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THE BENGALI MUSLIM BHADRAMAHILAS AND THEIR QUEST FOR EDUCATION (1880-1920).

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ABSTRACT

In the traditional Bengali Muslim society, women occupied a very inferior social position and for the majority of Muslim women home was their only world. In the absence of any education or economic empowerment, the lives of Bengali Muslim women were cast into the universal mould of the daughter-wife-mother roles. Muslim woman's life was mainly restricted to the inner quarters under a joint family set up, strictly adhering to purdah and absence of any kind of education. There was also patriarchal monitoring over every important aspect of their lives. Women accepted and upheld this system, which worked against their own interests. If there was any undercurrent of discontent, it found no formal outlet. The effective cure of the problem was to educate women and moderate the rigours of seclusion. This article will focus on the educational scenario of Bengali Muslim women in the colonial period and how the Muslim women overcame various obstacles to get themselves educated.

Key Words: Bengali Muslim Women, Colonial Bengal, Awakening, Enlightened, Zenana Education.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally the Bengali Muslim women received the rudiments of education if any within the strict privacy of the andarmahal. Education was usually imparted from the age of four or five and the girls would be introduced to the Koran through a lesson in Arabic letters. In about two years the girls learnt to read the Koran in Arabic without any comprehension. In some Muslim families, the girls were taught Arabic, Persian, and Urdu and although Bengali was added to the list, English education was seldom taught to them. In some cases, female tutors were employed by the elite Muslims to teach their daughters English, a little sewing and embroidery. Muslim girls were expected to learn the Quran and some accounting skills. The strict seclusion observed by the upper-class families prohibited their daughter from attending schools. As a consequence, whatever little these Bengali Muslim girls learnt was either from their families or through tutors. Thus, in the early and the late 19th century, Muslim women's education was synonymous with religious education. The Quran and the nasihatnamas written in Arabic and Urdu had to be memorized and recited by the Muslim women for acquiring religious merit, even if the meaning was not understood in most cases. Muslim daughters as well as sons learned the Quran in this parrot- like manner, taught either by a tutor or by a female teacher or ustadnis. Learning to recite the Quran in Arabic was no guarantee that the child understood a word of it, although sometimes the teacher, depending upon his or her knowledge would explain the essentials. In this article I will explore the reasons for the educational backwardness of the Bengali Muslim Women and will also focus on the different ways through which they started getting educated from the late 19th century.

Traditionally the female teachers or ustadnis had been the source of home teachers and would instruct only female members among the Muslim families. The shortage of efficient and learned ustadnis, "an endangered species" meant that the quality of education the girls were receiving was often very poor.[1] The problem of finding a teacher and ensuring an adequate standard of instruction was one important obstacle to the Muslim girl's education as Bengali Muslims were reluctant to send their girls out to school, and preferred to teach them at home, if at all. Another obstacle to the female education was the custom of early marriage. In the nineteenth century Bengal society, both Hindu and Muslim girls was married off any time after or even before the age of ten. After the marriage, they seldom returned to school, unless their husbands or fathers-in-law encouraged it.[2] Criticizing the practice of child marriage or early marriage Ismail Hossain Siraji wrote in Al-Eslam in 1918 that the system of child marriage

was a hindrance to female education and progress in a child's life. Considering child marriage especially harmful for girls, he warned that this evil practice would lead to the miseries of the Muslims.[3] The Hartog Commission pointed out that even in the early 20th centuary colonial Bengal, 80 percent of the Muslim girls dropped out of school, before completing their primary education due to marriage.[4] So basically, the Bengali Muslim girls learnt how to read the Koran, learnt household-oriented works, and how to keep an account of their family expenses and perhaps some basic Urdu.

