

The Bengali Muslim Women's Struggle For freedom (1905- 1930).

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ABSTRACT

By the early twentieth century, the lives of Muslim women in Bengal changed visibly and Bengali Muslim women were no longer 'voiceless' dwellers of the andarmahal. The traditional role of Bengali Muslim women was undergoing great transformation and the social prejudices which had hindered progress began to disappear gradually from the 1920's. The enlightened, educated Muslim elite group were the first to set the winds of change in motion in the conservative Muslim society of Bengal and this section of the Muslim community tried to give a new leash of life to the moribund Muslim 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" were no longer contented in their static role of domesticity and they were attending schools and colleges in large numbers for education. The National Movement articulated political consciousness among the Muslim Women and they tended to break the traditional bondage. Women's entry in the public 'male' world of the Nationalist politics undermined the socially constructed artificial dichotomization of the male sphere of the public and the female sphere of the domestic domain. Due to the social mobility of the early twentieth century in the Bengali Muslim Community, there were few Bengali Muslim women who not only helped their menfolk in their struggle against the British Government by providing auxiliary services but also by joining meetings, rallies, picketing secret arms and serving prison terms. Although Bengali Muslim women played an important role in India's freedom struggle, the contributions of these women have neither been appreciated nor knitted into the mainstream history. Thus, in the Nationalist History of the Colonial India, these Bengali Muslim women are invisible. This article will try to fill up this lacuna in Nationalist Historiography and would focus on the role of Bengali Muslim women in the anti-colonial struggle.

Key Words: Bengali Muslim Women, Colonial Bengal, Awakening, National Movement, The Freedom Struggle.

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I. INTRODUCTION

By the early twentieth century, the lives of Muslim women in Bengal changed visibly and Bengali Muslim women were no longer 'voiceless' dwellers of the andarmahal. The traditional role of Bengali Muslim women was undergoing great transformation and the social prejudices which had hindered progress began to disappear gradually from the 1920's. The enlightened, educated Muslim elite group were the first to set the winds of change in motion in the conservative Muslim society of Bengal and this section of the Muslim community tried to give a new leash of life to the moribund Muslim 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" were no longer contented in their static role of domesticity and they were attending schools and colleges in large numbers for education. Thereby, they tended to break the traditional bondage. By the first half of the twentieth century, there were a handful of Bengali Muslim women with formal education, who not only achieved individual prominence as founders of schools, teachers, professors, doctors, journalists and improved their own socio- economic status but were increasingly involved in the National movement of their time. The Swadeshi movement in Bengal gave women the first socially approved entry into politics and Gandhi's special call to women which gave them the right to participate in the National Movement which was earlier solely the activities of men.

Although Muslim women's entry into the Freedom Movement dates back from the very beginning of the Colonial Rule in India, it was only in 1905, in the wake of the Partition of Bengal, that the political thought process of the Bengali Muslims was sharply influenced by the Nationalist Movements. The Partition of Bengal

in 1905, influenced the ideas of the Muslims¹. At a time when a large section of the Muslim males in Bengal had kept themselves aloof from the Swadeshi movement, it is surprising that a Bengali Muslim woman, Khairunnesa propagated Swadeshi thoughts.² Khairunnesa Khatun (1870-1912) was an ardent supporter of the Swadeshi movement who inspired the Bengali women through her writings. In an essay entitled 'Swadeshanurag' published in Nababur in 1905, she appealed to the Bengali women to give up foreign goods in support of Swadeshi Movement and to use Swadeshi goods in order to revive the indigenous industry in Bengal. Khairunnesa requested the Muslim women not to remain aloof from the Swadeshi movement. She asked them not to use foreign clothes, cosmetics, ornaments and crockery. Khairunnesa pointed out that Swadeshi would help the poorer section of the Muslim community because it would stop economic drain and help industrial development. Khairunnesa was probably the first of the early Muslim women writers to formulate her ideas on social and political issues of the time.³

