

## Breaking Barriers: Begum Rokeya and the Quest for Gender Equality

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### Abstract

The contributions of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a trailblazing Bengali writer and activist, to the advancement of gender equality in South Asia during the period of British colonialism are of considerable significance. Through a combination of literary endeavors and vigorous activism, women's rights were ardently championed, with particular emphasis placed on education as a fundamental mechanism for empowerment. Renowned for her challenge to prevailing societal conventions, Rokeya's enduring influence on feminist literature can be exemplified through her seminal work, *Sultana's Dream*. Furthermore, she played a pivotal role in the establishment of educational institutions dedicated to women's education. The resistance encountered by Rokeya did not deter her commitment to women's autonomy, and her advocacy for Muslim feminism has fundamentally influenced feminist movements in the region. The legacy of her work continues to resonate, offering inspiration to contemporary movements pursuing gender justice and equality. Through her multifaceted efforts, Rokeya has established a foundation upon which current advocates may build, illustrating the ongoing relevance of her contributions to the discourse surrounding gender rights and empowerment.

**Keywords** Gender equality, feminist literature, women's rights, education, activism, Muslim feminism

### Introduction

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) represents a seminal figure in the feminist movement of South Asia, advocating for the empowerment of women within a socio-cultural context dominated by patriarchal structures. Her birth during the period of British colonial governance did not deter her from challenging conservative conventions; rather, it propelled her to become a prominent advocate for gender equality. Through her literary output and activist endeavors, she sought to dismantle the educational and social barriers that particularly constrained Muslim women in Bengal. Rokeya's progressive stances on

women's independence, education, and social reform positioned her as a visionary ahead of her time. The establishment of educational institutions such as the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School, alongside the publication of influential works like *Sultana's Dream*, solidified her status as a significant voice in the struggle for women's rights, with her legacy continuing to resonate within contemporary gender justice initiatives.

### Breaking Barriers: Begum Rokeya and the Quest for Gender Equality

Born in 1880 amidst the complexities of British colonization in India, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, commonly referred to as Begum Rokeya, established a formidable

legacy in the feminist sphere of South Asia. Esteemed as the pioneering feminist of Bengal, she employed her literary talents and activism to advocate fervently for gender equality, urging for the equitable treatment of women and men. Rokeya's writings - encompassing short stories, novels, essays, and satires - critically engaged with systemic inequities afflicting women while promoting education as a fundamental catalyst for empowerment.

### **A Trailblazer for Muslim Feminism**

Emerging as a leading proponent of Muslim feminism in Bengal, Begum Rokeya's contributions encompassed not only her writings but also her strategic activism. Despite encountering considerable societal opposition, she made significant strides by founding the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School and instituting the Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam (Islamic Women's Association). Her commitment to the upliftment of women remained steadfast; she even undertook door-to-door advocacy to encourage families to ensure their daughters received an education. This persistence characterized her efforts until her passing, inspiring numerous women to pursue independence and education.

Among her notable literary contributions, the novella *Sultana's Dream* serves as an imaginative exploration of a utopian society governed by women. Within this narrative, traditional gender roles are inverted, and the intelligence and leadership of women are celebrated, reflecting Rokeya's ambitious vision for a more equitable society. Another significant work, *Abarodhbasini*, critiques the practice of purdah (veiling), elucidating

its role in suppressing women's autonomy and intellectual development.

### **Early Life and Struggles**

Born in Pairabondh village, Rangpur, Bengal, to a conservative Muslim family, Begum Rokeya faced numerous challenges in her formative years. Her father, a landlord, enforced strict veiling practices and denied formal education to the women in his family, permitting only informal Arabic instruction for religious purposes. Nonetheless, Rokeya and her elder sister, Karimunnesa, resisted these restrictions, secretly acquiring knowledge of Bengali through their progressive brother, Ibrahim Saber. This act of defiance laid the groundwork for Rokeya's enduring struggle against gender inequality.

