

Begum Rokeya and the Quest for Women's Rights: A Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This research paper delves into the life and legacy of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a pioneering figure in the early 20th-century feminist movement in South Asia. A prominent Bengali writer, educationist, and social reformer, Begum Rokeya played a pivotal role in advocating for the rights and emancipation of women in colonial India. This historical perspective aims to analyze Begum Rokeya's multifaceted contributions to women's empowerment, education, and social reform. The paper explores the socio-political context of colonial India during Begum Rokeya's time and the challenges women faced in a deeply patriarchal society. It delves into her literary works, such as the iconic "Sultana's Dream," and examines how she utilized literature as a powerful tool to critique gender norms and envision a society where women held equal status with men.

Furthermore, the research investigates Begum Rokeya's efforts in establishing schools for girls, including the famous "Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School," and assesses the impact of her educational initiatives on the lives of women in British India. Through an analysis of her speeches, writings, and activism, the paper aims to shed light on the strategies employed by Begum Rokeya in challenging societal norms and fostering a sense of agency among women. The study also considers the reception of Begum Rokeya's ideas in the broader context of the women's rights movement and assesses her influence on subsequent generations of feminists. By examining her historical significance, this research paper seeks to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the struggles for women's rights in South Asia, highlighting the enduring relevance of Begum Rokeya's vision in the ongoing quest for gender equality.

INTRODUCTION

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a luminary of the early 20th-century feminist movement in South Asia, stands as a beacon in the historical struggle for women's rights. In the complex tapestry of colonial India, Begum Rokeya emerged as a visionary writer, educationist, and social reformer, challenging the entrenched norms that confined women to subservient roles. This research paper endeavours to unravel the multifaceted contributions of Begum Rokeya to the quest for women's rights, providing a historical perspective on her transformative impact.

The socio-political landscape of colonial India during Begum Rokeya's time served as the crucible for her advocacy. Born in 1880 in British Bengal, she navigated a society steeped in patriarchal traditions, where the rights and aspirations of women were often eclipsed. Against this backdrop, Begum Rokeya's life and work become a compelling lens through which we can examine the broader dynamics of gender relations and the evolving struggle for equality.

Central to our exploration is the analysis of Begum Rokeya's literary legacy, notably her groundbreaking

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KEYWORDS: *Women's Rights, Colonial India, Gender Equality, Sultana's Dream, Social Reform, Education for Girls, Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School*

work, "Sultana's Dream." Through this imaginative piece, she not only critiqued prevailing gender norms but also envisioned a world where women held positions of power and influence. This paper investigates how literature served as a potent tool in her arsenal, enabling her to articulate a vision of societal transformation that resonated far beyond her time.

Education emerged as another battleground in Begum Rokeya's quest for women's rights. The establishment of the "Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School" marked a tangible effort to empower women through education, challenging the prevailing belief that women were to be confined to domestic spheres. We delve into the impact of her educational initiatives, examining the ripple effect on the lives of countless women who benefited from these institutions.

Moreover, the research situates Begum Rokeya within the broader context of the women's rights movement in South Asia. Her activism and writings not only challenged colonial-era norms but also laid the foundation for subsequent generations of feminists. By examining her historical significance, we aim to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the struggles for women's rights in the region, acknowledging the enduring relevance of Begum Rokeya's vision in the ongoing pursuit of gender equality.

In tracing Begum Rokeya's journey, this research paper seeks to illuminate the historical nuances of the women's rights movement, paying homage to a trailblazer whose quest for equality continues to resonate in the ongoing narrative of gender empowerment.

Objectives:

- **Examine Begum Rokeya's Life and Background:** Explore the personal and socio-cultural context in which Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain lived, including her upbringing, familial influences, and the societal norms prevalent in colonial Bengal during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
- **Investigate Begum Rokeya's Educational Initiatives:** Explore the establishment and impact of Begum Rokeya's educational endeavours, notably the "Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School." Assess how these initiatives aimed to empower women through education, challenging traditional roles and promoting intellectual independence.
- **Examine Begum Rokeya's Advocacy for Women's Rights:** Delve into Begum Rokeya's speeches, articles, and public engagements to

assess the nature and scope of her advocacy for women's rights. Explore her strategies in challenging societal norms, promoting gender equality, and fostering a sense of agency among women.

- **Contextualize Begum Rokeya within the Women's Rights Movement:** Situate Begum Rokeya within the broader historical context of the women's rights movement in South Asia. Explore her connections with contemporaneous feminist movements and assess her influence on subsequent generations of feminists in the region.