Although Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain did not directly participate in the Swadeshi Movement, she inspired Bengali women with her nationalist thoughts and ideas. A footnote added to her book, *Nirih Bangali* written in the wake of the Swadeshi movement was significant. In it she praised the Bengali community as a race Rokeya's view on Swadeshi was also evident in the poem 'Nirupam Bir' which she composed to eulogize the revolutionary Kanailal who had been sentenced to death for his anti-British activities following the partition of Bengal.⁴ In 1921, Rokeya through her anti-colonial allegory, *Muktiphal* described the plight of India's society and polity due to colonization. Rokeya wrote that without co-operation of women, no country can be independent. In her poem, 'Appeal' (1922), Rokeya severely criticized the Bhadrakol who feared that the British Government might revoke their titles for their involvement in the anti-government activities. She appealed to those Indians who were not taking anti-British stand during the nationalist, anti-colonial movements during the crucial years of 1920-1922.⁵ Rokeya had no sympathy for the separatist politics of the Muslim League which was gaining ground at that time. From her writings, it can be noted that she sympathised with the Indian Nationalist Movement led by the Congress. Rokeya's concept of nationalism was found in her article entitled, 'Sugrihini' in which she said, "We are Indians first, then thereafter we are Muslims, Sikhs or some others."⁶ A large number of Bengali Muslim women supported and were actively involved in the swadeshi movement. Muslim women began to write patriotic letters to the press and to publish patriotic poems and stories. Women boycotted British textiles that were flooding the Indian market, which were destroying indigenous craft industries and bought only Indian goods. They took public swadeshi vows not to wear saris made from foreign cloth and began spinning and weaving in their homes. Razia Khatun Choudhurani one of the few Muslim female writers, who was influenced by the Swadeshi Movement wore khadi at all times and even her wedding sari was made of khadi. Women also participated in protest meetings and demonstration against the Partition and fund-raising campaigns to help the nationalist cause.⁷ Even though most of the women activities were providing auxiliary support to the main Nationalist Movement, the activism displayed by women during the anti-partition agitation surprised and gladdened nationalist leaders.⁸ Gandhi recognized the potentiality of women as picketers and he urged women to join the khaddar programme through his writings in 'Young India'.⁹ Non communal attitude, secular outlook and solidarity of women power, were the significant characteristics of the Muslim women's social and political movement. Khairunnesa Khatun of the nineteenth century and Begum Rokeya of the early twentieth century set in motion this trend of communal solidarity followed by Nurunnesa Khatun Vidya Binodini, Fazilatunnesa, Shamsunahar and Hamida Khanam. It was also taken up by the countless nameless Muslim girls of the thirties of the twentieth century.¹⁰

After the anti-Partition agitation died down, Bengali Muslim women temporarily retreated from political activities of the time. Many of the Muslim women who had participated in the Swadeshi Movement became active once again in the Non-Cooperation movement of the early twenties initiated by Mahatma Gandhi.¹¹ As a large section of the Muslim men joined the Non-Cooperation movement, Muslim women did not lag behind. The name of Be- Amma (Abadi Bano Begum), mother of the Khilafat leaders Mohammad Ali and Saikat Ali, must be mentioned in this respect. She was an outstanding Muslim woman leader, active in Muslim women's Association and the Khilafat Movement.¹² Bengali Muslim women also participated in the campaign for woman suffrage. Several prominent Muslim women braved the possible censure of their conservative co-religionists to take a strong stand in support of female suffrage which roused great controversy in the Bengali Muslim community.¹³ When a delegation on the issue of women suffrage was sent to Montagu -Chelmsford in 1917 on behalf of the Bangiya Nari Samaj, prominent Brahmo activist Lady Abala Bose, wife of famous scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose, precipitated this move. In early February, 1923, a women's delegation visited Lord Lytton, the Governor.¹⁴ The delegation which was led by Kamini Roy included two Muslim women, Mrs Mazheruddin and Mrs Latif and they demanded the governor's support for franchise for women in Calcutta. In his reply, Lord Lytton, lauded women's contribution to social and political reforms in Bengal. Bengali women applied their right to vote first time in the election of Calcutta Corporation in 1923. Encouraged by the victory of female franchise in the Calcutta Municipal election in 1923, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Begum Sultana Muwayidzada met Viceroy Lord Lytton, to seek his support for their cause. In 1925, Rokeya Sakhwat

Hossain played an important role in the meeting of BangiyaNari Samaj.¹⁵Support also came from a number of women's societies in the district towns of Dacca, Mymensingh and Chittagong. In 1925, the Bengal Legislature approved a limited female suffrage and in 1926, Bengali women exercised this right for the first time. This issue of female franchise carries the testimony of the change of mind of the Muslim community of Bengal towards modernism and rationalism. The victory of suffrage movement brought several Muslim women in the field of politics. It seemed that while the larger male society in the thirties and forties of the twentieth century became faction ridden, the feminine front continued in its solidarity. Non-communal attitude, secular outlook and solidarity of women power, were the significant characteristics of the Muslim women's social and political movement. Khairunnessa Khatun of the nineteenth century and Begum Rokeya of the early twentieth century set in motion this trend of communal solidarity followed by Nurunnessa Khatun Vidya Binodini, Fazilatunnessa, Shamsunahar and Hamida Khanam. It was also and taken up by the countless nameless Muslim girls of the forties of the twentieth century.

