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Article

Muslim Women Legislators and the Legislative Politics of Muslim Minority Issues (1952-1974)

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Abstract:

This paper examines the voices of Muslim women legislators in the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly between 1952 and 1974 through seven assembly debates from the first, third, and fifth legislative terms. Focusing on Safia Abdul Wajid, Kishwar Ara, Begum Aijaz Rasul, and Hamida Habibullah, it analyses their engagements on minority-related issues such as cow slaughter, Urdu, communal violence, and the closure of Aligarh Muslim University. The paper shows how these women intervened selectively in legislative debates, at times confronting male legislators and at other moments finding alignment and support, while drawing on constitutional principles to articulate minority concerns. By highlighting these often-overlooked interventions, the study sheds light on the challenges of representation, negotiation, and coexistence within the Assembly during a period of significant post-Partition political change.

Keywords: Muslim Women Legislators, Minority Politics, Uttar Pradesh, Post-Partition India, Legislative Debates, Urdu and AMU, Secularism

1. INTRODUCTION

The years following the partition and independence of the subcontinent have been remembered largely through narratives of communal violence, displacement, and marginalisation of religious minorities. While these are important accounts, they often leave out another significant aspect of political life: The ways in which conflict was debated, negotiated and, managed within democratic institutions. Legislative Assemblies were one such space where tensions, and competing claims were openly discussed, making them important sites for studying not only disagreements but also processes of coexistence.

The focus on the Muslim women legislators within the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly between 1952 and 1974, studying their interactions with other legislators on issues affecting Muslim minorities. In the immediate aftermath of Partition, the Muslim situation in India was characterized by poverty, discrimination, and powerlessness. After 1947, many Muslim leaders migrated to Pakistan; those who remained in India increasingly recognised that their political future depended on engagement with the country's democratic and secular institutions.[1] Muslim women legislators, who were elected through the Congress during this period, participated in legislative politics alongside Muslim men, despite their smaller numbers in the Assembly. Operating within these constraints, they intervened on

1 Tawseef Ahmad Malik, *Political Participation of Muslims in Uttar Pradesh: A Case Study of Muslim OBCs* (unpublished PhD thesis, Department of Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University, 2021), p.55.

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minority issues, although not frequently or consistently. However, when they did speak, their interventions revealed how questions of gender, citizenship, and religious difference were negotiated within the democratic space of the Assembly. They brought up issues that affected the Muslim community in UP, such as ban on cow slaughter, the Aligarh Muslim University debate, Urdu's promotion and recognition, and communal violence.

Post-colonial scholarship has focused on communal politics, minority problems, political marginalisation, and under-representation of Muslims.[2] Studies on UP politics concentrate on party competition, caste politics, and male leadership.[3] Writings on political participation of women in Uttar Pradesh highlight women's electoral role, their representation and role in Legislative bodies, and other related socio- economic factors.[4] As a result, Muslim women legislators- and their role in raising minority concerns within formal political institutions received limited scholarly attention.

This gap is addressed by bringing attention to the legislative interventions of 4 women legislators- Safia Abdul Wajid, Begam Kishwar Ara, Begam Aijaz Rasul, and Hamida Habibullah. It focuses on seven Legislative Assembly debates, which are spread across the first, third, and fifth legislative terms. In the he second and fourth Legislative Assemblies there were no Muslim women legislators elected. I have analysed how these women participated in a male-dominated space, responding to accusations, negotiating differences, and asserting constitutional principles to defend minority rights. Their speeches point out that the Assembly was not only a place where heated confrontations took place, but it was also a place where co-existence was negotiated through alignment of thoughts, appeals to democratic values, and constitutional arguments.

2. HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Uttar Pradesh had one of the poorest records in offering relief and reconciliation to Muslims after Partition. Mushirul Hasan writes, "loss of privileges, combined with dim material prospects, led to disappointment and anger. This was reinforced by the communal atmosphere that prevailed in the country and its effect on Muslims; for one thing, their loyalty to their country was suspect."[5] Prominent leaders such as Chaudhary Khaliquzzaman and Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan also migrated to Pakistan; the remaining Muslim political elite who stayed in India chose to work within the secular and democratic system. This period marked a shift from pre-Partition politics to a new mode of minority engagement based on constitutional rights, legislative participation, and alignment with secular parties, particularly the Indian National Congress.

