

Dreaming with Rokeya



FIRDOUS AZIM

SULTANA'S Dream was first published in 1905 in the *Ladies Home Journal* in what was then the Presidency city of Madras. Penned by an unknown

writer then residing in Bhagalpur, this short story has travelled the globe as the imagining of a utopian world run by women on feminist principles. The history of its publication shows a pan-Indian or South Asian sensibility at work, as the young Bengali writer writing in Bihar is published in Madras. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's entry into the literary firmament was indeed dramatic.

It is intellectual power that sets human beings apart, and women have been denied the opportunity to explore this aspect, as Rokeya has reminded us in essay after essay, and in all her writings. Sultana's Dream is a wonderful exposé of what women can do with their "brainpower."

What are the main elements of the space that Rokeya, through Sultana, is dreaming of? Of course the most well-known is freeing the women from the *zenana* and locking the men in the *murdana*, thus reversing gender norms and overturning gender roles. As Sultana is guided through the kingdom of Ladyland by Sister Sara, she notices the absence of men on the streets. Sister Sara at the same time remarks on Sultana's "manly" mannerisms. In Ladyland, "manly" connotes shy and retiring, as women can boldly walk about at all hours of the day and night, safe from horrible leers or danger. This is a dream indeed as we still cannot walk the streets of our cities without fear, both of attack and of social castigation.

How did this come about? "Through the superiority of intellectual powers and scientific innovation," says Sister Sara. The war with the neighbouring kingdom was won not through the superior armed power of the existing armed force, but by unmanned solar-powered missiles. This is shown as a force for good. But we, as twenty-first century readers, have to pause a bit at this point, as this kind of warfare has become a reality in our times. Science

and technology at the beginning of the twentieth century had held up immense possibilities for the social good, but a century and more later, we are faced with its dystopian potentials.

But winning this war has led to the establishment of the fabulous Ladyland. Here, the state is run on humanitarian principles: policing and penal systems are unknown, as there is hardly any crime or incidents of violence. The harshest punishment is banishment from the kingdom; most violators of the system are forgiven, and it is only repetition of violations that leads to banishment. Religion is based on universal love and the communal differences of the time find no expression in this ideal land.

There are two universities in the land, and taking a page out of Swift's *Laputa* perhaps (but completely overturning its satirical intentions), *Sultana's Dream* evinces great faith in scientific innovation. Thus, we are given pictures of clean kitchens, where of course the men are stirring the pots. These hearths are fired by solar power, so the soot-covered kitchens in which women chopped and baked all day, are replaced with clean spaces where women's entry appears to be optional. Agriculture has been revolutionised by harnessing this solar power as well as by harvesting rainwater. Rokeya has really let her imagination soar to ride on air balloons and control the weather. And women, being given educational opportunities, are easily able to explore and realise their potentials. Don't women have smaller brains than men? Size does not matter, as there are many creatures, such as elephants, who have larger brains than human beings. And what about physical strength? On that count, lions and tigers would rule the earth. It is intellectual power that sets human beings apart, and women have been denied the opportunity to explore this aspect, as Rokeya has reminded us in essay after essay, and in all her writings. *Sultana's Dream* is a wonderful exposé of what women can do with their "brainpower."

But are "feminine virtues" completely



Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (December 9, 1880 - December 9, 1932)

denied in Ladyland? Not at all, as a perfect work-life balance is achieved here. Lady-like "accomplishments", such as embroidery, fit into this world as leisure activities or even artistic expressions. Work is so organised that there is time left over for domestic involvements. Vegetables and flowers are cultivated as domestic chores are transformed into pleasurable and relaxing tasks.

Sultana is bemused as she wanders through the well-laid-out streets, safe and gaining in confidence. But at the end, she is jolted into reality as she wakes up with a start to realise it's only a dream. But is Sultana's dream and Rokeya's "sweet revenge" just that—a dream and a wish fulfilment? This early vision of a perfect world for women—it is one of Rokeya's earliest writings—has echoed through for over a century. It has acquired a historic position as the first feminist utopia, it speaks to women across time and geography, and for us in Bangladesh, Rokeya's dream gives us a full vision of the world we are

aspiring to. (Yes, I agree that locking up the men may be an extreme measure, but curbing the violence that women are subjected to, from leery looks to rape, requires some kind of drastic solution). First written in English, and later translated to Bangla by the author herself, the story has been able to travel the world, and has acquired a place in world literature, at least in the annals of transnational feminism.

