



THE CONTRIBUTION OF BEGUM ROKEYA ON WOMEN'S EDUCATION

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Abstract:

The 19th century was the period of Renaissance not only in Bengal but also in India. The movement of Renaissance was specially originated in Bengal with Raja Rammohan Roy and was continued by realists such as Vidyasagar, Keshab Chandra Sen and many others. Reformation sentiments affected not only Hindu Bengali society, but also Muslim Bengali society. The reformation movement within the Muslim community began in the late 19th century and persisted into the early 20th century. Begum Rokeya was the matriarch of the Muslim arising in Bengal prior to its partition. She belonged to a group of women known as Bengali 'bhadramahila' - a term akin to "New Women" coined by Virginia Woolf. She devoted her life to the liberation of Muslim women who were required to observe strict religious practices such as purdah and others. She realized that Muslim women should take advantage of educational opportunities of modern era. In the history of girls' education in India, she was a prominent figure who was fearless and indifferent to the harsh criticisms of the Muslim community's religious leaders (Maulabi). In this paper, an attempt is made to examine critically the educational ideas of Begum Rokeya and her contribution to the advancement of women's education in Bengal under the rule of the British.

Keywords: Renaissance, Bengal, Begum Rokeya, Contribution.

Introduction:

Begum Rokeya might have become a highly esteemed and renowned name in Bengal and Bangladesh. The greater the significance of women's liberation, the more barriers are overcome, the more women are encouraged to assert their rights, and the more Rokeya's name is spoken. Since Rokeya's birth, over a century has passed, but her stature has not diminished. However, each day it

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grows brighter and its meaning becomes clearer. Within the colonial Indian female population, no one with Rokeya's aptitude was discovered. This invisibility is largely attributable to Rokeya's outlook on life, which is reflected in her work and literature in various ways. Rokeya's contribution is difficult to classify into a single category. Her primary objective was to attract Muslim women into the realm of education. However, if she is only recognized as a pioneer in female education, a number of her contributions will be recognized. Again, it is challenging to recognize her as a writer. She never considered devoting her entire life to literature. However, her writing cannot be ignored. Without her, editing a feminist novel is insufficient.

Rokeya was prohibited for a formal education. However, the talents she displayed in composing Bengali literature are the envy of women with genuine advanced degrees, to say nothing of her English writing. To inspire women, she founded an organization, and this organization is so active among subjugated women that society has waited an extended period of time to establish a comparable organization. previous position. However, Rokeya's contribution to the organization has been forgotten by history. No scholar or critic has been able to comprehend Rokeya's views and endeavours in their entirety. One reason is that everybody has tried to evaluate Rokeya through their point of view and agenda, and also the aspect of Rokeya that they're trying to concentrate on is so broad that there's lots to ask. Therefore, despite the fact that there are numerous articles about Rokeya, we lack an authentic and comprehensive biography of her. Thanks to modernity, Islamic society follows the correct course by overcoming all social and religious obstacles in its way. She fought valiantly to include Muslim women in the realm of education. Consequently, she is considered a pioneer of women's education in the undivided Muslim Bengali society under British rule.

Methodology:

This paper is based on both primary and secondary data collected from a variety of sources, including autobiographies and memoirs, diaries, personal letters, correspondence, surveys, books, magazine, newspaper articles, original documents, periodicals etc.

Objectives:

The objectives are as follows:

1. To study the life sketch of Begum Rokeya
2. To analyze Begum Rokeya's educational contribution and roles of women empowerment in Bengal.

Life Sketch of Begum Rokeya:

Rokeya was born in 1980 in a village in the northern region of Bangladesh (Pairabondh, Rangpur). She originated from the upper class. Her father, Zahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Sabre, was affluent. Mother's name was Rahatunnessa. Her family residence was situated in the center of a vast 120-acre estate surrounded by dense woods frequented by wild animals. There, she grew up with her two older siblings, her older sister and her younger sister. She thanked two of them in

particular: an older sibling named Ibrahim Sabre and an older sister named Karimunnessa. Rokeya, like all female Sabre family members, was required to exist in the shadows from the age of five. Sabre women were required to observe Purdah in the presence of non-relative women. She states in her own writing that she was not permitted to be seen by males outside her family at the age of five. Not only was she restricted to it, but she also had to conceal herself from outsiders. Rokeya was conceived in such a setting. She was a member of a very traditional family of landed aristocrats who did not support women's education, in accordance with modern Bengali Muslim societal trends. Rokeya's sibling taught Bengali and English in secret by candlelight at midnight, when the rest of the family was asleep. Rokeya was able to acquire Bengali due to his sister Karimnassa's support and encouragement; she possessed exceptional qualities and courage. Rokeya's brother taught her English and Bengali in covert when her education as a woman was frowned upon. Rokeya, who never had the opportunity to attend school, displayed independence from an early age due to her self-taught disposition.