Uttar Pradesh occupied a central place in post-colonial Indian politics and in the first two decades after independence, dominated the political scene; although the internal factionalism and ideological differences were pronounced. Despite its secular claims, the Congress in UP often supported or failed to restrain communal tendencies, particularly on issues concerning religious minorities. These tensions became apparent in the legislative assembly.

Post-independence, there were several concerns of the Muslim community, such as educational backwardness, unemployment, Hindi-Urdu debate, reform of Muslim personal law, preservation of the minority character of AMU, cow protection, and communal riots.

Language was one such concern that became one of the most contentious issues post-Independence. Hindi in Devanagri script was adopted as the official language of UP in 1951. The adoption of Hindi as the official language marginalized Urdu in administration, education, and public employment.

From the 1960's, UP saw major communal riots resulting in significant loss of life and property of Muslims. The status of Aligarh Muslim University, was another important concern. AMU's association with Muslim identity and its historical links to the pre-Partition period made it a target of political suspicion.[6] The minority character of the institution, student agitation leading to the violence in the 1960s, and state intervention in university affairs intensified debates around the institution. The ban on cow slaughter in 1947 saw several protests in support and against it. These protests gathered momentum when the act banning cow slaughter was introduced in 1955.

In this difficult political and historical situation, shaped by conflict and disagreement, the Muslim legislators, including Muslim women, participated in the UP Legislative Assembly. Their interventions in debates on minority issues were often limited. Nevertheless, these instances

2 Mushirul Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims since Independence* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1977); Paul R. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Aishwarya Pandit, *Claiming Citizenship and Nation: Muslim Politics and State Building in North India, 1947–1986* (London: Routledge, 2021); Iqbal A. Ansari, *Political Representation of Muslims in India, 1952–2004* (New Delhi: Manak Publications, 2006); Theodore P. Wright Jr., "The Effectiveness of Muslim Representation in India," in *South Asian Politics and Religion*, ed. Donald Eugene Smith (Princeton: Princeton University Press.

3 Paul R. Brass, *Factional Politics in an Indian State: The Congress Party in Uttar Pradesh* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965); Tawseef Ahmad Malik, *Political Participation of Muslims in Uttar Pradesh: A Case Study of Muslim OBCs* (unpublished PhD thesis, Department of Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University, 2021)

4 Priya Pandey, *Evolution of Women and Child Human Rights in Uttar Pradesh (1947–1995)* (PhD thesis, Chhatrapati Sahuji Maharaj University, 2014), 106; Pragya Rai, *Role of Women in Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly: Vidhan Sabha (1980–2005)* (New Delhi, 2014); Shashi Shukla and Sashi Shukla, "Political Participation of Muslim Women," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 1/4 (1996): 1–13.

5 Mushirul Hasan, "Adjustments and Accommodation: Indian Muslims after Partition," *Social Scientist* 18, nos. 8–9 (August–September 1990), p. 51.

6 Paul R. Brass, *The Production of Hindu–Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), p.75.

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reveal how minority concerns were raised and negotiated in democratic institutions.

3. MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE UP LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

The UP-Assembly's Muslim representation in relation to the Muslim population of the state remained low, and the number of Muslim women legislators was even lower. No Muslim woman legislator was elected in the second and fourth assemblies. Despite the low numerical strength of these women in the Assembly, their visibility in the Assembly proceedings and deliberations is very clear, which makes their presence politically significant.[7] Although these women discussed a variety of issues in the Assembly, their speeches on minority issues are important because they highlight how religious difference, gender, and citizenship were negotiated within formal democratic institutions.

Among the four Muslim women examined here- Begum Aijaz Rasul, Begum Kishwar Ara, Safia Abdul Wajid, and Hamida Habibullah- Safia Abdul Wajid emerged as a remarkable personality in India's nationalist movement and in the shaping of politics after independence. She resigned from her government job during the Quit India Movement in 1942. She emerged as an important figure in Congress activities, and contested the 1946 provincial elections as a 'Nationalist Muslim' candidate. After independence, she became part of the first Legislative Assembly (1952-57) after her victory from the Bareilly constituency.[8]

Kiswar Ara was the only Muslim woman of the third Legislative Assembly (1962-67). Nominated by the Congress party from Rampur to the Assembly after her husband's death, she combined legislative work with professional advancement, completing her LLB during her term. She became Rampur's first female lawyer and the first woman elected to the Assembly from the region in the post-independence period.[9]

Among the four women, Begum Aijaz Rasul was the first to enter the legislature in 1937.[10] After Partition, she chose to remain in India and became the only Muslim woman to be elected to the constituent assembly in 1946. She was elected as an MLA in 1969 from Sandila. She also became a Cabinet Minister during the fifth Legislative Assembly (1969-1974).

