



The visionary educationist

ANWARA BAHAR CHOUDHURY BREAKING TRADITIONAL SHACKLES

The Daily Star looks at the life of a great Bengali Muslim educationist who dedicated her whole life for the education and empowerment of women.

NAZMIN TITHI

"Sometimes, I think of this great woman - seemingly out of time, out of rhyme, but an inexhaustible source of energy, music, and enlightenment. (...) You couldn't find such a lively soul, with a heart full of love and affection for her students in the whole of Pakistan."

Shaheed Janani Jahanara Imam's words perhaps best describe Anwara Bahar Choudhury, one of the few women of this region to call for the awakening of Bengali women in the last century. She encouraged women to take the fate of their lives in their own hands and be the change that they wanted to see in society. Through her own struggles, Anwara Bahar Choudhury paved the way for Muslim women to understand the value and importance of education, which could subsequently lead to their emancipation. One can get a glimpse of the challenges she must have faced in the words of her son, Iqbal Bahar Choudhury, who produced a documentary on his illustrious mother, "As I look back at the long journey of my mother, I feel overwhelmed. I wonder how despite being from a traditional family in the early 20th century, was she able to lead the educational and social movement for the liberation of women."

Following Rokeya's footsteps
The educationist, writer and cultural activist was born on February 13, 1919 in British India. Her father Abdul Huq Khan was a public servant. Her mother Kaniz Fatema Khanum passed away when she was only three years old, and she was raised by her maternal aunt, Mamlukun Fatema Khanum. When her aunt joined the Sakhawat Memorial School as a teacher on the request of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, who pioneered women's education in Bengal in the early 20th century, she enrolled Anwara Bahar Choudhury in the same school. She was the first student of the Bangla section. During her stay there, Rokeya's ideals and vision influenced Anwara to the extent that she would eventually succeed in fulfilling the dreams of her mentor.

She was one of the very few Bangali Muslim women to receive higher education during her time. After completing Matriculation in first division with a

She served as the secretary of Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam or the All Bengal Muslim Women's Association, established by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, from 1938 till 1947.

An educator with a vision
After the partition in 1947, she settled in East Pakistan and joined the Mymensingh Vidyamoyee School as its headmistress. There were not many students in the school at that time but Anwara Bahar Choudhury's determined efforts brought about a big change in the social attitude towards girls' education. Professor Nasreen Shams, daughter of Anwara Bahar Choudhury, recalls in the documentary, "When my mother joined Vidyamoyee School, there was a limited number of students and teachers. My mother used to visit families of Muslim girls and urged their parents to get their daughters enrolled in the school. Jahanara Imam, Lulu Rahman and Nazma Khan were amongst the newly recruited teachers."

Later, she was transferred to Kamrunnesa Girls School in Dhaka in 1949, which was the best school in Dhaka at that time. She also served as the headmistress of the Bangla Bazar Government Girls School.

For the students of Anwara Bahar Choudhury, learning became such a pleasurable experience that they did not want to go home from school. "She did not fit the dreaded stereotype of a teacher. She was full of affection for her students," reminisces Professor Asma Abbasi, an ex-student of Kamrunnesa School, in the documentary.

Anwara also worked as a Special Officer of Women's Education at the Education Department in 1955, where she stressed the importance of educating rural girls: "There is an urgent need to expand primary education all over the country. We have to remember that ours is a poor nation and its economy is primarily agricultural - the educated community resides in cities. In contrast, a huge proportion of our girls live in villages, for whom there are hardly any school facilities. Yet, the future of the nation lies in their hands."

All her life, Anwara Bahar Choudhury fought to free Muslim women from the superstitions of a conservative society. She wanted them to be educated, capable of free

Of strong principles and ideals
Anwara Bahar Choudhury believed in humility. A woman of rare qualities, she never boasted of her achievements or status. Instead of taking advantage of her husband's position (who was a cabinet minister of then East Pakistan), she lived a very simple life in Mymensingh with her five children.

