

From Sakhawat Memorial School to Rokeya Hall: A Journey Towards Language as Self-Respect

Sarmistha Dutta Gupta¹
Kolkata, India

Abstract

The paper traces the trajectory of Sakhawat Memorial School – founded in Calcutta by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain in 1911 – with reference to questions of identity and language in undivided India. The secularist Rokeya prioritised her ethno-linguistic identity as against her pan-Islamist self in the running of her school at a time when respectable Muslims of Bengal were caught between choosing the “Islamic” Urdu and “Hindu” Bengali as their mother tongue. Did the pioneering efforts of Sakhawat Memorial School in making Bengali Muslim women learn to read and write in their mother tongue have anything to do with the coming together of all Bengalis and women’s contribution in upholding the honour and dignity of their mother tongue during the Language Movement of 1952 in erstwhile East Pakistan? In addressing this question, the paper seeks to recognise Rokeya and the Sakhawat Memorial School as precursors of the secular nationalist movement that saw the birth of a new nation in 1971.

Keywords

Language Movement, identity, language, education, self-respect, Sakhawat Memorial School

It was November 2007. I was on my fourth visit to Dhaka but the first one to the MuktiJuddho Jadughar or the Liberation War Museum which brings alive the struggle for the birth of a secular nation mostly through individual and family collections. Incredibly moving as it was to be in that space – which is a two-storeyed house with a courtyard and a few trees where a family must have lived once – I was completely transfixed by a large photograph of sari-clad Bengali women walking the streets of Dhaka in a protest march in 1952. The government had been trying to impose Urdu as the state language based on the rationale that “Pakistan is a Muslim state and it must have as its lingua franca

¹ Sarmistha Dutta Gupta is a Kolkata-based independent scholar, a literary translator and an activist of the women’s movement. She has written extensively both in English and in Bengali on gendered histories of politics and women’s writing from the subcontinent. Her publications include *Identities and Histories. Women’s Writing and Politics in Bengal* (2010) and *Pather Ingit: Nirbachito Sambad-Samayikpatrey Bangali Meyer Samajbhavna* (2007). She is also the founder-secretary of Ebong Alap, a voluntary organisation that explores innovative pedagogies in Bengali.

the language of the Muslim nation.”² The move went against the sentiments and demands of the overwhelming majority of people in the eastern part of erstwhile Pakistan whose language was Bengali and the women in the photograph were in a rally protesting that.

This was only a couple of years after the Partition of India and the birth of the two nations. We in India have identified those years as that crucial period which saw the coming out of middle-class Hindu refugee women into a range of work/public spaces. Literature, film and feminist scholarship of recent years have made us aware of how these women of respectable families emerged as clerks, telephone operators, factory workers, salesgirls, teachers, nurses and in many other roles. A large section of them also took to the streets, fighting for their rights as workers.³ The tumult of political change and economic hardship had forced them to take up jobs which were inconceivable to their families even a couple of years prior to the redrawing of political maps. But the image of middle-class Bengali Muslim women, coming out of seclusion to such an extent as to march the streets as full-fledged participants of the Language Movement as early as 1952, did startle me. How little we know of them beyond Bangladesh I thought! Forget about the rest, even most of us feminists living in neighbouring India and sharing Bengali as our first language, are blissfully unaware of the dynamics of East Pakistani women’s political participation soon after Partition.

The more I thought about the photograph, the more it overpowered me. I had observed a distinct absence of educated Muslim women in public activities in the years preceding Partition in the course of my research on the interface of women’s writing and politics in late-colonial Bengal.⁴ Though a lot more of them were in schools and colleges than they had been in the 1910s and 1920s, and purdah was no longer as severe as it had been earlier, Muslim women’s participation in public life was still very limited. For example, they had not been generally a part of anti-fascist protests, or worked for famine relief or for communal harmony in the 1940s, barring a couple of notable exceptions.

This can partly be explained by the fact that the ’40s had seen a marked rise in Muslim exclusiveness with Islamist liberals on the wane. The dogmatic ulemas were insistent on separate literary and cultural spheres for Muslims (Dey 176) and preferred to sequester women more and more within the four walls of their homes. The separatists tried to convince their co-religionists that only

² Prime Minister Liaqat Ali Khan’s speech in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan Proceedings (1948), quoted in Rafiqul Islam’s “The Language Movement” in Syed Manzoorul Islam, ed. *Essays on Ekushey: The Language Movement 1952*, Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1994. 42-56.