Thus, we see that in the traditional society the nature of education that the Bengali Muslim girls received was primarily religious and moral. Begum Rokeya pointed out in a satirical manner that: "In Bengal, Muslim girls are not educated in a sensible way. Before learning their mother tongue, they were expected to memorize the Quran like a parrot without understanding the meaning of the Arabic words. Some of them learnt to read Urdu but did not learn to hold the pen and finally early marriage closed this chapter of incomplete learning. The maximum qualification that a Muslim girl could achieve under such circumstances is to learn cooking and sewing."[5] For Rokeya, the education of women was an all-important issue which held the key to Muslim women's emergence from social bondage.[6] The custom of strict purdah was an important hindrance for the female education. Abarodh deprived Bengali Muslim girls the access to education as until the second half of the 19th century seclusion was almost universal among Bengali middle- and upper-class women. From the 1860's, conscious initiatives were being taken in enlightened Hindu and Brahmo circle to remove purdah.[7] However this issue was not taken up by Muslims until much later.

The origin of Muslim women's education in Bengal can be traced from the second half of the 19th century. The three main agencies which tried to develop women's education in British India were the Christan Missionaries, the British government itself and few Muslim social reformers including both male and female. The Christan Missionaries in Bengal were the pioneers in the field of spreading female education and in this regard played a significant role.[8] The earliest attempts of female education in Calcutta was undertaken at the behest of Christian Missionaries, often with the help of local residents, surprising though it may seem Bengali Muslim girls were seen actively participating in their attempts of promoting women's education. As the orthodox Hindus and Muslims were not interested to send their girls to public institutions, the Christian Missionaries devised a new system of educating women called the "Zenana System of Education" This 'Zenana System of Education', was in vogue in both the

Hindu and the Muslim community during the end of the 19th century.[9] The zenana system of education was designed to impart education among the young girls and the aged women inside their homes by trained teachers. Wives and daughters of missionaries were generally appointed in respectable families to instruct girls and women at nominal fees.[10] This type of education i.e., zenana education gradually came to be widely approved by the traditional muslim society. Although zenana education i.e. education given in the home was expensive, cumbersome and largely ineffective, still it was popular during this time as the Bengali Muslims were unaccustomed to send their daughters to school. Complete seclusion meant that Muslim girls were denied school education which was the only practical method of educating them. In 1877 the D.P.I of Bengal reported that in every district of the Dacca Division, Zenana associations had been set up.[11] Zenana education under the English missionaries received a new impetus from Sir Alexander Pedler who strongly pleaded for enhancement of the amount of government grants and suggested appointment of both Hindu and Muslim lady teachers on salaries of Rs.30 per month to instruct girls and aged women at home. Pedler's proposal was accepted in 1902 and 12 lady teachers from Hindu and Muslim communities were given appointment.[12]

From the first half of the twentieth century the British Government, adopted certain measures for the promotion of zenana education among the Muslim community. 'The Committee for Advancement of Zenana Education' appointed in 1908 made several recommendations, which was well considered by the British Government.[13] It was said that the government will bear all financial liabilities relating to Zenana Education. The government allotted Rs. 5,400 for Zenana education. Five (5) female teachers were employed in Calcutta and Fourteen (14) female teachers in mofussil area for educating pardanasin Muslim women.[14] In 1912-13, Zenana education in Jhargram, Murshidabad and Comilla was progressing satisfactorily. Till the mid nineteenth century only traditional education was allowed to the Bengali Muslim women. However, few changes in the attitude towards women education can be seen from the end of the 19th century Muslim society. Contact with the Western culture in the colonial period directed the attention of the Bengali men to the condition of women in their society. Faith in modern education led bhadralok reformers to believe that the education of women was necessary to achieve any reform, not only in the condition of women but in the state of society at large. The contact with Western ideas such as liberalism, utilitarianisms which penetrated the urban Bengali society through western education, provided an important impetus for the nineteenth century programme of social reforms in which elevation of the position of women,

was a major part. The Western influence brought about a remarkable change of attitudes towards womenfolks among the educated Bengali Muslim elites from the 1870's onwards.

