

EVALUATING ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN'S (1880-1932) EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT AGAINST THE CONTEXT OF THE BENGAL RENAISSANCE

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Abstract

Rokeya was born in Rangpur in undivided Bengal at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although she had no formal education, with sheer inner courage and strength of character, Rokeya became the most celebrated female spokesperson for the progress of Muslim women's education in Bangladesh. This article will firstly scrutinise Rokeya's thoughts on pedagogy and secondly, it will evaluate her educational work against the context of the Bengal Renaissance and find out to what extent she was an independent thinker.

Keywords: Rokeya, education, Bengal Renaissance, Bengal women, Bengali patriarchy

Introduction

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) was born in the obscure village of Pairaband in Rangpur in British Colonial India at the end of the nineteenth century. Although she grew up in an affluent household and her elder brother Ibrahim Saber was sent to St. Xavier's College in Kolkata for his education, Rokeya's father could not confront the traditional attitude of that time of educating daughters at home. Sending Muslim daughters to school was an unthinkable social taboo no one would dare to break. Home education consisted mainly of cooking, sewing and knitting, housekeeping and reading the Koran. Thus, Rokeya never received any formal education. Because of this, she was acutely aware throughout her life of the limitations it imposed on her and to what extent it determined the lot of Muslim women of her time. However, due to her hard work and obstinacy, she eventually became the most celebrated female icon for advancing Bangladeshi Muslim women's education. This article will firstly analyse Rokeya's thoughts on education and secondly, it will review her educational work against the context of the Bengal Renaissance and find out to what extent she was an original thinker.

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Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative approach. It is a secondary data-based paper as due to time limitations and resource constraints I could not look into Rokeya's school documents and the journals she wrote for. As such, the paper uses only information available in the public domain.

Analysing Rokeya's Educational Thoughts

Throughout her life, Rokeya wrote innumerable essays, short stories, novellas and a wide number of letters, in them she echoed time and again, the importance of imparting formal education to women in one form or the other. These works were published in the leading progressive newspapers of the time. To understand Rokeya's thought on education, the discussion that follows will focus on three key themes. They are:

- 1) Who received an education in Rokeya's time?
- 2) What was taught or should be taught according to Rokeya?
- 3) What Rokeya thought should be the purpose of educating women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century?

Who Receives Education

The education of Bengali Muslim women is that runs a motif throughout Rokeya's writings. But she also writes that Bengali women—both Hindus and Muslims—in general, are barred from getting an education. 'Stri Jatir Abanati' (The Demise of Womankind) (1904)¹, 'Sugrihini' (The Good Housewife) (1905), 'Shishu Palan' (Rearing Children) (1920), 'Rasana Puja' (Worship of the Pallet) are such essays written about how Bengali women are barred from getting an education or that they are getting the wrong kind of education which will be discussed subsequently.² Other essays deal specifically with the lack of education of Muslim girls.³ The novella *Saurajagat* (*The Solar System*) (1905) and the

¹ All the dates of publication are quoted in parentheses beside Rokeya's writings and the latter are cited from Rokeya, B. *Begum Rokeya Rachanasamagra* (*Collected Works of Rokeya*). Salma Book Depot, 2014.

² 'Ganaphal' (The Fruit of Knowledge) (1921) and 'Muktiphala' (The Fruit of Freedom) (1920) are allegories which deal with the same theme.

³ 'Bangiya Nari Sikkha Samiti' (The Bengali Women's Education Conference) (1926), 'Education Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl' (1931), 'God Gives Man Robs' (1927), 'Dhangsher Pothe Bangiyo Muslim' (Bengali Muslims on the Path to Destruction) (1931), 'Ardhangi' (The Better Half) (1904), 'Borkha' (Yashmak) (1904), 'Delisiya

short story 'Bhrata Bhagini' (Brother and Sister) (1905) show the positive consequences of educating Muslim women and real-life sketches⁴ like 'Nars Nelly' (Nurse Nelly) (1919) show the consequences of delivering missionary education to women. A special mention can be made of 'Begum Tarzir Sahit Sakkhat' (A Meeting with Begum Tarzi) (1929) which deals with the education of Afghan girls. Apart from these writings, the novellas *Sultana's Dream* (1905) and *Padmarag* (1924) deal exclusively with women's formal education. The essay, 'Niriha Bangali' (The Innocent Bengali) (1903), criticises the purpose of education delivered to Hindu and Muslim Bengali men. So, the majority of her writings deal with educating Muslim women.

