

Educational contributions of Begum Rokeya (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain) (with sp. ref. to women education)

Bengal's first Muslim feminist thinker, writer and educationist Rokeya is a legendary figure for her efforts in support of women's independence and female education. With a modern, liberal and scientific outlook she envisioned that through education women, particularly Muslim women, would reach their fullest potentials as human beings and pursue their own interests without depending on men. Before or during her lifetime, though some persons took initiatives for educating Muslim women, in the Bengali Muslim society, Rokeya is the first to link up the expansion of education with emancipation and progress of women.

Her main goal was the emancipation of women. Her devotion was to expand female education in the Bengali Muslim society. She believed that education, if imparted properly, would enlighten women and liberate their selves from the barriers of rigid patriarchal and sexist norms. But though Rokeya advocated female education, astonishingly enough, she had no formal education.

Rokeya is a much discussed and highly esteemed name in Bangladesh now. The more the women's liberation is getting relevance, breaking barriers the more the womankind are progressing to achieve their rights, the more Rokeya's name is being uttered. As it is seen, more than hundred years have passed since Rokeya was born, yet her greatness did not tarnish; rather is becoming brighter day by day and her significance is getting brightened up anew. No time-winning talent as Rokeya was noticeable in the women population of colonial India. The main reason of this invisibility is the totality of Rokeya's views of life which is variously reflected in her works and literature.

What Rokeya contributed is really tough to frame up within a particular aspect. Her prime concern was to bring the Muslim women within the circle of education; but if she is identified as a precursor of female education only, one portion of her contribution is acknowledged. Again it is tough to identify her as a litterateur; because she never thought of devoting herself in literary pursuits totally. Yet there is no option for overlooking her literary writings, rather any compilation of feminist writings will be incomplete without her.

Rokeya had no qualification of institutional education; yet what skills she showed in the composition of Bengali literature, not to speak of English writings, is really a matter of envy to the highly educated women. To raise women's awareness, she established an association and that association was active within the downtrodden women in such way that the society had to wait for long to establish any such organization equivalent to the previous one. Yet Rokeya's role on organizing remains unnoticed to the posterity.

Born in 1880, in a village in the northern part of Bangladesh (Pairabondh, Rangpur), Rokeya came from an aristocratic background. Her father Zahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Saber was a wealthy landlord. Her mother was Rahatunnessa. Their family home stood in the middle of a vast estate of about 120 acres, surrounded by dense woods, frequented by wild animals. She grew up there with her two elder brothers, an elder and a younger sister. She remembered two of them with immense gratitude: an elder brother, Ibrahim Saber (to whom Padmarag is dedicated), and an elder sister, Karimunnessa (to whom she dedicated the 1908 book version of *Sultana's Dream*).

Like all female members of the Saber family, Rokeya also had to live behind the curtain from the age of five. The Saber women had to observe purdah even in front of the women who were not their relatives. In her own writings she quotes that when she was five, she was not allowed to be seen by any male non-member of the family. It was not only restricted to that, she even had to hide from women who were outsiders. It was in such environment that Rokeya was born. She belonged to a very conservative family of landed aristocracy which, following the trend of the contemporary Bengali Muslim society, did not favour female education. At the dead of night when the entire household was fast asleep, Rokeya's brother would teach her Bangla and English secretly under the glow of candles. Rokeya could learn Bangla due to the assistance and encouragement that she received from her elder sister Karimunnessa, a lady of great qualities and extraordinary courage.

In an era when women's education was frowned upon, Rokeya's brothers secretly taught her to read and write English and Bangla. Never having the opportunity to go to school Rokeya's auto didacticism lent her character, from her childhood days, a spark of independence. (Bagchi viii) Ibrahim Saber arranged Rokeya's marriage, when she was sixteen, to Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain, a widower. Nearly forty years old at the time of their marriage, Sakhawat Hossain was a deputy magistrate in Bhagalpur, Bihar. Educated from the west, he was a man of liberal and progressive ideas and he helped Rokeya in her pursuit of knowledge by giving opportunities to study. With his help and encouragement within a short period of time she became proficient in English. It was during her husband's lifetime that Rokeya's literary output, published in the Indian periodicals of the time, brought her into the limelight as a daring writer— Mrs. R. S. Hossain.

Rokeya acknowledges her husband's positive contributions to her writing career, "If my dear husband had not been so supportive, I might never have written or published anything". But Rokeya's happy days did not last long. Her husband suffered from acute diabetes. It led to his loss of eyesight and eventually took his life. More problems were waiting for her. She did not get along with her step-daughter and the latter's husband who forced her out of home in Bhagalpur after Sakhawat Hossain's death. But she did not lead an idle life.

She devoted her whole life from 1909 for the cause of Bengali Muslim women's emancipation. In her later life she founded a school and a ladies' association to translate her feminist ideas into reality. Rokeya witnessed the sufferings of women within the Bengali Muslim community and believed that it was her duty as a practicing Muslim woman to right the wrongs of society.

One of the major wrongs that Rokeya identified was the lack of education offered to Bengali Muslim women of her age. She was determined that all women should have education. She started writing various articles, essays, books, short pieces and social-critical essays where she again and again motivated women to receive education. In this way Rokeya started the movement for the emancipation of the Bengali Muslim women. She was the first among the Bengali Muslims who publicly raised the question of equal status for women, and thus she started a new era in the history of Bengali Muslim society.

