

Economic Empowerment and the Role of Muslim Women Professors in Colonial Bengal 1920-1947

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Abstract

The absence of Muslim women from the written history of Bengal is typically explained in terms of their apparent ‘traditionalism’ and ‘backwardness’. Although some attempts in this direction are being made, none the less Bengali Muslim women still remain almost invisible in our academic discourses and historical literature. This essay will endeavour to fill up the lacuna to some extent and will focus on Bengali Muslim women who strove to get themselves educated and joined the teaching profession. At the onset of the Twentieth Century, a new generation of educated and professional Muslim girls were emerging in Bengal. These Bengali Muslim women of the 1920’s who were into ‘white collar jobs’, proved with their lives that education brought knowledge and power, which in turn led to economic independence of women. Empowerment was embodied in these earning women who all handed this message to their next generation of young girls. The educated Muslim women Professionals in Colonial Bengal initiated a meaningful advance to be developed by latter day women, in order to create an alternative model of society where men and women would enjoy and share equal public and domestic rights, duties and status in the society. This article intends to trace the issue of Bengali Muslim women’s empowerment through education in the early decades of the twentieth century Colonial Bengal.

KEYWORDS:- Bengali Muslim Women, Abarodh, Purdah, White Collar Jobs, Economic Independence and Identity.

For the Muslims of Bengal, along with the Muslims of the whole Indian sub-continent the period till the twentieth century was a period of darkness, gloom and despair. The Muslims were suffering from decadence, ignorance, frustrations and were also held back by various customs and prejudices based on misinterpreted injunctions. As is usual in most backward societies, the worst sufferer from all these social ills of the Muslims, were their weaker counter parts i.e. the Muslim women. In the traditional Bengali Muslim Society, the women were the victims of the age old bondage and were segregated from the outside world. The so called Quranic injunctions and fatwas imposed on them by the orthodox Mullahs, Maulavis and Maulanas prevented most of the Muslim women from attending school outside home. There were several reasons why Bengali Muslim women lagged behind in society. The custom of strict purdah was an important hindrance for the female education. Abarodh deprived Bengali Muslims girls the access to education. Child marriage and conservative outlook were cited as the other causes for Muslim women’s educational backwardness.

With the advent of modernization in the Muslim Society from the late nineteenth century, Muslim women began to be involved in greater spheres of activity. For the Muslim community in Bengal its transition from tradition to modernization was accompanied by the birth of an enlightened elite group. This section of the Muslim community tried to give a new leash of life to the society by their liberal and rational thoughts. It was within this process of transformation that Bengali Muslim women stepped out into a new arena. Many of these “New Women” went to schools for

education and thereby they tended to break the traditional bondage. This first generation of educated Muslim women of the 1920's tried to create their own identity and tried to uplift their status in the society. It was only in the twentieth century that Bengali Muslim women developed the logic of gainful employment for women, which was practically unknown in the nineteenth century. Moreover, while in the nineteenth century just a handful of women (all Brahmos or Christians) had ventured to do paid jobs, in the twentieth century a substantial number particularly the Muslim women of Bengal joined the workforce. Thus it can be noted that 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 regeneration set in among the Muslims of Bengal. The traditional notion regarding 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.¹ 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. In the 1920's and 1930's a number of Bengali Muslim women got institutional education and began to acquire Graduate and Post Graduate degrees and few among them got into the teaching profession. Teaching as a profession for women won gradual acceptance because Bengali Muslim elite families who wanted education for their daughters were also anxious to shield them from contact with men outside the family circle. Realizing education as means to employment, few Muslim women were taking up the teaching profession, in Colonial Bengal, although an exact statistics cannot be obtained.

Among the few Bengali Muslim women who taught in colleges, Fazilatun Nesa Zoha (1905 – 1975) was one of the pioneer and was regarded as a model for the women of the time. Born in 27th February 1905 in a lower middle class Bengali Muslim family, in Tangail, with sheer determination, hardwork and merit she had an excellent academic career. In 1921, in the matriculation examination she secured the first position from Eden Girls' School and got a scholarship of Rs.15/- yearly.² She stood first amongst the students of the Dhaka district in the Intermediate Examination also. Then she came to Calcutta to get admitted to Bethune College, to escape the criticism of the village society she knew. She was the first Bengali Muslim women to get into Bethune College and in 1923, she made history as the first Muslim woman to receive a Bachelor's Degree from Bethune College in Calcutta.³ After completing her bachelor degree, she went to Dhaka University which had been founded in 1921. She was not only the first among the Bengali Muslim women to study for an M.A, but was also the first Muslim female student at the University of Dhaka where she completed her M.A degree. Mohammad Nasiruddin wrote, "In those days, the attitude of Muslim society towards women was extremely old fashioned. They could not imagine a Muslim girl sitting with boys in a classroom. When Fazilatun Nesa went to attend classes in a sari, without wearing the burqa, occasionally stones would be thrown at her. But she remained undaunted. She earned a scholarship and through sheer hard work and grit fulfilled her ambition of receiving higher education."⁴ Her result in the M.A examination in 1927 created a stir in all circles and Nazrul Islam himself wrote a poem in her honour. While studying at Dhaka, she discarded the borkha. This was symbolic, signifying her defiance of the traditional norms. This was not an easy task, for she not only had to face criticism, but even threat of physical violence. She was fearless and nothing could daunt her spirit. In 1928, Fazilatun Nesa went to England

