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HAMIDEH KHANIM - A WOMAN OF HER TIME AND NATION

Hamida Javanshir



The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) was a remarkable political and social phenomenon. Arising in 1918 from the most unpromising political turmoil following the Russian Revolution, it represented the birth of a new, wholly independent state among people who had for a century been subject to a Russian Empire that regarded them with suspicion. In fact, this new state quickly established itself as a progressive parliamentary democracy, probably the first in the Muslim east, with equal political rights for all, and it opened up a whole range of opportunities for people who had long been treated as second-class citizens.

Two sectors prioritised by the ADR's parliaments are particularly indicative of its forward-looking nature: education and women's rights. Many Azerbaijani intellectuals had benefited from education at the Gori seminary in Georgia and there had been proposals, rejected by the Russian Empire, to open a similar institution in

Azerbaijan. Within one year, however, the parliament enacted the establishment of Baku State University; more than one thousand students enrolled in its first year to study philology and medicine. The numbers of girls attending schools increased rapidly and in 1919, the same year, 130 students enrolled on a new course to train teachers; 32 of them women.

In any local discussion of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, its granting women the right to vote is probably the measure most often mentioned. After all, the pride is justified; beating the UK, the USA and other developed countries to equality of suffrage was no mean feat. This is especially the case when viewed from a partially-sighted western perspective - weren't those women all silently wrapped in chadors?

Well yes, to an extent. But as is seen in the example of Hamideh Khanim Javanshir, there were also many who were socially active. Their opportunities expanded under the ADR and advantage was taken, as women became increasingly involved in education, commerce and industry as well as forming social organisations and informing opinion through newspapers and magazines. However, it is true that the initial push for progressive measures was driven by men: men led the move for independence and equality in the early 20th century that was to culminate in the ADR. And men drafted the National Charter that accompanied the proclamation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic on 28 May 1918. Article 4 of the Charter read:

The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic guarantees to all its citizens within its borders full civil and political rights, regardless of ethnic origin, religion, class, profession, or sex (1).

However, the Baku Commune, the CentroCaspian Dictatorship, the British Dunsterforce and negotiations with the British General William Thomson ensured that more than six months passed before the independent parliament could get down to work in the capital and

First school for Muslim girls in the Muslim East in Baku. Words on the blackboard: first female Tatar school (Azerbaijanis were called “Transcaucasian Tatars” in early 20th century)

begin implementing its ideas. The ADR finally consolidated the issue of voting rights for women by passing a law on 21 July 1919 that gave the vote to citizens of both sexes who were at least 20 years old by the date of an election.

It took determined and militant campaigns by women in many other countries to achieve equal voting rights, but there is no account of a similar movement before the ADR enacted such equality. There were external influences: Azerbaijanis had been represented in the elections to the all-Russia Constituent Assembly in November 1917, the first to be open to women voters on an equal footing with men. The locally dominant Musavat Party had received over 600,000 votes.

There is also a story that Khalil bey Khasmammadov, one of the Azerbaijani deputies at the second Russian State Duma in 1907, had initiated a proposal to give women the vote - before the Duma was dissolved for being too radical for the Tsar's liking (2).

Women in history

So, apparently no Azerbaijani suffragette movement. However, there is a long thread in Azerbaijani culture of, let's say, socially active women....

The Book of Dede Korkut is a collection of 12 tales of the Oghuz Turks, who comprise a significant strand in Azerbaijani genealogy. According to Geoffrey Lewis, translator of the Penguin English edition (1974), they were probably compiled late in the 14th, or early in the 15th, century, but are certainly of earlier origin. He dates the underlying themes to Oghuz conflicts of the 8th-11th centuries.

One of the tales, *Kan Turali, Son of Kanli Koja*, tells of the son's search for a wife. He is very demanding, wanting a wife who can match his heroic skills, not *some pretty dressed-up doll*. He finds one, Princess Saljan, but they are separated and he is surrounded by enemies. She comes across the scene:

When Princess Saljan saw him then, fire flamed inside her. Like a peregrine falcon falling on a flock of geese, she drove her horse at the infidel; she smashed through them from one end to the other.