³ See especially Jasodhara Bagchi and Shubhoranjan Dasgupta, ed. *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, vols 1 and 2, Kolkata: Stree, 2003 and 2009 and Gargi Chakravartty’s *Coming Out of Partition. Refugee Women of Bengal*, Delhi: Bluejay Books, 2005.

⁴ Sarmistha Dutta Gupta. *Identities and Histories: Women’s Writing and Politics in Bengal*, Kolkata: Stree, 2010.

Pakistan would allow the minority Indian Muslims to maintain their cultural and political identities. With the rise of religious communalism, Muslim women could have felt a definite curtailment in their mobility and their right to free participation in the social and political life of the community.

But how is it that within four-five years of Partition so many young Bengali Muslim women – studying in colleges and teaching in schools for the most part – came out in public protests and could be seen organising processions and demonstrations, distributing leaflets, collecting funds, defying government bans and facing tear gas shells at the height of the Language Movement?⁵ In answering this question we, of course, have to first face the fact that around 1947-48, after many upper and middle class Bengali Muslim families moved to East Pakistan, their hopes of enjoying freedom and autonomy in the new country were dashed. They soon realised that the two-nation theory was no solution to their problems as the West Pakistani Muslims were as much a deterrent to their progress as the British or the Hindus had been. The West Pakistanis not only imposed Urdu over the majority of Bengalis, their rule over the political, economic and social life of the people of East Pakistan was colonial and exploitative. So, all Bengalis found their religious identities taking a backseat during the Language Movement of the late-40s and the early-50s.

But the question I want to ask here is, did this coming together of all Bengalis and especially Bengali women's contribution in upholding the honour and dignity of their mother tongue, also have anything to do with Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) and the Sakhawat Hossain Memorial School for Muslim Girls that she founded in Calcutta in 1911? Was it not Rokeya who lamented at the conference of the Bengal Women's Education League in 1927, that the Muslims of Bengal miss their mother because they don't have a mother tongue? (Nahar 412). Then how is it that in twenty-five years' time we hear one of the youngest participants of the Language Movement, a high school girl from Dhaka, saying that she found the very thought of embracing Urdu at the expense of her very own Bengali, ludicrous? (Abdullah 55). This essay is only an attempt to begin to address this question by looking at the early history of Sakhawat Memorial School. The history of this school can be written in many different ways and lead us in many different directions but in order to keep the focus manageable here, I have decided to trace its trajectory especially with reference to questions of identity and language until 1947.

⁵ Tushar Abdullah, ed. *Bhashakanya. Bahannor Bhasha Andoloney Narider Katha* (Daughters of the Language Movement of 1952), Dhaka: Nari Grantha Prabartona, 1997.

Caught in a Double Bind

When Rokeya bemoaned that the Muslims of Bengal had no mother because they did not have a mother tongue, she said that she was speaking from experience of running a school for sixteen years (Nahar 412). The year that she founded the Sakhawat Memorial School for Muslim Girls, was also the year that saw the founding of Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samity (Bengal Muslim Literary Society) in Calcutta. A group of young middle-class Bengali Muslims, who felt marginalised both by the majority Hindus and the upper-class Urdu-speaking Muslims, founded this literary association of their own and began to publish its Bengali mouthpiece, the *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika* from 1918. It was the time of emergence of the new Bengali Muslim intelligentsia, a section of whom stressed the ethno-linguistic component of their culture and projected Bengali as their mother tongue and as closer to the culture practised by the overwhelming majority of *atraps* or indigenous Muslims of the region. On the other hand, those in favour of Urdu, were the *ashrafs* or the well-born who traced their ancestry to Mughal or Pathan aristocracy, thus marking their difference from local converts. They felt Urdu was closer to Islam as it was written in the Arabic script and forged a link between Indian Muslims and the Islamic world beyond the sub-continent. They looked down upon Bengali as the language of Hindus and took pride in their Mughal, Persian, Turko-Afghan or Abyssinian origins (Anisuzzaman 46-49; Murshid Murshid 135).

