

The New Age, Dhaka

Wednesday 9 December 2014

<http://newagebd.net/74741/journey-through-the-world-of-rokeya/#sthash.Xt2nhKYz.dpbs>

Journey through the world of Rokeya

December 9, 2014 12:02 am 0 comments

by **Md Mahmudul Hasan**



My earliest exposure to the work of the most prominent Bengali Muslim woman writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) occurred during my elementary education years when I read her essay ‘Eid Sammilon’ (Eid Gathering). It celebrates the congregational prayer, social rendezvous and get-together of Muslims during the festive season of Eid. She states: ‘On Eid-day, the young and the old, and the rich and the poor all gather together in masjid! What a wonderful scene! The act of looking at this scene has the potential to purify eyes!’ She lays great emphasis on the unity not only within the Muslim community but also among various religious groups of the region. She stresses the need for including non-Muslim neighbours while rejoicing on such religio-cultural occasions so that such happiness can extend beyond religious boundaries and thus can facilitate greater unity among people.

The message contained in ‘Eid Sammilon’ is quite striking given the fact that the relationship between the two major religious groups – Hindus and Muslims – of the South Asian subcontinent during Rokeya’s time was marked by mistrust, animosity and political rivalry. Moreover, Rokeya lived through the communal tensions between these two religious communities and witnessed prejudicial attitudes and behaviours. As in ‘Bengal Muslims on the way to decline’ (1931) she quotes a contemporary verse popular among the Hindus which denigrates Muslims: ‘The tonsured Muslims,— / They have neither wealth nor honour.’ She also quotes a verse popular among the contemporary Christian community that caricatures Muslims: ‘Muslims are unfaithful / So beat them up with shoes and pull their ears.’

Despite discerning such negative propagandas against Muslims, Rokeya was not swayed by any sense of resentment when emphasising the need for communal harmony and for including non-Muslim neighbours in the joy of celebrating Eid festivals. What is more, in her creative pieces we notice a conglomeration of characters from various religious and cultural backgrounds.

There was a long gap between my first encounter with Rokeya's work and the second one. This time it happened during my university years with the intervention of a reputed scholar who is quite passionate about establishing women's equitable rights enshrined in, and guaranteed by, Islam but denied by social mythologies and cultural conventions. I was amazed that an Islamic personality encouraged me to read Rokeya, mainly because in most popular media and academic discussions she was viewed as critical of Islam in her pursuit of women's rights. While stressing the need to relook at the position of women in Islam, he introduced me to prominent reformist scholars who seek to establish women's rights and gender equity grounded in the framework of Islam.

It was in this spirit that he familiarised Rokeya's works, especially 'Bengal Muslims on the way to decline', to me and inspired me to read her other works. Since she is associated with feminism, many of the negative views of the movement are wrongly accorded to her. In such a cultural context, my exposure to this speech brought a revolutionary change in my perception of Rokeya. As she highlights Islam's egalitarian principles regarding education and the dire need for Muslim girls to have institutional learning, I discovered a different Rokeya. My third and most meaningful encounter with Rokeya's life and work happened during my PhD studies at the University of Portsmouth, UK, as she was the central author of my thesis titled *Introducing Rokeya's Plural Feminism: A Comparative Study of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Feminist Writings with Those of Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Attia Hosain and Monica Ali (2007)*. This time I discussed various aspects of her life and work in my thesis and my appreciation of her thoughts and philosophy understandably reached a higher level.

The above narrative of my personal journey through the world of Rokeya may not necessarily be the experience of the majority of the readers and scholars with academic interest in her life and work. Perception about Rokeya's intellectual battle for women's rights is polarised. Critical works on her feminist framework are equally divided. Two mutually exclusive groups hold opposite views about her take on Islam, especially in relation to women's position in the religion. One group regards her as a religious reformer who critiques cultural (mostly misogynistic) practices mixed with Islam, not the religion itself. Conversely, an ideologically opposing group of commentators categorically holds that Rokeya is a secular intellectual who rejects Islam as an institutionalised religion and exposes the 'hollowness' of its primary sources.

Away from these ideological differences regarding Rokeya's feminist framework, there is a consensus among all commentators on her unique standing as an advocate for women's rights. She fought for promoting women's equal educational opportunities and tried to help women overcome multiple discriminatory, institutional and psychological constraints that cripple their potentials and hamper their progress. She worked to establish women's equal access to resources and for their participation in public life, especially in the educational, economic and political spheres.

Rokeya began her literary career as a published writer in 1902 and continued writing for reforming society and for the causes of women until the last breath of her life in 1932. She left her last essay 'Rights of Woman' unfinished on her table the night she died of heart attack. It was posthumously published in 1958. This symbolically points to her relentless intellectual efforts for social reform and for women's rights throughout the entire period of active life.

Rokeya published in magazines run by Islamic, secular and non-Muslim intellectuals. This suggests her wider acceptance among the intelligentsia of diverse ideological trends and affiliations. Her balanced approach is also manifested in her choice of language. Among the Muslims of the region, there existed a kind of division with regard to linguistic preference. One section of the population preferred Bangla and the other spoke Urdu and considered it the language of aristocracy and nobility. Rokeya was above such linguistic parochialism.

As she came from a zamindar family of Muslim Bengal, she used Urdu in everyday familial and social communication. However, she chose Bangla as the medium of her artistic expression, as it was the language of the vast majority whom she wanted to reach through her writing. Moreover, in 'Bengal Muslims on the way to decline', she recommends the Qur'an be translated into both Bangla and Urdu for the smooth and wider transmission of its message to the people of linguistic affiliations with both the vernacular languages.

During Rokeya's time, there was some amount of reluctance, especially among Muslims, to learn or use English, as the language was associated with colonial rule and imperial domination. Again Rokeya was way above such prejudice against a specific language, as in 'God gives, man robs' (1927) she emphasises the need for Muslims to learn English. Importantly, three of her most significant works are in English. These are: Sultana's Dream (1905), 'God gives, man robs' and 'education ideals for the modern Indian girl' (1931).

Her educational activities developed over time. Sensing her strong urge for working for female education, her enlightened civil servant husband Sakhawat Hossain kept aside Rs 10,000.00 (a huge sum of money at that time) in order for her to establish a girls' school. Soon after his death in 1909, she devoted her time, energy, intellectual ability and financial resources for female education. First she tried to educate girls in her late husband's place in Bhagalpur. But, because of familial and social difficulties, she had to move to Calcutta where she set up Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in 1911 and ran it despite stiff opposition mainly from pseudo-religious zealots. The school continued to grow during her lifetime and is still functioning in Calcutta.

The dedication she shows for female education, braving social mythologies and wrong interpretations of religious texts, is incredible. Her political activism for the sake of women's education and other legitimate rights is no less noteworthy. She set up the Calcutta branch of the Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam in 1916 and led and motivated other Muslim women to become involved in it at a time when their participation in such activities was even beyond the wildest imagination.

Given the enormity of problems she faced while engaging in reformist activities at multiple levels, the relentless resilience she showed and the impressive magnitude of the impact of her work on Bengal society and beyond, it may be difficult to find Rokeya's match in the history of women's rights movements. She simultaneously worked on three fronts – intellectual, educational and political – for ameliorating women's condition as well as for rectifying her tradition-bound, custom-ridden society. She excelled in them almost equally.

Md Mahmudul Hasan is a faculty member at the department of English language and literature, International Islamic University Malaysia.

- See more at: <http://newagebd.net/74741/journey-through-the-world-of-rokeya/#sthash.Xt2nhKYz.dpuf>