

## **EDUCATIONAL THOUGHTS OF BEGUM ROKEYA AND HER CONTRIBUTION IN THE UPLIFTMENT OF WOMEN EDUCATION IN BENGAL**

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### **Abstract:**

19<sup>th</sup> century was the time of Renaissance in undivided Bengal under the British rule. It had begun with Raja Rammohan Roy and continued by the pragmatists like Vidyasagar, Keshab Chandra Sen and others. Reformation spirits not only affected the Hindu Bengali society but also affected Muslim Bengali society. The impetus for reformation within the Muslim community occurred in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and continued in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Begum Rokeya was the mother of the Muslim Awakening in undivided Bengal. She belonged to the group of women who were called Bengali '*bhadramahila*' - a similar concept as 'New Women' coined by Virginia Woolf. She devoted her life for the emancipation of Muslim women who were to follow stern religious practices like *purdah* and others. She realised that the Muslim women should be given the opportunity for education. In the History of Women education of India she was a significant figure who was dauntless enough and did not care the strong criticisms of the religious heads (*Maulabi*) of Muslim community.

In the present paper an effort has been given to examine critically the educational thoughts of Begum Rokeya and her contribution in the upliftment of women education in undivided Bengal under the domination of the British rulers.

**Key-words:** Renaissance, pragmatists, Muslim awakening, '*bhadramahila*', *purdah*.

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**Introduction:**

In the History of women liberation in colonised India, Begum Rokeya (1880-1932) was like the pole-star guiding and showing the Muslim society the right way to be followed defying all the social and religious obstacles in the path of modernity. She struggled hard to bring the Muslim women within the circle of education. So she is rightly considered as the precursor of women education in Muslim society of undivided Bengal during the British rule.

She was born in a village named Pairabondh in the Rangpur district of undivided Bengal in the year 1880. Her father was Zahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Saber. Her mother was Rahatunnessa. She had to live behind the curtain from the age of five like all female members of her family. She had a deep craze for studying in the early days of her life. In an era when women education was neglected, Rokeya's brother secretly taught her to read and write English and Bengali. In the year 1896, Her father arranged her marriage when she was sixteen to a widower named Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain who was nearly forty years old at the time of marriage. Sakhawat Hossain was a man of liberal and progressive ideas. He helped her in studies and made all the arrangements for her studies. Later with his help, she started to publish her writings in Indian periodicals of that time. Her happy days did not last long as her husband died unexpectedly in 1909. After his death she fell in the great sea of misery. But she was not ready to submit before destiny. Actually, she had a noble mission to achieve. She struggled hard and devoted her life for the cause of Bengali Muslim women's emancipation. She felt the need of women education and founded a girls' school for that purpose. She died of heart problem on 9<sup>th</sup> December, 1932. Her greatness lies in the fact that till the last day of her life she worked for the upliftment of women education in Bengal.

She was a prolific writer of both Bengali and English. She wrote essays, novels, utopias, poems, humor and satirical articles on the rights of women and other social issues of that time. Her husband inspired her a lot in this regard. Her literary career started in 1902 with a story named '*Pipasa*' (The Thirst). She wrote two anthologies of essays named '*Motichur-I*' and '*Motichur-II*'. She wrote a novel named '*Padmarag*' (1924). These writings are in Bengali. She also wrote few works in English. '*Sultan's Dream*' (1908) is one of them. She also wrote two essays- '*God Gives, Man Robs*' (1927) and '*Educational Ideals for the Indian Girls*' (1931).

Through all her writings, she tried hard to promote women education in Muslim society in Bengal.

**Objectives:**

Objectives of the study are the followings:

- (i) To examine critically the educational thoughts of Begum Rokeya.
- (ii) To comprehend the role of Rokeya in the upliftment of women education in colonised India.