With Urdu being identified as a Muslim language and the high-born *ashrafs* looking down upon Bengali as a Hindu language, the women of upper-class Muslim families in the province were caught in a double bind. Late nineteenth-century reformers of northern India like Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi of Deoband and Altaf Husain Hali of Aligarh had found *begamati zuban* or women's language in Urdu to be archaic and insufficiently Islamic. They tried to purge the vernacular expressions that persisted in it, replacing these with higher status loan words from Persian and Arabic (Minault 113). In Bengal the situation was more complex as most women of upper and middle-class families, whose mother tongue was not Urdu, spoke the language very badly. Yet they were severely chastised when they learnt to read and write secretly in Bengali. Such families took pride in strictly secluding their girls and offering them only some rudimentary training in parroting the Qur'an without the knowledge of Arabic. Some of them who started sending their boys for an English education to well-known schools at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, could come to terms with women learning Urdu and Persian at home but never Bengali. This attitude continued from the time Rokeya was growing up in a high-born family in the 1880s till well into the early 1920s, when the school she founded was already in its second decade of existence. One of the foremothers of the Language Movement of East Pakistan and eminent poet Sufia Kamal, thirty years younger to Rokeya, recalls in her

memoirs how she learnt to read Bengali at home and how she met with severe censure from her in-laws, the Nawabs of Shaistabad, when her first published writing appeared in a Bengali periodical of Barisal in the third decade of the last century (Kamal 34).

At a time when aristocratic Muslims considered learning a “Hindu language” a blasphemy, it was Rokeya’s elder sister Karimunnesa Khanum who inculcated in her the love of Bengali in childhood (Nahar 63).⁶ Karimunnesa, who Rokeya thought was a “hidden gem,” had braved immense opposition from relatives and friends to learn her mother tongue. When their father discovered Karimunnesa reading a Bat-tala *punthi* or manuscript, considered cheap and sleazy, he started teaching her chaste Bengali. However, with obstructionist mullahs raising a hue and cry, this had to be stopped soon and shortly afterwards Karimunnesa was married off (Rokeya, “Lukano Ratan,” Nahar 415). Rokeya describes her elder sister as a born-poet and a voracious reader who remained undaunted in her efforts to learn Bengali clandestinely in her marital home (Nahar 416). It was she who made sure Rokeya did not forget her mother tongue after marriage to a Urdu-speaking family of Bhagalpur in Bihar. In dedicating her book *Motichur* (1922) to her elder sister, Rokeya writes:

I have been running this Urdu school for the last eleven years; here too everyone speaks Urdu..... I have to speak to them in Urdu day in and day out. The fact that I have not forgotten Bengali in spite of such torment for so long, is only because I am blessed to have a sister like you. (Nahar 63)⁷

Though both her highly-educated husband and elder brother taught Rokeya English and encouraged her to read and write, it was her self-educated sister instilling in her the love of her mother tongue that strengthened Rokeya’s cultural identity as a Bengali and shaped the way she emerged as a major writer. Karimunnesa egged her on to write in Bengali, keenly read everything that she wrote and Rokeya, in turn, tried to retrieve some of her sister’s poetry and mainly looked up to Karimunnesa for motivation (Nahar 416). A space was created in the margins for the sharing of gendered experiences which made Rokeya realise early in life what sorority could bolster and turned her into a firm believer in female collectivities.

It is worth noting here that upon her arrival in Calcutta in 1910 with the intentions of starting a school, Rokeya had sought out leading educational workers from other communities to gain first-hand knowledge of how these women were running girls’ schools. That is how Rokeya and two pioneering Brahmo women, Sarala Ray and Abala Bose, first met to fashion a lifelong

⁶ Rokeya refers to this in her dedication of the book *Motichur* to her elder sister.

⁷ All translations from Bengali to English in this essay are mine.

friendship.⁸ It is not within the scope of this essay to discuss how, in her later years, Rokeya forged a secular sisterhood to address the violation of rights of women across communities and religions when the clash of interests between middle-class Hindus and Muslims was growing sharper by the day in Bengal.⁹ But we shall see how the secularist Rokeya prioritised her ethno-linguistic identity as against her pan-Islamist self in the running of her school when she braved tremendous odds to introduce Bengali there. Before going into that, let us briefly overview the history of her school until Partition.

The Purdah School and the Moving Black Holes

Rokeya's first attempt to start a school was in Bhagalpur in 1909 in memory of her husband Sakhawat Hossain who had bequeathed a legacy of Rs 10,000 for the purpose. After moving to Calcutta soon after, she founded the Sakhawat Hossain Memorial School for Muslim Girls in March 1911 in a rented room in Walliullah Lane of the city. With Rokeya's door-to-door campaign urging her co-religionists to send their daughters to her school where, she had to assure, purdah norms would not be violated, the number of students increased from 8 to 30 within two years and the school shifted to a slightly bigger rented address in 1913. In 1915, with as many as 84 students it became an upper primary school and moved house again. By 1927, it was a high school with 149 students and ran a boarding for Muslim girls who came from several district towns of Bengal. The first three girls were sent up for the University Entrance examination in 1931 and the next year the school shifted to a bigger rented accommodation on Lower Circular Road, shortly before Rokeya's death.¹⁰

