

Begum Rokeya on the Predicament of the Muslims of Bengal

Honourable president and respected audience, I always vex you with the issue of the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School to such an extent that some people may consider me a 'nuisance'. Had I been an idolater and had a deity to worship, the deity would have definitely been irritated and said: 'During the time of worship, instead of making supplications like "Give me riches! Give me fame!" this girl continuously says "Give a home for the school! Give it prosperity and advancement!" So kick this bugger away!'

Today I beg a little time from you so that you can kindly listen to a few words of mine with patience.

You all know that I will not die if this Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School ceases to exist. Certainly, nothing like this will befall me, that "My homestead will be razed to the ground, Pots will not mount on the stove. The physician will not find the pulse. And I will be gasping in a dying state."

I will not sustain even an iota of loss if this school does not continue to exist. Then, why do I want the progress of this school? I do not want it to increase my own good reputation; I do not want it to commemorate the memory of my husband: I want it only for the welfare of the Bengal Muslim community. If the two words "Sakhawat Memorial" cause any harm to the school, then let those two words be erased from the 'signboard'. Certainly, I will have nothing to lose or gain if the Muslim community survive or go to the dogs; because I do not have any descendants who will perturb me by their probable bad state, or shame me by their misdeeds. So you have understood that I have no personal interests in my concern for this school. If those, who have children and future, want to look after the community, then my appeal to them is this: please build this beneficial girls' school as a model institution.

Turn over the page of history once and you will see that such a time came when the light of knowledge peeped through the dark house of the Bengali Hindus; then they opened their eyes. Thereafter, by the twittering of the birds they came to realize that "night time was over, it dawned." They stood up leaving their idle bed. In spite of this, where could Hindus go? Due to their system of innumerable taboos, they become outcaste by doing this, or by eating that. Therefore, they became Christians in droves – gradually, in lieu of 'Bandyopadhyay,' they became 'Bannerji'; and a 'Sarker' turned to be a 'Sirker'. In the time of that dreadful, critical situation, renowned social welfare workers like Raja Ram Mohan Ray and Keshab Chandra Sen founded the Brahma Samaj, the Society of God [in 1828]. This prevented Hindus from becoming Christians en masse. Then they had their

own schools and colleges; their sons and daughters no longer went to Christian schools. They protected themselves by becoming independent.

Conversely, the Muslim community was seeing a daydream of castle while sleeping in woody undergrowth. At that time, the light of awakening also peeped through their dilapidated thatch. They could not remain satisfied with reading Pandenama and Shâhnâmah only. They ran to the schools run by the Hindus and by the Christians. They did not set up any schools or colleges of their own at all. By receiving education from Christian colleges, they turned into good sahibs – they speak the English language, call household attendants ‘behara’ instead of ‘beyara’, and porters, coolie instead of ‘motey’.

Still then, not much extensive harm befell the Muslim community; because children could not see whether their fathers drank tea or smoked cigarettes in the clubs. They always saw their devout, prayerful mother at home; they used to imitate that role model and play namaj (prayer) in imitation of their mothers. Facing east, south or any other direction, they used to copy the call for ritual prayers – Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar.

Gradually, the educated fathers could not remain satisfied by teaching their daughters only books like Rahe Najat and Sunavan at home. They sent their daughters to Convent and Hindu schools. Having gone to the Convent, Laila’s name was changed to ‘Lily’, and Zaynab’s to ‘Jenny’. Equally, having gone to Hindu schools, Ayesha’s name became ‘Asha, and ‘Kulsum’ turned to be ‘Kusum.’ If it had stopped at that, it would not have caused much detriment to the Muslim community. However, that was not the end of our downfall.

Subsequently, Christian ayahs were needed to bring up Jenny’s children so that they could learn how to speak English. Her daughter’s name became “Barbara Areef”. Now Barbara does not see her mother praying at home, so the church becomes the model of her play. Upon returning home after learning songs from the Convent, she sings:

“Jesus saves me this I know
For the Bible tells me so”-
Or: “Mussulmans [Muslims] are unfaithful
Beat them up with a shoe and pull their ears.”

