



BEGUM ROKEYA

A Daily Star

Homage to

December 8, 1994

Tomorrow 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, December 9, 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.

BEGUM ROKEYA

A call to Arms not to Ornaments

by Zaheda Ahmad

BEGUM Rokeya, born in 1880, belonged to a society that was feudal, backward-looking and reactionary in the extreme. But the story of its misfortune does not end here. By all accounts the Bengali Muslims, high in number but low in status, was a depressed community. Their few upper class families, mostly landed, had tenaciously held on to the community's traditions of Arabic, Persian and Urdu learning. They had shared none of the high caste Hindus' passion for English language education. As a consequence these Hindus of Bengal came to acquire a commanding position in government services, the learned professions, higher education and even landholding almost by default. As for the vast bulk of lower class Muslims — far removed from their upper class co-religionists by social, economic, cultural and sadly even by linguistic barriers — they consisted of poor, illiterate peasants, artisans and other low occupational groups.

That made for an intolerable situation for the community as a whole. But because of the entrenched patriarchy with its strong gender bias reinforced by a Mullah infested and Mullah dominated social establishment, the lot of the Muslim womenfolk, irrespective of class, was even more pathetic. Poor, illiterate, ill-fed, ill-clad and often in ill-health too, our women carried on a miserable existence totally unfit for dignified human beings.

Rokeya, even with her upperclass background, was aware of the situation because, as noted earlier, women of all classes were subject to the oppression, not necessarily in the same degree, of a tyrannical society. Her strong sense of commitment and compassion, for the oppressed led her to give up the comfortable life of an upper class lady for the hazardous road of a writer, social thinker and an activist. That boundless compassion found a wrenching expression in one of her addresses to a gathering of female educational and social workers in Calcutta in 1926. "For the last 22 years," she said, "I have been shedding tears for the most wretched creatures in India... even animals here have their well-wishers, witness the many Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' here and there. When a dog is run over on the street, the Anglo-Indian press gets into a fit of lamentation. But there is absolutely no one to lament the hard lot of our women languishing in their *parda*-prisons."

But bewailing alone was a rare indulgence on her part. Being an activist, the improvement of the lot of these 'most wretched creatures' became the all-consuming passion in her life. No doubt a visionary she was, a vision of which we witness a tantalising presentation in her extra-ordinary literary piece 'Sultana's Dream'. But she was an activist too — daring, defiant and devoted — with a programme of action designed to render as much help as possible to her fellow sisters in society. And, to be sure, her literary and social activities were but parts of a grand design.

There are some who would like to argue the point as to which Rokeya — the writer or the activist — was greater, a puerile argument that missed the point altogether. For by now most of us know that all her feverish activities — literary, social or educational — were geared to achieve one single goal — that of changing the society by raising the subordinate status of women. Her literary endeavour she wanted to be more a vehicle for desirable social change rather than anything else intended solely to satisfy the aesthetic tests of the literary pundits. That is why she became, by conscious choice, first and foremost an essayist concentrating her literary skill, persuasive powers, wit and satire on that field.

At this point it is pertinent to ask what were her ideals of womanhood that she wanted Indian women to cherish and develop among themselves? What did she consider to be the causes of their backwardness? And finally, what were the remedies that she thought necessary for their upliftment? First of all she wanted a woman to be a full human being — independent, educated, brave and dignified — a complete person in her own right and not as an appendage to or an extension of her male protectors or benefactors in society. Because of her perennial dependence on her male relations of one type or another, Rokeya had seen an Indian woman always looking up to her male benefactors for sustenance and protection. She realised that centuries of a culture of dependency had stunted the development of many desirable human qualities among our enslaved women. As a result they cannot think or act rationally, an example of which she presented in her characteristic incisive fashion.

