## A Rebel Par Excellence

by Zaheda Ahmad

family background that Segum Rokeya came from. That engali Muslim society at large - a society that was backwadlooking, orthodox and conssted mostly of poor peasants, rtisans and other small ncome groups. Education in eneral and female education in particular was little in demand and largely ignored for a variety of socio-economic reasons. As for female education the late nineteenth century witnessed the establishment of a few

to be a failure or a loser either. Building up the girls' school that she started in Calcutta after the death of her husband in 1909 was an uphill battle. But nothing - hostile criticism, indignities, abuses, financial difficulties - could break her iron will. In the end she left the school well established and much appreciated. A historic victory indeed.

But her place in history rests on something much more solid and fundamental. Important though her contributions as an educator were these were but a part of her much larger range of

A rebel and a pioneer she was all through her life. But unlike many of the so-called present day feminists, with a shrewd eye on the publicity and profit potential of loud rhetoric and eye-catching but nonetheless cheap gimmick, her rebellion was of an entirely dignified and for that reason different sort. Rokeya had none of the advantages offered by today's high- tech international media network ever-ready to carry whatever messages today's publicity-crazy "feminist stars" may seek to convey to a frivolous and fun-loving eager clientele.

private female schools. But they had very little impact since they were mostly religious in nature and content. Muslim society had to wait for a decade or two when in the aftermath of the partition of Bengal the newly created province of Eastern Bengal and Assam launched vigorous programme of raising Muslim female enrollment in the schools within the province. Progress, though significant, was achieved more at the primary level than at the higherones. Poverty was a major cause which made parents give preference to boys' education ignoring that of the girls'. The custom of child marriage also significantly along with other social taboo hampered progress in this respect. Not surprisingly Muslim female students at Bengal's Colleges or at the Universities were a rarity till the 30s of this century. In the neighbouring Hindu community of Bengal the situation was very dramati-

cally different, to say the least. Such a dark and depressing socio-cultural scenario formed feminist, the pioneer.



the backdrop of the social milieu from which we see the emergence of the heroic figure of Begum Rokeya. Her father, the head of the family, was a real blue-blooded feudal lord much given to the profligate and licentious ways of life so characteristic of the then decadent and decaying aristocracy. He had four wives. Parda was so strictly observed that even small girls were severely brainwashed to go by the rules set by the family elders, recalled Rokeya later in her life. Any kind of female education except a rudimentary instruction in the scriptures was anathema to him. Equally strong was his opposition to the cultivation Bengali language in the family. In spite of such parental prohibition. Rokeya with the active but ecret help from her highly educated progressive elder brother. took lessons in both Bengali and English and later grew up to be extremely proficient in both. Married to a widowed high government official 22 years older than her, she never had a happy married life in the modern sense of the term although that marriage, no doubt, gave her social status and security. But calm and composed that she normally was Rokeya was not the person to make much of her private grief in public. Only once did she give vent to her feelings in a private letter to a close relation "As a young girl I had missed an affectionate father and had to spend my married life by looking after a sick husband. Life has been a failure with me, but never mind, I go

on carrying the burden cheer-

But no, Rokeya was not born

activities designed to further the cause dear to her heart - the emancipation of Bengali Muslim women in particular and of the whole nation in general. With an amazing clarity of vision she could identify the real enemies of female emancipation — a strong patriarchy and its social collaborators which she thought were responsible for the creation of traditional male-female stereotypes. Her courageous attacks on the commercialised religious establishment were proof enough, if any were necessary, of her determination to carry on the standard of revolt against male domination. "It is

revelations. ... But these scriptures are in reality man-made. ... Now let us not put up with unjustified male dominance." These were powerful challenges which, made for the first time on the soil of Bengal, clearly marked her out as the first real

the males" wrote Rokeya, "who,

in order to keep us in perpetual

darkness, had pronounced the

religious scriptures as divine

That same spirit of defiance and steely determination not to accept things as they are marked her other activities too. Had she obeyed the family injunction against the cultivation of Bengali language, Rokeya the gifted writer would have been lost to us. From head to toe she was a true Bengali and we all know how proud she was of that identity, a point of refreshing contrast with many of her Muslim contemporaries. Another marked feature of her Bengaliness was her spirit of non-communalism. Her heart, her school and her literary world all were wide open to Hindus and Muslims alike. Here also she was far in advance of many of her illustrious contem-