for further studies on government scholarship and principally with the help of Saogat editor Mohammad Naseeruddin, braving sever social opposition. She married Shamsuj Zoha, a barrister she had met in England.

She chose education for a career. At the start of her career, she became the Assistant Inspector of Schools and later on, she became a Lecturer of Mathematics in Bethune College, her alma mater. She became the Head of the Department of Mathematics at Bethune College in Calcutta, and later it's Vice- Principal during partition in 1947. It was a rare honour for Muslim women to become a Vice- Principal in a premier educational institution in those days.⁵ Post 1947, her family opted for Pakistan and Fazilatun Nesa and her family relocated to Dhaka and took charge of Eden College as its Principal but lost her job under controversial circumstances in 1956. Her student at Bethune College and later colleague at Eden College, the noted educationist Akhtar Iman recalls "There were no other Muslim Professors at Bethune College during our times (1935-1937) except for Mrs. Zoha. Muslim students were of course, debarred admission to Bethune School. So it was out of question to have Muslim teachers there. Mrs. Zoha was not only a professor, she was the head of the Department of Mathematics..... In the first years Honours class she taught us Hydrostatics, Co-ordinate Geometry and Higher Algebra. She was quite a good teacher..... I felt so proud to attend the classes of the one and only Muslim teacher of the College..... When a big car came to drop her off at college every morning, it felt really good to see a Bengali Muslim woman so well-established at Bethune College."⁶

Fazilatun Nesa's career graph was not as smooth as it seemed to be. She came from a lower middle class Bengali Muslim family in East Bengal. Sheer determination and of course exceptional merit led her from one academic success to another. She discarded the borkha while studying at Dhaka and Calcutta. This was also not an easy task, for she not only had to face criticism but even threats of physical violence. Fazilatun Nesa was fearless. Her voyage to England was also not a smooth one. The Minister for Higher Education in Bengal, Nawab Mosharaf Hossain was shocked that a Muslim girl should venture without purdah and think of going abroad. "Muhammadi" and "Hanafi", the orthodox journals of that time vehemently criticised her for breaking the Muslim norms and traditions. Undeterred by criticism Faziltunnessa was equally unmoved by admiration. She spurned the love of Kazi Nazrul Islam, who was then at the height of his reputation as a poet and lyricist. She did not accept his marriage proposal and instead was more interested in building up her career and went abroad for further studies. Fazilatun Nesa strove to fulfil her aspirations with single minded determination. Fazilatun Nesa expressed her opinion against patriarchal society through her writings. In an article on female education which was published in Saogat in 1927, she advocated equal educational rights for women. In this article entitled "Muslim Nari Sikshar Prayojaniyata" she wrote in favour of the spread of formal secular female education along western lines where boys and girls would receive the same education.⁷ Such an education she believed would be beneficial for the Muslim society at large. She said that women have been confined in prison, which resisted the advance of knowledge in women's mind. Citing the ideas of Roman Rolland and Bertrand Russell, Fazilatun Nesa said that freedom of women is a necessity and no society can prosper without recognition of women's freedom.⁸ In an article entitled "Muslim Narir Mukti" published in Saogat in 1336 B.S. she boldly pleaded for women's emancipation through education.⁹ Thus, we see that Fazilatun

Nesa was the first Bengali Muslim woman to earn a postgraduate degree and the courage with which she took the first step in that direction was awe- inspiring.