16-year-old Rokeya was assigned to marry Khan Bahadur Saeed Sakawat Hossein by Ibrahim Sabre. At the time of his nuptials, Sakhawat Hossain was nearly forty years old and a deputy judge in Bhagalpur, Bihar. Growing up in the West, he was a liberal and progressive man who provided Rokeya with educational opportunities so that he could expand his knowledge. With his assistance and encouragement, she rapidly mastered English. Rokeya's literary work published in an Indian periodical during her husband's lifetime was the courageous writer R.S. He urged her to take centre stage as Mrs. Hossein. Rokeya recognizes her husband's contribution to her writing endeavors. She stated, "Had my cherished husband not been so encouraging, I may not have written or published anything." But Rokeya's joyful days didn't last long. Her spouse was afflicted with severe diabetes. It caused his blindness and ultimately killed him. More difficulties awaited them. She did not get along with her husband and stepdaughter, who evicted her from her Bhagalpur residence following Sakawat Hossein's passing. But she did not live a life of laziness.

Rokeya devoted her life to the emancipation of Muslim women in Bengal beginning in 1909. Later, she established a school and a women's organization to implement feminist principles. Rokeya witnessed the distress of women in the Bengali Muslim community and believed it was her responsibility as a Muslim woman to rectify social errors. Rokeya identified the paucity of education for Bengali Muslim women of the same age as one of the greatest flaws. She determined that all women must receive an education. She began to publish numerous articles, essays, books, brief articles, and socially critical essays in which she encouraged women to pursue an education. This is how Rokeya began the Bengali Muslim women's liberation movement. She was the first Bengali Muslim to publicly address the issue of women's equality, ushering in a new era in the Bengali Muslim community's history.

Begum Rokeya's Educational Contribution and Roles for Women Empowerment in Bengal:

The most attractive aspect of Rokeya's narrative is not her rhetoric or intellectual profundity, but rather her actions. She was not only an intellectual proponent of the cause, but also an activist, a combination we rarely see. She composed novels, poems, short tales, works of fantasy, satire,

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treatises, and essays. In her writings, she argued that men and women should be regarded equally as rational beings, and that the primary reason for women's lagging behind is their lack of education. Rokeya argued that education for girls is the fundamental requirement for women's emancipation; consequently, she founded a primary school in Kolkata for Bengali Muslim girls. Rokeya is said to have gone door-to-door to convince the elderly to transfer their daughters to her school. She led the varsity team until her death despite vitriolic criticism and numerous social obstacles.

She founded the Muslim Women's Association in 1916, a group that campaigned for the education and employment of women. In 1926, Rokeya presided over the Bengal Women's Education Conference in Kolkata, which was the first significant attempt to unite women in support of women's education rights. She participated in debates and conferences regarding the advancement of women until her passing on December 9, 1932, shortly after presiding over a session at the Indian Women's Conference.

She desired to examine Bengali, the predominant vernacular in Bengal. The family disapproved of this because many upper-class Muslims of the time preferred to use Arabic and Persian as the medium of instruction rather than Bengali, their native language.

Khan Bahadur Sakhawat Hussain, her Urdu-speaking spouse, was kind, liberal, and very interested in female education. He encouraged her to write, and based on his recommendation, she chose Bengali as the primary language for her literary works, as it was the language of the populace. She began her literary career in 1902 with an essay titled *Pipasa* (Thirst) in Bengali. During her husband's tenure, she also published *Motichur* (1905) and *Sultana's Dream* (1908).

In honor of her cherished spouse, Rokeya established the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' high school. It began with only five pupils in Bhagalpur, a historically Urdu-speaking region. A property dispute with her husband's family compelled her to relocate the institution to Bengali-speaking Calcutta in 1911. It remains one of the city's most popular institutions for women and is now run by the state government.