Rokeya was born at a time when women's education was looked down upon. She secretly learnt how to read and write from her elder brother Ibrahim Saber. Ibrahim had been educated in the Western system, under the auspices of men such as Syed Ameer Ali, who were pioneers of Western education amongst the Bengali Muslims. Due to such tutelage, Ibrahim knew that women's education was necessary to progress the society, and influenced by such ideas, Ibrahim taught Rokeya English. His influence inspired her to remove prejudices and cherish modern thoughts. Her elder sister Karimunnessa's role was also a great source of inspiration for her. She taught Rokeya Bangla alongside Urdu, Persian and Arabic language. LITERARY WORKS Rokeya's writings are not voluminous but full of significance. Her literary career starts in 1902. The first composition is "Pipasa" (The Thirst). Most of her writings are in Bengali. These include two anthologies of essays, satires, short stories which are entitled Motichur and divided into two volumes— Motichur- I (1904) and Motichur- II (1922), a novel— Padmarag (1924), Avarodhbasini (1931), a narration of 47 historical and true events of the miserable plight and indignities which women have suffered in the name of purdah. She also wrote a few works in English. The most famous of those is Sultana's Dream (1908). Other than Sultana's Dream, she also wrote two essays— "God Gives, Man Robs" (1927) and "Educational Ideals for the Indian Girls" (1931) which were published in The Mussalman magazine.

Rokeya was a self-educated woman with progressive thoughts and ideas. Through her insightful eyes she not only observed the miseries of women but also saw how they were deprived of education. As she was an intelligent woman, these aspects helped her to define her future activities. She understood that awakening of women was a must to set them free from their miseries. Thereby, she took vow of female education and held pen to write against the inhuman position of women in the society. These two aspects were both complementary to each other. Because, the prior condition of female education is women's self-awareness, and self-awareness persuades women for education.

In today's world it cannot be imagined to what extent women were lagging behind in Rokeya's time. At that time, in one side the society had conservative influence, and in another side the women lacked self-awareness, they had the mentality to push out the opportunities to develop themselves as real human beings. In some cases, women themselves were against female education. So, their awakening was not possible without triumphing over the religious orthodoxy and social obstacles. Rokeya understood that education is the power which can show women the way, help to be self reliant, conquer the groundless fear of false prejudicial belief and establish them in the society as proper human beings. With that vision in mind she set up school (Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School) and organization for women (Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam). She composed several books in both Bangla and English. In her writings she depicted the wretched condition of women in the family and in the society as well.

And side by side she showed how acute the suppression of women was at that time. Her speech at "Bengal Women's Educational Conference" can be worth mentioning in this respect: I have been crying for the lowliest creature in India for the last twenty years. Do you know who that lowliest creature in India is? It is the Indian women . . . There are people also who feel for animals, so we see animals' rights groups everywhere. If a dog is hit by a car, we hear an outcry in the Anglo-Indian media. But there is not a single soul in the whole of the subcontinent to mourn for incarcerated women like us. (qtd. in Quayum) As mentioned earlier, in Rokeya's time, women's movement was limited to the four walls of the zenana (inner house) and they were secluded from the outside world. Their education was limited to the study of the holy Quran in the name of religious studies and it was not taught in the maktab or madrasha. The instructors were appointed as house tutors who were the maulavis of the nearby mosques. Women had to receive education in confinement and had no idea about the outside world. Because the whole Muslim society at that time did not feel the necessity of education for men, let alone for women. And to confine women within four walls was the custom of the time. The persons who set these customs were of the belief that what they had done was the only way to secure the safety of women. As a result of these customs, the life of women was at stake.

If Rokeya's writings are examined, two major aspects come out. In one aspect, she shows how the patriarchal society is depriving women from their due rights and talks about the education through which women can get rid of their misery and indignity as well as retain their rightful position in the society. And in the other, in her novels and stories she depicts the picture of that imaginative land where women have been equal to men in knowledge, intelligence, vision, thinking, etc. and in achievements sometimes excels men and these women are established on respective positions for their merits. In "Istrijatir Abanati" (Woman's Downfall), Rokeya discusses the inferior status of women and cause of that degradation. "What are we in this civilised world of the twentieth century?" (6) Nothing but slaves; even if it is said that slavery as a trade has disappeared from this world but women's servitude has never ended. Rokeya continuously struggled against patriarchy to establish women's rights and privilege. The aim of that liberation was equal rights with men.

There were three objectives— a. abolishing the seclusion system, b. eradicating the darkness of ignorance, and c. achieving economic independence. And the means of achieving these objectives was education; for their self-establishment, women need self-motivating education. Rokeya says, "Owing to the lack of education we have been unfit for gaining freedom. For being unfit we have lost our freedom. So, Rokeya urges for true education, the education which makes woman good citizens and helps them to contribute to the society; and which also helps them become financially solvent and self-reliant without being parasites on others for food, clothing and shelter. Rokeya lays particular emphasis on the importance of women familiarizing themselves with the world of science and is explicit in her condemnation of male militarism.