Political apathy on the part of the Muslim women however, rapidly disappeared with the emergence of the militant nationalist movement in Bengal from the third decades of the twentieth century. Their participation in this movement (1930-32) differed qualitatively and quantitatively from the early 1920's and won them a place in the history of Nationalist Movement. These Muslim women along with their Hindu sisters made and sold salt, picketed cloth and liquor shops, preached the value of Khaddar, went to jail and participated in the street processions. They themselves wore khaddar, actively joined processions in different parts of Bengal and initiated women organisations in order to strengthen the movement.¹⁶Among the Bengali Muslim women, who all participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-32), Zubeda Khatun Chaudhurani was a prominent one. She was born in 1901, in a conservative Muslim family and thus, she did not get much formal education because of strong objection from her family. She was married at the age of eighteen to Khan Bahadur Abdur Rahim Chowdhury. Inspired by patriotism, she fearlessly fought for freedom throwing off all her barriers. In 1927, she removed her veil or burqah and attended the reception ceremony held at Sylhet in Eastern Bengal in which Kazi Nazrul Islam, A.K Fazlul Haque , Dr Mohammad Shodullah and other were given warm reception.¹⁷In 1928, Zubeda officially joined the Congress.Zubeda was elected the president of SrihattaMahila Sangha connected with the Sylhet Congress.¹⁸ The Congress, under the presidentship of Zubeda Khatun,passed a resolution urging women to boycott foreign goods, to establish Hindu-Muslim unity and to support the various movements of Congress. Zubeda, along with the Hindu women of Sylhet took out 'ProbhatPheries', processions, picketed school, colleges and propagated Hindu -Muslim unity. These women marched on the road of Sylhet and violating Section144, they broke salt laws and forest laws. Atleast sixty of these women were arrested. Although Zubeda was not arrested, she was an important member among the organizers of this campaign. Zubeda not only participated in various Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Campaign, but also in various peasant movements. When the Manipuri peasant movement of Sylhet organized the "Bhanubill Movement", Zubeda urged the women folks to support it and she herself actively took part in it and was often seen walking in front of the procession.¹⁹Zubeda was associated with 'SurmavalleyMahilaSangathan' along with Saralabala Devi, Hiraprova De, Naresh Nandini Dutta and Matangini Das. She was also actively associated with the students' movement.

Daulatunnessa Begum born in 1918 was one of the important Muslim female freedom fighters who participated in the anti- imperialist movement to liberate their motherland. Begum Daulatunnessa was born in Sanatala in the district of Bogura in Eastern Bengal. Her father was Mohammad Yasin and her mother was Nurunnessa Khatun. She studied in Eden Girl's School till 1930 and was married at a very early age with a doctor.²⁰ Even in her in-laws' place in Gaibandha, she pursued her studies in private and ultimately obtained the B.A degree. As a true nationalist Daulatunnessa, organised women's associations at Gaibandha which carried on the work of Gandhi and the Civil Disobedience Movement in remote villages of Bengal. At an early age of 14, she felt that it was her task to organise and work among women in rural Bengal. She motivated women from her community to take part in the Nationalist movement and people gathered from all quarters to listen to her emotional speech.²¹ In this way, Daulatunnessa carried the torch of political struggle into the Muslim andarmahal. In 1930, Daulatunnessa actively organised meetings, led procession, and violating Section 144 she broke the salt law. She participated in the Civil Disobedience movement, as a whole timer and was the secretary of the Gaibandha Samiti. A large number of Bengali rural women violated the British laws under the leadership of Daulatunnessa and Maya Bhattacharya who was the president of Gaibandha Samiti.²²Daulatunnessa delivered speech at different meetings in which thousands of Hindus and Muslims from BamundangaSuratkhali, Naldanga, Fulsari, KuptalaTulshighat assembled to listen to her. She was jailed several times for her revolutionary activities against the British. When she was jailed, ZiaunnaharRakina Khatun and Samsunnahar led the movement in her absence..²³Fulbahar Bibi was another prominent Bengali Muslim woman who joined the Indian National Congress and actively participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement. Fulbahar Bibi was born in 1916 in the village of Subhaspur (Bikrampur), Dacca. As she lost both her parents at an early age, she was brought up by her elder brother Tamizuddin, an ardent worker of Congress. Fulbahar was inspired by her

brother Tamizuddin who was arrested in 1932 for his anti-British activities. As an ardent supporter of Gandhi, she worked during the Civil Disobedience Movement together with Kiran Rudra of Paikpara.²⁴ Like her brother she was also arrested for her anti-British activities and was sentenced for six-month jail. After her release from the jail, she devoted herself till her death to the cause of the Congress.²⁵

From the above discussion it is clear that quite a number of Muslim women participated in the Civil Disobedience movement. As a result, it can be pointed out that a significant number of muslim women were either arrested or they became victims of police violence during the Civil Disobedience Movement. These Bengali Muslim women were Raziya Khatun and Halima Khatun of Mymensingh, Samsunnesa Begum, Raisa Bano Begum (wife of Asaf Ali Beg of Dacca), Badrunnesa begum (wife of Akhtaruddin Hossain of Dacca) and others. Banabibi was tortured by the police after she was arrested from Midnapore in 1932. Hazimunnesa Khatun was arrested in Calcutta for organising movement against the British. These women not only actively participated in the freedom movement but also helped the male leaders with their money and jewellery, so that these leaders could carry on their activities against the British. A number of Muslim women of Calcutta also fought fearlessly for the nation's freedom and a large number of them were arrested and imprisoned during the years 1930 to 32.

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. These Muslim women emerged from purdah during a time of great social and political change in India. In these respects, the activities of Muslim women in colonial Bengal paralleled those of other Indian women at the same time. The study of Muslim Women's struggle for freedom in colonial Bengal in the decades from 1905-1930, makes it evident that political consciousness had grown among the Muslim girls and they emerged out of their confines into the outside world, unequivocally denouncing the authority of the traditional structure and participated in the various types of political movements of the colonial period and created their new identity more confidently.

END NOTES

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