



## A Rebel Par Excellence

by Zaheda Ahmad

All of us know about the feudal, aristocratic family background that Begum Rokeya came from. That family was but a microcosm of Bengali Muslim society at large — a society that was backward-looking, orthodox and consisted mostly of poor peasants, artisans and other small income groups. Education in general 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

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 higher ones. 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 taboos 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 dramatically different, to say the least.

Such a dark and depressing socio-cultural scenario formed 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 the males" wrote Rokeya, "who, in order to keep us in perpetual darkness, had pronounced the religious scriptures as divine 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 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 secret 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 cheerfully."

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 contemporaries.

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 might say.

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

# BEGUM ROKEYA

A Daily Star Tribute to

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

by Azfar Hussain

BORN in 1880 in a village called Payrabandh in the district of Rangpur, Begum Rokeya had to live with realities telling colonial and feudal. Needless to mention, the ethos of colonialism then encouraged various forms of disintegration, cultural or religious or social, as a means to domination of the coloniser over the colonised. Politics in 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 interest-based alliance and the middle-class, on the other. The role of the middle class in colonial India 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 the colonial trap.

It needs mentioning that the 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 position of the colonizer and the colonized in that women remain mostly subjugated, dominated, and deprived in a colonial society, and women, thus, can best provide the real and metaphorical dimensions of the meaning of freedom itself. To free a woman is to free a society and vice versa, and thus, for society at large, Rokeya herself raised this very significant rhetorical question in one of her essays called "Arhang" 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 wrote numerous essays which

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. Rokeya herself raised this very significant rhetorical question in one of her essays called "Arhang" 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.

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

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 Narigantha Prabartana.

Name: Ruku alias Begum Rokeya

Date of birth: 9th December, 1880. (As the exact date of her birth is unknown, the women groups observe the death anniversary as the birth anniversary).

Place of birth: Vill-Parabandh, Thana — Mithapukur, and Dist- Rangpur.

Father's name: Jahiruddin Md Abu Ali Haider Saber. (He had four wives. He was the zamindar of Rangpur, Dinajpur, Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra, Jalpaiguri districts. Fluent in Arabic, Persian and Urdu, he was free from superstitions.)

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

coloured being under the pressures of prejudices, religion, cultural norms, social dynamics, all of which led to discriminations and deprivations.

But, it should be noted 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 "Chaaashar Dukhu". 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

and rhetorics. Indeed, Rokeya took her prose to that secular, rational and persuasive height from where the evils of colonialism 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 way as a farmer was.

Rokeya did not keep her activities 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 organising activities which could have a direct bearing on the lives of women themselves. She fought for women's rights and privileges, and she was particularly interested in women's education.

Rokeya, indeed, was an intellectual of a very high stature, who could move forward to blend her vision and thoughts with actions and interventions 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 associations and collective actions was nothing but a futile exercise in an isolated abstraction.

Rokeya's approach to education was intimately connected with her attitude to the purdah system. She was no doubt opposed to the purdah, but it was more the purdah within than the purdah without which she wanted to stand against, meaning 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 feudalism.

Here, only an aspect or two 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 people with vision and need-based programmatic interventions intended 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 age of imperialism and neo-colonialism, she is still a source of inspiration for all freedom-fighters.

The writer teaches English at Jahangirnagar University and is Literary Secretary of Bangladesh Lekhak Shibir.

Bhagalpur on October 1, 1909. Later on the school was shifted to Calcutta on March 16, 1901.

In 1916, she established 'Anjuman-e-Khawatin Islam', a women organisation. Under her Secretaryship, the organisation worked to solve the problems of the women folk and to raise awareness to establish their rights.

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 'Nartitirtha', a organisation established by Dr Lutfur Rahman to rehabilitate the prostitutes. In 1920, she was elected 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: *Motichuur-1st part* (1905), *Motichuur-2nd part* (1921), *Sultana's Dream* (1908), *Aborodhbashini* (1335, Bengali calendar), *Padmarag* (before, 1910, approx), *Narr Adhikar* (the last written prose).

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

Compiled by Rashed Mahmud Titumir

Compiled by Rashed Mahmud Titumir

The methodological aspects of Rokeya's struggle in her



## An Activist and Radical Writer

by Farida Akhter

NINTH December is perhaps belatedly being 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.

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.

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 Rokeya 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 "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 profession 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 more suppressed.

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".

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.

The writer is Executive Director, UBINIG, an NGO.

The writer is Executive Director, UBINIG, an NGO.