Methodology:

This research paper has been employ a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach. Primary sources, including Begum Rokeya's speeches, articles, and public engagements, were meticulously examined to gain insights into her advocacy for women's rights. The analysis of her literary works, particularly "Sultana's Dream," provided a lens through which to understand her visionary ideas and critique of societal norms. Secondary sources, such as historical records, biographies, and scholarly articles, were consulted to contextualize Begum Rokeya's life within the broader historical and socio-political landscape of South Asia during the early 20th century. The research methodology also included an exploration of contemporaneous feminist movements, both globally and within the Indian subcontinent, to elucidate the influences and connections that shaped Begum Rokeya's activism. By employing a combination of archival research, literary analysis, and contextualization within the feminist discourse of her time, this research paper aims to present a comprehensive historical perspective on Begum Rokeya's significant contributions to the quest for women's rights.

The personal and socio-cultural context in which Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain lived, including her upbringing, familial influences, and the societal norms prevalent in colonial Bengal during the late 19th and early 20th centuries:

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, born on December 9, 1880, in the village of Pair band in British Bengal (now Bangladesh), navigated a socio-cultural landscape deeply entrenched in colonial norms and patriarchal traditions. Her early life and upbringing played a crucial role in shaping her worldview and sparking her commitment to challenging the status quo.

- **Upbringing and Family Background:**
 - **Early Years in a Conservative Environment:** Begum Rokeya was born into a conservative

Muslim family, where traditional gender roles were prevalent. Her upbringing occurred in an environment that adhered to the prevailing norms of purdah (seclusion of women) and restricted opportunities for female education and empowerment.

- **Encouragement for Education:** Despite the conservative atmosphere, Begum Rokeya's progressive father, Abu Ali Saber, recognized the importance of education for both genders. He played a pivotal role in fostering her intellectual curiosity and supported her pursuit of knowledge, a somewhat unconventional stance in the context of the time.
- **Societal Norms in Colonial Bengal:**
 - **Purdah System and Gender Segregation:** Colonial Bengal was characterized by a strict purdah system, reinforcing the seclusion of women from public life. Begum Rokeya's early experiences would have exposed her to the limitations imposed on women, influencing her later advocacy for women's rights and education.
 - **Restrictions on Women's Education:** The late 19th and early 20th centuries in Bengal witnessed limited educational opportunities for women. The prevailing societal norms deemed female education unnecessary, and women were often discouraged from pursuing intellectual endeavours.
 - **Emergence of Social Reform Movements:** Simultaneously, this period saw the emergence of social reform movements, with individuals and groups challenging various aspects of traditional norms. Figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar had initiated movements advocating for social change and women's rights.
- **Begum Rokeya's Response to the Socio-Cultural Context:**
 - **Intellectual Awakening:** Begum Rokeya's exposure to a contrasting environment at her husband's home in Kolkata allowed her to witness a different socio-cultural milieu. This experience contributed to her intellectual awakening, prompting her to question and challenge the restrictive norms imposed on women.
 - **Empowerment through Education:** The recognition of education as a tool for empowerment became a central theme in Begum Rokeya's life. Her personal experiences, combined with a growing awareness of the injustices faced by women, fuelled her

determination to establish educational institutions that would uplift and empower women.

Begum Rokeya's life unfolded against the backdrop of a society in flux, where colonial influences intertwined with deeply ingrained cultural norms. Her upbringing, marked by both conservative values and progressive encouragement, laid the foundation for a remarkable journey of advocacy that would significantly impact the trajectory of women's rights in South Asia.

Establishment and impact of Begum Rokeya's educational endeavours, notably the "Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School.”:

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) was a prominent Bengali feminist, writer, and social reformer who played a significant role in advocating for women's rights and education in British India. Her educational endeavours, particularly the establishment of the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School, were groundbreaking in challenging traditional gender roles and promoting intellectual independence for women.

- **Establishment of Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School:**
 - **Pioneering Effort:** Begum Rokeya founded the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School in 1911 in British India (now in Kolkata). This initiative marked a pioneering effort in providing formal education to Muslim girls, challenging the prevalent norms that restricted women's access to education.
 - **Educational Vision:** Rokeya's vision for the school went beyond just literacy. She aimed to provide girls with a modern education that would enable them to be intellectually independent, socially aware, and capable of contributing to society.
 - **Empowerment through Education:** The school was established to empower girls by giving them the tools to break free from traditional constraints. Rokeya believed that education was the key to women's emancipation and that educated women would be better equipped to challenge societal norms.
- **Impact of Educational Initiatives:**
 - **Empowering Women:** The Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School became a platform for empowering women through education. It allowed girls to acquire knowledge, skills, and confidence, enabling them to participate more actively in public life.

