

Daughter of the East

By Ms. Kalyani Menon

menon.kalyani@gmail.com

Abstract

I had not asked for this role; I had not asked for this mantle. But the forces of destiny and the forces of history had thrust me forward, and I felt privileged and awed.

-Benazir Bhutto, on becoming Prime Minister, in her autobiography, Daughter of The East.

Keywords

Benazir Bhutto, Prime Minister, Pakistan

Introduction

The Incomparable One.

That's what her parents named her. That was who she was at Oxford. And that was how her countrymen saw her, when they placed their faith and trust in her. For indeed, she lived up to her name, and became the Unique one, the Unsurpassed one.

This is the story of Benazir Bhutto, born into a prominent political family of Pakistan, and who became the first woman to be elected as the Prime Minister of Pakistan.

Benazir was born in Karachi, on 21st. June 1953, as the eldest child of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Nusrat Ispahani. The Bhuttos were aristocratic, wealthy landlords, who played an important and influential part in the political life of Pakistan. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was a barrister turned politician, who served as the ninth Prime Minister of Pakistan. Nusrat Bhutto remained largely in the shadow of her powerful husband, until his execution in 1979, when she emerged politically, along with daughter Benazir, to lead the Pakistan People's Party founded by her late husband.

As a child Benazir was precocious, and keenly interested in all that went on around her... Contrary to the then prevalent highly traditional and conservative attitudes towards women, Benazir was actively encouraged to further her own personal development through modern education. Her father, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, was a liberal in outlook and thought, and motivated the young Benazir to stay abreast of current affairs and political developments. Slowly but surely, Benazir began developing the keen astuteness that is the necessary aid to success for a career politician.



Image 2: Benazir's Childhood Photo

After completing her schooling, first in Karachi and later in Murree, Benazir went to Radcliffe College, Harvard University, where she studied for an undergraduate degree in comparative government. In the four years that she spent at Harvard, Benazir was an active participant in campus happenings, becoming the arena tour guide and social secretary of her dorm.

After her stint in the United States Benazir went to the United Kingdom, where she enrolled for yet another undergraduate degree at Oxford University. Older now and the possessor of a more confident, vibrant personality, Benazir easily became a popular figure on campus. Later, as a postgraduate student, she was elected to the Oxford University Union as President of its debating society.

Benazir was being purposefully groomed by her father, in order to take on a more dynamic role in public life upon her return to Pakistan. She studied Philosophy, Politics, and Economics for her second undergraduate degree, and went on to read international law and diplomacy for post-graduation.

Even while she was still a student, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was gradually initiating the teenaged Benazir into the complexities and strategies of diplomacy incumbent in the navigation of a political career. A teenaged Benazir accompanied her father in 1972 to the India - Pakistan summit, held in the hill station of Shimla. She was very well received by the Indian public, and extensively covered by the print media.

Back in Pakistan after completing her studies, Benazir briefly worked at the Prime Minister's office - when her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was the Prime Minister - while intending to take the civil services examination for a career in the Pakistan Foreign Service.

However, a coup by military chief General Zia ul Huq overthrew her father in 1977, and consequently Benazir's life was in turmoil. With her father soon after imprisoned by General Zia, Benazir found herself willy nilly thrown into active politics, assisting her mother Begum Nusrat Bhutto, who had now taken charge of the Pakistan People's Party, the PPP, founded by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

As full-fledged politicians, Benazir and Nusrat Bhutto were now in and out of detention, while the military regime of General Zia took total control of Pakistan. In 1979 Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was executed by General Zia, and the future of the PPP now rested solely upon the fragile shoulders of the mother-daughter duo.

Pakistan is a predominantly patriarchal, male dominated society, with a rigidly conservative Islamic character. It was difficult for a young, unmarried woman to command respect, not only from the general public, but even from the PPP. It therefore made political sense for Benazir to enter a traditional marriage to gain greater acceptance and respectability, both within the PPP and among the Pakistani people.

So in 1987, Benazir agreed to an arranged marriage with Asif Ali Zardari, a wealthy landowner, and businessman selected for her by her mother, Begum Nusrat Bhutto. It was understood and accepted by the Zardari family that the marriage was in no way to impede or interfere with Benazir's role in the PPP and Pakistani politics. And Benazir would continue to keep the Bhutto name after marriage.

Benazir had by now fully plunged herself into the life of politics. She was the leader of her party and campaigned vigorously during election time. In spite of being heavily pregnant with her first child, Bilawal, she continued to tirelessly campaign for the PPP and led her party to victory in the national elections of 1988.

On 2nd December 1988, Benazir Bhutto was sworn in as the Prime Minister of Pakistan. She thus became the first female Prime Minister of a Muslim majority country. And, at 35 years of age, she was also the world's youngest prime minister.

"There was hope among many observers that her premiership would mark a new era of multi-party democracy, growing gender equality, and better relations with India."

- Talbot, Ian (2009). *Pakistan: A Modern History*, London: C. Hurst and Co.

"She personally stated that her electoral victory was "the tipping point in the debate raging in the Muslim world on the role of women in Islam".

- Suvorova, Anna (2015). *Benazir Bhutto: A Multidimensional Portrait*. Karachi: Oxford University Press Pakistan.

The people of Pakistan had rejected bigotry and prejudice in electing a woman Prime Minister. It was an enormous honor, and an equally enormous responsibility... I had not asked for this role; I had not asked for this mantle. But the forces of destiny and the forces of history had thrust me forward, and I felt privileged and awed.

— *Benazir Bhutto, on becoming Prime Minister, in her autobiography, Daughter of The East.*

She won elections, she lost elections. And despite a Western education, while in Pakistan she chose to project an image of apparent conformity with Islamic mores. She was, after all, a people's leader.

Benazir was twice elected Prime Minister of Pakistan. Hers was a checkered rule, deeply mired in controversy, familial discord, and charges of corruption. Her husband Asif Ali Zardari had become powerfully influential in government, and was openly referred to as Mr. Ten Percent, a reference to his apparent commission rate for securing deals. Ousted from office, Benazir lived with her family of husband and three children in exile in London and the Gulf.



Image 2: Benazir Bhutto

In October of 2007, Benazir returned to Pakistan, to once again contest the national elections. It was widely thought that this time she had a strong chance to win and become Prime Minister again. With her characteristic vigor and determination, Benazir plunged herself into intense, unrelenting tours of campaign.

It was the afternoon of the 27th. of December 2007. Benazir gave an emotionally charged speech at a Pakistan People's Party rally in Rawalpindi's Liaquat National Bagh. And then moved to the vehicle that was to take her on to the next engagement of the day.

She never made it.

Benazir had opened the sunroof of the car and stood up to wave to the cheering crowd. A hail of bullets pounded on her. A bomb went off in her vicinity. It was not determined whether it was the bullets or the shrapnel from the exploded bomb that killed her.

And just like that, in the tyranny of fate conspired by unforgiving politics and intrigue, Benazir, the matchless, the peerless, the unparalleled Daughter of The East, was no more.

References

1. Image 1 and 2 from Benazirbhutto.com
2. Wikipedia