A rebel and a pioneer she was all through her life. But unlike many of the so-called present day feminists, with a shrewd eye on the publicity and profit potential of loud rhetoric and eye-catching but nonetheless cheap gimmick, her rebellion was of an entirely dignified and for that reason different sort. Rokeya had none of the advantages offered by today's high- tech international media network ever-ready to carry whatever messages today's publicity-crazy "feminist stars" may seek to convey to a frivolous and fun-loving eager clientele. Rokeya stands head above shoulders over all these social pigmies and intellectual dwarfs whatever their apologists

The writer who teaches history at the University of Dhaka is the editor of the Saptahik Somoy.

might say.

## A Paily Star Tribute to DEGUM KOKEYA

December 9, 1993

Today marks the 61st death anniversary of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain who was born in 1880, and died at the age of 52 in 1932. Since her date of birth cannot be ascertained with accuracy, we take this opportunity to observe today, December 09, as Rokeya Day.

A prose-writer, philosopher and social activist, Begum Rokeya is still our contemporary, particularly with regard to the struggle for freedom for the marginalised and the oppressed, and of course, for women inhabiting this part of the world. The Daily Star takes this modest opportunity to observe Rokeya Day with the purpose of taking lessons from Rokeya's life and work.

## More than a Leader of Women's Awakening

also wrote a number of satirical

pieces. It is indeed difficult.

within such a limited space as

is available here, to dwell on the

whole range of thematic con-

cerns Rokeya's oeuvre exhibits.

But, some of the burning, anti-

colonial thematic threads

by Azfar Hussain ge called Payrabandh in the district of Rangpur. sciousness. She studied 'under were not collected in books, and Begum Rokeya had to live with a lamp in that small dark vilrealities tellingly colonial and lage', and continued to do the feudal. Needless to mention, the same, with increasing energy ethos of colonialism then and intensity. She moved onto encouraged various forms of Calcutta; got married to disintegration, cultural or Shakhawat Hossain, and her religious or social, as a means marriage was a rewarding one to domination of the coloniser in that she continued to eduover the colonised. Politics in cate herself without any slight Bengal of the nineteenth century could be read as a dramatic text of tensions caused by the power-pull between the British rulers and the Zamindars on the one hand, and between the British and the Zamindar forging an interestbased alliance and the middleclass; on the other. The role of

the middle class in colonial In-

dia was, in fact, charged with a

forceful ambivalence in that the

middle-class gravitated towards

the British rulers whenever

such a gravitation offered

charming social and economic

prospects, and it was this very

class which also rose in revolt

against the same British rulers.

partially succeeding in breaking

colonial dynamics can best be

reflected in the predicament of

women in a given society. In

other words, the position of

women itself can show the po-

sition of the colonizer and the

colonized in that women remain

mostly subjugated, dominated,

and deprived in a colonial soci-

ety, and women, thus, can best

provide the real and metaphori-

cal dimensions of the meaning

of freedom itself. To free a

woman is to free a society and

vice versa, and freedom itself is

always ideologically opposed to

colonialism. Begum Rokeya had

always been aware of this colo-

nial dynamics, and her concern

with, and focus on, women had

never been narrowly defined.

sex-based issues por feminist

ones in the conventional sense

of the term, but they consti-

tuted larger political and cul-

tural issues to fight for. There-

fore, to call Begum Rokeya a

mere leader of women's

awakening is to diminish her

actual scale and scope and

space. This is the perspective

one should not miss while

looking into the work of Begum

was a life-long struggle. The

village she was born and

brought up in was an extremely

backward one, disconnected

from the facilities that the nine-

teenth-century India was then

capable of providing, as Rokeya

herself mentioned it in one of

Begum Rokeya's life itself

It needs mentioning that the

the colonial trap.

binding all of her prose and poetic works can be readily identiobstacle from her husband who, fled: the marginalisation and at times, was a source of inspidwarfing of women which, in ration for her. Shakhawat Hosfact, indicate the dwarfing of the sain died early, but this death এস যত পরিত্যাক্তা কাণ্ডালিনী অসহায়া লাঞ্জিতা সকলে এস তারপর সমাজের বিরুদ্ধে

আমাদের যুদ্ধ ঘোষণা।"

