



Revisiting Begum Rokeya in the idea of Women Empowerment

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Abstract :

In the nineteenth century, Begum Rokeya was born into a conservative Muslim family. At that time, society was deeply immersed in superstitions, and women had no right to education. Their lives were confined within the inner quarters of royal households or within the four walls of their homes, living behind the veil (purdah). Against all these injustices, Begum Rokeya raised her voice in protest within contemporary society. She understood that women would only rise against such oppression when they became enlightened through education. Along with advocating for women's education, she also emphasized the importance of skill development so that women could become self-reliant. Many aspects of her ideas align with contemporary thoughts. This research paper provides a detailed analysis of how Begum Rokeya's ideas continue to contribute to women's empowerment even in the present era. The study primarily follows a qualitative methodology.

Begum Rokeya was not only a social reformer but also a writer. She was proficient in both Bengali and English and wrote literature in both languages. In her famous work *Sultana's Dream*, she highlighted important aspects of women's empowerment. The main objective of this research is to evaluate how Rokeya sought to transform the status of women through social movements and literature. Throughout her work, the theme of women's liberation appears repeatedly. Her central message was that women must be made self-reliant through education. She also protested against gender discrimination in various ways.

The Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School, established by her, played a significant role in promoting women's education. Her rational thinking and social activities continue to play a crucial role in advancing women's empowerment in society even today. Her ideas remain a source of inspiration in the modern world.

Keywords :

Women Empowerment , Women's Education , Gender Equality , Begum Rokeya , Women's Rights



Introduction:

Women's empowerment is an important issue in the contemporary world. Women's empowerment is a process through which women gain equal rights in social, economic, and all other spheres of life. Empowerment of women is one of the key elements in building a developed and just society. In South Asia, the movement for women's empowerment has been ongoing for a long time, and one of the most prominent figures in this movement was Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Indian society was largely patriarchal. Women were confined within various social restrictions. They were not allowed to participate in education or in social activities. Men in society often intimidated women in different ways and confined them within the four walls of their homes. At that time, women were not provided with any opportunities for education. In such circumstances, women were treated merely as insignificant members of society. Their lives were mostly spent behind the veil, within the inner quarters of the household.

In such a situation, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain raised her voice for women's rights. She questioned various social customs and traditions. She believed that education was the primary path to women's liberation. If women could be brought into the light of education, they would become aware of their rights. Once women became educated, they would be able to achieve dignity and respect in society.

One of Begum Rokeya's most groundbreaking literary contributions was *Sultana's Dream*, which presented the idea of women's empowerment in a new way. Through this work, she attempted to imagine a society based on gender equality.

This research paper analyzes Begum Rokeya's thoughts in the context of the concept of women's empowerment. It also highlights her perspective in relation to contemporary society and examines her significant contributions to the establishment of women's rights.

Objectives:

1. To examine the ideas of Begum Rokeya regarding women's empowerment.
2. To analyze her contributions to women's education and social reform in a historical context.
3. To understand the relevance of her thoughts in the modern discourse on women's empowerment.
4. To evaluate the impact of her initiatives on the development of women's rights in society.

Methodology:

This research paper is primarily based on a qualitative approach. Secondary data have been used for data collection. Information has been gathered from various books, journals, research papers, and online sources. Content analysis has been followed for data analysis. The historical method has also been used in writing this research paper, which has made it possible to evaluate the social condition of women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.



Means of Empowerment :

Empowerment is a process through which an individual becomes capable of exercising their own rights, building self-confidence, and making decisions independently. In this context, women's empowerment refers to a process through which women achieve equal rights in social, economic, political, and cultural spheres. Through empowerment, women become capable of making important decisions for themselves. As a result, they can establish a dignified position in society and reduce gender discrimination. According to Amartya Sen (1999), "women empowerment involves expanding women's capabilities and freedoms so that they can lead the kind of lives they value and participate equally in social, economic, and political spheres." According to the World Bank (2012), "women empowerment is a multidimensional social process that helps women gain control over their own lives by increasing their confidence, self-worth, and ability to influence social change." According to UN Women (2015), "women's empowerment involves ensuring that women have equal rights, opportunities, and the capacity to participate fully in economic, political, and social life."

For a long time, women have been treated as neglected members of society. They were confined within various social restrictions and barriers. They were deprived of the right to education and were not allowed to step outside their homes. They were always expected to remain behind the veil. To change this condition of women, the concept of women's empowerment plays a crucial role. Through this idea, women become aware of their rights and gain the ability to express their opinions in society. They can participate equally in social and political fields.