Hamida Habibullah joined active politics in 1965. She represented Haidergarh as an MLA in the fifth Legislative Assembly. She served as Minister of State during the same period. An educationist and social worker, Hamida Habibullah has often been described as an iconic figure of Indian womanhood in post-independence India.

Together, these women entered the assembly, when issues of religion, language, and citizenship were often debated. The next section looks at how they spoke during moments of conflict in the Assembly and what this shows about negotiation and coexistence in legislative politics.

4. SITES OF CONFLICT AND CONTESTATION: MINORITY ISSUES IN THE ASSEMBLY

In the first Legislative Assembly (1952-57), Safiya Abdul Wajid participated in a debate titled, 'Resolution Regarding Imposing an Interim Ban on Cow Slaughter' on 26th August, 1955. The resolution proposed banning cow slaughter until a cow protection law came into force. Safiya Abdul Wajid's remarks on the proposed resolution were framed around the idea that in a secular nation like India, the state should respect every faith's practices. She argued that a secular framework obliges the government to protect religious freedom rather than impose a single religious view.[11] She invoked constitutional provisions that guarantee freedom of conscience and the right to practice one's religion, she positioned the issue as a matter of upholding the secular principle of "equal respect for all religions". Her speech was criticized by Nageshwar Dwivedi, who supported the ban on economic grounds, arguing that cattle were essential for agriculture. The debate was followed by the introduction of the 'Uttar Pradesh Cow Slaughter Prevention Act', 1955, which was passed later.

In the third Legislative Assembly (1962-67), Begum Kishwar Ara raised the issue of Urdu during the discussion on ' Voting on Demands for Grants in the Income-Expenditure of 1965-66- (Grant no.17)-Education', held on 23rd February, 1965. She highlighted the gap between Urdu's constitutional recognition and actual implementation. She said, " Urdu is one of the 14 languages in our constitution. Therefore, it should be given regular language status, which it is not receiving."[12] Criticizing state policy, she remarked, "Urdu is being considered as a regional language and is being eliminated under the guise of being revolutionary. Today, no applications are accepted in Urdu."[13] She complained that those literate in Hindi take advantage of those who do not know the language and urged the government to make arrangements for those whose mother tongue was Urdu. Her position was supported by Abdul Sami, while Basant

7 Pitam Singh, *Women in Politics: A Sociological Inquiry of Women Legislators in Uttar Pradesh* (PhD thesis, Chaudhary Charan Singh University, 2001, p.146.

8 Apart from Safia Abdul Wajid, another Muslim woman, Saeeda Jahah B. Makhfi Shervani was also elected during the first Legislative Assembly, but she didn't speak on minority issues.

9 Saddam Hussain, "*Rampur ki Pehli Khatun Member Assembly: Begum Kishwar Ara* (Rampur's First Woman Member of the Legislative Assembly: Begum Kishwar Ara)," *Daily Rampur Ka Elan*, January 22, 2026.

10 Rasul, B. Aijaz, From Purdah to Parliament, Ajanta Publication, 2001, p. 32.

11 Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly Debates, First Legislative Assembly, vol. 155, Number-1, August 26, 1955, Resolution regarding imposing an interim ban on cow slaughter, speech by Safia Abdul Wajid, p. 69.

12 Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly Debates, **Third Legislative Assembly**, Vol. 254, Number-2, February 23, 1965, *Voting on Demands for Grants in the Income–Expenditure of 1965–66 (Grant No. 17 – Education)*, speech by Begum Kishwar Ara.

13 Ibid.

Singh of Bhartiya Jana Sangh opposed it, claiming that "Urdu is just a style of Hindi written in Devanagri script."[14] The Finance Minister Kailash Prakash passively concluded that languages other than Hindi also deserved recognition.

In the fifth Legislative Assembly (1969- 74), Begum Aijaz Rasul, during the 'General Discussion on Income-Expenditure for 1970-71', held on 13th May 1970, also like Kishwar Ara, expressed concern about the continued neglect of Urdu. She recalled that during Chandra Bhanu Gupta's government, petitions and judgments were issued in Urdu and funds were allocated for its promotion. She expressed disappointment that similar commitments were not reflected under Chaudhari Charan Singh and criticized the use of complex Hindi in official documents, which made them difficult to understand.[15] Rasul's remarks closely aligned with those of an earlier speaker, Chaudhari Girdhari Lal, who criticized the use of complex language in the budget.