**Methodology:**

Methodology plays an important role in any type of research as the validity and reliability of the findings depends on the adopted methods of the study. This paper is descriptive in nature and is based on the secondary data collected from the various sources like books, journals, articles and periodicals.

**Educational thoughts of Rokeya and Her contribution in women education:**

Rokeya's philosophy of education was based on her own life experience. She was an idealist in her approach. She witnessed how the women of the Bengali Muslim community suffered due to age-old religious norms and the patriarchal dominance. To drive away their misery she felt the need of education. She dreamt of a new dawn of a new age when Muslim women would be treated equally like their male counterpart. She rightly detected the cause of the unspeakable misery of the Muslim woman as the misinterpretation of Islam.

She took the vow of women education. But it was not an easy task when the Muslim women were secluded from the outside world in the name of religious directives of Islam. At that time a handful of Muslim women belonging to the higher class of the society got the opportunity only for religious studies by the instructors or *Maulavis* of the nearby mosques. The *Maulavis* taught them holy Quran in confinement.

At first she started to write various articles, essays, books etc. in support of women education and their emancipation. With her husband's help and encouragement, she started a girls' school in Bhagalpur. For that purpose her husband, Syed Sakhawat Hossain gave her a legacy of Rupees 10,000. Five months after the death of her husband, she established a high school there in the

memory of her beloved husband and named it as ‘Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ High School’. It was started in Bhagalpur-a traditionally Urdu-speaking area with only five students. In 1910, she was forced to close down the school because of a feud over family property with her step-daughter’s husband. In the same year she came to Kolkata (Then Calcutta). She did not leave the motto of her life which was the emancipation of Muslim women. She re-opened Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ High School here at 13, Waliullah Lane on 16<sup>th</sup> March, 1911. At first there was only eight students. Gradually, the number of students rose and it became eighty-four in 1915. Lady Chelmsford, the wife of the governor general and Viceroy of India inspected the school in 1917. Later it was upgraded to a Middle Girls’ School. In 1931, it was again upgraded to a High English Girls’ School. The school was shifted to different places because of the increase in number of students and some other reasons. In 1931, it was at 13, European Asylum Lane, in 1932 at 162, Lower Circular Road and in 1938 at 17, Lord Sinha Road and Alipur Hasting House. The school got its permanent address in 1968 when it was finally shifted to 17, Lord Sinha Road.

#### **Important years in the History of ‘Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ School’:**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Occurrence</b>
1909	Begum Rokeya established a school in Bhagalpur in the memory of her husband and named it as ‘Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ High School’.
March 16, 1911	The school was reopened in Calcutta (now Kolkata) at 13, Waliullah Lane.
1917	Lady Chelmsford inspected the school. The school was upgraded to Middle Girls’ school.
1931	Upgraded to High English Girls’ School
1932	It was shifted to 162, Lower Circular road.
1938	It was shifted to 17, Lord Sinha Road and Alipur Hasting House.
1968	It was finally shifted to its own House at 17, Lord Sinha Road.

She ran her Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School for 24 years fighting against ear-piercing criticisms as well as various social hindrances. She tried hard and soul to make it the best school for Muslim girls. At first the non-Bengali families sent their girls to Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School. But the Bengali Muslim families were indifferent about their girls' education. So Rokeya came forward and took the initiative of persuading Bengali Muslim families to send their daughters to her school. She even made door to door campaign and convinced the parents that *purdah* would be observed at her school too. She arranged a horse-drawn carriage so that girls could go to school and return home observing *purdah*. Later she offered a free bus service for the girl students. For observing *purdah* she instructed to fit the shutters to the windows of the bus. Sometimes the girls inside the bus fainted because of the lack of ventilation. Later she replaced the shutters with curtains. One of her friends described the bus as 'moving black hole'. She was a thoughtful woman who felt the need of various subjects for educating the Muslim girls of that time. She herself constructed the curriculum for the girls of her school. She included the following subjects in the curriculum:

- (i) Quran
- (ii) English
- (iii) Urdu
- (iv) Persian
- (v) Home nursing
- (vi) First-aid
- (vii) Cooking
- (viii) Sewing
- (ix) Physical education
- (x) Vocational Training.