What Gets Taught and Why versus What Should be Taught and Why

Throughout her writings, there is a clash between what was taught to women in the late nineteenth century in India and specifically in Bengal, and what according to Rokeya's view, should be taught to women. In 'The Demise of Womankind', she writes that both Hindu and Muslim married women in India are taught to wear huge amounts of jewellery to the point that they cannot walk and that this is a sign of the slavery of women⁵. Women are taught to enslave their minds⁶. So, what should be taught and why? Rokeya says, "Educate your daughters properly and they will be able to earn their own livelihood"⁷.

That the aim of education for women should be to earn a livelihood so that they can be equal to men was a radical idea of her times (see Amin in Caudhuri et al., 2006, p. 29). Women's need to be educated in order to be equal to men, is a recurring aim of providing education for Rokeya. It is seen in essays such as 'The Better Half', or 'Open Sesame' (1918). For Rokeya, the purpose of education is also to cultivate the mind (as

Hatya' (The Murder of Delicia) (1921), 'Aborodh Basini' (The Secluded One) (1929), 'Rasana Puja' (Worship of the Pallet) (1904), 'Asha Jyoti' (Star of Hope) (1906), 'Cisem Fank' (Open Sesame) (1918), 'Lukano Roton' (Hidden Treasure) (1931), 'Rani Bhikharini' (The Beggar Queen) (1927), 'Subeha Sadek' (The First Light of the Morning Sky) (1930), 'Shatsho Schooler Deshe' (In the Land of 700 Schools) (1930) and 'Tin Kure' (The Three Idlers) (1926).

⁴ Rokeya herself mentions this at the beginning of the essay.

⁵ Rokeya, p. 27, my paraphrase.

⁶ Rokeya, p.32, my paraphrase.

⁷ Rokeya, p. 33, my translation.

expressed in ‘Yashmak’, p. 53) to the extent that women can earn a living through doing intellectual works such as writing novels (as shown in ‘The Murder of Delicia’) or even poems (as shown in ‘Hidden Treasure’). Education could enable women to become not only the financial but also the intellectual equal of a man in marriage, thereby resulting in true compatibility as the novella *The Solar System* portrays. Education should make women able to apply logic and be logical (as is the view expressed in ‘Brother and Sister’) as well as become ideal citizens. So, what kind of education is it that was imparted to women at that time in India and what according to Rokeya should be imparted to women to make them complete human beings?

‘The Better Half’ informs us that Muslim women were taught to read the Arabic alphabet and then the Koran without understanding its meaning⁸. They were taught cooking and sewing and Bengali girls were not even taught Bengali⁹. Rokeya is not against teaching girls sewing and cooking but for her, the purpose of education is something more than this. She says:

The aim of education is not a blind imitation of a specific race or nation. Rather, its aim is to develop by practice, the faculties that have been naturally bestowed on us by God. It is our duty to use that virtue fruitfully and misusing them is a mistake. God has bestowed upon us a pair of hands, eyes, ears and thinking faculties. If we train our hands to be strong and for doing good; our eyes to see or observe attentively; ears to listen wistfully and mental faculties to think more subtly, then that is real education. We cannot call education which only teachers use to pass, true education¹⁰

Nowhere is this vision more prominent than in her two novellas *Sultana’s Dream* and *Padmarag (Ruby)*. Both are utopias with the difference that *Padmarag* has marked social realism. In *Sultana’s Dream*, women of an imaginary country called Ladyland receive technological knowledge and science education at the university and use this education to build a civilisation that represents the heights of technological advancement. Women are able to control physical aspects of their environment such as the amount of rain the country receives, irrigation as well as develop solar power. Women truly become the creators of their

⁸ Rokeya, p. 41, my paraphrase.

⁹ Rokeya, p. 42, my paraphrase.

¹⁰ Rokeya, p. 31, my translation.

own destinies by means of the formal and higher education they receive to the extent that men become redundant in the public aspect of running or governing the country. Ultimately, the latter are made to withdraw within the home—the reality for women of Rokeya's time—where they do household work. Rokeya is playing on the reversal of gender roles in this novella to show what it is that education is able to achieve for women if they receive proper formal education: everything from running the environment to ensuring smooth governance of the country to minimising crime rates (Rokeya, p. 402). *Padmarag*, on the other hand, is based on Rokeya's experience of the day-to-day running of the Sakhawat Memorial School established by her and is in this way closer to reality than *Sultana's Dream*. The protagonist of *Padmarag* called Padma rejects marriage to devote herself to the advancement of downtrodden women, having had access to vocational education herself. The views that Padma utters are unthinkable for a woman of Rokeya's time and radical by any standard. In the introduction to the translation of this novella, Bagchi (in Rokeya, 2005, p. xiii) mentions:

Complementing *Sultana's Dream*, *Padmarag* presents a complex educational and philanthropic female utopia. In Tarini Bhavan, a community set in Bengal and founded and run by their own kind, women from diverse races, regions and religions with personal histories of patriarchal oppression band together, united by the common goal of fulfilling an educational and philanthropic purpose. ...