A few years before founding her school Rokeya had penned the short story "Souro Jagat" (The Solar System) where her protagonist Gauhar, the enlightened father of nine daughters was keen to send his girls to the renowned Dow Hill School in Kurseong. But his brother-in-law Jafar vehemently opposed

⁸ Rokeya knew nothing about administering a school, framing a curriculum and pedagogic practices. In her own words, "When I first started the school with five students, I had no idea how a single teacher could teach five pupils at the same time" (Mahmud 32). Sarala Ray, who was closely associated with the Brahma Balika Shikshalaya at that time, made it possible for Rokeya to observe closely the running of that school when the latter was about to start her own institution (Nahar 597). Also see Barnita Bagchi's "Towards Ladyland: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Movement for Women's Education in Bengal, 1900-1932," in *Paedagogica Historica*, January 2009: 743-55.

⁹ Pradip Kumar Datta has shown how, at a time when the Muslims were emerging as an important political force in the Khilafat Movement and the Swarajists were pushing for the Bengal Pact, the projection of Hindu weakness through reports of abduction of Hindu women by rapacious Muslim males became a composite point for mobilisation of a large range of tensions including inter and intra-caste relations, the threatened position of zamindars and the mofussil bhadrak as well as the whole problem of gender relations. For further details, see Datta's *Carving Blocs Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth-Century Bengal*, Delhi: Oxford UP, 1999.

¹⁰ Secretary's Report on the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School (1911-1931) (Nahar 609-616).

him as he feared it would eventually turn his nieces into Christians. Gauhar and his wife were, however, confident that this could never happen because they had acquainted their daughters with Islamic ideals and texts from very early childhood (Rokeya, "Soura Jagat," Nahar 88-108). It was precisely because Rokeya upheld these ideals that both through her writings and through her school, she spearheaded a movement to grant women the rights conceded in Islam but not practiced socially.

Firmly believing that a rationalisation of religion could liberate women from superstition and incarcerating practices, Rokeya's school educated them to interpret Islam in particular and respect elements of value in India's heritage in general. The school also sought to modify ancient practices to suit modern conditions of life so that it could develop the "physical, moral and mental" faculties of girls along "modern lines" and synthesise "the East and the West" (Rokeya, "Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl," Nahar 498). This meant preventing the "slavish imitations" of western customs and traditions which turned the convent-educated Jainabs into Jennies and made them lose all respect for their culture and religion (Rokeya, "Dhangsher Pathey Bangiya Musalman" [Bengali Muslims on the Road to Destruction], Nahar 444). The girls had to be educated to be able to counter critiques of the status of women in Islam and the "right" values, enshrined in the role models from the golden past of Islam, had to be inculcated in them. Simultaneously, offering Muslim women a modern curriculum – compulsory English, maths and science, geography, history and public administration as well as darning and embroidery – was a priority so that they could match up to the educational attainments and socio-political visibility of middle-class Hindu, Brahmo and Christian women.¹¹ Extra-curricular activities like music and sports were included too and the girls were exposed to a diverse range of literary and cultural activities.¹²

However, inadequate and intermittent grants from the colonial government and colossal indifference showed by most members of her own community – some of whom called Rokeya a whore and an embezzler of funds – hindered the growth of the school during the founder's lifetime.¹³ Parents

¹¹ Rokeya asked fellow Muslims, whom she thought were on the road to self-destruction, that "if women of other civilized communities and other provinces of India could become doctors, barristers, councillors and delegates of round-table conferences, why should our girls be deprived from the fruits of edification?" ("Dhangsher Pathey Bangiya Musalman" 446).

¹² Author's interviews with Dhaka-based Sakhawat almuna Latifa Akand and Sultana Zaman as well as Kolkata-based alumna Naseema De and Syeda Ghani in Kolkata in March-June 2010. All of them studied in the school between the late 1930s and the early 1950s.