Rokeya's vision most crucially has continued to inspire the women's movement in Bangladesh. We are indeed fortunate in having such a wonderful example to follow, as Rokeya traversed over the fields of writing, education and organising in her times. Her vision was expressed playfully and with a light touch in *Sultana's Dream*, but her total body of writing and life's work were devoted to the advancement and liberation of women. In this task, she recognised no barriers, cultural or national, in reaching out to women of all communities in her city, including Christian nuns and

Brahma educators, read widely, drawing examples from the lives of women in Turkey or Bombay, looking at the causes of women's subordination in culture and religion, and speaking out when she needed to. Her writing spans essays and fiction. *Padmarag*, for example, builds on the themes from *Sultana's Dream* to construct a woman's space, throwing in a lot of women from diverse communities together. Sakhawat Memorial School, which Rokeya established in Kolkata, educated the first generation of Bengali Muslim women. She was not constrained in defining herself, either as Muslim or Bengali or Indian, but what was absolutely central to her, was her mission for the advancement of women. Transforming dreams into reality was her mission in life. She called on all women—*bhaginigon*—to join her in this effort.

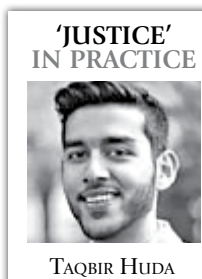
The contemporary women's movement in Bangladesh still turns to Rokeya, responding to her call in various ways, be it in its stance on secularism, or in its call for the safety and security of women in homes and public spaces.

Dreams and visions are necessary for the path to women's advancement and liberation. Today, the anniversary of her birth and death, will be marked as usual by memorial lectures and functions. *Naripokkho* has taken a leaf out of Rokeya's book this year to mount an exhibition comprised of paintings by 50 women. These paintings have been chosen through a call for submissions, and will be on display at Drik Gallery from December 9 to 16. Entitled *Amader Shopno*, this exhibition recognises the importance of dreaming, of creating visions that can be transformed into achievable goals, or dreams as expressions of our realities, where the conditions of our lives take on new and meaningful dimensions. Rokeya had called for the unlocking of women's creativity, and we, in our humble way, are trying follow in her footsteps.

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16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

We need a state compensation fund for victims of violent crime



TAQBIR HUDA

'JUSTICE' IN PRACTICE

WHenever a violent crime like gang rape or custodial torture takes place, we are quick to demand justice for it. However, what exactly do we mean by justice? More often than not, our demands for and perception of justice only extend to ensuring

punishment of the perpetrator of the crime. While that is certainly an essential component of securing justice, it is not and should not be the only aspect we focus on. The modern study of victimology stresses that focusing on the victim and addressing the harms and costs they face as a result of the crime committed against them should be an essential component of justice, yet it is something we seldom acknowledge.

violence, the possibility of receiving compensation was made dependent on the possibility of securing a criminal conviction of the perpetrator. For instance, the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000, the Acid Control Act 2002, the Prevention of Torture and Custodial Death Act 2013 and the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017, etc. all introduced provisions relating to compensating the victim of the offence. However, under these provisions, a court is given the discretion or duty to convert a sentence of fine (which goes to the state treasury) into an award of compensation (which would go to the victim). These provisions only served the purpose of reiteration as criminal courts already had the power to convert fines into awards of compensation under section 545(b) of the Code of Criminal Procedure 1898.

Making the possibility of receiving compensation dependent on the possibility of securing a criminal conviction of the

compensation for custodial torture, and Tk two lakh for custodial death. Additionally, according to a 2020 study by BLAST, the average amount of fine imposed by the Court in rape cases was around Tk 28,000.

Thirdly, if award of compensation from the order of fine is subject to judicial discretion, as it is under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000, this further reduces the victim's chances of receiving compensation. For instance, the 2020 study by BLAST also found that although the Court imposed fines on convicted rapists in 100 percent of the cases (since fine is mandatory for rape), the judge converted the fine into compensation and awarded it to the victim/survivor in less than seven percent of the cases.

Fourthly, securing a criminal conviction may take years, if not decades, while victims of violent crime require monetary relief immediately due to the costs associated with the crime.

Therefore, it is clear that for victims of violent crime to receive compensation, an alternative is needed. In 2007, the Law Commission noted the inadequacy of the existing laws to provide redress to victims of violent crime and proposed a draft law named Crime Victims Compensation Act to fill this void. Due to the concerns and challenges outlined above, compensation schemes for victims of violent crime have been introduced in many countries across the world.

The draft law primarily obliges the state to create a Crime Victims Compensation Fund in each district, from which victims of a closed list of violent offences (including rape) can apply for compensation as a matter of right. This closed list of offences includes: murder, culpable homicide not amounting to murder, causing death by rash or negligent driving or riding on a public road, attempt to murder, voluntarily causing grievous hurt, causing death or grievous hurt by means of corrosive substance, kidnapping, abduction, rape, extortion, robbery, dacoity, and offences under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000.