This is also what the Sakhawat Memorial strived to do in real life, albeit for Muslim women because they were the most backward section of society.

Evaluating Rokeya's Educational Thought against the Bengal Renaissance

Rokeya's birth coincided with the beginning of what became known as the Bengal Renaissance. It started with the Battle of Plassey being held in 1857. This was a cultural and intellectual movement. Notable men of the Bengal Renaissance were Ram Mohun Roy (1772-1833), best known for his abolition of the practice of widow burning, Nawab Abdul Latif (1828-1893) and Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905). Mass educational and social reforms were undertaken during the Bengal Renaissance to enable both Hindu and Muslim men to hold ranks in the British colonial

administration to which they did not have access before. The question of educating women formally was raised as part of this venture of providing a new type of education to the Bengali men folk. Persian was the official language of the Mughals in the previous era and Urdu enjoyed a high status because it was recognised as the language of the Muslim elite (*ashraf*) of Northern India (Amin in Caudhuri et al., 2006, p. 23). Bengali, Rokeya's mother tongue, was the language of non-aristocratic Muslims (*atraf*). The local system of Persian education from the early nineteenth century was transformed by the British to westernise/modernise it. This gave rise to a new type of modern Bengali man, well-versed in English, known as the *bhadrolok*. The Hindu *bhadrolok* wanted English-educated wives now for them to converse with British officials. But unlike their Hindu counterparts, Muslim men did not aim for their wives to converse with British men as this goes against the concept of *purdah*. Their aim was to produce educated wives according to the teachings of the Koran and the Hadith in order for these wives to produce sons "who would restore the pristine glory of Islam" (Ray, 2002, p. 52). Indeed the two key questions for Muslims were 1) if women were to be educated at all and 2) if so, to what extent and in which direction and whether at home or school (Ray, 2002, p. 52). It is with regard to the second question that Rokeya becomes relevant. While there was unanimous agreement among most Muslims towards the turn of the nineteenth century that women should be educated, opinions varied considerably as to whether women should be sent to a school or not. Hindu girls were sent to the Bethune School after its establishment in 1849. But the type of education best suitable for Muslim women was hotly contested (Ray, 2002, pp. 46-53). The Bengal Renaissance itself was not a movement of the masses (Samanta, 2008, p. 5) and neither was its ideology homegrown because it was started by the British. In that sense, it can be said that the Bengal Renaissance was a colonial venture meant to benefit the British themselves and the idea of educating Muslim women was a trickle-down effect of the Bengal Renaissance.

It is against this backdrop that one must evaluate the life of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. She was the heir and proponent of the Bengal Renaissance (Caudhuri et al., 2006, p. 23). Sonia Nishat Amin notes:

She was not just an advocate and pioneer of Muslim girls' education, though this was the arena in which she is most remembered today by the majority. But to evaluate her only as a proponent of Muslim girls'

education, is to limit the vast area in which Rokeya, we now know, lived, worked and thought. In order to be evaluated Rokeya must be placed in her social and historical context: the backdrop of liberal reformism and the impetus for women's reform embodied in the Bengal Renaissance; as a 'feminist', whatever the term this may have been in her day; and finally as a British subject working within and for the Muslim community in Bengal. (Caudhuri et al., 2006, p. 23)

The British advocated the Bengal Renaissance because they wanted to exploit the Indian population for their benefit. They did not predict that the latter would radicalise education for Muslim women which was the most backward section of society and that this would be brought about by a woman who was a representative of that section.