- **Challenging Traditional Roles:** By providing education to girls, Rokeya challenged the traditional roles assigned to women in conservative societies. She believed that women should not be confined to domestic spaces but should actively engage in intellectual pursuits and contribute to the betterment of society.
- **Promoting Intellectual Independence:** The curriculum at Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School was designed to foster intellectual independence. Rokeya wanted to ensure that women were not just educated but also capable of critical thinking, making informed decisions, and contributing meaningfully to societal progress.
- **Cultural and Social Transformation:** Rokeya's educational initiatives contributed to a broader cultural and social transformation. The exposure to modern education empowered women to question traditional norms and inspired them to seek a more active role in shaping their destinies.

➤ **Legacy:**

Begum Rokeya's legacy extends beyond the establishment of the school. Her advocacy for women's rights, education, and intellectual independence laid the foundation for future feminist movements in the region. The Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School remains a symbol of her commitment to breaking down barriers and empowering women through education.

In conclusion, Begum Rokeya's educational endeavours, especially the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School, played a pivotal role in challenging traditional gender roles and promoting the intellectual independence of women. Her vision and pioneering efforts have had a lasting impact on the empowerment of women in South Asia.

Begum Rokeya's speeches, articles, and public engagements to assess the nature and scope of her advocacy for women's rights:

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, commonly known as Begum Rokeya, was a pioneering Bengali feminist writer, educationist, and social reformer in the early 20th century. Born in 1880 in British India (now Bangladesh), she dedicated her life to advocating for women's rights and social equality. Although she faced numerous challenges and societal norms that were deeply entrenched, Begum Rokeya employed various strategies in her speeches, articles, and public engagements to challenge these norms and promote gender equality.

- **Educational Empowerment:** One of Begum Rokeya's primary strategies was to emphasize the

importance of education for women. She believed that education was the key to empowerment and actively worked towards establishing schools for girls. She founded the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School in Kolkata in 1911, which aimed to provide modern education to girls.

- **Literary Contributions:** Begum Rokeya was a prolific writer and used her literary works to challenge societal norms and advocate for women's rights. Her famous work, "Sultana's Dream," written in 1905, is a feminist utopian story that depicts a world where women have taken over and men are confined to a separate space. Through her writings, she encouraged women to envision a different reality and challenge existing power structures.
- **Public Speeches and Engagements:** Begum Rokeya actively participated in public engagements, delivering speeches to raise awareness about the importance of women's rights. She addressed various forums, including social gatherings and conferences, where she spoke about the need for women's education, their participation in social and political spheres, and the dismantling of oppressive practices.
- **Advocacy for Legal Reforms:** Begum Rokeya advocated for legal reforms to improve the status of women. She highlighted the need for legal rights for women, including the right to education, property, and participation in governance. Her efforts contributed to the formation of the All-India Women's Conference in 1927, where women's issues and rights were discussed.
- **Fostering Agency and Self-Reliance:** Begum Rokeya encouraged women to be self-reliant and independent. She believed in fostering a sense of agency among women by promoting skills development and economic independence. Her efforts were directed towards enabling women to contribute actively to society and challenge traditional gender roles.
- **Engagement with Religious and Cultural Context:** Begum Rokeya engaged with religious and cultural contexts to promote her ideas. While challenging patriarchal interpretations of religious texts, she also sought to demonstrate that women's empowerment and education were not contradictory to Islamic values.
- **Formation of Women's Organizations:** Begum Rokeya played a key role in establishing women's organizations to address issues related to women's

rights. She actively participated in the formation of Anjuman-e-Khamwaen-e-Islam in 1916, an organization aimed at promoting the welfare of Muslim women.

Begum Rokeya's advocacy for women's rights was comprehensive, addressing educational, social, economic, and legal aspects. Through her writings and actions, she sought to challenge societal norms, promote gender equality, and empower women to take control of their destinies. Her legacy continues to inspire feminist movements and women's rights activism in South Asia.

Begum Rokeya within the broader historical context of the women's rights movement in South Asia:

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain played a pivotal role in the early women's rights movement in South Asia, contributing to the broader historical context of feminist activism in the region during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Her efforts were concurrent with and influenced by global feminist waves, and she, in turn, left a lasting impact on subsequent generations of feminists in South Asia.

➤ **Contemporaneous Feminist Movements:**

- **Global Influences:** Begum Rokeya's activism occurred during a period when feminist movements were gaining momentum globally. The suffragette movement in the West and the broader push for women's rights influenced her thinking. She was also aware of the struggles and achievements of feminists in other parts of the world.
- **Connections with Indian Feminists:** Begum Rokeya was not isolated in her advocacy; she had connections with other prominent feminists in India. Her work coincided with the efforts of women like Anandibai Joshi, Ramabai Ranade, and Pandita Ramabai, who were actively working towards women's education and rights in different parts of British India.
- **Influence on Subsequent Generations:**
 - **Educational Legacy:** Begum Rokeya's emphasis on women's education left a lasting impact on subsequent generations. The schools she founded, including the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School, continued to provide education for girls, contributing to a broader movement for women's literacy and empowerment.
 - **Literary Contributions:** Begum Rokeya's literary works, especially "Sultana's Dream," became a source of inspiration for later feminist writers. Her ability to use literature as a tool for

social critique and envisioning alternative realities resonated with subsequent generations of writers and activists.