Akhter Imam, also belonged to the first generation of Bengali Muslim working women. Akhter Imam (1917-2009) was an educationist; feminist activist who was born on 30th December 1917 in her maternal grandfather's house at Narinda in the old part of Dhaka.¹⁰ She passed Matriculation in 1933 and Intermediate in 1935 from the Eden Girls' High School and Intermediate College. Akhter Imam completed her Honours in Philosophy in 1937 from Bethune College in Calcutta, under the University of Calcutta. For having secured the first position among girls with honours, she was awarded Gangamani Devi Medal by the University of Calcutta. She did her Masters in Philosophy from the University of Dhaka in 1946.¹¹ She was granted a government overseas scholarship from the Bengali Muslim Education Fund and so in 1952, she did her Masters again in Philosophy from University of London. In 1963-65 she pursued further research in Philosophy at the University of Nottingham, U.K.¹² Akhter Imam started her career as an Assistant Teacher at Eden School. From the middle of the 1940s upto March 1956, she worked as Lecturer at Eden College with a scale of pay Rs.350-25-500¹³ (E.B. after 14th and 18th stages). After 1956 she joined Dhaka College on transfer as Professor. For several years since 1953, she had taught at the department of Philosophy of the University of Dhaka as a part-time teacher.¹⁴ In 1968-69, she became the first female Head of the Department and first female teacher of Philosophy in the University of Dhaka.

On invitation from Unicef and various governments and organizations, she attended many International Seminars, visited host of institutions and toured many countries. In 1968, she was the first woman to be elected General President of the Pakistan Philosophical Congress at its 15th session. She was the first Convener of the Presidium of Bangladesh Philosophical Society and then a member of the Bangladesh Philosophical Congress. For three consecutive years, she was the President of the 'Bangladesh Lekhika Sangha'. She was also the President of Hemantika an organization for the welfare of senior woman citizens of Bangladesh. Akhter Imam has written scores of essays and book both in Bengali and English. Her noted books were Galpo Nay (1970), Bahurupee (1974), David Hume – on the Nature of the Self, Rokeya Halle Bish Bachhar (1986).¹⁵ In recognition of her contribution to the society, she was awarded 'Roquiah Padak 2002'.¹⁶ In 1976, Dhaka University Alumni Association ceremonially honoured her on the occasion of its 75th founding anniversary. Mrs. Akhtar Imam was a Lecturer in Child Psychology, Eden Girl's Dacca. She was appointed to B.E.S. on 9.3.43 and her service was confirmed on 15.08.47. when she was on a study leave in the U.K. for two years from 04/09/1950, Maulvi Syed Md. Abdul Hai, B.A. (Hons), M.A. (Philosophy) officiating from 26/11/1950. In 1998, on the occasion of Golden Jubilee of India's Independence Kolkata the International Society for International Studies and Research conferred on her special reception and Memorandum as a renowned teacher. She died in Dhaka on 22nd June 2009.¹⁷ Akhtar Imam had dreamt of becoming economically self-independent, and she was successful in fulfilling her dreams. Her writings were against the discriminatory behaviour and existing prejudices of the society towards womenfolks.¹⁸

Shamsun Nahar Mahmud, a Bengali Muslim woman professor, was also a writer, educationist, teacher, social worker and later, a Parliamentarian in East Pakistan. She was born in an aristocratic, cultured and an enlightened family of Noakhali, which

had taken to western liberal education and government employment very early and had crusaded for women's rights. She was related on her father's side to Fazlul Karim, one of the first Muslim graduates of Bengal. Her maternal grandfather, Maulana Abdul Aziz, was one of the founding members of the Muslim Suhrid Sammelani. Her childhood was spent in the strictest purdah in Chittagong. At the age of nine she was taken out of Dr. Khastagir's Girls' School in Chittagong in order to observe purdah.¹⁹ Shamsun Nahar again started her studies under a male Hindu tutor at home and she describes the thick curtain that separated her from her tutor which was a measure taken by her family to seclude her.²⁰ Shamsun Nahar passed her Matriculation Examination with excellent marks which won her the permission to join college. Shamsun Nahar finally got admitted in Diocesan College, in Calcutta. The figure of the burqa clad Muslim housewife student was often a source of amusement for the relatively more emancipated Brahma and Hindu women in that exclusive institution. This did not daunt her spirits and Shamsun Nahar surprised everybody by securing the twentieth place among all the students who had appeared for the Intermediate of Arts Examination under Calcutta University in 1928. She obtained her Bachelor's degree with distinction in 1932 and was accorded a civic reception by Rokeya's Anjuman-i-Khawmateen-i-Islam the same year.²¹ In her address, Rokeya said; "We are assembled here on the occasion of Nahar's passing her B.A. This is an honour for all of us women..... I pray that more women follow Nahar's footsteps."²² Shamsun Nahar appeared for the Master's examination as a private candidate and she successfully passed M.A. in 1942. Shamsun Nahar was married to the educated and magnanimous Dr. Wahiduddin Mahmud and her marriage opened the doors for her, to higher education and ended her days of confinement. Since then, there was no looking back, only a steady climb up the ladder.