It is simply amazing how clear-sighted she was about what she so correctly and courageously called "these badges of slavery" fashioned and promoted by a male dominated society. In an article of that name, written in 1905, Rokeya wrote, "Truly, jewelry are nothing but badges of slavery. Prisoners in jails are required to put on ankle chains made of steel. We do the same with gold ones called 'moll', but do it gladly. Again, their handcuffs are made of steel; our handcuffs — of gold or silver — we call bangles. Our 'chiks' look exactly like the 'dog-collars' which the owners of those animals put around their necks. We adorn our necks with gold chains instead of iron chains that horses and elephants are kept tied with. The masters of bulls put on nose-rings on their animals. Likewise our master-husbands have made us put on rings or 'phuls' on our noses too.... Now, dear sisters, do you realise that those expensive pieces of ornaments are nothing but emblems of our slavery? The fun of it is that those can make the most display of these badges on their persons are the most influential ones in society." Real feminist stuff indeed.

These convictions — deeply held and firmly expressed — put Rokeya among the most advanced and radical feminists of today. Like these radicals,

Rokeya believed that even if these useless items are prized not for their economic but for their decorative value, such considerations are equally derogatory to a woman's self-respect and dignity. A woman's real worth lies, in her views, not in her looks, clothes, jewels or such other external factors but in her qualities of head and heart. This is a concept of womanhood which consciously, contemptuously rejects an obsessive concern with look, cosmetics, fashion parade, beauty contest, the Miss World and Miss Universe and all the rest of it that go by the name of so-called femininity.

Judged by these standards, Rokeya stands head and shoulders above the fashion-conscious, gold-crazy millions of her "dear sisters" a few of whom reportedly go to the absurd length of daily washing their faces with green coconut water for the so-called cosmetic reason. Even more shameful is the spectacle of seeing their sycophant male adulators publicly extolling these exercises as if therein lies a political woman's sole claim to leadership. How many of those in the women's movement — people who in season and out of season wax eloquent in singing the praise of Rokeya — care to remember and respect such admonitions of Rokeya today?

She was equally clear-sighted in identifying the real enemies of female emancipation — a strong patriarchy and its social allies which she knew to be responsible for holding back the progress of women in society. With astounding courage she declared, "It is the males, who, in order to keep us in perpetual darkness, had pronounced the religious scripture as divine revelations.... But these scriptures are in reality man-made.... Now let us not put up with unjustified male dominance." These were incendiary materials too hot to be left unchallenged by the social establishment. Hence we find her toning down the rhetoric even going to the extent of withdrawing these "offensive" paragraphs from the next edition of her book. But again and again, she came back to the theme in one form or another.

That same spirit of defiance and determination characterised her other activities too. She knew very well that with- out proper education the lot of our women would never improve. "As our bedrooms do not let in the sunlight so do our closed minds. They never come into contact with the light of knowledge.... To achieve equality with men we shall do whatever is necessary. If an independent livelihood is necessary for that, we shall have to achieve that. What do we lack? Hands, feet, intelligence? The labour that we put in looking after the household of our husbands can't we employ that in developing an independent vocation for us?"

More and better education for all women was one of her battle cries for the struggle for female emancipation. Her place in history lies in the fact she practised wholeheartedly what she preached. The role of an idle preacher was not cut out for her. She was too committed and too courageous for that.



The Magnanimous Lady

by Prof Roushanara Hoque

TOMORROW is the 61st death anniversary of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein. She was a great humanist philosopher, a pioneer of Muslim education and a forerunner of Muslim women's emancipation. She was an eminent litterateur, and a dedicated social reformer.

Begum Rokeya, in the outset of her book 'Padmarag', wrote that God has created all human beings as equal, but it is the difference in belief that had divided them into Hindus, Muslims, Bouddhas and Christians, again subdivided into many castes, creeds and communities creating irrationality and frictions among them. She claimed equal rights both for sons and daughters of the same family. In 'Motichoor' she had put forward a strong argument that 'as both mother and God have given equal time in the mother's womb and equal amount of breastmilk to both sons and daughters, they should be thought to be equal.' It is only the prejudice that had degraded their status in the society. Rokeya protested against this and claimed that women are not only equal-half but better-half of the society. They are also the mother of creation.

In her 'Badges of Slavery', Begum Rokeya wrote that in the evolution of the civilisation, we read that to dominate others of the same clan the most intelligent ones declared themselves as the incarnations of God. These self-declared saints issued self-made strictures and compelled the society to obey them blindly as holy and God-sent messages. These rules are partial and stricter for the women, such as, 'The heaven of wives lie under the feet of their husbands,' and that, 'God has first made men and then for the pleasure of them He has created women, hence they are always to remain subservient to them having no independent identity of their own.' Rokeya rightly said that since all these saints are males they had made rules for their interests only. Had there been any female saints, they would

have made different rules.