The fund is to be managed by a Victim Services Committee (VSC), which would have to be established in the office of the District and Sessions Judge in every district and supervised by the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs. Every application for compensation is to be heard by the Committee, which will decide not only whether to grant compensation, but also the amount and the mode in which it is to be paid (i.e. lump sum or periodic payments).

In determining the amount of compensation, the Victim Services Committee must take into account a number of factors. These include expenses actually and reasonably incurred as a result of the personal injury or death of the victim, by the victim or his dependents; loss of earning power as a result of the victim's total or partial incapacity; economic loss to the deceased victim's dependents; lost wages or loss of support; medical, funeral and burial costs; the need for financial aid; and any other relevant matters. Most importantly,

the award of compensation is to be made independently of apprehension, prosecution or conviction of the alleged perpetrator. The draft law also clarifies that the award of compensation is not to be seen as a price of compromise between the parties, as it often is in our country, even in the case of non-compoundable offences.

The financing of the fund remains somewhat vague, as the draft law lays down government contributions to the fund as one of only two mandatory sources of financing, but does not specify which branch of government would have to budget for this. The other mandatory source is the money recovered from all fines, amount of forfeited bail bonds, and

penalties that can be realised from those convicted of the list of violent offences covered by the Act. Optional sources of funding include: voluntary contributions, donations or grants from any individual or organisation, and any other source.

As we celebrate our miraculous economic growth and transition into a middle income country, it is essential that we reinvest some of the country's wealth in activating the Crime Victims Compensation Fund proposed by the Law Commission back in 2007, so victims of violent crimes are able to get the monetary relief they deserve as a matter of right.

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PHOTO: REUTERS

Victims of violent crime should be adequately redressed for the harms suffered, as part of the justice response, such as by being granted compensation or reparation. Victims of violent crime, such as rape, torture and murder, are likely to face an array of diverse harms that punishment of the perpetrator alone does nothing to address. These harms may be physical (e.g. bruises and wounds) and mental (depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety). Seeking professional treatment for these injuries may cause the victim to incur hefty medical expenses, especially in the case of mental health services, which remain limited and costly. Severe injuries resulting from the crime may lead to the victim losing employment, causing a loss of earnings and inability to care for dependents.

Even where our laws have sought to introduce compensation for victims of

perpetrator, and linking it with the fines imposed on the perpetrator, is limiting for three main reasons.

Firstly, securing a conviction in a criminal court itself remains a daunting and improbable task. For instance, a 2015 study by BRAC University found that the conviction rates in the cases disposed by the Women and Children Repression Prevention tribunals in three districts was less than one percent.

Secondly, even if the victim manages to secure a conviction, the amount of compensation is likely to be inadequate since it depends on the amount of fine—which is typically nominal and limited. For instance, the maximum amount of fine (and therefore compensation) under the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 is Tk one lakh, while the Prevention of Torture and Custodial Death Act 2013 prescribes only Tk 25,000 as

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e-Tender Notice: 18/2021-22

e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP System (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the Procurement of following Tender ID & Schemes.

Sl. No.	Package No, Name of Scheme & Tender ID No.	Tender method	Last date & time of selling document	Last date & time of submission document
1	SupRB/Jas/Replace/21-22/W-46 Construction of 30.00m long PSC Girder Bridge on Jhikargacha-Kayemkhola GC via Sreerampur Road at Chainage: 7100m under Replacement category Road ID-241232011 under Jhikargacha Upazila, District: Jashore. (TID No. 617073)	OTM	02-Jan-2022 14:00	03-Jan-2022 15:00
2	SupRB/Jas/Replace/21-22/W-60 Construction of 36.05m long RCC Girder Bridge on Monirampur GC-Bakra GC via Rajgonj GC Road at Chainage: 70m under Replacement category Road ID-241612001 under Monirampur Upzila, District: Jashore: (TID No. 633613)	OTM	02-Jan-2022 14:00	03-Jan-2022 15:00
3	KDRIDP/Jess/W-208-2021-22 Improvement of Noapara North Bengal (Bengal Textile)- Gobindapur Thrimohony via Dhopara Primary School Road Ch. 3600-5960m by BC (Road ID 241044004) under Abhoynagar Upazila District Jashore. (TID No. 634497) (3rd Call)	OSTETM	26-Dec-2021 14:00	27-Dec-2021 15:00

This is an online tender, where only e-Tender will be accepted in the National e-GP System and no offline/hard copies will be accepted. To submit e-Tender, registration in the National e-GP Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) is required.

The fees for downloading the e-Tender documents from the National e-GP System Portal have to be deposited online through any registered banks branches. Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP System Portal and also from E-mail: xen.jashore@lged.gov.bd or Call to 0421-68951. For any queries interested tendered are requested to communicate with the undersigned during office hours.

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