Naturally, Kan Turali is angry at her assumption that he needed help and threatens to kill her for impugning his honour. She replies:



*...do heroic warriors, princely warriors,
Slaughter their beautiful ones?
My warrior, my lord, my warrior,
One wing of this enemy for me and one for you! (3)
True equality!*

There was also something in the air of 12th century Ganja city. Little is known of the life of Mahsati Ganjavi, apparently a court poetess for Seljuq Sultan Sanjar (ruled 1118-57) who thought and lived more freely than was usual for women of the time but who was respected for her poetic skills:

*We cannot be held at the point of an arrow
Cannot be held in some sad cell
The one whose hair has enchained
Cannot be held in chains at home*

Mahsati is also said to have met Nizami Ganjavi (c.1141 to 1209), generally acknowledged to be the greatest poet from this region. Famous for his *Khamsa* (a collection of five long narrative poems) the most vivid being *The Seven Beauties*. This is a tale of Bahram Gur's journey towards wisdom as a king. He is notably, and endearingly helped on his way by advice in the moral tales told him by his seven princess wives, each from a different part of the world.

They say that influential women stood behind many a throne and Sara Khatun was certainly one. She was the mother of Uzun Hasan, Oghuz Turk ruler of the Agh Qoyunlu dynasty, from 1453-78, over lands that included the South Caucasus and parts of present day Iran, Syria and Turkey. His mother was the appointed diplomat in negotiations with many other states, notably between Mehmet II (the Conqueror) and Emperor David of Trebizond as the Conqueror sought to consolidate his expanding Ottoman Empire. The sultan is said to have rewarded Sara Khatun with jewels for her role in achieving a peaceful conclusion (4).

Enlightenment. So women of action and women as



School building for Muslim girls in Baku

wise counsellors are hardly unknown in Azerbaijani tradition and culture. And that tradition was certainly still alive as Azerbaijanis worked their way towards independence. The period leading up to that, from around 1850, was something of an enlightenment as writers and others took stock of the social conditions of Muslims under the Russian Empire. In that year Mirza Fatali Akhundov wrote the first of six plays that, eventually (the first staging did not happen until 1873), initiated a turn to realism, as well as satire, on the stage. His plays depicted the social restrictions imposed on women, but *Adventures of a Brave Miser (Haji Qara)*, for example, also featured the feisty Sona khanim, both demanding and beguiling in her determination to get the life she wants.

The new century brought with it the first school for Muslim girls (1901), the first women's magazine in Azerbaijan - *İşıq (Light)* in 1911, edited by Khadija Alibeyova - and the first appearance by an Azerbaijani woman on stage in Baku (the heroic 15-year-old Shovkat Mammadova in 1912). There was also fierce opposition to these projects - Shovkat had to be hastily driven away from angry traditionalists after the show - but there was no less determined defence.

"Molla Nasreddin". Supportive publications proliferated in those early years, few having greater effect than the satirical magazine *Molla Nasreddin*. Founded in Tiflis (Tbilisi) in 1906 by Nakhchivan-born Jalil Mammaguluzade, it included contributions from the leading writers of the day - dramatists, poets, journalists and novelists, as well as the sharpest cartoonists - who lambasted the hypocrisy of the clerics and the vices of the powerful. It also promoted local culture (it was written in Azerbaijani), modernism, education and... women's rights. These were many of the issues behind the drive for advance and independence that led to the founding of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic just over a decade later.

It was no easy task editing *Molla Nasreddin*; it survived for 25 years, years of the Russian Empire, Russian Revolution, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, the crushing of the democratic movement in Tabriz and, finally, the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. Mammadguluzade published the magazine first from Tiflis (1906-17), before political unrest forced a move to Tabriz (1921), after which he was invited to Baku (1922-31). It was banned several times and subjected to censorship, very often forced to delete sentences or articles. The editor's personal safety was also threatened.

In 1907, Jalil Mammadguluzade married Hamideh Javanshir and she was with him through it all. However, she was very much more than a supporter of her man's mission and luckily we have her first-hand account of her life with him (5). It was certainly a life that belied the notion of a woman in passive receipt of her rights. It was also a life spent mainly away from the capital during the lead up to, and life of, the ADR; and her account indicates that the social, political and cultural developments of the time were not confined to the political elite.