"তুই জীবন সংগ্রামের জন্য প্রস্তুত হ! মৃষ্টিমেয় অন্নের জন্য যাহাতে তোকে কোন দুরাচার পুরুষের গলগ্রহ না হইতে হয় আমি তোকে সেইরূপ শিক্ষা-দীক্ষা দিয়া প্রস্তুত করিব।"

— বেগম রোকেয়া

nations and deprivations.

could not stop Rokeya from carrying forward a continuous struggle to find a way out of the colonial blackmagic gripping the life of people in India — a way out for women, and thus, for society at large. Rokeva herself raised this very significant rhetorical question in one of her essays called "Ardhangi" published in Nabanoor in the Bengali year of 1311: "How could one think of developing a society without paying attention to women?" Indeed, Rokeya's concern with women was always synonymous with her concern with society itself - with a society that was only wallowing in the slough of colonialism and

feudalism. One can certainly attribute an impressive range of activities and accomplishments to Begum Rokeya who produced a remarkable volume of oeuvre in the form of essays, articles, treatises, poems, translations, and a novel. Her important works include Motichuur (Vol 1). published in 1905; Sultana's Dream published in 1908: Motichuur (Vol 2) published in 1921; Padmarag published in 1924; Aborodhbashini (whose date of publication cannot be ascertained with accuracy); etc. Some of her notable poems are: "Bashiful", "Nalini o Kumud", "Saugat", "Appeal", "Nirupam Bir", "Chand", etc. Besides, she

colonised being under the pressures of prejudices, religion. cultural norms, social dynamics, all of which led to discrimi-

But, it should be noticed that this anti-colonial, political programme of Rokeya was being carried out both at the linguistic level and at the level of praxis, which, taken together, distinguish the role of Rokeya as an intellectual from that of a traditional intellectual Gramsci spoke of. She was, in the first place, evolving a language of discourse and dialectics almost a la Vidyasagar, a language capable of accommodating space for women's voice or for voids hitherto not filled in. This was the language with which she could rationally fight against a colonial and feudal culture that encouraged silences and absences which metaphorise not only the position of women, but also that of the oppressed in a feudal society. It is not difficult to see that her concern with the oppressed found expression in her sensitive reactions to the plight of the Indian farmers. which she observed in one of her pieces called "Chaashar Dukshu". Here, the position of a woman and that of an oppressed farmer were fused into an ideological unity in a language realistic, down-to-earth, forceful, and of course, protesting, but bereft of sentiments

desh Lekhak Shibir. Bhagalpur on October 1,1909. Mother's name: Rahatunnessa Chowdhury. She was Later on the school was shifted to Calcutta on March 16, 1991. daughter of a zamindar of

fighters.

In 1916, she established 'Anjumane Khawatin Islam', a Brothers and Sisters: Eldest sister Karimunnessa was forced women organisation. Under her to get many at the age of 14, Secretaryship, the organisation worked to solve the problems of under the pressure of the Mollah's for studying Bangla the women folk and to raise Two elder brothers - Abul Asad Ibrahim Saber and Khalilur Rahman Abu Jaigam Saber ed-

Other involvement: She was life member of "All India Muslim Society, and worked as a member of 'Bengal Women's Educational Conference'. She acted in the 'Naritirtha', a organisation established by Dr Lutfor Rahman to rehabilitate the prostitutes. In 1920, she was elected

(before, 1910, approx). Narir Adhikar (the last written prose).

Compiled by



## An Activist and Radical Writer

by Farida Akhter

INTH December is perhaps belatedly being I recognised at the national level. For a long time, this date was only remembered in small circles of activist women's groups. Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain, died on this day in the year 1932. And on top of being the guiding light of all our women's emancipation campaigns, she is indeed one whose writings and life means so much to our society as a whole.

and rhetorics. Indeed, Rokeya

took her prose to that secular.

rational and persuasive height

from where the evils of colonial-

ism and feudalism reflected in

the ceaseless dwarfing of the

colonized 'other' could easily be

glimpsed. Rokeya clearly saw

that a woman in India was the

colonized 'other' in the same

tivities confined to writing only

Writing, for her, was of course a

"political work of culture" to use

Frederic Jameson's phrase, or a

way of broadening "social

space" as Edward Said calls it.

