority rights—was central to the secular vision Begum Rasul championed.

### **Advocacy for Secularism, Fundamental Rights, and Language Rights**

Beyond minority representation, Begum Qudsia Rasul made wide-ranging interventions in the Assembly debates, reflecting her broad constitutional vision. She was a staunch secularist and civil libertarian at heart. When the Draft Constitution was unveiled in November 1948, she evaluated it not only from a communal angle but from the perspective of individual freedoms and constitutionalism. In that debate, she

praised Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the Drafting Committee for their hard work, but did not shy away from critique. In a memorable phrase, Begum Rasul lamented that many of the so-called Fundamental Rights in the draft were hollow: “*Sir, coming to the Fundamental Rights, I find that what has been given with one hand has been taken away by the other,*” she observed pointedly. By this she meant that the draft constitution’s rights (free speech, equality, etc.) were riddled with so many exceptions and provisos that the rights could be easily curtailed. She argued that a set of rights so easily amendable or suspendable by law hardly deserved to be called fundamental. This frank assessment showed Begum Rasul’s legal acumen—she identified a core tension in the draft: the desire to promise liberty, versus the urge to qualify it for security or social considerations. She believed at least some liberties should be absolute or protected from legislative meddling. Her plea was that *the Constitution must preserve certain essential civil liberties in full*, without “provisos and exceptions” that let future governments chip them away. Though the Assembly did not remove all restrictions, Begum Rasul’s words captured the unease of many that the document might be too lengthy and cautious.

She even proposed an innovative solution: the creation of an independent agency or commission to monitor Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles. Anticipating future rights commissions, she told the Assembly that if no watchdog existed to ensure rights were observed in practice, it might lead frustrated groups to form communal organizations for self-protection—an outcome she wished to avoid. *It was necessary, she argued, to have a mechanism that would bring to the government’s notice any violations of citizens’ fundamental rights or of the constitutional directives, in any province.* While such an agency was not created in 1950, her idea foresaw the need for institutions like human rights commissions that

emerged decades later. It was another instance of Begum Rasul's forward-looking thinking and her constant emphasis on safeguarding the rights of all citizens, majority and minority alike.

As a Muslim woman, Begum Rasul also took keen interest in issues of gender equality and cultural rights. She expressed "*very great satisfaction*" that the new Constitution would prohibit any discrimination on the basis of sex, thereby guaranteeing equal rights to women. She noted with pride that critics who said India would not grant women equality had been proven wrong-when Indians drafted their own Constitution, they ensured women had the same rights as men. This, she believed, would help women "come forward and fully shoulder their responsibilities" in nation-building. Her own life was testament to that principle.

Begum Rasul further championed the rights of linguistic minorities. Together with fellow members like Z.H. Lari and Kazi Syed Karimuddin, she co-sponsored an amendment to ensure that *any minority community with a distinct language or script would have the right to primary education in that mother-tongue*. This proposal was essentially aimed at protecting Urdu and other minority languages in education. Although the specific amendment was not written into the Constitution's text (Jawaharlal Nehru felt such detail didn't belong in the Constitution itself), the spirit of it did influence policy. In fact, Nehru acknowledged privately that he agreed with the objective and even advised provincial governments to implement such measures in schools. The final Constitution's Articles 29 and 30, which safeguard the rights of cultural and linguistic minorities (including the right to conserve one's language and establish educational institutions), owe something to the efforts of Begum Rasul and her peers. Her passionate defense of Urdu's place in India was also evident in the debates over the national language. While ultimately Hindi in Devanagari script was adopted as the official language,

Begum Rasul was a strong voice urging that the transition be gradual and that "*Hindustani*" (*a blend of Hindi and Urdu*) be recognized. She argued it was unfair and impractical to expect *40 million Indian Muslims* to overnight change their script and language of familiarity. She reminded the Assembly that Mahatma Gandhi himself had favored Hindustani in both Nagari and Perso-Arabic scripts as a *lingua franca*. In the end, the Constitution did not explicitly adopt Hindustani, but her advocacy contributed to the decision to allow Hindi and English as official languages for a 15-year transition, and implicitly to the protection of Urdu in Article 347 and other provisions. Her interventions on language showed her *sensitivity to minority sensibilities* even as she embraced a unifying national vision.

### **Cross-Community Alliances and Support**

Throughout her time in the Constituent Assembly, Begum Qudsia Rasul enjoyed and reciprocated support from many Hindu colleagues and leaders. In an era scarred by Partition's communal violence, this was no small achievement-it was a testament to her personal diplomacy and the inclusive ethos of the Assembly's core leadership. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in particular valued her contributions. As head of the Minorities Committee, Patel relied on Begum Rasul to persuade other Muslim members when tough decisions needed to be made. He noted that when minorities themselves- led by Begum Rasul-indicated they no longer required reserved seats, it gave him confidence to proceed with abolishing those provisions. Patel publicly appealed to all communities to support the new arrangement, and with Begum Rasul by his side, he forged a Hindu-Muslim understanding on one of the most sensitive issues of the constitution. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, too, held her in esteem; he included her in important communications, such as circulating his letter on minority language education policy to her for feedback in 1948. These instances show how Hindu leaders

*helped her achieve milestones by treating her as an equal partner, not an adversary.*

It was not only top leaders; rank-and-file Hindu members also often spoke appreciatively of Begum Rasul's stance. During debates, when conservative Muslims accused her of selling out minority interests, several Hindu and Sikh members rose to defend her sincerity and reiterate that the majority would uphold its end of the bargain. For example, Sardar Hukam Singh (a Sikh leader) pointed out that by trusting the Hindu majority, Begum Rasul and others had given the majority a chance to prove its fairness-implicitly calling on Hindus to honor that trust. Even opponents respected her; some who disagreed initially, like Mohammad Ismail Khan, eventually gave "*unstinted support*" to the final resolution once they saw the broad coalition Begum Rasul had built in its favor.