Hamideh khanim. Better known as Hamideh khanim (*xanim* - a polite form of address used for all women in Azerbaijan: approximately 'madam'), she was related to the family of the ruling khans of Karabakh and was born in 1873 on her family's estate in Kahrizli, central Azerbaijan. Her father, Ahmed bey Javanshir, was an enlightened man who had served in the Russian army, improved irrigation on the dry Mil plain, translated Russian poets, written a political history of the Karabakh khanate and ensured that both daughter and son were well educated.

Aged 16, Hamideh khanim married a colonel in the Russian army who was 22 years older. They had two children before he died in 1902. Her father died the following year, leaving the Kahrizli estate to her along with a request to publish an anthology of poems he had written and translated for children. In 1905 she travelled to Tiflis to take her daughter to the girls' school there and carry out her father's wish. At the *Qeyrət* (Honour) publishing company, she met Jalil Mammadguluzade, who was then a writer for the *Şərqi Rus* (Russian East) magazine that reflected the developing trend towards secular nationalism.

Clearly a woman of great energy, Hamideh khanim did not waste her time in Tiflis. She noted that most girls

Activist of Muslim women's education
H. Azizbayova. 1919

in her daughter's school received lessons in their native language, but there was no teacher of Azerbaijani - she offered to pay a teacher's salary, meanwhile persuading the head of the Muslim community to fill in. And with a friend she set about establishing a women's charitable society, enlisting the help of the granddaughters of both Mirza Fatali Akhundov and Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev, oil magnate and founder of the first girls' school in Azerbaijan. Back in Kahrizli in 1906 she was told about *Molla Nasreddin*, she liked it and met up with Jalil again when she returned to Tiflis to bring her daughter home for the summer.

Peacemaker, farmer, charity worker, mother.

1907 was an eventful year for her. She had already acted as a peacemaker between Armenians and Azerbaijanis during clashes in Karabakh in 1905 and was now invited to a peace conference in Baku. However, there was opposition to a woman's participation and she did not take part. In Kahrizli a plague of locusts destroyed the crops, causing famine and an outbreak of typhoid. She worked in the fields, found flour and baked bread for distribution and raised funds for those afflicted. In Tiflis again for her daughter's graduation, Hamideh khanim finally agreed to marry Jalil Mammadguluzade, influenced by a *Molla Nasreddin* article about the position of Azerbaijani women. That article also placed Jalil's life in danger from outraged reactionaries; he had to move to a safer address. An order to suspend the magazine's publication followed - the first and not the last. They married in June and spent the first of many summers in Nagorno-Karabakh with cultural friends like celebrated playwright Najaf Bey Vezirov, before moving back to Tiflis to continue publishing the magazine.

1908 was hardly less busy. Despite receiving a fatwa from the powerful jurists of Najaf early in the year that condemned him to death, Jalil continued production of the magazine, worked on his play *The Dead* and also took on domestic duties. The latter task was necessary because Hamideh khanim was busy helping with a charity concert (held jointly with the Men's Charity Society), providing costumes and supporting productions by the newly-formed Azerbaijani drama society. In mid-March, while her husband was preparing for the main Novruz holiday, she gave birth to their first son, Midhat. From April to June she was back in Kahrizli to oversee the planting of crops, including cotton. A couple of months'



rest in Georgia helped her recover from childbirth, before returning home to domestic affairs.

School founder, agriculturalist, on guard. Her next project was to realise a dream to open a co-educational school in the village - probably the first in Azerbaijan. Again she enlisted her husband's help in equipping and, for a short time, teaching the initial intake of 30 boys and 10 girls, before taking on professional teachers. It is interesting that in her accounts of these times, Hamideh khanim notes that the first teacher, as well as an agricultural specialist they brought in to plan the orchards and others who came to their small estate, turned out to be revolutionary activists; something she accepted. At this point she also notes that since a smallpox epidemic in 1903, she had learned to inoculate, overcome local suspicion and now held sessions for children every spring.

In 1912 she was again invited to address a conference and things must have changed since 1905: this time she was able to present in person her paper on expanding cotton cultivation in a Tiflis hall - to an audience of 500 male landowners, cotton growers and officials of the Transcaucasus.

Hamideh khanim's recollections offer background and a personal insight into the general situation in 1918 beyond the political centres, as events in Tiflis, Ganja and Baku took Azerbaijan through chaos to the ADR. With "anarchy" (inter-ethnic fighting) in nearby Karabakh and



Nigar Shikhlinskaya is one of the first Muslim women who worked as a nurse in a military hospital

What is happening in Baku we don't know.

