

Contribution of the Women from Muslim Community in the field of Education during Colonial Bengal

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 15 May 2019

Keywords

Bengal, Education, Emancipation, Empowerment, Muslim, Women.

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ABSTRACT

Education is a major instrument of social change and development. It enables women to respond to the challenges, confront their traditional roles and change their life. So depriving someone from education means keeping an individual aloof from various opportunities. During colonial rule Muslim women in Bengal had very little opportunities. There were various social restrictions in the path to receive education by Muslim women. But during this time some eminent Muslim ladies not only came forward to educate themselves but also worked for the emancipation of their fellow sisters. So the present article attempts to explore their efforts towards the spread of education among women from the Muslim community.

Introduction

Education plays a vital role in providing human being proper equipment to lead a harmonious life. Islam gives great importance to education. In Islam gaining Knowledge is an obligatory duty for every men and women. But throughout the British period, Muslim women lagged far behind in attaining formal education and also in the process of modernization in comparison to women of other communities and also in comparison to the male counter parts of their own. In the nineteenth century whatever little opportunity they had in education was mainly based on religious education. Girls learned the Holy Quran like a parrot without understanding the meaning. In this period the problem of education among Muslim community in Bengal became more complex. This was undoubtedly due to the practice of strict purdah, child marriage, lack of Government initiatives and negligence of men folk of Muslim community.

But it is a matter of fact that in spite of numerous aged long evil social customs and other restrictions a few courageous women emerged who not only emancipated themselves through education but also played a vital role towards the spread of education among their fellow sisters. These women were Shamsunnahar Mahmud, Mrs. Masuda Rahman, Razia Khatun Chaudhurani, Khairunnesa Khatun, Nur Jahan Begum and Nurjahan Murshid.

Shamsunnahar Mahmud:

Shamsunnahar Mahmud was a writer, educationist, teacher, social worker and disciple of famous social reformer Rokeya Shakawat Hossain. She was born in an aristocratic, cultured and educated family of Noakhali in 1908. Her grandfather Maulavi Fazlul Karim was the first Muslim graduate from Noakhali. Her maternal grandfather Khan Bahadur Abdul Aziz was a great supporter of women's education and one of the founders of the *Muslim Suhrid Sammelani* (society for improvement of women).¹ Like the other girls of the time she also spent her childhood in strict purdah system. She studied up grade 6 in the Khastogir Girls High School. Due to the custom of purdah she stopped attending public school and

remembered how "At the tender age of nine, I had to leave school. From then onwards, I spent my educational life at home. Years passed by, my class mates, those who were Hindus, Brahmo, and Christian all moved about freely. Some of them went to Calcutta after their matriculation and were admitted to Bethune College and the Diocesan College. They wrote to me frequently describing the new world in front of them. I felt that we the Muslims were residents of a dark world whereas they were of the colorful world..".² Her passion for learning helped her to overcome the difficulties. In 1926 she passed matriculation examination with first division which was a great achievement for a woman.³ Her marriage with educated and magnanimous Dr Wahiddin Mahmud opened the door of higher education. She obtained her Bachelor Degree with distinction in 1932 from Bethun College. Begum Rokeya hosted a party for Naher's success on the behalf of *Anjumane Khawatin-e-Islam*. In her addressing note, Rokeya said that "Nahar stands apart from the rest of the graduates— she had to achieve all these besides being involved as a wife paying attention to her husband, her children, and to the total family household, which are not mean achievements. I hope the girls in our society will follow Nahar's footsteps".⁴ Through her speech Begum Rokeya encouraged girls to pursue both education and marriage. Naher was such ideal example who not only maintained her family life but also started career as a lecturer in Lady Brabourne College in Calcutta in 1939. In 1942 she successfully passed MA examination from Calcutta University.

