

## Princess Abida Sultaan 1913-2002

*Enlightened lady, not feminist*

After the death of her father, **President Ayub Khan** (d.1974) asked her wouldn't she like to go back to her princely heritage in India, and she replied: 'I have consciously made my choice for Pakistan, if it was a question of palaces, money and life of leisure, I would have never come to Pakistan. I shall always be in Pakistan.' These were two very different types of Pakistanis: Ayub Khan, a 'geographical' Pakistani, she a 'historical' Pakistani.

That was Princess Abida Sultaan, the heir apparent of the last ruler of Bhopal, **Nawab Hamidullah Khan** (ruled 1926-49; d.1960), who died, aged 89, in Karachi on 11 May 2002; she was born on 28 August 1913 in Bhopal.

According to the treaty between the British and the state, Bhopal should have automatically regained full sovereignty after the British had relinquished their paramountcy. But in 1949, New Delhi coerced Bhopal into acceding to the Indian Union, following which it was merged into a newly created state, Madhya Pradesh. The historical entity Bhopal had been 'abolished'. After Hyderabad, Bhopal was the second largest Muslim princely State in British India.

Except for some jewellery, the Begum had left behind all her princely estates and possessions and came to Pakistan in 1950, via London. She was appointed her new country's ambassador to Brazil.

Not at ease with the bureaucratic culture of the foreign ministry, she quit after only 18 months. She, however, went to the UN in 1954 as a member of Pakistan's delegation. She visited China and met Chairman **Mao Zedong** (d.1976), Foreign Minister **Zhou Enlai** (d.1976), and Defence Minister **Marshal Ho Lung**. She then settled down in Karachi where she stayed until her last day.

Abida Sultaan was a 'begum' *par excellence*, in the tradition of the House of Bhopal. She had been brought up by her grandmother, **Sultan Jahan Begum** (ruled 1901-26), who arranged for her a good Islamic education. By the age of eight, Abida had completed both the reading and literal translation of the Qur'an. Besides riding and hunting – bagged a record number of 73 tigers – she had also obtained a flying licence. In due course, she was appointed chief secretary to the Nawab and later president of the cabinet as well; in her father's absence she presided over cabinet meetings.

She was an indomitable woman, of both culture and courage. In 1961 Ayub Khan used the cover of martial law to promulgate a highly questionable and, in many parts, un-Islamic, Muslim Family Laws Ordinance. She stood up against these so-called reforms; even wrote a well-reasoned tract criticising the ordinance, no less the provision aimed at making it quite difficult for anyone to take a second wife.

It is interesting that both her own father and her husband, **Nawab Sarwar Ali Khan of Kurwai**, had taken second wives. And while she did not happen to like her step-mother, **Aftab Jahan**, she

had approved her husband's second marriage. However, even though she separated from Nawab Sarwar Ali Khan after only a year, yet none of her own unhappy experience could make her doubt the eternal wisdom of the Islamic family laws. The Begum was an enlightened lady, not a feminist copycat.

In 1965, when Ayub Khan sought to be elected as president, the Begum campaigned in support of the combined opposition candidate, **Miss Fatima Jinnah** (d.1967). Miss Jinnah was the sister of the leader of the Pakistan movement, **Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah** (d.1948).

Princess Abida Sultaan's death brings to close a unique chapter in the history of the House of Bhopal founded around 1709 in the twilight years of the Mughal empire. She is survived by her only son, **Shaharyar M Khan**, who retired as Pakistan's foreign secretary.

It did not matter to her that the only person who rang Shaharyar to offer him condolence was the chief minister of the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, **Digvijay Singh**, but it did say something about the people of a country she had 'consciously' opted for.

The Begum was a self-confessed 'rebel'. Her aptly titled autobiography, *Memories of a Rebel Princess* is to be published posthumously.

## Hala Salaam

*Fighting prejudice in America*

Leading Arab-American activist and president (1996-2001) of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), Dr Hala Salaam, 56, died in Washington, 26 April 2002.

Daughter of a former Lebanese minister, **Malik Salaam**, and niece of a former prime minister, **Sa'eb Salaam**, she was born in Beirut. She took her first degree as well as a master's degree in mathematics from the American University in Beirut. She then went for another masters degree in government from Georgetown University, Washington DC, and did a doctorate in political theory from the same university.

Her husband, **Dr Clovis Maksoud**, served as ambassador of the League of Arab States and special representative to the United Nations. He now heads the Global South Centre at the American University, Washington DC.

Having helped to found the ADC in 1980, Hala Maksoud remained active all her life in fighting bias and prejudice against the Arabs and Muslim-Americans.

## Baroness Young 1926-2002

*Woman, Christian and minority*

The first woman to lead the House of Lords and the only woman to sit in **Margaret Thatcher's** cabinet, **Janet Mary Young**, 75, died at her Oxford home, on 6 September 2002. She was born on 23 October 1926. Janet Young had entered the Lords via the Oxford City Council where she would not attend any meeting between 5.00 pm and 7.00 pm, the time when she prepared her children for bed.

In government she was known for fairness and hard work, but perhaps too outspoken and too meticulous for Mrs Thatcher, who dropped her from the cabinet and made her a minister of state in the Foreign Office.

Baroness Young of Farnworth is,

however, going to be remembered more than anything else for her firm stand on the politically unpopular moral and family issues on which she also reached out to Catholics and Muslims.

She defeated the first Blair government's attempt to abolish Section 28 that banned promotion of homosexuality in English and Welsh schools, but lost in her opposition to bring down the age of homosexual consent to 16. She was also unable to stop over-the-counter sale of the morning-after pill. Almost alone and undaunted, she continued to campaign for 'abstinence education' and to persuade the young to wait for marriage before sex. There were many bishops but, it seems, few Christians in the Lords. Hopefully she was not the last of them.