She was also involved in organ-

ising activities which could have

a direct bearing on the lives of

women themselves. She fought

for women's rights and privi-

leges, and she was particularly

interested in women's educa-

was an intellectual of a very

high stature, who could move

forward to blend her vision and

thoughts with actions and in-

terventions at the social level.

One also gets the impression

that she was in a way stressing

the need for an active unity of

intellectuals and people. For

Rokeya, intellectualism divorced

and dissociated from social as-

sociations and collective actions

was nothing but a futile exer-

cise in an isolated abstraction.

cation was intimately connected

with her attitude to the purdah

system. She was no doubt op-

posed to the purdah, but it was

more the purdah within than

the purdah without which she

wanted to stand against, mean-

ing that intellectual and

ideological slavery should be

constantly fought against in an

attempt to liberate women, and

thus, society itself, from the

morbid spell of colonialism and

of Rokeya's contributions has

been inadequately touched

upon only to indicate that

Rokeya was more than a leader

of women's awakening or more

than a Muslim woman writer.

Rokeya was a great social

thinker, and edged quite close

to Gramsci's organic intellectual

who could read the temper and

signs of the times and respond

to the actual needs of the peo-

ple with vision and need-based

programmatic interventions in-

tended to initiate positive

changes in the life of the people.

Yes, Rokeya was writing and

fighting for the causes of

women, and thus, for the

causes of the colonised and the

oppressed in general. In today's

colonialism, she is still a source

The writer teaches English at

age of imperialism and neo-

of inspiration for all freedom-

Jahangirhagar University and is

Literary Secretary of Bangla-

Here, only an aspect or two

feudalism.

Rokeya's approach to edu-

Rokeya, indeed,

Rokeya did not keep her ac-

way as a farmer was.

Now, in the era of an international linkages between women's groups all around the world, and our growing access to the writings of international feminist philosophers, we are quite proud to see that Rokeva was more than a match for many of them. Unfortunately for them, Rokeya wrote in Bengali to reach her own people, so it could not be read by the outside world. If her writings could be translated into English and other languages. other societies would have been benefitted as well. Women in Bangladesh are often seen as recipient of feminist ideas from the outside world. But it is not wholly true. We have a history of brilliant feminist writers and their struggles; we have a lot to offer

to the outside world. The most important aspect of Rokeya is that she did not limit herself to only writing. She took practical actions in mobilising the society towards change in favour of women. Her efforts to establish a school for the Muslim girls. who were deprived of education because of seclusion, was a remarkable action. Sakhawat Memorial School undoubtedly set a milestone for the education of Muslim girls. Rokeya herself and her elder sister Karimunnesa were victims of such seclusion. They learnt reading and writing Bengali and English with the help of their brothers quietly at night without the knowledge of other family members. So she knew the pain of such deprivation. It was a strategic move on her part to mobilise the Muslim community in India to

come out of seclusion. It was equally true for Muslim men who were not reading English in their opposition to the British rulers. Rokeya is recognised more for her contribution for opening up opportunities for the education of Muslim girls. But that is only a small fraction of what she has done. So on ninth December, if we express our gratifude to Rokeya for her contribution for the school only, then we will

do a great injustice to her. Rokeya spent time to get herself acquainted to the writings of John Stuart Mill, Mary Wollstonercraft and other Western writers, but at the same time her eyes were very much on the ground of her own society. She grasped the real meaning of women's emancipation in the context of her own society. Rokeya did not imitate the thinking of others, specially those of the western philosopheres. Her originality of thinking is ex-

pressed in all her writings. The methodological aspects Rokeya's struggle in her

writings, her work, and her personal life is very important for us to understand. Being a daughter from a Muslim family in the colonial environment of India, Rokeya had to be very tactical and articulate. On the one hand, she fought within her own society particularly against religion and against patriarchal values imposed by men. At the same time, she rejected false notions of Western emancipation. Her brilliant analytical insights are still useful as a guiding principles for the

women's movement. The "orientalist" western view is apt in blaming veil as the primary obstacle of Muslim women to social emancipation. Rokeya rejected this notion as ridiculous. She argued, then the unveiled Western women must be emancipated compared to veiled Muslim women, which is not true at all. Her analysis about the position of women in the society is that, it is determined by gender division of labour. Occupational division of tasks and roles based on sexual difference fixes women's roles and activities, which is prior to segregation and veil. The path to women's emancipation is to break the chain of gender division of labour and the creation of social, economic, political and cultural condition so that they can undertake any pro-

fession in the society. There is a lot to talk about Rokeya's contribution to the women's movement. We can go on and on citing from her writings. But that is not the only intention of the present day women's movement. We want to move forward and in this forward march Rokeya is still our leader. Moreover, to the society we want to show the significance of Rokeya's work for the social change as well: specially to confront the communal forces which are raising their heads in the society. We have to take renewed pledges for our actions against those who are making women more and