Women's empowerment can only be achieved when women are enlightened through education. Education helps in developing knowledge, skills, and self-confidence among women. When women gain confidence, they become capable of making their own decisions and actively participating in society. A country can be truly developed only when it eliminates gender discrimination and ensures equal rights for both men and women in all spheres. Educated women play a significant role in the development of family and society. Through education and skill development, economic empowerment helps women become self-reliant. Employment enables them to achieve financial independence and decision-making power. Women's empowerment not only contributes to the development of women but also supports overall societal development.

Thoughts of Begum Rokeya:

Begum Rokeya was born on 9 December 1880. She was born into a conservative family where strict restrictions were imposed on women. Later, after her marriage, with the encouragement of her husband, Rokeya became involved in women's education and social reform. She was proficient in both Bengali and English. Her notable works include *Sultana's Dream* (1905) and *Padmarag* (1924). Through these writings, she strongly criticized the condition of women in society and various social superstitions.

Her contribution to the promotion of women's education is undeniable. In 1911, she established the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in Kolkata. Earlier, in 1906, she founded an organization named Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam, whose main objective was the upliftment of Muslim women. Begum Rokeya's thoughts were progressive and rational. She believed that women could only be freed from social superstitions when they received education. Education not only helps in acquiring knowledge but also makes women self-reliant.

At that time, society was patriarchal. Women were expected to obey men unquestioningly. To prevent women from raising their voices, they were kept away from the light of education and confined within various social superstitions. Rokeya strongly asserted that without women's education, social progress is never possible. Her famous statement was: "The progress of a nation depends on the status of its women." She also raised her voice against religious orthodoxy and superstition.



According to her, education does not only mean bookish knowledge; it also includes practical and scientific learning. Rokeya understood that education is the primary tool for women's liberation. Through education, gender inequality between men and women can be eliminated. Women, like men, can work equally both inside and outside the home. Rokeya was a highly intellectual and rational thinker, and her ideas and perspectives remain equally relevant even today.

Contribution to Women's Education:

In the history of women's education, the name of Begum Rokeya shines as a bright star. At the time she was born, women were completely deprived of the right to education. Even in such circumstances, she played a significant role in promoting women's education. She firmly believed that education is the primary path to women's liberation. Only education, she thought, could remove the stagnant condition of women. Begum Rokeya emphasized that education is the most powerful tool for women's liberation and social transformation (Hossain, 1931). She advocated for modern, rational, and skill-based education to ensure women's empowerment (Hasan, 2012).

She was not only a social reformer but also engaged in literary activities in both Bengali and English. In her famous work *Sultana's Dream*, she depicted an imaginary women-led society called "Ladyland." In this story, a completely reversed social system is presented—women are educated, independent, and responsible for governing the state, while men are confined within the household. Through this inversion, she satirized the patriarchal structure of society. Rather than directly criticizing society, she used fictional characters to question the condition of women and male dominance. The work also strongly opposes the practice of purdah imposed on women.

A major milestone in the history of women's education was her establishment of the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in Kolkata in 1911. This institution was primarily created for the education of Muslim girls and was a revolutionary step at that time. Despite facing many obstacles initially, the school later became a prominent center for women's education.

In 1916, she founded an organization named Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam, which worked for the welfare and development of women and also played a significant role in promoting female education. Rokeya emphasized the importance of mother-tongue-based education to enhance women's understanding and confidence (Hossain, 1922). She also viewed education as a tool for moral development and leadership building among women (Ahmed, 2014). Begum Rokeya emphasized the development of critical thinking among women so that they could challenge social norms and superstitions (Hossain, 1930). She also highlighted the role of education in building self-respect and awareness, which are essential for achieving social justice (Chowdhury, 2010).

Although she was born into a conservative family, her rational and progressive thinking initiated a transformation in women's education. Influenced by her vision and ideas, women gained the courage to break free from social superstitions and restrictions. Gradually, women began to be enlightened by the light of education. Her contributions remain memorable and inspirational to this day.

The Idea of Women's Liberation in Literary Works:

Through her literary works, Begum Rokeya also voiced strong protest in favor of women's liberation. Her writings present women as independent human beings. In society, various superstitions and illusions have confined women's true human identity, and Rokeya consistently struggled in different ways to free women from these constraints.