¹³ Begum Rokeya's novella *Padmarag*, published in 1924, offers interesting vignettes of the trials and tribulations faced by Dinatarini Sen and her co-workers in running a girls' school where parents of wards accuse the principal of running a fraudulent business and of being something like a prostitute. See the critical introduction by Barnita Bagchi in *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag: Two Feminist Utopias*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005.

would only send their wards if fully-curtained transport was arranged to ferry the students and funds were a major constraint in getting adequate number of buses which were looked upon as “moving black holes” by other communities in the city (Chattopadhyay in Nahar 606). Had Rokeya not made arrangements for transporting her students in purdah buses and had not provided for daily reading of Qur’an in the school and a separate *namaaz* room with basins for ablutions for day scholars as well as boarders,¹⁴ very few Muslim families would have sent their girls there. Rokeya herself had to adopt a policy of strategic compliance by maintaining purdah throughout her life, though she didn’t personally believe in veiling herself.¹⁵ As the religiously endorsed seclusion of women had become a subject of intense anxiety amongst the Bengali Muslim intelligentsia ranging from the conservative ulema to the more progressive liberals, Rokeya realised that it would be impossible for her to run the school unless she observed purdah. She taught, single-handedly administered the school and even conducted all-male school managing committee meetings with the help of an educated, non-Muslim woman without defying purdah norms (Mahmud 45).

Lack of sufficient funds for purdah buses resulted in slower intake of day scholars and those girls who sought admission here from other parts of Bengal had to be turned down due to lack of resources in running a boarding until the late 1920s (Rokeya, “Secretary’s Report on the Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ School,” Nahar 609-16). At a time when government-appointed inspectors of schools were of the view that Muslim girls’ schools were not getting a fair share of grants placed at their disposal,¹⁶ it was the founder’s lasting regret that the school could not manage to have a building of its own.¹⁷ Between 1927 and

¹⁴ Interviews with Latifa Akand, Sultana Zaman and Syeda Ghani. See also Husne Jahan’s “Amar Jiboney Sakhawat Schooler Abodan” [The Influence of Sakhawat School On My Life], *Rokeyar Manaskanyara*, Dhaka: Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ School Alumni Association, 2002. 112-17.

¹⁵ Interview with Mohammad Naseeruddin. Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmik, eds. *Women in Concert: An Anthology of Bengali Muslim Women’s Writings, 1904-38*, Kolkata: Stree, 2008.

¹⁶ Depositing before the “Committee to Advise on Advancing Muslim Education in Bengal” in 1934, Hridaybala Bose, Inspectress of Schools, Presidency and Burdwan Divisions, said: “I do not think that the Muslim girls’ schools are getting a fair proportion of the money set apart for female education. Muslim girls are not getting a fair share of the grant placed at my disposal.” File no: 8R-24 of 1934, Progs no.1-6. Serial no. 1-6. Govt. of Bengal, Education Department (112).

¹⁷ For government’s dilly-dallying over grants and allocating a plot of land to the school and the indifference of Muslim ministers in the Bengal government, see “Secretary’s Report on the Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ School” (Nahar 609-16) and the editorials in *The Mussalman* dated 30 March and 30 May 1930 (Nahar 618-20). In her address to the managing committee of her school on 8 March 1931, a year before her death, Begum Rokeya began by saying that many people considered her a nuisance because she was always begging for her school and if she had believed in idol worship she would undoubtedly have badgered a goddess to grant a building to the school so that it might grow and prosper. This address was later published as “Bengali Muslims on the Road to Destruction” in *Masik Mohammadi*, June-July 1931.

1932, Rokeya left no stone unturned to get the government sanction a plot of land and funds for a school building. But nothing came off it until her death.¹⁸ Four years after Rokeya's demise, Sakhawat Memorial became a fully government-aided school in 1936 and moved to a huge colonial building with large grounds at its present Lord Sinha Road address in 1937. It was opened to girls of all communities after Partition and did away with curtained buses by the end of 1948.

Bad Urdu and a “Hindu” Language

In her speech at the Bengal Women's Education Conference, Rokeya had strongly suggested that the Qur'an must be translated into regional Indian languages. Then she went on to ask:

But what would be the regional language in Calcutta?... People here claim Urdu as their mother tongue but speak such bad Urdu that it's a pain to listen to them. Anyway, I feel the Qur'an ought to be taught in both Urdu and Bengali translations. My dear non-Muslim sisters! I hope you are not thinking that I'm a diehard conservative for suggesting that the Qur'an should to be taught to girls very early. As you know, I have always been dead against all forms of conservatism. I am suggesting the teaching of Qur'an because what we understand by basic education is all to be found there. (Nahar 413)

After having spent more than a decade in her marital home in Bihar amongst Urdu-speaking people, the severity of the language problem plaguing a large section of the Muslims in Bengal dawned on Rokeya as she settled in Calcutta. Every day she realised anew the gravity of the problem – especially with regard to women – and by the time she delivered this speech Rokeya had 16 years of experience in running the Sakhawat Memorial School to reflect upon. Just as she had strategically complied in observing purdah herself and ensuring purdah norms were observed in her school, so also Rokeya tried to convince her co-religionists how they stood to gain if the message of Islam was spread through local languages and through their mother tongue.