On the other hand, Kusum’s daughter’s name has now become Soudamini Begum!
Soudamini’s model of play is idol worshipping and making gods with clay. She sings:
“Smearing the clay of the river Jamuna in the body
Write the name of Lord Hari in it;
All friends meeting together sing the glory of Lord Hari
When you are exasperated.” -
Or: “The tonsured Mussulmans, They have neither wealth nor honour.”

The other day, I happened to meet with a “Mussulman Brahmo” woman during the occasion of the Bengal Women’s Educational Conference. She bluntly said that, since in the Mussulman community of her childhood there was no provision for women’s

education, her father arranged for her higher education by resorting to the support of the Brahma Samaj. The way she received education and culture did not give her opportunities to discuss the Qur'an and Hadith. So she could not adjust to Muslim society [and eventually turned into a Brahma].

The Muslim community including her parents and brothers had to lose such a well-educated woman! For the lack of women's education, the loss register of our society has been becoming extremely heavy. I have been informed by a reliable source that some respectable, high-born Muslim young men are advertising in newspapers that, if graduate brides are not available, they will not marry; or, if graduate women are not found in the Muslim community, they will become Christian.

Some lament: "My mother gave me in marriage to an illiterate woman; now let her live with her daughter-in-law – I can't live as a householder with that wooden doll." Some gentlemen audaciously demand an 'I.A. pass' bride. Some want at least 'matriculation pass' brides; otherwise, they will become Christian or Brahma. The main reason for this extreme feeling is the current irreligious education, as the poet Mr. Akbar of Allahabad excellently puts it:

"How can the infant get any scent of
its parents' character?
While it is fed on tinned milk and gets educated
by the [colonial] Government."

It now appears that the houses of highly educated Muslim gentlemen are not illuminated without an 'MA pass' bride. However, instead of rebuking those gentlemen, arrangements should be made so that we can rectify this. It is also to my knowledge that many godless men have reformed at the hand of suitable, learned [religious] wives.

In this twentieth century many other people have held onto their own practices tightly after having them reformed, rectified and refined. By incorporating our social norms, such as inheritance, divorce and khul'a in their customs, they are trying to sanction bills like the Bill of Daughters' Inheritance in Fathers' Property, the Bill of Divorcing One's Wife, and the Bill of Divorcing One's Husband. Conversely, we are turning into some peculiar brutes by abandoning our very beautiful religion and social practices. How will a name like Surendra Salimullah Samuel Khan sound?

The sum and substance of this is that the only remedy to this situation is an ideal Muslim girls' school where our daughters will receive a high education that will enable them to keep pace with people from other communities and regions of the modern world. Muslim women from other greatly civilized communities and even of other parts of the Indian sub-continent are becoming doctors, barristers, councilors and members of the Round Table. Why should our women be deprived of this splendid development and prosperity? Ideal Muslim girls' schools will produce ideal Muslim women whose children will be like Hazrat Omar Faruq and Hazrat Fatema Zohra. To realize this goal, the spread of the teachings of the Qur'an in a large measure is necessary; that is, extensive spread of its

translations into Bangla and Urdu is essential.

In my childhood, I used to hear my mother say: “Qur’an Shareef will protect us as a shield.” That statement is very much true. However, this is not to say that we will need to fasten a big and beautifully wrapped-up Qur’an tightly on our back. Rather, what I understand is that the universal teachings of the Qur’an will guard us from the danger of superstitions of various kinds. Religious practices according to the Qur’an will protect us from moral downfalls and social degradations.

Secretary of the Executive Committee of Sakhawat Memorial Girls School, Khan Bahadur Tassaduq Ahmad read out this speech at a Committee meeting in 1931. It was then published in the Calcutta-based monthly Mohammadi in 1931. See A. Qadir (ed.), Rokeya Rachanabali (2nd ed.) (1999) (pp. 244-247), Dhaka, Bangladesh: Bangla Academy. Translated by Dr Md. Mahmudul Hasan, IIU Malaysia.