Sumsunnaher Mahmud expressed her view and promoted her ideas through her writings. Her first literary work was "Punymoyi" which was published in 1925 when she was just seventeen years old.⁵ It contained the biographies of eight great and inspiring women of the Muslim world like Prophet's(SA) beloved daughter Fatima(RA) and his wives Ayesha(RA) and Khadija(RA). Rokeya Jibani, an authentic autobiography of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was her most well-known work which was published from Calcutta in the *Bulbul* magazine in 1937. Rokeya was not only his mentor but also a comrade in the crusade for women's education. Naher was famous as an educationist and many of her literary works

related with various aspects of education. In her essay "Nari Jagaran", she mourned the seclusion and illiteracy of Bengali Muslim women which made them ignorant in relation to human civilization.⁶ She noted ironically that while the husband calculates the distance of the sun and stars from the earth, the wife calculates the length and breadth of the pillow cover.⁷ She pointed out that how illiteracy made women unfit companions for their educated husbands. Her work entitled "Shishur Siksha" was published in 1939. Rabindranath highly appreciated her work "Shishu Sikha".⁸ In this work, she argued that mother should be educated themselves so they could be better teacher to their children. In her another article titled "Shishu Sahitya" in which she wrote about the child psychology, citing the educational ideas of Froebel, Montessori, Herbart Spencer and Rabindranath.⁹

She involved with *Anjumane Kawatin-e-Islam* and participated in Nikhil Bharat Sammelan. She also represented Muslim women from Bengal in the *International Women Conference* held in Calcutta in 1936 under the auspices of *International Council of Women*. She was associated with the magazine *Bagum* which was one of the famous women magazine of that time. She served as president of *Begum club* which was first cultural institution for women within the Muslim community.¹⁰ Her eventful Working life was not an end here, she and her older brother Habibullah Bahar jointly brought out the progressive periodical *Bulbul* from Calcutta.¹¹ It was one of the successful magazine run by brother and sister duo which raised greater awareness about women education and women related problems. She was one of fortunate women among few who got the support of her family. On the one hand she played traditional role as wife, mother, and religious women and on the other she went far beyond by serving as a teacher, writer and social activist who tirelessly worked for the betterment of women.

Mrs. Masuda Rahman:

She was a strong critic of many social problems like her contemporary Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain. She was born in an educated family of Sherpur in the district of Hoogly in 1885. Her father Khan Bahadur Mazharul Anwar Chowdhury was a landed aristocrat and a distinguished lawyer of the Hooghly Judge Court. Like other Muslim women of that time, she was educated at home. She secretly took lesson from her parental uncle's son. Masuda learnt how to read the holy Quran, and Bengali and Urdu at home. Due to her father's strong opposition she was deprived of higher education. At the age of eleven she was married to the zaminder of Furfurah in Hoogly, Kazi Mahmudur Rahman who was Registrar of Calcutta.¹² After her marriage to Kazi Mahmudur Rahman, she was known as Mrs M Rahman. She began writing after the First World War. She was most aggressive in her writing than the many other women who wrote about the social injustice towards women at that time. She criticized conservative section of Muslim society in a ruthless manner. Her works were appreciated by progressive Muslims. She wrote regularly for Kazi Nazrul Islam's *Dhumketu*, published from Calcutta which was a popular and progressive periodical of the time.¹³ The rebel Poet was an admirer of her and considered her source of inspiration. She dedicated her "Bisher Banshi" to this remarkable lady.¹⁴ Her literary works dealt with women's rights,

their economic helplessness, patriarchal domination, women education and purdah and rights of women as sanctioned by Islam. Like Rokeya she also shared liberal view. Mrs M Rahman insisted upon a liberal interpretation of scripture in Purdah Banam Prabanchana and wrote "*In this age of our awakening, she (woman) shall not blindly follow religion nor accept ritual as its substitute*".¹⁵ She distinguished between purdah and abarodh which banished women behind the andarmahal. She severely condemned the Muslim society and wrote "*In the name of severity of purdah, we have been deprived of many good things in life, no longer must we remain so deprived of many good things in life, no longer must we remain so deprived. We demand honour, freedom and rights as bestowed on us by Islam. Who is there to hold us back? The Satanic society? No it will never succeed*".¹⁶ She was a great advocator of women education. In an article entitled 'Amader Dabi' in which she condemned Muslim society for making discrimination between man and women in the matter of imparting education. She wrote "*Both men and women must acquire knowledge and education. No discrimination should be made between a son and a daughter in this respect. In spite of this, the less than human followers of Mohammad treat sons as the guide who will lead them to deliverance and daughters like garbage..... A considerable amount is spent on the son's education, but no one remembers to educate the daughter*".¹⁷ Mrs Rahman raised her voice in the favour of women's independence. She believed that liberty is meaningless without giving them economic independence. Her other literary works are Barbanal, Katha Banam Kaaz and Santio Sakti. This wonderful lady died on 20th December, 1926. After her death her husband published her collected work called *Chanachur* in 1927. An article in *Saogat* praised her work "*She was concerned with protecting the rights of women at all times and her writings strongly condemned the injustices meted out to women*".¹⁸