Shamsun Nahar and her brother Habibullah Bahar jointly edited *Bulbul* from Calcutta in 1933. She was primarily an educationist and many of her writings concerned with the various aspects of education. Her main literary works are *Punnyamayee* (1925), *Rokeya Jibani* (1937), *Begum Mahal* (1938), *Shishur Siksha* (1939), *Nazrulke Jeman Dekhechi* (1958) and *Amar Dekha Turaska*. At the age of ten Shamsun Nahar started writing. Her first work *Punnamayee* (The Virtuous women) was published in 1925, when she was only seventeen years old.²³ It contained short biographies of eight great women of the Muslim world who served as role models. She portrayed the inspiring woman such as Rokeya, the Prophet's daughter Fatema and his wives Ayesha and Khadija. In her *Begum Mahal*, Shamsun Nahar recorded the lives of great Pathan and Mughal women of Medieval India. Her most well known work was *Rokeya Jibani*, an authentic biography of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, her mentor and comrade in the crusade for women's education. *Rokeya Jibani* (The life of Rokeya) was published from Calcutta in 1937. Her work entitled 'Shishur Siksha' was highly appreciated by Rabindranath Tagore who was experimenting with the ideal environment for the development of children at Santiniketan.²⁴ In *Prabasi*, Shamsun Nahar wrote an article titled *Shishu-Sahitya* in which she explained the child psychology, citing the educational ideas of Froebel, Montessori, Harbert Spencer and Rabindranath Tagore.²⁵ Her book *Nazrulke Jeman Dekhechi* (As I saw Nazrul) was about the common and firm belief that both of them shared, regarding the lamentable conditions of the women of the Bengali society. In 1926, Kazi Nazrul Islam visited their home from Calcutta with her elder brother Habibullah Bahar. On that occasion she did not get to meet him and she only heard him read and sing his poetry of protest from the inner chambers. Back in Calcutta, Nazrul wrote to Shamsun Nahar, 'The girls in our

country are very unfortunate. I have seen many girls born with enormous talent, but their potential dried up under demands of society.”²⁶ Shamsun Nahar acknowledges her deep debt to Kazi Nazrul Islam as a source of inspiration.²⁷

Shamsun Nahar’s career started as a teacher in Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ School. Mrs. Shamsun Nahar Mahmud was appointed to the Government Service on 07/07/1939 as Professor of Bengali, Eden Girls’ College, Dacca with a pay of Rs.240. Her service was to be confirmed from 07.07.1941 and when she was on long leave Mrs. Khodeja Khatun of the B.E.S. was officiating from 1.10.1948 in her place.²⁸ At the initiative of A.K. Fazlul Huq, the Chief Minister of Bengal at the time, Lady Brabourne College was set up in Calcutta in 1939 for the education of Muslim girls.²⁹ Shamsun Nahar accepted the post of Lecturer in Bengali at the College in the same year and later on became the Head of the Bengali Department. In 1942, Shamsun Nahar appeared in the Master’s Examination as a private candidate and passed successfully. After the Partition of 1947 she joined the Eden College in Dacca. Shamsun Nahar was largely involved with issues concerning women throughout her life. In 1935, when the British passed the Government of India Act, women had no voting rights. Shamsun Nahar was one of the chief pioneers who on behalf of the Nikhil Bharat Mahila Andolan principally struggled for the voting rights of women. She joined many women’s organization and became active in the women’s movement in undivided India. She was a tireless worker for the All India Women’s Conference, National Council for Women in India, Bengal Women’s Education League, Bengal Provincial Council of Women and other women’s organizations. She got the opportunity to exchange views to discuss ideas with well-known women from India and abroad. In 1944, in recognition of her achievements in the fields of education and social welfare the British Government honoured her with the title of MBE.³⁰ In 1961, in the drawing up of Muslim Family Law, her role was pioneering and on the question of women’s rights, she was extremely vocal.³¹ After partition of India Shamsun Nahar returned to Dhaka and had joined the Eden Girls’s College. She joined the government run women’s organization APWA (All Pakistan Women’s Association). On the question of women’s rights, she was extremely vocal. In 1961, in the drawing up of Muslim Family law, her role was pioneering. She was the president of the ‘Begum Club’ in Dhaka, from its inception till the end of her life. She died on 14 April 1964.

