

Paper by Ali Murtaza

The LSE-Sciences Po International History Seminar was inaugurated in 2020 with the aim of serving as a congenial platform for doctoral students and early career researchers to share their research work with a scholarly cohort and get valuable feedback. In the Spring 2023 session of the seminar, I got an opportunity to present my paper on the theme of international human rights with a specific focus on women's rights. The paper explores how Begum Shaista Ikramullah, a Pakistani diplomat, politician, and writer, conceived and framed the question of women's rights.

The paper offers a contextual understanding of the meaning and significance of the statements and interventions Shaista Ikramullah made as a representative of Pakistan in the Third Committee of the UN during the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). It is consistent with the emerging historiographical strands underlining the agency of Global South states and actors to shape the Liberal International Order (LIO). The emerging scholarship on Global South has begun to foreground the role of women diplomats and leaders, like Shaista Ikramullah, from the Global South in influencing international diplomacy. However, even a few relatively detailed works on Shaista Ikramullah merely confine themselves to reproducing the statements she delivered at the United Nations (UN) or, at best, coupling them with the information derived from her English autobiography to lay out her conception of human rights. In addition to these indispensable sources, I draw on her previously untapped Urdu and English literary writings, Pakistan's Cabinet Division and UN archives, and colonial, national and transnational histories to develop a more comprehensive and critical understanding of her conception of human rights and the interventions she made at the UN.

I argue that Shaista Ikramullah's interventions at the UN reflected her complex relationship with liberal values and Western modernity in general. Her views on women rights and empowerment were deeply influenced by the longstanding traditions of Muslim feminism in British India- of which she was both a product and an active agent. Moreover, they are grounded in her acute sociological and psychological analysis of contemporary Muslim society. Though she largely advocated the liberal approach to human rights, her support was hedged with meaningful and consequential qualifications stemming from these influences. The paper emphasizes that rooted as they are in the lived experiences, these points of divergence from the Western consensus and a creative reconciliation with and appropriation of liberal values and frameworks represent the most authentic expressions of the assertion of the agency of Global South actors in its engagement with the LIO and its institutions. Shaista Ikramullah's literary oeuvre also allows us to reconstruct the individual and collective sensibilities underpinning the commitment displayed by the Global South actors to the question of human rights which, in turn, lends to her worldview and career a contemporary relevance. It is a common refrain these days that in Global South the liberal order does not have many takers and its demise is imminent. The reality, however, has been more complicated. The aspirations of Global South actors like Shaista Ikramullah and millions whom they represented reflect an unmistakable emotional commitment to liberal values. Thus, any exercise in prophesizing the

future of the LIO or firming it up should consider the deep roots of liberalism in Global South, its diverse intellectual sources, and a long history of a creative and contentious engagement with the LIO by Global South actors.

The presentation elicited an encouraging response from the participants and the discussant, Katherine Ritetzer, who also offered constructive suggestions to enrich the paper. Katherine suggested to me to probe further Shaista Ikramullah's transnational linkages. Priyanka Jha of Banaras Hindu University drew my attention to more radical Muslim feminist contemporaries of Shaista Ikramullah and suggested that I should also consider exploring the latter's ideas and activism in relation to them. Conclusively, I learned immensely from this experience, for which I thank the seminar organizers and would encourage other researchers to apply for it.