- **Formation of Women's Organizations:** Begum Rokeya's involvement in the formation of Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam in 1916 and her efforts to establish a platform for Muslim women's issues set a precedent for the formation of women's organizations. These organizations became important spaces for feminist activism and advocacy in the region.

Legacy in Bangladesh and Beyond:

- **Nationalist Movement:** Begum Rokeya's activism intersected with the nationalist movements in British India. While advocating for women's rights, she also emphasized the role of women in the broader struggle for independence. Her legacy is often intertwined with the nationalist narrative in Bangladesh.
- **Symbol of Empowerment:** Begum Rokeya's life and work have become a symbol of empowerment for women in Bangladesh and beyond. Her contributions are celebrated as part of the national heritage, and her achievements continue to inspire feminists in the region.
- **Continuation of Feminist Activism:**
 - **Intersectional Feminism:** Begum Rokeya's advocacy had an intersectional dimension as she addressed issues of both gender and religion. Subsequent generations of feminists in South Asia have embraced intersectionality, recognizing the interconnectedness of various social identities and oppressions.
 - **Legal Reforms and Political Participation:** The efforts of feminists in the region, building on Begum Rokeya's legacy, have contributed to legal reforms and increased political participation for women. The struggles for equal rights in the legal sphere and increased representation in politics have continued.

In summary, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain played a crucial role in the early women's rights movement in South Asia. Her connections with contemporaneous feminist movements, her influence on subsequent generations, and her lasting legacy in the educational, literary, and organizational spheres have contributed significantly to the broader historical context of feminist activism in the region. Begum Rokeya's work laid the foundation for ongoing efforts towards gender equality and women's empowerment in South Asia.

Findings:

- **Educational Advocacy:** Begum Rokeya's advocacy for women's rights was prominently reflected in her emphasis on education. She recognized education as a tool for empowerment and established the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School in 1911 to provide modern education to girls. This institution became a significant milestone in the quest for women's rights, fostering intellectual development and challenging traditional gender roles.
- **Literary Contributions:** Through her literary works, particularly "Sultana's Dream," Begum Rokeya demonstrated a visionary approach to gender roles. Her writings not only critiqued the existing societal norms but also provided a utopian vision where women were empowered. The literature served as a powerful medium for challenging stereotypes and fostering a sense of possibility and agency among women.
- **Public Engagements and Speeches:** Begum Rokeya actively engaged in public forums, delivering speeches that addressed various aspects of women's rights. Her articulate and impassioned advocacy contributed to the awareness and mobilization of support for gender equality. By speaking out against societal norms that restricted women, she played a crucial role in initiating conversations around women's rights in the public sphere.
- **Advocacy for Legal Reforms:** Begum Rokeya's commitment to legal reforms for women's rights was evident in her efforts to address issues such as the right to education and property. Her advocacy played a part in shaping the discourse around legal rights for women and their increased participation in governance. She contributed to laying the groundwork for subsequent legal reforms benefitting women.
- **Fostering Agency and Self-Reliance:** A key aspect of Begum Rokeya's approach was the emphasis on fostering agency and self-reliance among women. She believed in empowering women economically and socially, encouraging skills development and independence. This strategy aimed at challenging traditional gender roles and positioning women as active contributors to society.
- **Connections with Contemporaneous Movements:** Begum Rokeya's activism was situated within the broader context of feminist movements globally and in South Asia. Her connections with contemporaneous feminist

activists in India and her awareness of global feminist struggles influenced her approach. This situational context provided a backdrop for her advocacy and shaped the collective efforts towards women's rights.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the historical perspective on Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's quest for women's rights illuminates a remarkable legacy that transcends time. Her strategic and multifaceted approach, encompassing educational advocacy, literary contributions, public engagements, and efforts towards legal reforms, positions her as a trailblazer in the early 20th-century women's rights movement in South Asia. Begum Rokeya's unwavering commitment to challenging societal norms, fostering agency and self-reliance among women, and connecting with contemporaneous feminist movements underscores her visionary contributions. Her educational institutions, such as the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School, remain testaments to her commitment to women's education. As subsequent generations continue to draw inspiration from her life and work, Begum Rokeya's historical legacy stands as a beacon in the ongoing pursuit of gender equality and women's empowerment in the region. Her quest for women's rights extends beyond her lifetime, shaping the discourse and actions of feminists, educators, and advocates in South Asia and beyond.

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