Let us recall Rokeya's short story “Souro Jagat” once again where Gauhar is sure that his daughters would never forget their roots even if they were sent to a convent because of the way they were acquainted with Qur'an since early childhood. He had even made his wife Noor a “worthy companion” in this by teaching her to understand Qur'anic precepts and not merely let her recite the Arabic text. But how was Qur'an to be made accessible to Indian women in

¹⁸ See “Secretary's Report on the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School” and Begum Rokeya's letter to the Additional Director Public Instruction of undivided Bengal, Khan Bahadur Tassadak Ahmed, dated 25.4.1932 (Nahar 517-18).

seclusion who did not have “enlightened” husbands like Gauhar, were deprived of formal education, and who barely had the opportunity of learning a language other than that which was spoken in their immediate surroundings? Her answer lay in making women learning to read and write in their mother tongue, thus opening up the possibility of self-improvement through the Qur’an and at the same time widening women’s access to education. If the most effective way to silence a community was to rob them of the language they were born into, the gendered subaltern subject was doubly robbed having no recourse to other languages.

As Urdu was not the mother tongue for the majority of Muslims in Bengal, there was a crying need to educate women bound by severe purdah and other strictures in their own tongue. However, when the Sakhawat Memorial School was founded in 1911, there was “not a single institution” for Muslim girls in the capital of the Bengal Presidency where the medium of instruction was Bengali (Zaman 63). Sakhawat Memorial too had to use Urdu as the medium of instruction as most of the girls who were sent to the school in its first decade belonged to Urdu-speaking non-Bengali families. Rokeya noted that the Bengalis were much less enterprising in this respect.¹⁹ After the first seven years of living in Calcutta, she found that none of the “respectable Mohamedan ladies” that she had come into contact with, spoke Bengali even though their Urdu was “miserable.” When Rokeya introduced English in the school in the early years, she remembers having tried to explain the meaning of English words in Bengali. But this had to soon stop as guardians requested her to use Urdu instead (Zaman 28-29). The other schools for Muslim girls that had opened in the city in the wake of the Sakhawat Memorial School were also Urdu-medium. At this time the government’s move to appoint peripatetic teachers to teach Urdu to girls and women of families which observed strict purdah, showed that there was no public demand for Bengali from amongst Bengali Muslims (Zaman 28-29).

Therefore, it was an onerous task for Rokeya when she tried to introduce Bengali as a subject in her school at the end of 1917. This coincided with the efforts of early Bengali Muslim intellectuals to bring out periodicals like the *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika* (1917), *Moslem Bharat* (1920) and *Saogat* (1918) which voiced the aspirations of the new middle class and engaged with the language question. As we know, since 1902²⁰ Rokeya had been advocating in Bengali against the excesses of purdah, for women’s education and about the violation of rights of women across religions through her polemical pieces and fiction. She continued to contribute to these new periodicals edited by Bengali

¹⁹ See Begum Rokeya’s letters to the editor of *The Mussalman* dated November 30, 1917 and December 20, 1918 in *The Musalman Patrikay Rokeya Prasango* 27-35.

²⁰ Her first essay “Pipasa” (Thirst) was published in the monthly *Nabaprabha* in February-March 1902.

Muslims. However, it was not until the mid-1920s that Rokeya's relentless efforts to introduce Bengali in her school bore fruit.

After trying for two years, she had to discontinue Bengali in 1919 as the number of students enrolled for the subject kept dwindling and it became a part of her daily routine "to invent work for the lone Bengali teacher" who had only three students (Zaman 32). Parents of girls whose mother tongue was Urdu were not willing to let them learn Bengali even if it did not cost them anything extra (Zaman 29) as the language was thought to be non-Islamic and Bengali background and cultural symbols continually stigmatised (Ahmad 12). Then again there were too few Bengali families who let their girls be instructed in the mother tongue and Rokeya tried hard for many years to convince these parents that instead of parroting "bad Urdu," Muslims from Bengal needed to be taught Bengali (Zaman 27-35). It was mostly government servants transferred to Calcutta from the districts for short stints, who preferred Bengali to Urdu for their wards. To Rokeya these Bengali girls seemed like meteors who "blaze forth the firmament of the school for a few months and then disappear altogether" (Zaman 34). Girls from district towns started swelling the ranks since the school began to take in boarders in the late 1920s²¹ and Sakhawat Memorial could resume a regular Bengali section parallelly with the Urdu section from around 1927 (Nahar 701).