During the latter part of the 19th century the Muslim women were suffering under the bondage of slavery. Though Islam had given them some basic rights, the orthodox people and the imitators of Persian culture had compelled them to remain inside the seclusion of Harem, only to be used as instruments of pleasures and enjoyments, having neither any right nor opinion. In her 'Aborodh-Bashini' she depicted the miserable condition of women inside seclusion in a sad but satirical way and how she had to live in seclusion even at the age of five. They were regarded as sex-mates and without having right of property and choice. She also criticised the women for their love of ornaments thereby losing their self-esteem and prestige. In her 'Badges of Slavery' she said, 'Ornaments are nothing but the badges of slavery, and the irony of fate is, the more badges of slavery a woman wears the more aristocrat she is considered to be.' So she proposed that parents should educate their girls with the money they spend on dowry and ornaments. They, according to her, must achieve economic freedom at the outset to acquire equal position in the society.

Rokeya perhaps was inspired by the words of Karl Marx: 'The level of civilisation can only be judged by the position of women within it.' Her argument was, 'As a cart with two unequal wheels cannot proceed further and only move around its centre, similarly a society with two unequal partners cannot progress.' So she dedicated her whole life to the cause of female education. She said that God had gifted us with intellectual faculties. The purpose of education is to develop that further. It is our duty to raise their status by imparting proper education to them so that they can discharge their duties as ideal mothers, wives and citizens as well. With this end in view

Reading Rokeya before World Women's Conference in Beijing

by Farhad Mazhar

God gives, man robs. There is a saying "Man proposes, God disposes," but my bitter experience shows that God gives, Man Robs. That is, Allah has made no distinction in the general life of male and female — both are equally bound to seek food, drink, sleep, etc. necessary for animal life.....

THIS is one of the unpublished English writings of Rokeya. Rokeya has written mostly in Bengali. She covered a wide range of issues related to women and women's emancipation.

But since she did not write in English, her messages did not reach the minds of development planners at the international level. She is only known to readers of fiction because the only published English piece she has written is 'Sultana's Dream'. Sadly, among the English speaking circle Rokeya is projected only as a dreamer of a women's world where the roles of men and women are interchanged. She published it because her husband, Sakhawat Hussain, loved it. He was highly impressed with 'Sultana's Dream' and termed it, "a terrible revenge". It was a kind of feminist vision in early part of this century when even the feminists in the west were not courageous enough to express such vision. This is not her best, rather marginal compared to the strategic texts she produced in her confrontation with patriarchy in a colonial context.

On the other hand, among the Bengali speaking readers, the most popular Rokeya's writings is that of Aborodh-bashini, the secluded ones, where Rokeya has sketched out the lives of Muslim women in seclusion with graphic humility. Her punning in sarcasms hits the senses of the readers. While this was one of her strategic writings, the picture sketched out in 'Aborodh-bashini' are taken as the authentic representation of Muslim women during Rokeya's time, which is absolutely wrong. She belonged to a decadent feudal class, a des-

perate breed fast disappearing in the later part of colonial era, the text reflects that reality only. The Bengali readers suffer from severe limitation because of their own ignorance about the situation of women, specially those of muslim women in this sub-continent. Until today, the history of both Islam and muslims of Bengal is poorly studied. The secluded ones has been translated in English, again to give an authentic picture of women in muslim societies to the outside world.

If we remember the historical contexts Rokeya appears more brilliant than one generally assumes. Taka for example, her excellent critique of purdah. She ridiculed the stupidity of the western and orientalist preoccupation that claims "purdah" to be the main cause of women's backwardness. She distinguished "purdah" from the gender division of labour.

The patriarchal oppression is grounded on the sexual division of social production that allocates women a particular role only. To break that she says, "we must be lady judges and lady clerks". Imagine the colonial aspirations, these are the highest status the colonized could aspire at that time. These are roles assigned for men only. To her "purdah" reflects the dichotomy of the private and the public, which she claims is present in every society. There is purdah in every society.