### **Analysis:**

Rokeya was by heart and soul an educationalist. She got a little support from the British Government for running her school. But she was not a person to be defeated so easily. She used her private income in order to run her school. There was not only economical hindrance but also

hindrances in other areas. She faced religious criticisms and countered them by writing many articles, essays to differentiate between true religion and man-made religion. Her aim in this regard was to convince the parents about the need of education in the life of their daughters. She saw how the Muslim women submitted themselves to their husbands and had no chance to question inequality inherent in the Muslim society. Rokeya wanted to break the religious dogma and also wanted to inform the women that Islam did not promote inequality between man and woman.

For the true understanding of the religious doctrine in the Quran, she recommended the translation of the Holy book into provincial languages. She recommended the reading of Quran. But she did not support the parrot like recitation of the Holy Book. She told that the very truth exposed by the Quran should be understood by the Muslim girls.

She emphasised on physical education because she believed that it would make the women physically stronger, fit and confident. She also gave importance to vocational training because she thought that it would make the women economically independent.

She also recommended the value oriented education for making the girls ideal daughters, wives and mothers or obedient daughters, loving sisters, dutiful wives and instructive mothers.

Rokeya dared to go against the norms of the Muslim society for the inspiration she got seeing the efforts made by the British Rulers and the educationalist like Vidyasagar in the expansion of women education. She was also affected immensely by the rationalism of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Keshab Chandra Sen.

She felt the need of good teachers for providing the best education to the girl students of Bengal. There was a lack of female teachers at that time. For creating good female teachers she herself used to train them.

**Findings:**

Begum Rokeya was a benefactor of women education in undivided Bengal. In spite of being the counterpart of Muslim society, she wanted to change the age old outlook regarding the status of the Muslim women who were being deprived of even the right of the human beings. She observed that the so called orthodox male of the society misled community for their own benefit and in this way the growth of women as human beings was hampered. She truly realised that education has the power which can show women the way to be self-reliant, conquerer of groundless fear of false prejudicial belief and establish themselves as proper human beings in the society. With this vision in mind, she set up a school for the girl students of Bengal. She wrote several books both in Bengali and English in support of the education for the Muslim girls. She selected the curriculum to improve the mental faculty of her pupils. Her emphasis on vocational efficiency is similar to the 'Basic education' concept adopted by Mahatma Gandhi. Her support to 'open air schooling' is also another side of her progressive modern educational thoughts.

**Conclusion:**

In the History of Women education of India, Rokeya is a legendary figure who supported and fought for women's independence and education. She was a seer. She felt that the women would be equal to the men in respect of knowledge, vision, productive-thinking and intelligence if they are given the opportunities. To provide them opportunities and awaken their inner soul for freedom, her struggle for the educational opportunities of the women especially of the Muslim women was very notable in the History of Women Education of Bengal. Her educational ideal was the mixture of pragmatism and progressiveness. This made her a prominent educationalist in the British dominated India. The initiative of women education was first taken up by the Christian Missionary. Vidyasagar's role in women education was praiseworthy too. Following the footprint of the former, Begum Rokeya continued her mission for the emancipation of the Muslim girls through education. She advocated women education but she had no formal education in real sense of the term. It is very much astonishing to all of us.

We can conclude mentioning the definition of education given by Rokeya in her literary piece named '*Stree Jatir Abanati*':

**“Education does not mean to follow a particular nation or cultural norms. God has given us many faculties and education means to cultivate that natural faculty by hard work and exercise. It is our duty to ensure the proper use of our faculties. God has given us hands, legs, eyes, ears, mind and ability of thought. When we do good works with our own hands, observe with the eyes, listen with ears and can think reasonably, that is called education”.**

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