By then a prominent section of the Bengali Muslim intelligentsia had begun strongly advocating a secular, anti-communal and humanist stance while foregrounding their ethno-linguistic identity. The early 1920s saw the fizzling out of the Khilafat Movement and with it more and more Bengali Muslims began re-thinking the question of nationalism, rejecting pan-Islamist ideals and urging for a change in attitude towards religion, morality, education and the status of women. A small group of Bengali Muslims, led by the poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, began discarding both pan-Islamist and nationalist ideologies and started raising their voice against religious bigotry and all forms of exploitation in the periodicals *Dhoomketu* (1922), *Langal* (1925) and *Ganabani* (1926). Nazrul's poems, drawing freely on both Hindu and Muslim pantheons, started appearing in print for which a section of the Muslim press censured him for being "un-Islamic" and "satanic." Some Hindus too criticised him for polluting the Bengali language with Perso-Arabic words (Murshid 148-50). Around this time, the new group Muslim Sahitya Samaj (Muslim Literary Society), formed in Dhaka in 1926, spearheaded the campaign to trace the cause of Muslim backwardness and led what was called the *buddhir mukti andolan* or a "movement for the liberation of the intellect" through their journal *Shikha*. It was the same group that formed the "Anti-Purdah League" and gave a huge reception to the first Bengali Muslim woman graduate Fazilatunnesa when she discarded her

²¹ Interview with Latifa Akand.

burkha and started attending classes in a sari in Dacca University in 1925-26, often facing stones and brickbats (Naseeruddin 583).

Rokeya was no longer a lone voice and her untiring efforts as a secular nationalist and a champion of women's education finally started paying off with Muslim girls from diverse backgrounds coming to study in the school from the mid-1920s. There were girls from upper-class families with landed and business interests, from families of middle-class professionals as well as a few from lower middle-class families. The middle and lower-middle class girls were largely Bengali-speaking and many of them, staying in the school hostel, came from suburban towns like Pabna, Sirajgunj, Barisal and Bogura in the eastern part of undivided Bengal.²²

There was no longer a dearth of girls who couldn't be made to pronounce Bengali words correctly, as had been the case in 1916 when Rokeya had for the first time tried to make a few of her students recite a Bengali poem during the school's prize distribution ceremony (Zaman 30). With Bengali resumed as a medium of instruction, a poem by the renowned Bengali poet Golam Mostafa was sung as a prayer song in the school Assembly in the 1930s and 40s. By the mid-1930s, Bengali girls were taking a lead in most cultural activities. Escorted by their teachers they rode in purdah buses to participate in inter-school sports and all-Bengal needlework competitions.²³ Teachers were mostly from Christian, Hindu, Brahmo and Anglo-Indian communities and they served as secular role models teaching the students to see the world differently from what they had been experiencing at home and in their community.²⁴

The divide between Bengali and non-Bengali Muslim girls of the school, however, did not disappear altogether. The Urdu-speaking upper-class girls were still mostly condescending towards the Bengalis, who they thought were not quite Muslims as the latter wore saris, staged Rabindranath Tagore's dance dramas, performed Sukumar Ray's plays, recited Ghalib's poetry, and sang songs of Kazi Nazrul Islam and Atulprasad Sen.²⁵ When politics in the sub-continent acquired new overtones in 1946-47, its repercussions were felt in the school too. The Muslim League had started labelling nationalist Muslims – who did not support the idea of Pakistan – as traitors to Islam. This resulted in an undercurrent of tension between the majority of the senior girls whose families supported the League and the two-nation theory, and the minority who did not. In the process, most of the Urdu-speaking and Bengali-speaking girls united as Muslims, prioritising religion as the basis of their identity shortly before

²² Interview with Latifa Akand and Naseema De.

²³ Interview with Naseema De. Also see Nahar 615.

²⁴ Interviews with Latifa Akand, Sultana Zaman, Naseema De and Syeda Ghani. All of them remembered their teachers very fondly for their devotion to the teaching profession and for never looking down upon the Muslim students as "backward."

²⁵ Interviews with Sultana Zaman and Naseema De. See also, *Rokeyar Manaskanyara*.

Partition.²⁶ But as we all know, this was short-lived and the Bengali students of Sakhawat Memorial School who migrated to East Pakistan in 1947, soon found out that they had no freedom to express a central part of their identities as Bengalis under the new regime.