Compare now Rokeya with the western and orientalist literatures that place purdah at the root of backwardness. One can pick up any development literature and will find purdah the sole cause of patriarchal oppression for muslim women.

Rokeya, in addition made severe criticisms of the lifestyles of upper class western influenced women. While Rokeya was most modern in her outlook, her strategic appearance in the society was conservative. In the only picture available she almost looked like as if veiled. It is needless to mention that while she is critical of the western notion of purdah

she did not believe in the culture of aborodh-bashini, the culture of seclusion.

Till few years before, Rokeya was only known for her contribution to education of muslim girls in the early part of this century. In the school curriculum and in other social discussions, Rokeya is projected as a social reformer specially to contribute to women's education. Bangla academy has published a collected works of Begum Rokeya in 1973 called Rokeya Rochonaboli — a 611 page book with essays, stories, poems and speeches of Rokeya. This book, published 40 years after her death in 1932, at least documents the wide range of Rokeya's talent in grasping the social and political issues of her time. With the satirical elements in her writings, Rokeya could communicate to the broader society the message against oppression of women. One must not forget that she was gifted with an excellent style of bengali prose.

Bangladeshi women's struggle has a deep rooted history expressed in Rokeya's writings. Yet in the era of global women's movement, Bangladeshi women are given the feeling that they have to depend on imported theories on women's emancipation. A re-reading of Rokeya is therefore necessary before Beijing Conference. This is mainly to oppose western "consultants" view to project Bangladeshi women only in the context of oppression, and not in their struggles. It is unfortunate that English speaking world can not even imagine Rokeya's strong critique of subordination of women in the name of religion. All the religious texts were produced, by men, she said; if women would have written the religious books they would be different. This is Rokeya. These writings are in Bengali, therefore, are limited only among the Bengali speaking people. The western people believe by heart that countries like Bangladesh are basically fundamentalist and women have never opposed religious oppression. Therefore the women in Bangladesh need support from the western world to save themselves from their own people. To them, Rokeya's writings should have been made accessible. The millions of dollars which were spent during early seventies on "consultants" to describe the conditions of women and to find out what to do for them, part of them could have been used for the translation of Rokeya's writings to get a correct perspective for planning on women's development.

Rokeya's critique of the social welfare attitude to women is not known to the development consultants, who continue to see women only in poverty and destitution. Rokeya has always asked women to rise up economically, socially and culturally. Rokeya talked about revitalisation of the local industries as well as making women capable to do all kinds of works, to transcend the sexual division of labour. Rokeya was not willing to change women's lot by treating them as 'objects of development'. More importantly, the imported theories on women's development are nothing but making women the means to achieve other goals.

In recent years the most attractive issues are women's empowerment and education. The development agencies have found all the answers for women in educating them upto a certain level so that she reduces her own fertility. Rokeya wanted women to be educated for raising her self-esteem and to contribute to the society. For her, men and women are parts of the same society. If men are educated and women lag behind then the society cannot move forward. But this is not the same when World Bank and UNFPA and other bilateral and multilateral agencies are trying to give women enough literacy to make them capable of becoming cheap industrial labour and to reduce population growth rate.

Women are to be the goal of development, not the means to achieve other ends. This must be learnt by us from Rokeya before the Beijing Conference.

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by Prof Roushanara Hoque

Rokeya had established Sakhawat Memorial High School in 1909 with the money left by her husband, with only five girls and two benches to sit on. In 1915 the number rose to 85 and its fame spread far and wide. In 1917 the number rose to 85 and its fame spread far and wide. In 1917, wife of the then Governor General, Lord Chelmsford came to the school for inspection. She was so overwhelmed with the ideal method of teaching and system of management that she raised it to the status of a Girls' High English School.

The sad demise of this magnanimous lady is a tremendous loss to the Muslim society and to the nation at large. On 8th December, 1932 at 11 pm when she was writing an article entitled 'Narir Adhikar' (The Rights of Women) she had a sudden heart-attack. She breathed her last at 5 am on 9th Dec., 1932 at the age of 52 only. Within an hour her residence within the school became filled with bereaved people of all sections of the society. Her namaj-e-janaja was very largely attended.

The contribution of Begum Rokeya did not end with her.



Rokeya's eldest brother



Rokeya's elder brother