The debate held on 20th July 1971, during the general discussion on Income and Expenditure for 1971-72, was particularly significant in relation to the Urdu issue, as several members spoke on the subject. The debate began with the speech of a senior leader from the Congress party, Chaudhari Girdhari Lal, who welcomed the budgetary provision for Urdu and drew attention to discrimination faced by Muslims, comparing their situation to that of Harijans and other backward classes.

Rasul also supported the provision and reiterated the importance of education in the mother tongue. She mentioned a letter from Jawaharlal Nehru assuring her support for this principle. However, the debate witnessed strong opposition from Ram Gopal Sand, from the Bhartiya Jana Sangh (BJS), who described Urdu as a foreign language. He took a personal jibe at Rasul, questioning her national loyalty. He said, "Who is Begum Rasul? She is the wife of a big leader of the Muslim League, and Jinnah *Sahab* used to stay at her house. Today, Begum *Sahiba* is happy sitting there, she appeals to Nehruji."[16] Shiv Bihari Pandey criticized Sand's view. He said, "It is the duty of the government to protect all people living in the state.... Urdu has been adopted under this principle...There are a large number of Muslims in our country; we don't want to let their language die...We want to protect their tombs, Mosque and their language."[17] While several members supported Urdu, opposition voices criticised the allocation of funds, revealing deep ideological divisions within the Assembly.

In another debate held on 26th March, 1971, Riyasat Husain had presented a 'Resolution Proposing the Establishment of a Commission to Prevent Communal Rights'. While several members opposed the proposal on constitutional and jurisdictional grounds, Hamida Habibullah spoke in its support. She described communalism as a serious threat to national unity and stressed that it must be opposed, irrespective of religion or caste. She pointed out that the general public doesn't support communalism; they support an honest person who will bring socialism, remove poverty, and unemployment. She said parties need to prove they love all communities. She criticized Anantram Jaiswal for rejecting the proposal. She said, "Mere words are of no use, the people who voted for you, want their poverty to be alleviated, they remember you, thinking about their peace, prosperity, and children."[18] The house remained divided on the resolution, and the debate ended without a decision.

On 11th April 1972, during the budget discussion for 1972-73, Begum Rasul spoke in the context of the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971. She praised the Indian government and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for their leadership during the war and highlighted the unity shown by the Indian people. Responding to remarks made by Habib Ahmed who was an independent candidate, she asserted that Indian Muslims did not view India as responsible for the creation of Bangladesh.[19] Rasul explained that India had to go to war with Pakistan because of the atrocities committed against innocent people, leading to a refugee crisis in India. She asserted that Indian Muslims supported India's action and sought to live as equal citizens. She countered doubts about Muslim loyalty by recalling her opposition to separate electorates in the Constituent Assembly and emphasized intercommunal trust by noting that Muslim candidates were often elected with Hindu support.

The most politically charged debate occurred on 17th April, 1973, concerning the law and order situation following the closure of Aligarh Muslim University after the AMU (Amendment) Act. Madhav Prasad Tripathi of the Bhartiya Jan Sangh tried to connect AMU's identity to the pre-partition era of Muslim separatism. He questioned the loyalty of Muslim students in AMU, "Those who study there become engineers, and they dream of going to Pakistan. Pakistan won a match, and students cheered and hoisted Pakistan's flag in AMU."[20] He further said that the government encourages and promotes traitors in AMU who keep looking towards a foreign country.

His speech was followed by Rasul's, who staunchly

14 Ibid. speech by Basant Singh, p. 179.

15 Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly Debates, **Fifth Legislative Assembly**, Vol. 282, Number-7, May 13, 1970, *General Discussion on Income–Expenditure for the Year 1970–71*, speech by Begum Aijaz Rasul, p. 818.

16 Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly Debates, **Fifth Legislative Assembly**, Vol. 289, Number- 7, July 20, 1971, *General Discussion on Income and Expenditure for the Year 1971–72*, speech by Ram Gopal Sand, p. 808.

17 Ibid., Speech by Shiv Bihari Pandey, p. 809.

18 Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly Debates, **Fifth Legislative Assembly**, Vol. 288, Number- 5, March 26, 1971, *Resolution to Set Up a Commission to Prevent Communal Riots in the State*, speech by Hamida Habibullah, p. 368.