A new ideal was gradually emerging in the 1870's and 1880's according to which Bengal would become civilized only if its women were educated along with its men. The belief in education as a precondition of and the first step towards women's modernization was common to all reformers.[15] By the 1870's whether in practice or not, a section of the educated urban Muslim elite of Bengal recognized the good effects of female education. This was the beginning of an era when a cross section of Bengali men became aware of the need to educate and thus emancipate their women. During the end of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, the Muslim society in Bengal was undergoing vast changes. The pattern of women's lives also began to change and Bengali Muslim women were coming out of their isolated and exclusively domestic existence.[16] Bengali society witnessed the emergence of a new type of Muslim men and women towards the end of the nineteenth century.[17] Bengali Muslim's women's jagaran (literally meaning awakening, revival or regeneration) was initiated from the late nineteenth century and the Muslim's Women's emancipation started from the early twentieth century.[18] Men of the Muslim professional middle class were increasingly favouring women's education and to educate their women and raise their status was their important agenda. They wanted their wives to be knowledgeable about Islam, to raise their children in faith and to lead pious and disciplined lives. Men of this generation, who were western educated therefore seeked the ideal women who would be better wives, mothers and better Muslims. In those days' education was not seen as means of livelihood for women but the newly emerging educated Bengali Muslim middle class expected his wife to be interactive and suitable for the educated middle-class household. Women's education was seen as a necessary step for the upliftment of Bengali Muslim society.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a section of the Bengali Muslim elites started criticizing sharply certain orthodoxies prevalent in the Muslim society in Colonial Bengal like polygamy, child marriage purdah, rigorous widowhood, arbitrary divorce etc. and they expressed their views on women's emancipation. With the emergence of these newly educated, middle and enlightened Muslim middle class a new outlook on gender relations grew. The best educated women at this stage were the ones who had been educated privately at home from either their husbands or in some cases from their parents. In few instances it was noticed that these Muslim women were illiterates before their marriage and were educated by their

husbands. One of the ardent leaders of the Dacca Anjuman, Abdul Aziz, sent his granddaughter Samsun Nahar to school, but after she completed class VI at the age of nine, Nahar was withdrawn from school and was kept at home strictly maintaining purdah.[19] She was married off in 1925 at the age of 16 and thereafter, she settled in Calcutta. The metropolitan environment of Calcutta, offered the couple a certain anonymity outside the control of a conservative family, which gave her the scope for educational pursuits. She graduated from the Diocesan College in 1932 and joined Lady Brabourne College as a Professor of Bengali in 1939 and passed MA examination in 1942.[20] Just as Mahmuda's doctor husband supported her attempts at self-improvement, Nurunnessa Khatun's lawyer husband took her along with him during his tours. This gradually resulted in the waning of the strict purdah in which she grew up and consequently widened her vision.[21] She became a reputed writer and was awarded the prestigious literary title of her times-Vidyavinodini. Rokeya's elder brother, Ibrahim Saber, educated in St. Xavier's College, Calcutta, taught his sister by candlelight late at nights.[22] This was not possible in the daytime in the face of social criticism. Syed Sakhawat Hossain, her husband, supported her creativity openly. He introduced Rokeya to many foreign journals and magazines. He encouraged her to publish what she wrote and sent the manuscript of her novel Sultana's Dream to Mr. Macphearson, Commissioner of Bhagalpur for his comments.[23]

It would of course, be an oversimplification to imply that these examples enlightened all Muslim men and inspired them to take up the cause of women's liberation in early 20th century Bengal. However, the outstanding literary and professional achievements of these few women undoubtedly encouraged many more to assert themselves. For example, Mamluqul Fatema Khanam (1894-1957) decided to separate from her husband, when the latter left his medical profession to take up Pirism (Sufi religious preaching) in 1920. She took up teaching as a career.[24] This had no precedence in the history of Bengali Muslim women and could have been possible only in the contemporary context of social transition and cultural transformation. As traditional structures broke down, the extended family gave way to nuclear type families, the bride was invested with a new role which differed from the one played by her mother or mother-in-law. Marriage to a government employee or professional was a very different proposition from marriage to a member of the former landed or administrative gentry.[25] The wife went to stay with her husband in towns leaving behind their ancestor's house. The very concept of domestic life changed and with the new role came new skills and gender relations encouraged often by the men themselves. For these women such changes brought a new sense of liberty,

specially the changes in conjugal norms. All these changes gave a new personality to the bhadramahilas in the Muslim society. The Muslim families had become conscious of the social need of the girl's education and many of the Muslim women not only tried to get educated but they were also inclined to pursue noble professions. Changes in the Muslim society drew the andarmahal dwellers out of their confines into the outside world. The first stepping path on this outward journey for women was to be the centres of learning. Thus, these educated elites provided a conducive atmosphere at home for the literary and artistic pursuits of their women, though there was no question of sending the Muslim girls to school or college even in the few early years of the 20th century. The educated elites thought of different ways by which their women folks could be educated.[26] Initiatives for social reform came from this tiny emergent middle class.[27]