"She was very reserved. No one could imagine that she was the wife of a cabinet minister. She was known on her own account

Tagore's influence on Anwara
Her life and writings were deeply influenced by Rabindranath Tagore. She believed in and followed Tagore's philosophy on education. After the death of Tagore, she had written: "Bengali poetry, literature, song, culture, everything successively sparked with the glimmer of Rabi. The language we speak today is also Tagore's. Rabindranath is at the base of almost all the smiles and songs, music and rhyme of our life."

Besides, Anwara Bahar Choudhury wrote several books, which include biographies, school textbooks and children's books. She was also a poet; her collection of poems, *Amar Chetonar Rang* was published just before she passed away.

Establishing Habibullah Bahar College
In 1971, when the War of Liberation broke, Anwara Bahar Choudhury decided not to work under the military government and opted for an early retirement. She had



Anwara Bahar Choudhury with family



Books authored by Anwara Bahar Choudhury

scholarship in 1934, she enrolled in Bethune College of Kolkata, where she completed HSC in first division, after which she obtained a BA degree, once again in first division, in 1938. In 1941, she passed BT, a graduation programme in teaching, from Scottish Church College, after which she joined Sakhawat Memorial Girls School as an Assistant Teacher. She later went on to become the school's headmistress. She also taught Bangla at the Lady Brabourne college of Kolkata for some time.

thinking, and contribute to national development. She realised that in order to create such citizens, it was extremely important to involve young girls in all types of extracurricular activities along with regular education. Students of her school would participate in sports, physical exercises and cultural activities such as singing, dancing, drawing, reading, staging dramas, etc. In fact, on her initiative, a music school called Surbitan was established in Kamrunnesa School.

as Anwara Bahar Choudhury," Nurjahan Begum, Editor of *Weekly Begum* and ex-student of Sakhawat Memorial School says in the documentary.

Professor Emeritus Dr Anisuzzaman says in the documentary, "The minister's wife was stationed far away with her children in Mymensingh, a small district town. He could have easily solved the problem, simply by securing a transfer to Dhaka. Surprisingly, Anwara Bahar did not make any effort to do so, neither did Habibullah Bahar."

Anwara Bahar Choudhury and Bhaktimoy Dasgupta made enormous contributions in promoting Tagore's music in East Pakistan. To celebrate the birth centenary of Tagore, they organised several cultural programmes, including dance dramas like *Chandalika*, *Shyama*, etc.

She was similarly influenced by rebel poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, who was closely associated with her family.

Anwara Bahar Choudhury felt the need to establish a strong institution to develop and extend the tradition of Bangla music and dance. She played a pioneering role in establishing the Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA), named after famous dancer Bulbul Chowdhury, of which she was the treasurer. "Anwara Bahar Choudhury felt the need to train girls in cultural activities. It is because of this awareness on her part that BAFA was established," observes Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Chowdhury, in the documentary.

After her marriage with Habibullah Bahar Choudhury in 1938, she became even more engaged with the progressive social movement of her time. She was intensely influenced by the company of Begum Shamsunnahar Mahmud, Habibullah Bahar Choudhury's enlightened sister. They jointly wrote a textbook for children titled *Shabuj Path* (1939). *Kishore Sathi* was another joint venture by them. Children liked these books for their simple and attractive language and style.

established Habibullah Bahar College, named after her husband, in 1969. After her retirement, she devoted her time to building the institution dedicated to higher education. She spent all her personal savings in order to buy the furniture and other necessary items for the college.

"She was an extraordinary human being. She helped people in need in countless ways. Many have received shelter from her, and many built their lives with her direct support and help. She would do philanthropic work often in secret, so that there was no publicity involved," reminisces Prof Anisuzzaman, in the documentary.

After fighting a long battle with cancer, she breathed her last on October 27, 1987. Professor Kazi Madina, who wrote the biography of Anwara Bahar Choudhury, is fascinated by the strength of her character. "Anwara Bahar Choudhury was secular in her thoughts and full of compassion. She was a capable mother at home. She had engaged herself in creative literary works. She genuinely practiced plain living and high thinking, leading a simple and austere life. She was committed to building an enlightened society, dedicating her intelligence, energy and resources for societal development."

The writer is a journalist at *The Daily Star*. (Source: *Anwara Bahar Choudhury*, a documentary produced by Iqbal Bahar Choudhury and directed by Samir Kushari.)