

Between Women and God: Begum Rokeya and Ismat Chughtai on Religion

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In a communally volatile atmosphere like ours, religion is too sensitive issue to speak about, which could invite anything from fatwa to gunshot these days. One can only wonder about the syncretic fabric of India, home to so many religions since time immemorial. And yet, it has been witness to communal violence and hatred time and again. In this context, the paper looks into the views on religion held by two radical Muslim women writers of twentieth century: Begum Rokeya (1880-1932) and Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991) who though distant in many ways were quite similar about religion. Both had experienced the crest phase of communal tensions during partitions. Without any superfluous talk about Hindu-Muslim integrity, their works confirm a strong conviction on the essential oneness of all religions. They exhibited a unique sense of non-sectarian attitude towards the communal disharmony, believing intensely in the syncretism of the two religions, Hinduism and Islam. Besides, the way they questioned the rigidity and orthodox nature of religion which they saw as more a fabrication of men than some divine command makes their views still fall on similar tracks. Thus the present paper attempts to look into the relevant writings of these two women which speak of their ideas on religion and analyze them in the backdrop of Indian milieu to bring out their uniqueness which also offers a fresh outlook to the religious intolerance raging this nation presently.

Key Words: communalism, secularism, syncretism**Introduction:**

India is a land of myriad colours in terms of faith and ethnicity, where people coming from hugely diverse background have lived side by side since time immemorial and yet there has been undeniably also an unfortunate spurt of religious intolerance on this land. As we face the present crisis of intolerance in our society when ideologies take precedence over peace and human life, the present paper revisits the lives of two iconoclastic writers of the past, Begum Rokeya (1880-1932) and Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991). These women manifested exemplary understanding of religion

notwithstanding the communal turmoil they experienced.

Begum Rokeya, a pioneering feminist figure from early twentieth century Bengal wrote and worked actively for the upliftment of women with *Sultana's Dream*, *Padmarag*, *Abarodhbashini* and *Motichur* as her major works where she attacked patriarchy relentlessly. Ismat Chughtai on the other hand, has immortalized the different facets of Indian women in Urdu literature most unequivocally. With her innumerable short stories and novels, she has created a world of her times in some most remarkable hue. Some of her best remembered works, such

as *Tehri Lakeer* (The Crooked Line), *Dilki Duniya* (The Heart Breaks Free), “Chauthika Joda” (The Wedding Shroud), “Bichu Phuphi”, etc. have presented the plight of Indian women with all intensity and vivacity. Juxtaposing these two personalities here who were closely located in time and space is justified not simply for their feminist commitment, but beyond it, for their firm adherence to non-sectarianism at a time where most failed to remain unaffected by the communal air that was brewing during the partitions, first in 1905 and then in 1947.

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) was born in a highly orthodox Bengali Muslim family where women were kept under the strict purdah and allowed to read only Persian and Urdu, the languages of elite Muslims. However, being a part of Bengali milieu, she went on to write her thoughts in Bengali which reflected her syncretism in spite of the exclusive affiliation to Urdu at home. Moreover her writings which were dedicated to the cause of women’s upliftment never exhibited any religious bias which came as a commendable exception at a time when most of her contemporaries had been affected by the growing distrust between Hindus and Muslims in the wake of partition of Bengal in 1905. Similarly Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991) believed in her ‘pluralistic identity’ and wrote about the lives of those including Hindus as well as Muslims as she knew them.

Born to a Shia Muslim father and a Sunni Muslim mother she followed both sects of Islam at the same time. In fact, it gets even better. She would also unabashedly

visit Hindu temples and recite Sanskrit verses invoking praises for temple idols, all this while proudly claiming the identity of a Muslim woman (albeit to the chagrin of many in her community.) (Husain 212)

Obviously this could not have come easily to these women for the underlying distrust between the two communities, Hindus and Muslims was apparent. Of an incident that had a ‘tremendous impact’ on her, Ismat Chughtai describes in “GhubareKarvan” (Caravan Dust) in the autobiographical *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan* that “there was something inherently different between a Hindu and a Muslim. Right from our childhood, we were conscious that the verbal avowals of brotherhood went hand in hand with a certain constraint.” (23) However, her inquisitive mind kept questioning these frictions and searched for the meaning of religion. Being gifted an idol of Krishna by her Hindu neighbour, she addressed her dilemma of someone like her with plural layers of identity, of being born with a mixed cultural legacy of being born a Muslim and living along with Hindus:

I am a Muslim; idol worship is a sin. But Pauranic mythology is a part of my national legacy. Aeons of culture and philosophies are saturated in it. Religion and culture of a nation are two different things. Here I have an equal share just as I have in its soil, its sunlight, its water. If I play with colour during Holi and light lamps during Diwali, does my religious belief take a beating? Is my belief and conscience so weak, so incomplete that it can be reduced to pieces? (32)

Religion for her was a matter of personal belief of a person which had no intrinsic connection to the customs and practices in a society to which generally they are tied to with political motives. Both Ismat as well as Rokeya blamed patriarchy for using religion against women. In *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan* again, she draws examples of Hindu as well as Muslim women while ruminating over an ideal Indian woman like Sita, Mira Bai and Razia Sultana. All these women faced sad ends in spite of their virtues in the patriarchal society. In fact Ismat strongly felt that religion has been maneuvered to turn misogynist as she once said about Islam in an interview: "It [Islam] believes in the welfare of women. But now Muslims have snatched away everything from Muslim women." (Kumar 171)

Similarly Begum Rokeya criticized patriarchy unreservedly for the plight of women across different communities. In her essay, "Ardhangi" (The Better Half), Rokeya questions the treatment Sita received by Lord Rama which she compares as indifferent as a kid treating his inanimate toys:

But the way he treated Sita shows that his relationship with her was almost that of a boy with a doll...he can love the doll...can get angry without any reason and throw the doll into the mud. But the doll cannot do anything, because, though she has got hands and feet it is but an inanimate thing. (45)

Similarly she questions the way Islam treats women where she sarcastically writes, "we

are but half a man" and women are deprived of even that right.

A similar tune is heard in Rokeya's "Strijatir Abanati" (The Degradation of Women) which caused a lot of uproar for disclaiming any divine authority to the religious texts with misogynist tone. She accused men who "are lording over women in the name of "religion." She wrote:

My sisters, you can see for yourself that these religious books are nothing but rules fabricated by men...Had there been a woman sage you might have seen the opposite. All the religious books were not God's commandments. (30)

Rokeya had questioned the fanatic adherence to the ideologies in the name of religion to subjugate women. She denounced the way religion has been manipulated by authority and reduced to strict protocols which when breached called for punishment. However there was lots of hue and cry and she was accused of being anti-Islamist. Obviously the general reader missed her message. Religion for her, or Chughtai had been a way of living than mere bundle of customs and practices which it is generally reduced to.

Religion for Rokeya and Ismat Chughtai had been a transcendental subject above the worldly issues. Thus both of them believed in the oneness of all religions and manifested a deep philosophical attitude towards religion in their writings. *Padmarag*, might be termed as the Rokeya's manifesto of secularism where women from different classes and communities unite

together for their emancipation. In the Preface, she writes:

Religion is like a three-storeyed mansion. On the ground floor there are many rooms- for Hindus and their many castes, like Brahmins and Shudras; for Muslims and their various sects like Shias, Sunnis, Hanafis, Sufis and others; so also for Christians- Roman Catholics, Protestants and so on. On the first floor, you will see Muslims- all Muslims- or Hindus- all Hindus and so on. Then go up to the second floor and you will see just one room with no divisions. That is, there are no Muslims or Hindus or anything else of the kind. Just human beings. And the object of their devotion is one God. If one starts a detailed analysis, nothing remains: everything becomes null and void, only God remains. (19-20)

Ismat Chughtai's "Muqaddas Farz" (Sacred Duty) is a comparable reply to the orthodoxy in the society that bars inter-religious marriages. Two young people belonging to Hindu and Muslim communities marry against their parents' wishes and leave a letter justifying themselves:

We have no religion. All religions are gifts from the same Bhagwan, they're for all mankind; He's also called God. You know Him only as Allah, but we know of His thousand other names, He who takes many forms:

Who is within and without,...
Who is in negation and in affirmation.
(38)

Besides believing in the oneness of all religions for the inherent universality of it, Rokeya and Ismat Chughtai held the conviction that communal harmony was essential for the nation's progress. In "Sugrihini" (The Good Housewife), Rokeya while discussing the characteristics of a good housewife emphasized the role of women in furthering the brotherhood between different communities.