Razia Khatun Chaudhurani:

She was another major critic of social problems in colonial Bengal. She had a brief life span, but she made a mark in the society as a poet and short story writer.¹⁹ In 1907 she was born at Noakhali. Her father Abdul Rashid had a good relation with Deshbandhu Chitranjan Das, the mayor of Calcutta corporation at that time. He had appointed her father as the deputy executive officer. Due to her father's job she spent most of her childhood days in Calcutta. Her education was started by taking lesson on Quran. She was married to Ashrafuddin Ahmed Chowdhury who belong to the Zamindary family of Comilla.²⁰ Being married to a politician she got the opportunity to come very close to the politics of the time i.e. Swadeshi Movement, Khilafat Movement and Civil Disobedient Movement. She expressed her political view in her short story *Sramik*.²¹ The education of Muslim women, women's role in the home and outside, purdah and its perversion abarodh, the status of women in Islam and motherhood were the major issues of all most all the essays written by her. In her literary work 'Samaje o Grihe Narir Sthan' where she wrote :

"For so long Muslim women suffered all oppression in silence. Today a few are getting education and their eyes have opened...There are societies for preventing prevention of cruelty to animals, the

government has laws to hang murderers and yet no one turns a glance in this direction".²²

Khairunnesa Khatun:

She was born in a middle class family of Sirajgang in 1870. Khairunnesa worked as a Headmistress in Hossainpur Balika Vidyalaya in Sirajgang during the end of the nineteenth century.²³ In 1895 Hossainpur Balika Vidyalaya was founded by Munshi Mohammad Meherullah of Shirajganga who was a Municipality Commissioner and also a member of district board and local Union board.²⁴ She was the first Muslim professional woman of Eastern Bengal in colonial India.²⁵ She came out from private sphere and entered public sphere by taking the job as a teacher in Hossainpur Balika Vidyalaya at a time when the society was not familiar about the concept of working women. She dedicated the last fifteen years of her life to this school working for this girl's school. During the initial stage when this girl's school faced a financial crisis, she contributed the school funds from her own income and appealed to the villagers for help to bear the expenses of desks, chair, and teaching material. But no one came forward to help the school. Being hurt by the negative attitude of the wealthy people of the surrounding area on her appeal, she criticised such people in *Amader Siksher Antaray*, an essay which was published in the monthly journal *Nabanur* in 1904.²⁶ She also organized a night school for *pardanasin* Muslim girls and she went from one village to another by walking to collect the girl students.

Khairunnesa was one of the early women who expressed her social and political views through her writings. In her essay *Amader Shiksha Antaray* in which she wrote about the obstacles in the path of women education. Her essays are published in *Baboon*.²⁷ In 1905, she published another essay titled *Swadesh Anurag* in the support of *Swadeshi* movement and appealed to boycott foreign goods.²⁸ Her other political article were *Swadesh Mangal*, *Rajnaitik Andolon o Musalman* and *Amir Ali Shahaber Probondha*.²⁹ In 1908, she published "*Satir Patibhakti*" which was a manual for women lying down the duties of a good wife.³⁰ It contained advices about child rearing, conjugal relationship, and the importance of women in the family. Mansuruddin observed regarding Khairunnesa in the following manner,

"She has written about a husband-wife relationship and raising children, after much study. Though her views may appear at times conservative due to the environment she lived in, her basic arguments would benefit liberals too....She opined that female backwardness was the root cause of societal decline; a household in which women are not happy will never prosper".³¹

It was quite revolutionary that an ordinary Muslim woman like her who lived in a remote village far from political, economic and social centres of Dhaka and Calcutta, she not only actively participated to the spread of female education but also helped to create awareness among the native people about existing political condition of that time.