Rokeya also founded the Islamic Women's Association (*Anjuman e Khawateen e Islam*), which actively held debates and conferences regarding the status of females and education. She advocated reformation, especially for women, and believed that parochialism and excessive conservatism were primarily responsible for the relatively sluggish growth of Muslims in British India. Consequently, she is one of the foremost Muslim feminists. She believed that modern Islam had been distorted or corrupted; *Anjuman e Khawateen e Islam* organized numerous social reform events in support of the original teachings of Islam, which she believed had been lost.

We are about to commemorate 'International Women's Day' on March 8, with a vision to ensure a more gender-equal world, to confirm justice, dignity, and hope for daughters everywhere. At this very instant, we recall our own cherished daughter, who celebrated the freedom trail for Muslim women in Bengal. She will be described as the embodiment of the age's spirit and conscience.

Shamsun Nahar Mahmud (1908-1964), biographer and associate of Begum Rokeya, described her as a 'spider mother' and famously proclaimed: "The fate of the Bengali Muslim

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women has changed dramatically over the past half century, and there's no way to deny that this kind-hearted woman played the most significant role in it."

Rokeya was mentioned within the meticulous conservatism practiced at the time by the aristocratic Muslims. She became the harshest critic of the system as a result, her understanding and insight regarding Islam and mere societal doctrine allow us to reconcile the ostensibly contradictory positions of Islam and female education. Instead of blindly blaming Islam for the ignorance and unholy conservatism of that period, Rokeya cited historical evidence to support the importance of Muslim girls' education.

Despite the fact that Islam has effectively prevented the physical murder of infant girls, Muslims continue to destroy the mind, intellect, and judgement of their daughters. Many consider it a badge of honors to keep their daughters ignorant, devoid of knowledge and comprehension of the world, and cooped up within the four walls of the home.

In her 1926 address to the Bengal women's education conference, Rokeya harshly condemned males for denying women education in the name of religion. Her eloquent assertion reveals the profundity of her thought and concept as well as the breadth of her comprehension. Her comment reminds us of the inadequacy of thought and behavior of Bengali Muslims at the time, as well as her ability to accept that religion is not an obstacle to women's rights, but rather social dogmas in the name of faith.

The most attractive aspect of Rokeya's narrative is not her rhetoric or intellectual profundity, but rather her actions. She was not only an intellectual force in the campaign, but also an activist, an uncommon combination. Rokeya was born into a very conservative family environment and had no formal education, so her existence was destined to be that of a typical Muslim housewife. She grew up to become a writer in both Bengali and English, as well as an activist for the freedom of Muslim women in Bengal and an educator. In March 1911, she established the Sakhawat Memorial School for Women to instruct Muslim females. Rokeya, who as a child had never set foot in a classroom, became the architect of the Bengal Renaissance through the education and modernization of Bengali Muslim women.

Begum Rokeya led the college for twenty-four years, enduring severe criticism and overcoming numerous social obstacles to make it the most effective institution of higher education for Muslim women. Initially, only females who were not Bengali attended Sakhawat Memorial School. However, Begum Rokeya exerted significant effort to persuade Bengali Muslim families to enroll their daughters in high school. She went door-to-door, persuading the elderly that education could be essential for women and promising that her school would observe purdah.

The result of her tireless efforts was that middle-class Muslim girls broke the taboo against leaving the home to check. She also organized horse-drawn carriages so that girls could travel to and from school while observing purdah.

Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School taught Quran recitation and interpretation, as well as Bangla, English, Urdu, Persian, home nursing, first aid, cookery, sewing, exercise, and other subjects. Begum Rokeya frequently visited other girls' schools to observe the teaching techniques employed and the administration of the faculties. Due to the dearth of qualified female teachers in

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Calcutta at the time, Rokeya chose to train the teachers she hired from Madras, Gaya, Agra, and other cities. 1919 saw the establishment of the Muslim Women Training School in Calcutta, per her repeated requests. She worked to secure government funding and social support for the institute, despite facing widespread criticism.

Begum Rokeya left behind numerous Bangla and English correspondence. She possessed a high regard for the Bangla vernacular. Although Urdu was the language of the aristocratic Muslims of the time, including her own residence, she realized that Bangla, the language spoken by the majority of Muslims in Bengal, should be her primary language. In 1927, at the Bangiya Nari Shikkha Sammelan (Convention on Women Literacy in Bengal), she advocated vehemently for the usage of Bangla.