Dyson (1997) writes:

Even though the Hindu community was more advanced in the field of female education in Bengal, the most radical, revolutionary, voice of protest among Bengali girls was that of a Muslim lady. Her name was Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Her thought was characterised by distinct feminist traits. In spite of certain compromises and hesitation, is not Rokeya the first true feminist woman of Bengal as we understand the term today? If that is so, the question arises, despite the vanguard position of the Hindu community in the arena of the Bengal Renaissance and female education, why did the first actual feminist woman emerge from the confines of a Muslim home? (pp. 269-270)

Ray makes a key use of Rokeya's autobiographical writings as well as her essays to answer these questions. In Rokeya's own words, we are told how, from the age of five, she had to maintain strict *purdah* in order to make herself invisible not only from non-related men but also from women who were not family members. In the process of hiding herself from these women, she would go unfed for days because people would forget she was hidden and thus, not bring food to her (2002, pp. 19-20). Ray (2013) expounds on how Rokeya's life history may explain her radical vision of women's empowerment in her two novellas *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag* and also essays such as 'Yashmak' and 'The Secluded One'. What Rokeya's condition was in *purdah* was the fate shared by most Muslim women of her time. Yet, the majority of the Muslim women of Rokeya's time did not speak against the *purdah* or

uphold the purpose of education to be paid employment and equality with men. In the latter view, Rokeya was radical and without any forerunner (Hossain, 1996, p. 11). This makes her the feminist that Ray calls her to be. Rokeya voices clearly:

We will do everything to become equal to men. If we need to earn a living in order to be free, then we will do that. If necessary, we will become everything from being a lady-clerk to being a lady-magistrate, lady-barrister, lady-judge—everything. After fifty years, we will become a lady-vice-roy and turn all women into queens! Why shouldn't we earn? Don't we have hands or feet or intelligence? What not? Can't we use the toil that we spend into doing household work at our husband's home to set up an independent business? ¹¹

This is as radical as it gets for Rokeya's time.

Was Rokeya an Original Thinker?

Jahan (in Caudhuri et al., 1996, p. 52) notes that Rokeya's writings were a direct outcome of the socio-cultural conditions of her time. But was Rokeya a product of her time or was she original? As far as Rokeya's life is concerned, what she learned out of *purdah* and her childhood experiences, prepared her for what she became in her later life. She had luck in that she was married to a person who although much older than her, understood her vision and supported her in her educational mission not only emotionally but also financially. It is true that the question of Muslim men's education in the late nineteenth century came up because of Bengal Renaissance which took place against the need for Muslim men to participate in the British government and administrative undertakings if they were to progress along with their Hindu counterparts. The need for Muslim men's education and specifically English education which would enable them to participate in the British governmental administration and other affairs triggered off the need for Muslim women's education as these men needed modern wives but no one was as radical as Rokeya in spelling out a different need for women's education. It can be said that while Rokeya's birth coincided with the times of the Bengal Renaissance and it influenced her educational outlook and views, the way in which she gave a voice to expressing those inequalities was the product of her own

¹¹ Rokeya, p.33, my translation.

radicalism. To this extent, she is an extremely original and innovative thinker. What she advocated as the purpose of women's education and also what should be taught for achieving that was something no other women of her time voiced as radically as she did. In this regard, it will not be far-fetched to opine that she was a rebel standing and thinking far ahead of her times.

Conclusion

This article has firstly analysed Rokeya's thoughts on education and secondly, it has reviewed her educational work against the context of the Bengal Renaissance. Rokeya was born and spent most of her life against the backdrop of the Bengal Renaissance when the question of providing formal schooling both to Hindu and Muslim girls became pertinent. But advocating formal education especially for Muslim girls in order for them to be financially independent and therefore, equal to men, was something unimaginable during Rokeya's time. In this regard, her vision was radical and unparalleled. The purpose of women's education for Rokeya was solely their empowerment. This was unprecedented in Rokeya's time. What Rokeya envisioned was gender equality for women that might be achieved by obtaining functional education, i.e., education which would enable women to earn an income. This was unheard of in Rokeya's time. She realised correctly that in order to break free from the shackles of oppression, women have to obtain financial freedom if they were to attain equality. In fact, what she imagined for Bengali women to achieve some 150 years ago remains one of the most fundamental goals for ensuring women's empowerment until the present day. She correctly envisioned in *Sultana's Dream* that educating women leads to sustainable development—something adopted by the UN only recently through its Millennium Development Goals. In as much as Rokeya had the audacity to dream for Bengali women to reach unprecedented heights and tread paths unthinkable of during her time, her thoughts and ideas remain original and relevant for today's world. For time constraints, this article could not inspect Rokeya's school-related documents and the journals she wrote for. Further studies related to them may throw new light upon Rokeya's educational thought.

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