19 Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly Debates, **Fifth Legislative Assembly**, Vol., Number-, April 4, 1972, *Budget Discussion for the Year 1972–73*, speech by Begum Aijaz Rasul.

20 Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly Debates, **Fifth Legislative Assembly**, Vol.303, Number-9, April 17, 1973, *Discussion on the Law-and-Order Situation Arising from the Closure of Aligarh Muslim University*, speech by Madhav Prasad Tripathi, p. 1075.

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criticized Triparthi's speech. She expressed disappointment that such arguments were being repeated even after 25 years of independence. She rejected the idea that AMU should carry a permanent stigma for partition or Pakistan's creation. She said, "... The flag of the Muslim League was not raised in AMU... It was said that AMU helped in the formation of Pakistan. But a generation has passed since then. The thoughts of people studying there 25 years ago are no longer the same as those of people studying there now. Students there consider India as their own country, and they are as much responsible for the progress of this country as others."[21] She further said it has been 35 years since she has been in politics; nobody can say that she is a separatist. To this, Jagannath Khanna said that before 1947, Rasul was in the Muslim League; she shouldn't forget that. Confronting Khanna's jibe with a bold and collective affirmation of 'Muslim Indian identity', she responded, "Speaking on behalf of Muslims of Hindustan, I can say with a raised voice that we consider ourselves rightful citizens of India and are fully entitled to live here."[22] In the end, she requested the government to open the university.

5. CONFLICT, CONTESTATION, AND CO-EXISTENCE IN THE LEGISLATIVE ARENA

As we have examined, the legislative arena emerged as an important site where conflicts around the issue of language, religion, and loyalty were played out after independence. In the Urdu debates, there were accusations of foreignness, associating Muslims with 'otherness'. Similarly, in the AMU issue, Muslim students were considered traitors and their loyalty was questioned by linking them to the pre-partition past. In both the debates, Rasul's loyalty and her "Indianness" were questioned, even after claiming that she served the nation for 35 years. The debate on communalism also exposed the disagreements within the house over how communal violence should be addressed.

Women legislators did not act as passive representatives; they contested the tensions and hostilities. Safia Abdul Wajid questioned the cow slaughter ban, stressing the importance of secularism and religious freedom. Kishwar Ara and Begum Rasul contested the erasure of Urdu, by highlighting the gap between constitutional recognition and actual implementation. Begum Rasul contested the accusations disloyalty of AMU students, and Indian Muslims. She distanced herself and the Indian Muslims from Habib Ahmed's views and emphasized inter-communal trust and unity. In the AMU debate, she confronted accusations of Muslim separatism and asserted a collective Indian citizenship. Hamida Habibullah spoke against communalism and stressed it should be opposed regardless of religion.

These women contested these claims in the language of the constitution, nationalism and secularism. Across several debates, Muslim women legislators found support from non-Muslim colleagues. Even in moments of intense hostility, debates remained within institutional boundaries, relying on constitutional arguments. These debates reveal that co-existence was not the absence of conflict, but the management of difference through dialogue, restraint, and constitutional reasoning.

6. CONCLUSION

Although Muslim women legislators were few in number and intervened infrequently their speeches on minority issues are important because they spoke in a male dominated Assembly, highlighting how religious difference, gender, and citizenship were negotiated within formal democratic institutions. In these debates, Muslim women legislators did not remain silent observers; instead, they intervened and responded to accusations, defended constitutional principles, and asserted democratic belonging when minority concerns were directly challenged. By bringing attention to these often-overlooked voices, the paper highlights the role of these women in shaping discussions about minority issues after independence in UP. Their voices help us in understanding the challenges of representation while also acknowledging that negotiation and co-existence were possible within legislative democracy.

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Author(s) Contribution

The author solely conceived, designed, researched, analysed, and wrote the manuscript. All archival research, interpretation of legislative debates, and drafting of the paper were carried out independently by the author.

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I used AI-based assistance was used for language refinement, structural organisation, and improvement of clarity. The research design, archival analysis, interpretation of debates, arguments, and final intellectual responsibility for the content remain entirely with the author.

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Availability of Data and Materials

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21 Ibid., speech by Rasul, p.1078.

22 Ibid., p. 1079.

Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Clinical Trial Registration (if applicable)

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