The union led the battle for the education, employment, and legal and political rights of women. Society subsidized the cost of education for an excessive number of women and arranged marriages for a number of disadvantaged girls. It provided housing for orphans and the indigent, as well as financial assistance to widows. In addition, it established enterprises to help girls achieve economic independence. It significantly contributed to the event of Muslim women in Kolkata. Rokeya encouraged women to join the union despite scathing criticisms and accusations from conservatives. She criticized ruthless customs based on a perverted interpretation of Islam and emphasized that girls achieving their full potential as individuals could best exhibit Allah's glory. Rokeya realized that economic independence was necessary for women to achieve complete emancipation and no longer rely on their fathers, siblings, and husbands for their livelihoods. To that end, she advocated for the revival of artisan industries that women could pursue successfully at home.

In contrast to the Hindu women's reform movements, which relied primarily on legislative changes, Muslim women's reform was administered on a more social level, focusing on issues related to education, purdah, health care, and the adoption of a literate modern Muslim identity. In 1937, the application of jurisprudence was proposed as a revolutionary solution to the deprived status of Muslim women. Furthermore, issues pertaining to marriage, divorce, polygamy, and inheritance also figured prominently.

The social reform of Muslim women is best viewed from three distinct perspectives: a) ulama-led attempts to purify Muslim women and their religious practices by educating them about actual Islamic teachings; b) Modern educationist- and reformer-led movements for women's education; and c) literary solutions offered to elevate the moral psyche and provide guidance for the modern Muslim woman's subjectivity. The underlying motif of all three reform strands was the effort to reconcile with a modern Muslim identity by manipulating, re-conceptualizing, and appropriating modern Muslim women.

Rokeya was occupied with writing, activism, and welfare work until her passing. Her leadership, primarily in the context of the early 20th century, amplified the influence of women's existence in India before partition. Her words and messages are still highly germane to our contemporary culture and time. Her foresight, tolerance, and forward-thinking can still guide women who wish to pursue their ambitions despite all forms of prejudice and non-religious bigotry.

No wonder she remains a prominent figure in the women's movement and a beacon for tens of thousands of female leaders domestically and internationally.

Conclusion:

Begum Rokeya was a supporter of women's education in Bengal before its partition. Despite being an opposite of Muslim society, she wished to alter the traditional view of the status of Muslim women, who lacked even the rights of the general populace. She observed that the so-called orthodox males of the society misled the community for their own advantage, thereby impeding the growth of women as social groups. She realized that education has the power to teach women how to be self-reliant, overcome baseless dread of false prejudicial beliefs, and establish themselves as respectable members of society at large. With this goal in mind, she established a college for Bengal's female pupils. She authored several Bengali and English books advocating for the education of Muslim females. She chose the curriculum to enhance her students' understanding. Her priority on vocational effectiveness is comparable to Mahatma Gandhi's concept of "basic education." Her support for "outdoor education" is an additional aspect of her progressive modern educational philosophy.

Rokeya may be a legendary figure in the history of women's education in India who supported and fought for women's independence and education. She was a psychic. She believed that if given the chance, women would be on par with men in terms of knowledge, vision, productive thinking, and intelligence. In Bengal's history of women's education, her fight for educational opportunities for women, particularly Muslim women, to provide them with opportunities and reawaken their innate desire for independence was a landmark event. Her optimal educational philosophy was a combination of pragmatism and progressivism. This made her a prominent educator in the British-dominated Indian subcontinent. The Christian Missionary was the first to pursue the initiative of women's education. Vidyasagar's contribution to the education of women was also laudable. Begum Rokeya continued her efforts for the emancipation of Muslim females through education in the footsteps of her predecessors. She advocated for women's education, despite the fact that she had no formal education.

It is significantly astounding to all or any individuals. Rokeya's "Stree Jatir Abanati" provides the following definition of education: "Education does not require adherence to particular national or cultural norms. God has endowed us with numerous faculties, and education enables us to cultivate these faculties through effort and practice. It is our responsibility to verify the appropriate use of our colleges. God has given us arms, legs, eyes, hearing, a brain, and the ability to think. When we work with our hands, observe with our eyes, listen with our ears, and are able to think rationally, that is education."

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