Mother Tongue and/as Self-Respect

The language movement of the Bengalis vehemently opposing Urdu had a few women in the lead and many in the rank and file. A few of them had been students of Sakhawat and many had not. But the influence of Sakhawat Memorial, in producing enlightened women who contributed enormously to the self-making of the middle-class Bengali Muslims, was by then far-reaching. Schools were well-attended all over erstwhile East Pakistan by Muslim girls where earlier the majority of students were Hindu. Bengali had been a medium of instruction in most such schools since inception and it was no longer a matter of shame for respectable Muslim girls to read and write in the language so powerfully and assiduously propagated by Rokeya and pursued by writers like Razia Khatun Chowdhurani (1907-34), Shamsur Nahar Mahmud (1908-64) and Sufia Kamal (1911-99) amongst others.

In the years immediately following Partition, a small percentage of girls from district towns like Noakhali, Mymensingh and Bogura, who wanted to pursue higher education, usually moved to Dhaka after finishing school and stayed in college hostels. Though these young women studying in Dacca University were still bound by awful strictures like having to seek permission from the Proctor before talking to any of their fellow male students, staying in a campus offered them some freedom from the regulations at home and an awareness of current political debates and discussions (Abdullah 4, 22). As Roshan Ara Bacchu, Sharifa Khatun and the others remember, it was this very small percentage of women staying in college hostels of Dhaka who took the lead during the Language Movement of 1952 in mobilising both day scholars of the university and students of the various girls' schools in town. Besides, school teachers like Mumtaz Begum of Narayangunj also played a crucial role in making students and the general public of district towns aware of the implications of having Urdu as the only state language of the country (Akhtar, "Preface," *Bhasakanya* 2-3).

By breaking law to come out openly in street meetings and rallies in defense of their mother tongue, a few of these women risked being expelled from colleges and hostels. Though most of them took on less visible work like collecting funds or supplying food to those directly involved in political action, some of them braved being disowned by their families after being rounded up

²⁶ Interviews with Sultana Zaman and Naseema De.

by the police.²⁷ However, what was common to all of them was that they had not been deprived of education and had had an opportunity to make sense of the world through the language of their birth. Education had ingrained in them a sense of self-respect which was intrinsically linked to taking pride and expressing themselves in the language they considered their own. They refused the dominance of an alien language and culture when they had nothing else but their self-respect to fall back on.

This was a long way from the times of Majluma, the illiterate woman with no sense of self-worth whom Rokeya had portrayed as “representative” [sic] of all subjugated and helpless Indian women in her transcreation of the British writer Marie Corelli’s novel *The Murder of Delicia*. Though Rokeya questions the colonial suggestion of the “empowerment” of British women as opposed to the “oppression” of Indian women in her interpretation of *The Murder of Delicia*, she emphasises that the outstanding difference between Delicia and Majluma is that the former has education which in turn induces self-esteem, while the latter does not. Rokeya believes that even if Delicia did not have economic independence as a successful novelist, she would still have left her disloyal and deceitful husband. Not having a farthing, she would perhaps have earned her living as a teacher or a governess or a matron of an orphanage (Nahar 155-56). Tarini Bhavan, Rokeya’s fictional creation of a female-founded philanthropic institution in the novel *Padmarag*, and her own school Sakhawat Memorial, were homes to many such women like Delicia and Majluma who made use of their education to be self-reliant and self-respectful.

In the 1950s, Majluma’s daughters, most of whom had secured their right to education and right to mother tongue through Rokeya’s untiring efforts, had demanded the renaming of Chameli Hall – the women’s hall of Dacca University – as Rokeya Hall a few years after their participation in the Language Movement. When the hall was thus renamed in 1964 (Nahar 689), Bengali women – whether they were from Sakhawat Memorial or not – had formally managed to acknowledge Rokeya as a pioneer in girls’ education. But as I have tried to argue, there are grounds for claiming a lot more – to recognise Rokeya and the Sakhawat Memorial School as precursors of the secular nationalist movement that saw the birth of a new nation in 1971. It is high time we joined hands in looking afresh at Rokeya through histories of this movement.

²⁷ Mumtaz Begum, the headmistress of Narayanganj Morgan Girls’ School in 1952, organised one of the largest women’s demonstrations in Narayanganj in protest of police atrocities and the killings of February 21 and 22 in Dhaka. People of the district town blocked the road to Dhaka after she was arrested and being taken to the capital of East Pakistan. After her imprisonment, she refused to admit that she was wrong and get released by signing a “mercy petition.” As a result, her husband divorced her and she lost her job too (Akhtar, “Preface,” *Bhashakanya* ii).

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