We are Indians first and then only Muslims or Sikhs or anything else. A good housewife will spread this awareness in her family. Then gradually petty jealousies and selfishness will disappear... (65)

Likewise Ismat Chughtai ardently believed in the mutual compassion between different communities.

Another example of Rokeya's idea of a true religion can be cited from her widely read work, *Sultana's Dream* which narrates the dream of a *pardahnasheen* (observing purdah) lady Sultana where she visits the Ladyland, the utopia which is run by women. Curious to know the religion of this progressive and peaceful land, Sultana is told that their "religion is based on Love and Truth. It is our religious duty to love each other and to be absolutely truthful." (165) It is interesting to see how Rokeya instead of devising a name of religion explains the meaning of it which essentially is humane according to her.

Ismat must have meant something similar when in an interview she said:

"A Muslim is one who stands for peace...I regard myself as a Muslim

because I am peace loving. According to me one who aspires for peace, whether he is a Hindu, a Sikh or a Christian, is a Muslim at heart. (Sukrita Paul Kumar 171)

Thus it is apparent that for Begum Rokeya and Ismat Chughtai religion was not bound by certain customs and practices, rather it was a humane approach to life as the latter confirmed:

I believe in socialism. I have high regard for all religions. All religions impart the same moral instruction- don't grab, give; don't deny others their rights. I regard Islam as the most perfect religion. It is so fulfilling...A Muslim in the true sense is one who leads one towards goodness, truth, serenity of mind. There are many people who are greater Muslim than I am... (AfsarFarooqui Kumar 188)

Both Begum Rokeya and Ismat Chughtai experienced a communally charged atmosphere and where many of their fellow writers seemed to turn antagonistic to other communities, these two ladies kept out of this narrow-mindedness and denigrated the communal riots in most condemnable terms. Post Bengal's partition in 1905, the distrust between Hindus and Muslims grew and worsened with the abduction of women allegedly by the opposite community. In her essay "SubhSadak" Rokeya criticized the politicization of women who were being termed as commodity to be harmed and protected by the men of the two communities. Her "response to the communalisation of gender relations was to confirm communal units by a critique of

patriarchy." What is significant is that "While talking of the abduction issue, Rokeya does not even mention the question of communalisation. Instead, she reframes the whole enterprise by locating it in relationship to the social definitions of womanhood." (Datta 282)

In fact, in *Sultana's Dream*, "Love and Truth" for religion was a significant move against communalism as Sangeeta Ray points out

If we bear in mind the political and ideological motivation for the partition of Bengal mandated by Lord Curzon, as well as the swadeshi movement, then the eradication of formalized religion in Lady land could be read as a response to the communal friction of the times. *Sultana's Dream* can then be understood not only as a feminist utopia but also as a manifesto for a truly secular nation. (122)

Ismat Chughtai wrote in her autobiographical *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan*, "Whenever I hear of a Hindu-Muslim riot from any part of the country, my pen turns around to nag me." Her discomfort at these unrests was best expressed in "Communal Violence and Literature" which she wrote on the occasion of bloody aftermath of partition of India in 1947. She questioned the mad rage post-partition and ponders over the role played by writers. On the one hand she praised writers like Krishan Chander who could stand up against odds to depict a true picture of the society where no one gained in the mayhem. She criticized those who were swayed by communal passions and were

writing communally biased literature and putting the whole blame on the:

I don't know on what grounds they make this claim. Perhaps they have been supplied their figures by the brutes themselves, because anyone with any sense at all knows that both factions have committed atrocities and each side has attempted to outdo the other. In their opinion only a one-sided picture can clearly portray the events that took place. (449)

Sadly, the uncertainty that lurks around in present times reminds of Ismat Chughtai's words that "In this politicking world where God is the most profitable occupation, the inky stains of defeat are washed in the blood of innocents. Men like to fight like dogs to prove the worthlessness of one another." And like her wonder, "Will God break the metal sheath and come out one day?" (32) The conviction with which these women remained secular in their thoughts and actions is exemplary and makes one wish for more people like them today.

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