By December, with the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic newly established, he was in a village near Shusha writing his play *My Mother's Book* and learning to play the kamancha. Shortly afterwards Hamideh khanim learned that the deputy speaker of the ADR parliament had suggested she stand for election. She did not reply and got on with organising the wedding of Jalil's daughter from his first marriage.

Flight to Tabriz. Of course, nowhere could remain unaffected by such major political upheaval and Bolshevik forces returned in 1920 and took control of the country. An anti-Bolshevik rebellion in Ganja was crushed and once more chaos ensued. Rumours about advancing forces reached Kahrizli and people began to flee. Hamideh khanim and Jalil decided to cross the border to Tabriz (in Iranian Azerbaijan) where a democratic government was in place and *Molla Nasreddin* was represented. They reached there in September, after a trek lasting almost three months, helped along the way by many people sympathetic with the magazine. Within a week the shah's troops had attacked and overthrown the democrats and Jalil was once again under threat, as the magazine had many times criticized Iran's shah and religious authorities.

In difficult living conditions, aided by supporters but also facing much opposition, Jalil managed to get agreement to publish *Molla Nasreddin*, and did so in February 1921; it was immediately banned but then reinstated. Seven further editions appeared and his play *The Dead* was staged before Jalil left Tabriz with his family for Baku on 24 May, at the invitation of the Soviet government in Azerbaijan.

Return, restoration, legacy. Hamideh khanim was appointed director of the textile mill in Shusha and her property, including the flour mill, was returned to her. After bouts of typhoid and raids by bandits, she set about repairing the effects of long neglect. By 1922, she had set up looms in Kahrizli for women to make cotton fabrics and was organising cleaning of the also long-neglected irrigation pipes. Meanwhile Jalil was back in Baku, having received permission to re-start publication of the magazine.

After long struggles with Soviet confiscations and bureaucracy, in 1924 Hamideh khanim joined Jalil in

banditry as gangs took advantage of collapsed authority, she records her fears for her Kahrizli household of 10 women and 4 small children (Jalil was in Tiflis and travel was dangerous) as they listened with guns loaded, to the shooting going on around them.

A cholera outbreak in summer decided her to take the children to Shusha. After an eventful journey and amid great tension between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, she helped organise flour and bread distribution to beleaguered families on both sides and witnessed the arrival of Ottoman forces.

Textile factory. At times, it's hard to believe Hamideh khanim's energy as she goes on to relate how, as tensions eased, she took on the task of expanding an old textile factory to provide employment for women in Shusha. Bringing in 12 looms, she set up four in the house she was staying and more in an old mosque. Jalil, as usual, was roped in to the enterprise, and he found the wool.

At times, too, it seems that life in the regions was in a different world from that of the capital. For history in that summer, the Baku Commune had fallen and been replaced by the CentroCaspian Dictatorship, but for Jalil Mammadguluzade, editor of the region's leading (but suspended) satirical magazine there were other concerns; he wrote from Kahrizli to his wife in Shusha reporting on the harvest and adding:

One of the most famous pianists Khadija Gayibova

Baku in an overcrowded apartment that was also the magazine's office. She found the restriction difficult and Jalil was in conflict with the authorities over the content of *Molla Nasreddin* - he removed his name as editor.

The memoir ends with Jalil's death at 3pm on 4 January 1932 and the last few years are a tale of decline: at one point Jalil was burning manuscripts to provide heat, but Hamideh khanim's indomitable spirit lived on until 1955. Her publication of memoirs of her father and her husband are keen reflections of what may be termed a period of social and cultural enlightenment for Azerbaijan.

Like other spirited women: poet and philanthropist Natavan (1832-97), Sona Taghiyeva director of the first school for Muslim girls (1901), *İşıq* editor Khadija Alibeyova and the brave singer Shovkat Mammadova among others, it is clear that Hamideh khanim Javanshir was no passive recorder of events or receiver of rights.

Such women throughout the history of the Azerbaijani people contributed to social and cultural advance that was crucial to the founding of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic that from 1918-20 established a remarkable foundation for social, educational, cultural and political advance, especially for women. The names and achievements of that first period of independence are still held as examples and a legacy that guides to this day. 🌱

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