Nurjahan Begum:

She dedicated her whole life to a women's magazine which was first illustrated weekly magazine in the Indian

subcontinent.³² She was born in 1925 in an educated family. Begum was the daughter of Mohammad Nasiruddin, a journalist and founder of *Saogat* and *Begum* which were two progressive women's magazine.³³ Upon Rokeya's request her father admitted her in Shakhawat Memorial School. She passed matriculation examination from this school. She also studied in Lady Brabourne College. Nasiruddin felt the need of a magazine which would solely focus on Bengali women issues. The weekly periodical *Begum* which took up the cause of Bengali women was first published on 20th July in 1947 from 12 Wellesley Street, Calcutta.³⁴ He launched this periodical in Saogat's office premises. The first issue was published on 20th July in 1947 with photo of women activist Begum Rokeya on the cover page. First three years *Begum* was published from Calcutta. In, 1950 Nasiruddin came to Dhaka and after that this weekly was published from Dhaka.³⁵ For the first few months Nurjahan worked as co-editor of the magazine helping the editor poet Sufia Kamal with collecting, editing and selecting writings for the issues. This magazine was hugely popular not only to the women readers but also attracted the attention of men. The magazine created a space for many female Muslim writers. The main objectives of *Begum* had always been the all-out betterment and development of Bengali women and to lead them to self-emancipation. In 1948, Nurjahan Begum took the responsibility of publishing this long lasting periodical very successfully.³⁶ Nurjahan Begum's dedication as a journalist and her long association with the weekly periodical *Begum* demonstrate her commitment to perform a lasting duty to the nation and denied age long perception that there was no purpose in educating girls.

Nurjahan Murshid:

She was a journalist, teacher and social activist. She was born at Taranagar in Murshidabad in 1925. She was the fourth daughter of Janab Ayub Hussain Beg and Bibi Khatimunnesa. She received her early education at home. Her father observed her dedication towards learning and decided to send her daughter to her uncle's house in Barishal. She was admitted in Sadar Girls School in Barishal and studied up to eight class. She came to Calcutta for study. She obtained Matriculation, I.A., B.A. degree from Victoria institute in Calcutta. She successfully passed M.A. from Calcutta University and went abroad to take higher education in the university of Boston.³⁷ After completing graduation she joined as headmistress of a girl's school in Barisal at the age of twenty two.³⁸ While she was waiting for the result of her M.A examination she was appointed as a superintendent of a girls hostel in Calcutta known as Munnujan.³⁹ At the same time she was appointed as a broadcaster in All India Radio.⁴⁰

She joined politics in 1954 and was elected to the East Pakistan Legislative Assembly on united Front ticket by defeating distinguished educationist Begum Shamsunnahar Mahmud.⁴¹ Her greatest achievement was to edit a journal titled 'Edesh Ekal'. About the condition of women, she said, "*Even so women are poorer and more exploited and deprived than men*".⁴² In her article, she expressed her view about equal rights of man and woman: "*The idea of social justice was accepted and current but it did not seem to include the notion of equal rights for men and women*".⁴³ In her words, the objective of the journal was: "*The journal wanted to draw*

attention to this defaults of long standing and to work for the equality of women and men. This we thought would be possible only in a sane, civilized and just society and our aim was too contributed to the creating of such society".⁴⁴ Through her journal, she tried to create awareness about women's rights and various social, economic, political issues. Nurjahan Murshid is remembered as a great activist who struggled throughout her life for women's rights.

Conclusion:

When women's economic independence was unimaginable, Khirunassa got economic independence by

taking a job in a school and helped a school financially. Samsunnahar Mahmud perfectly balanced between private domain and public sphere. Nurjahan Murshid and Nurjahan Begum entered into politic sphere which was not considered as women's field. Through their progressive steps, these eminent ladies were looking forward in shaping their own lives, households, communities and their own nation. Mrs Masuda Rahman and Razia Khatun Chaudhurani tried to create awareness about women education among the masses. They began a new era in the field of Muslim women's education as well as women's education in Bengal during colonial rule.

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