On the other hand, progressive Hindus *helped her cause by fighting for a secular state that would render communal quotas unnecessary*. Leaders like H.C. Mookerjee (a Christian heading the Minorities Sub-Committee) and Govind Ballabh Pant argued passionately that India must not be a sum of enclaves but one nation where minorities did not live in perpetual separation. Begum Rasul found her ideals aligned with theirs. The trust and camaraderie between her and these Hindu colleagues was evident outside the Assembly as well. In early 1950, after the Constitution was adopted, Begum Rasul went on All India Radio and addressed the Muslims of India, urging them not to succumb to fear or flee to Pakistan but to build their future in secular India (Heritage Times, 1950). Such a broadcast had the implicit blessing of the government. It underlines how her voice was seen by the Hindu-led government as crucial in healing communal wounds—a Muslim woman leader reassuring fellow Muslims to trust a nation led largely by Hindus. This healing role was perhaps her greatest milestone, made possible

through mutual respect and support across community lines.

### **Post-Independence Career and Legacy**

When the Constituent Assembly concluded its work in January 1950, Begum Qudsia Rasul had already cemented her place in history as a founding mother of the Republic of India. But her journey did not stop there. She chose to stay in India (when many Muslim League contemporaries migrated) and continue public service. In 1950, the Muslim League in India was formally dissolved, and Begum Rasul, never an extremist, joined the Indian National Congress. The Congress, recognizing her talent, soon sent her to the newly constituted *Rajya Sabha* (Upper House of Parliament) in 1952. She served a term there, involving herself in national legislative work. By the late 1950s and 60s, Begum Rasul returned to state politics in Uttar Pradesh, getting elected again to the U.P. Legislative Assembly. She served in the U.P. Assembly for two decades (1969–1989), a longevity that few can match. From 1969 to 1971, she even held a cabinet rank as the State Minister for Social Welfare and Minorities, focusing on upliftment of disadvantaged groups. It was a fitting portfolio for someone who had always championed communal harmony and social reform.

Begum Rasul's interests were multifaceted. Apart from politics, she was a patron of sports—notably, she was President of the Indian Women's Hockey Federation for 20 years. Under her leadership, Indian women's hockey flourished, even achieving world-record victories. She took great pride in this role, seeing it as nation-building in another sphere—empowering women through sports. The *Begum Rasul Trophy* was named in her honor in women's hockey, commemorating her contributions. For her public service, she was awarded the Padma Bhushan, India's third-highest civilian honor, in 2000, just a year before she passed away in August 2001 at the age of 92.

In her later years, Begum Qudisia Rasul witnessed India change in many ways. She remained committed to secularism, but she was not blind to the challenges. In a nuanced shift, decades after opposing quotas, she seemed open to revisiting the idea of minority reservations under new circumstances. In 1999, too elderly to attend a convention on Muslim welfare, she sent a message observing that *communal tensions had grown and the concept of "Hindutva" had gained ground; therefore, "it is time now to think anew" about improving Muslims' educational and economic conditions*. Some interpreted this as the Begum acknowledging that perhaps additional safeguards or affirmative action might be needed in present times, given new challenges. It shows that her thinking was never dogmatic-it evolved with the context, always guided by what she perceived as the *practical best interest of Indian Muslims and national unity*.

Begum Qudisia Aizaz Rasul's life is a shining saga of courage, progressive thought, and patriotism. She stood at many intersections-between *Hindus and Muslims, between women and men, between the powerful and the marginalized*-and tried to bridge them with wisdom and empathy. In the Constituent Assembly, she proved that a Muslim woman could be one of the loudest voices for a secular, democratic India. She cherished her dual identities and made them a source of strength: her faith was personal but her citizenship was universal. With allies across communities, she helped steer India's founding document away from communal separatism and toward a promise of equal citizenship.

Her legacy, however, is somewhat unsung-something modern India is beginning to rediscover and celebrate. Historians note that *she charted a new course for Muslim women* at a time when their public presence was minimal. As the only Muslim woman framer of the Constitution, she paved the way for future generations of women from minority communities to

participate in public life without fear. Today, scholars and the public alike draw inspiration from her speeches and writings. Her autobiography *From Purdah to Parliament* stands as a candid chronicle of an extraordinary journey from cloistered traditions to the heart of India's constitutional democracy. It reminds us that the Indian freedom struggle and nation-building were not the work of men alone-women like Begum Qudisia Rasul were there, making difficult decisions and infusing the new Republic with the inclusive values that hold it together.

In sum, Begum Qudisia Rasul's remarkable life illustrates how one individual, with principle and perseverance, can help transform the destiny of a community and a country. She was a *bridge-builder* in a fractured time, and her story continues to inspire those who believe in an India where unity is forged through diversity and justice. In an Assembly otherwise dominated by male voices and often by the Hindu majority, *her voice rang clear, human and resolute*-insisting that India belong equally to *the minority and the majority, to women as much as men*. That is perhaps her greatest contribution to the making of modern India.

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