Khodeja Khatun (1917-1990) educationist, writer and social worker was born on 15th August 1917 in a middle class family in the village of Mandaldharan in Bogura district. She was the second Muslim woman of Bengal after Fazilatun Nesa Zoha, to obtain a Master’s degree. She got a M.A. degree in Bengali from the University of Dhaka (1939).³² She began her career in 1941 as a Lecturer in Lady Brabourne College, Calcutta. After the Partition, she migrated to Dhaka in 1947. From 1960 to 1968, she served as a Professor of Bengali in Eden Girls’ College. From 1968 to 1972, she worked as the Principal of the Government Women’s College, Rajshahi. In March, 1972, she returned to Eden College as its Principal.³³ Apart from teaching, Khodeja Khatun also wrote many poems, short stories and essays. Her first book of poems, *Bedonar ei Baluchare*, was published in 1963. She wrote several short stories which were collected in *Shes Praharer Alo* (1969) and *Ekti Sur Ekti Gan* (1982). She also wrote stories for children *Rupkather Rajye* (1963) and *Sagarika* (1969).³⁴ She travelled a lot and recorded her travel accounts in her *Bhindeshi Sera Galpa* (1984) and *Amar Dirgha Bhraman* (1985). She wrote a number of literary, essays, which were published in various academic journals. She also edited a number of anthologies

such as the *Shatapuspa* (3 vols.) (1984, 1989 and 1990). Khodeja Khatun was associated with many social welfare activities. In 1974, she was a member of the Dhaka University Senate and from 1977 to 1985, she was the President of the Bangladesh Women Writers' Association.³⁵ She was also a member of the Bangladesh National Women's Organisation, the Academic Council of Rajshahi University, Bangla Academy and Eskaton Ladies Club. Khodeja received several awards which include President's Gold Medal for education (1967), the Nurunnessa Khaatun Vidyabinodini Medal for Literature (1977) and the Abdur Razzak Memorial Medal awarded by the Rajshahi branch of the Bangladesh Women Writers' Association for her essays (1984).³⁶ She died on 3rd February 1990. Khodeja Khatun was among the few Bengali Muslim women who was teaching in colleges and she is said to have also established an Islamic Women's College in Dhaka.

By the close of the 1920's many Bengali Muslim bhadramahilas were also coming out of the purdah on their own. The obstacles in their way had not vanished, although they were not the same as in the days of Rokeya. Fazilatunessa, Akhtar Imam, Shamsun Nahar and Khodeja Khatun were few first generation career woman of the Bengali Muslim community who were not contented merely with fulfilment of their own aspirations. Throughout their lives they would work for the cause of woman's education and for gender equality. They belonged to the first group of pioneer women humanists of the Bengali Muslim community. While Fazilatun Nesa would speak of a Nationalism based on cultural and linguistic affinity devoid of communal discord, Akhtar Imam relentlessly wrote on gender discrimination and on male chauvinism urging woman to assert their independent identity. They stressed on economic independence of woman. The message that empowerment was embodied in the earning woman was the maxim that Fazilatun Nesa and Akhtar Imam handed down to the young girls of the Bengali Muslim community. This was a decade which saw the rise of a professional middle class Muslim woman all over Bengal. Bengali Muslim woman in many instances physically discarded the burqa, the symbol of the andarmahal and stepped out into the world equipped with institutional education. These newly educated Bengali Muslim women embarked on teaching and other careers and their desire for education intensified.

Teaching was considered to be one of the most acceptable professions for Muslim women and it employed the largest number of Muslim women in Bengal.

From the 1920's many educated Muslim women agreed with Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain about the damaging effects of purdah on women's lives and capabilities and were leaving purdah. Most Muslim women who came out of purdah in the first half of the 20th century were not political or social rebels, but dutiful daughters who left purdah only with the sanction of their families, whether natal or conjugal.³⁷ These professionally active Bengali Muslim women contributed in many ways to the greater visibility of Muslim women in educational, social and political action in the 1920's, 30's and 40's Bengal. In these respects, the activities of Muslim women in colonial Bengal paralleled those of other Indian women at the same time. From the second decades of the 20th century, Bengali Muslim women began to enter college and university but it did not necessarily distract them from the traditionally expected role of wife and mother. However it did give women with higher qualification a cause to think that their lives should be different from those of their mothers and grandmothers and that they should give others in their community the benefit of their advancement through various forms of public service.³⁸ A longer process of education and a rising

age of marriage, in the Muslim community, meant that some women entered the workforce. A small number of Muslim women did not marry but became independent career women. The phenomenon of independent earning power began to affect the lives of these working Muslim women by giving them a greater sense of individuality and an identity of their own in the society.

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