All these cannot be done if we observe ninth December as Rokeya's death anniversary. So we want to have the day to be celebrated as "Begum Rokeya Day".

more suppressed.

There is another practical reason, too. Rokeya was born in 1880 and died in 1932 While the exact date of her death was known, the date of her birth could not be known. Her family sources could not give enough evidence of a correct birth date. However, it does not matter much. But what matters is that we do not have a date for celebrating Rokeya's birth anniversary. We can only observe her death anniversary. For us, Rokeya never died, in fact she comes back to us again and again. She wakes all the people who are sleeping and dying. It is a day, when women synchronize their thinking in a historical context, and thereby contextualize the present situation of Bangladeshi women. We need a day which can encompass such needs. Begum Rokeya Day on the ninth of December gives us such an opportunity.

The writer is Executive Director, UBINIG, an NGO.

tique of theology, where she masters the "orientalist" view to show the primary obstacle of Muslim women to attain the social emancipation.

nothing but rules and laws made by men. Whatever you hear from the priests, may have been the opposite to what a woman priest would say. No one can definitely declare religious books as the testament sent by God. Men have declared those books as the testament of God to keep us in the dark".

common even among the feminist of her times in the western countries.

wrote numerous essays which

Given the struggle she made in her life to show the road to women's emancipation, it is necessary to take lessons from her brief, but illustrious life. We here produce a compilation of her short-length life sketch, taken from various publications, including those of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad and Narigrantha Prabartana.

Name: Ruku alias Begum

Date of birth: 9th December,

1880. (As the exact date of her

birth is unknown, the women

groups observe the death an-

niversary as the birth anniver-

Place of birth: Vill-Paira-

Father's name: Jahiruddin

bandh, Thana - Mithapukur,

Md Abu Ali Haider Saber. (He

had four wives. He was the za-

mindar of Rangpur, Dinajpur,

Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra,

Jalpaiguri districts. Fluent in

Arabic, Persian and Urdu, he

was free from superstitions.)

and Dist-Rangpur.

sary).

ucated from Saint Xaviers College of Calcutta. Marital life. She was married to Deputy Magistrate of Bha-LIFE and WORK

> galpur Syed Sakhawat Hossain, B A M R Sc. Educated in England, Hossain was 40, while Rokeya was 18. Hè was very supportive of Rokeya and helped her in her works. However, he died on May 3, 1909. Ro-

hood.

keya had two daughters, both of whom died in their early child-Education: Although the

language of the family was Urdu, she began to learn Bangla and English from her brother and sister. Involvements: She started Sakhawat Memorial School with five girl students at

awareness to establish their

president of the 'Health and Children Exhibition of Calcutta. She delivered a speech as the chairperson in the all Bengal women's education conference. Literary works: Matichuur-1st part (1905), Matichuur-2nd part (1921), Sultana's Dream (1908), Aborodhbasini (1335, Bengali calendar), Padmaraag

Died: Dec 9, 1932, at Calcutta Sakhawat School.

Rashed Mahmud Titumir

her essays called "Nurse Nelly" included in Motichuur (Vol. 2). This village itself was a prison, despite its immense sylvan verdure, and Rokeya had to find a way out, which, however, she did in the form of seeking the path to education and con-ODAY, the 9th of December, is the day for the women of Bangladesh. Women, who are still

subjected to subordination by the prevailing patriarchal nature of the society. The articles she wrote during the twenties, the task she started as a social reformer, and the ideological battle she stormed under the colonial environment deserves to be a day of the women of the whole world. Her originality in grasping of

women's position in the society is not only brilliant in style, but also contains radical analytical insights. Here is a quotation, a cri-

"The religious books are

Courage to confront theology in such a radical tone was not