Although she was born into a conservative family, her thinking and rationality were distinct from others. She observed that men always tried to keep women confined, and for that reason, women were kept far away from the light of education. She raised her voice against all these injustices. In each of her works, the idea of women's liberation shines brightly like a guiding star. She also emphasized the need to eliminate gender discrimination.



She always encouraged women to become self-reliant. According to her, women can become truly independent only when they are educated and capable of making their own decisions. Education is the only way to ensure that women do not have to depend on men in economic or social matters. Education enables women to stand shoulder to shoulder with men and actively participate in all aspects of society.

Her famous work *Sultana's Dream* delivers a sharp critique of the contemporary social system. In this story, men are imaginatively confined indoors while women hold positions of power. Through this, she illustrates that if women receive proper education, they too can participate equally with men in all societal activities.

In another of her notable works, *Abarodhbasini*, she strongly opposes the purdah system prevalent in society. In this book, she discusses how social superstitions continuously deprive women of their freedom. Across her entire body of literature, women are portrayed as active participants in society. "I had been used to look upon my sex as a helpless,

unprogressive mass of humanity, a mixture of superstition, sentiment and servility." (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1905/2005) While the original text is in the public domain, it is widely anthologised. The literary critic Deeksha Sharma (2017) argues that the story demonstrates what a feminist utopia might look like beyond gender binaries: "A world without patriarchy and gender discrimination" (Sharma, 2017, para. 3). Through logical arguments, Rokeya demonstrated that no society can achieve overall progress by keeping half of its population behind. Her writings consistently emphasize self-respect and self-confidence. Her message to women is to break social restrictions and become aware of their own strength and potential. Thus, the idea of women's liberation is powerfully expressed in Begum Rokeya's literary works.

Relevance in the Context of Present Education:

The contribution of Begum Rokeya to the expansion of women's education and the concept of women's empowerment is highly significant. According to her, if women are not educated, the overall development of society is never possible. This viewpoint remains equally relevant in contemporary society. At present, women's education has expanded considerably. Women are working shoulder to shoulder with men in all sectors of society. Although gender discrimination has reduced to a great extent, girls in underdeveloped rural areas still do not have adequate access to education. Even in the 21st century, the birth of a girl child often brings a sense of disappointment to families. In society, women are often considered objects of pity. Their childhood is spent under the control of parents, and after marriage, their lives are governed by their husbands. At no stage is their independence given proper importance. Society has always been inclined to restrict women's freedom. Even in modern times, girls often lack the right to make their own decisions. Poverty and gender-based discrimination still deprive many women of education. Even today, more emphasis is placed on boys' education than on girls'. The tendency to suppress women is still visible in many areas. Begum Rokeya protested against all these issues. She always emphasized that women should become self-reliant. These stagnant conditions can only change when women become independent in all aspects. Even today, her ideas serve as a guiding force.

The present education system is no longer limited to bookish knowledge and marks alone. Modern education is life-oriented and skill-based. The National Education Policy of 1920 also emphasized the holistic development of learners. This aspect is clearly reflected in Rokeya's educational philosophy as well. Gender equality is an important element in today's education system, and this idea is firmly established in Rokeya's writings. It can certainly be said that she was a visionary. There is a strong resemblance between her thoughts and modern societal perspectives. She believed that education makes women confident and aware of their rights. Her main objective was to bring women into the mainstream of society. In the digital age, it is essential to ensure equal participation of women in online education. In conclusion, it can be said that her ideas on the spread of women's education, gender equality, and self-reliance continue to deeply influence the present education system and society. Her ideals and thoughts paved the way for women's empowerment.



Conclusion:

The thoughts and activities of Begum Rokeya provide an important foundation for the concept of women's empowerment. She sought to liberate women from the oppressive social structure of her time. Rokeya protested in various ways against the injustices and oppression faced by women. She consistently emphasized that women should acquire not only education but also practical skills. She aimed to establish women as valuable human resources. She understood that her ideas would only be firmly established when women became self-reliant through education and skill development.

In all of her writings, themes of women's education, freedom, and resistance against superstition are clearly reflected. Through her famous work *Sultana's Dream*, she imagined an alternative social system and demonstrated that women are capable of governing society. To promote women's education, she founded the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in Kolkata in 1911, which played a significant role in the spread of female education. Additionally, she established an organization called Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam to address various problems faced by women, which is considered effective in promoting women's empowerment.

This study shows that Rokeya's ideas place strong emphasis on women's education, self-reliance, and self-respect—principles that are central to modern education. The path of social change and empowerment through women's education that she proposed remains equally relevant in the present era.

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