In the early twentieth century, the "women question" loomed large and women's education became a dominant issue in the early twentieth century. It was precisely, during this time that a modern middle class among the Bengali Muslim came into the fore front and they sought to redefine gender norms, they tried to restructure the concept of feminine educational system and make the idea of institutional education for women acceptable. In 1903, Syed Emdad Ali, in Nabanur, urged the purdanashin women to come out of their homes and to get themselves educated for the all-round development of the Muslim society.[28] Kazi Nazrul Islam, in his poem "Nari" (1925) urged Muslim women to fight against the social inequality and purdah. He pointed out that since Islam preserves women's right to education, it was unjust to deprive them of this particular right. In his essay entitled, "Taruner Sadhana," he emphasized on women's education.[29] In a speech delivered to Faridpur Student's meeting in 1343 B.S, Nazrul called the Muslim youth to fight against purdah and the existing social injustice against women, which was still prevalent in the 20th century Bengali Muslim Society. S. Wazed Ali, the prominent barrister and writer, cautioned the Muslims that an all-round development can never be possible unless the practice of purdah be abolished. He held the view that the progress of a nation wholly depends on women folk and a society cannot prosper keeping their women in the dark and in seclusion. In 1938, in his essay entitled 'Moslem Nari', he condemned seclusion and purdah. In his essay entitled "Nari O Samaj" Wazed Ali pointed out the importance of both women's freedom and women's education.[30]

Thus, it can be noted that from the end of the nineteenth century an enlightened middle class of the Muslims became aware of their great deficiency and tried their best to challenge the social prejudices and certain orthodox ideas that prevailed in the Muslim community in Colonial Bengal. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed a gradual awareness among the Muslim community about the need of modernization of their society. Under such circumstances, Muslim reformers in Bengal increasingly began to realize the importance of institutional education for their women. During the first half of the twentieth century, while the political struggle against an alien rule dominated the front stage, in the backyard of social scenario, major changes were taking place. The social prejudices which had hindered the education among Muslim women till the 19th century began to disappear gradually in the 20th century. As the Bengali Muslim community came into closer contact with the westernizing influences through education and job, a process of cultural adaptation set in among some groups of the Muslims of Bengal. The traditional idea of female education began to change, aborodh or seclusion of women lost its force and traditional family life of the Muslims began to enter into transition. With the progress of education in the Muslim community of Bengal, a group of 'new women' emerged in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Many of these "new women" were primarily educated in their homes and then went to school for education. As the andarmahal itself was undergoing significant transformation, traditional education imparted there was no longer deemed adequate and the need for the institutionally educated women was felt in the first half of the twentieth century. The 1920s was the decade when the Muslim community of Bengal accepted the idea of their girls going to school, and the thirties constituted the decade when they started going to college in larger numbers which necessitated the foundation of Lady Brabourne College. Muslim female education in colonial Bengal has undergone through all stages like total apathy, indifference, criticisim, and ridicule to gradual acceptance and recognition. From the traditional religious education (i.e. basically the reading of Koran without understanding) to secondary and higher education, the bias against Muslim women pursuing institutional education was gradually weakening, but the patriarchal, socio-economic constraints still limited the participation of majority of Muslim women in carrers and professions in colonial Bengal. Till the end of the 19th century and even in the beginning of the 20th century Muslim women were not imagined as breadearners in their family, but however by the 1930s, Bengali Muslim women were certainly poised on the brink of some measure of economic independence. Thus, we see that a kind of consciousness of economic independence began to grow gradually among the Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal which broadened the

horizons of the reform movement in the Muslim society so that women could have an easier passage in the future.

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