The marriage of Rokeya to Sakhawat Hussain, a well-educated and liberal deputy magistrate, marked a transformative phase in her life. Encouraged by her husband to pursue her literary aspirations, she received support in her educational endeavors in both Bengali and English. It was within this supportive environment that she began to publish her initial works, including 'Motichur', a two-volume essay collection addressing social issues and advocating for women's empowerment. Despite enduring profound personal tragedies, including the deaths of her husband and two infant daughters, Rokeya remained resolute in her mission to advocate for women's advancement.

### **Literary Contributions and Themes**

The literary corpus of Begum Rokeya is distinguished by its incisive critiques of societal norms and logical arguments advocating for gender equality. In 'Sultana's Dream', she delineates a society wherein

women occupy leadership roles across all sectors, effectively challenging traditional gender roles. The novella's imaginative framework highlights the irrationality inherent in patriarchal restrictions and envisions a reality where women's contributions are acknowledged and celebrated.

In 'Padmarag' (Essence of the Lotus), published in 1924, Rokeya narrates the story of a women's community that flourishes through mutual support and self-reliance. This novel depicts women from varied backgrounds collaborating to surmount societal challenges, emphasizing the critical roles of solidarity and education in attaining liberation. Furthermore, 'God Gives, Man Robs' epitomizes Rokeya's critique of male-dominated societies, employing logic and wit to argue that the subordination of women is not a divine decree but rather a manifestation of male moral shortcomings. Her writings persistently illuminate the notion that women's dependence on men stems from systematic denial of education and opportunity.

### **Activism and Advocacy**

The intertwining of Rokeya's activism with her literary pursuits is exemplified by her establishment of the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in Kolkata in 1911, which commenced with a modest enrollment of eight students. By 1915, this institution experienced significant growth, accommodating 84 students, and it subsequently evolved into a high school in 1930. The curriculum was designed to include vocational subjects, such as nursing, sewing, and home economics, along with linguistic studies in Bengali and English.

Additionally, the inclusion of physical education underscored the commitment to promoting women's health and physical strength. Rokeya advocated for a pragmatic approach to education that would empower women to achieve economic independence and self-sufficiency.

In parallel with her educational initiatives, Rokeya initiated the Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam in 1916, which aimed to assist women from disadvantaged backgrounds. This organization played a vital role in offering financial aid, shelter, and literacy programs to women residing in slum areas. Such efforts significantly contributed to the enhancement of living conditions for numerous women, thereby facilitating a departure from entrenched cycles of poverty and oppression.

### **Resistance and Legacy**

Despite the substantial accomplishments of Rokeya, considerable societal resistance was encountered in response to her advocacy for women's education and emancipation. Opposition from conservative factions manifested through criticism, yet Rokeya remained resolute in her mission. Through her literary and public endeavors, she challenged prevailing patriarchal norms, instigating a movement for societal transformation.

Rokeya's slogan, "Jago Go Bhogini" (Wake Up Sisters), emerged as an influential rallying cry, encouraging Bengali Muslim women to resist subjugation and assert their individuality. She consistently contended that the oppression of women was a construct of societal injustice rather than a divine mandate. In her writings, she provocatively questioned the premise of women's inferiority, arguing that if women were

created with equal physical needs, such as the ability to bear and nurture children, it stood to reason that such equality should not be viewed as indicative of inferiority.

The culmination of her extraordinary life occurred on December 8, 1932, during her work on an article entitled *Narir Odhikar* (Women's Rights). Her legacy is commemorated through various means, including the observance of December 9 as Rokeya Day in Bangladesh, the establishment of Begum Rokeya University, and the creation of the Begum Rokeya Padak, a national honor recognizing significant contributions to women's rights.

## Conclusion

The life and work of Begum Rokeya serve as a symbol of hope and advancement for women's rights in South Asia. Through her literary contributions, activism, and steadfast commitment to education and equality, she laid essential groundwork for future generations of feminists. The vision she articulated—a society in which women are regarded as equals—continues to resonate in contemporary movements advocating for gender justice. Reflecting on her contributions highlights the transformative power of education and the necessity of challenging entrenched societal norms to establish a more just and equitable world.

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