

Begum Rokeya

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (Bengali: বেগম রোকেয়া সাখাওয়াত হোসেন; 9 December 1880 – 9 December 1932), commonly known as **Begum Rokeya**, was a Bengali writer, thinker, educationist, social activist, advocate of women's rights, and widely regarded as the pioneer of women's education in the Indian subcontinent during the time of the British rule.

She wrote novels, poems, short stories, science fiction, satires, treatises, and essays.^[1] In her writings, she advocated that both men and women should be treated equally as rational beings, and the lack of education is the main reason of women's lagging behind. Her major works include *Abarodhbasini*, a spirited attack on the extreme forms of purdah that endangered women's lives and thoughts; *Sultana's Dream*, a science fiction novella set in a place called Ladyland in nisah, a world ruled by women; *Padmarag* ("Essence of the Lotus", 1924), another feminist utopian novel; *Matichur*, collection of essays in two volumes.^[1]

Rokeya suggested that education of women is the foremost requisite of women's liberation; hence she established the first school aimed primarily at Bengali Muslim girls in Kolkata. Rokeya is said to have gone from house to house persuading the parents to send their girls to her school in nisah. Until her death, she ran the school despite facing hostile criticism and various social obstacles.^{[1][2]}

In 1916, she founded the Muslim Women's Association, an organization that fought for women's education and employment.^{[1][3]} In 1926, Rokeya presided over the Bengal Women's Education Conference convened in Kolkata, the first significant attempt to bring women together in support of women's education rights.^[3] She was engaged in debates and conferences regarding the advancement of women until her death on 9 December 1932, shortly after presiding over a session during the Indian Women's Conference.^[3]

Bangladesh observes *Rokeya Day* on 9 December every year to commemorate her works and legacy.^[4] On that day, Bangladesh government also confers Begum Rokeya Padak on individual women for their exceptional achievement.^[5]

In 2004, Rokeya was ranked number 6 in BBC's poll of the Greatest Bengali Of All Time.^{[6][7][8]}

Begum Rokeya



Begum Rokeya

Native name	বেগম রোকেয়া সাখাওয়াত হোসেন
Born	Rokeya Khatun 9 December 1880 Pairaband, Mithapukur Upazila, Rangpur, Bengal Presidency, British India (now Bangladesh)
Died	9 December 1932 (aged 52) Calcutta, Bengal Presidency, British India
Occupation	Social activist, writer, Muslim feminist
Language	Bengali
Citizenship	British Indian
Literary movement	Women's Rights
Notable works	<i>Sultana's Dream</i> , <i>Padmarag</i> , <i>Abarodhbasini</i> , <i>Matichur</i>
Spouse	Khan Bahadur Sakhawat Hussain

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Life

Rokeya Khatun was born in 1880 in the village of Pairabondh, Mithapukur, Rangpur, present Bangladesh, in what was then the British Indian Empire. Her father, Jahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Haidar Saber, was a highly educated and successful zamindar (landlord) who married four times; his marriage to Rahatunnessa resulted in the birth of Rokeya, who had two sisters and three brothers, one of whom died in childhood. Rokeya's eldest brother Ibrahim Saber, and her immediate elder sister Karimunnesa Khanam Chaudhuranj both had great influence on her life. Karimunnesa wanted to study Bengali, the language of the majority in Bengal. The family disliked this because many upper class Muslims of the time preferred to use Arabic and Persian as the media of education, instead of their native language, Bengali. Ibrahim taught English and Bengali to Rokeya and Karimunnesa; both sisters became authors.^[9]



Birthplace of Begum Rokeya in Pairabondh, Mithapukur, Rangpur

Karimunnesa married at the age of fourteen, later earning a reputation as a poet. Both of her sons, *Nawab Abdul Karim Gaznawi* and *Nawab Abdul Halim Gaznawj* became famous in the political arena and occupied ministerial portfolios under British authorities.

Rokeya married at the age of eighteen in 1898. Her Urdu-speaking husband, Khan Bahadur Sakhawat Hussain, was the deputy magistrate of Bhagalpur, which is now a district under the Indian state of Bihar. He married earlier also. Sakhawat was then 38 years old before his marriage with Rokeya. Sakhawat did his *B.A.G.* from England and was a member of Royal Agricultural Society of England. He married Rokeya after the death of his first wife. As he was gentle, liberal-minded and had much interest in female education he encouraged Rokeya to continue her brother's work by encouraging her to keep learning Bengali and English. He also encouraged her to write, and on his advice she adopted Bengali as the principal language for her literary works because it was the language of the masses. She launched her literary career in 1902 with a Bengali essay entitled *Pipasa* (Thirst). She also published the books *Matichur* (1905) and *Sultana's Dream* (1908) during her husband's lifetime.

Her book *Sultana's Dream* was quite influential. She wrote this book reversing the roles of men and women in which women were the dominant sex and the men were subordinate. It is regarded as quite a fantastic satire and was able to garner a decent amount of influence upon its publication.

In 1909, Sakhawat Hussain died. He had encouraged his wife to set aside money to start a school primarily for Muslim women. Five months after his death, Rokeya established a high school in her beloved husband's memory, naming it Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School.^[10] It started in Bhagalpur, a traditionally Urdu-speaking area, with only five students. A dispute with her husband's family over property forced her to move the school in 1911 to Calcutta, a Bengali-speaking area.^[10] It remains one of the city's most popular schools for girls and is now run by the state government of West Bengal.^[1]

Rokeya also founded the Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam (Islamic Women's Association), which was active in holding debates and conferences regarding the status of women and education. She advocated reform, particularly for women, and believed that parochialism and excessive conservatism were principally responsible for the relatively slow development of Muslims in British India. As such, she is one of the first Islamic feminists. She was inspired by the traditional Islamic learning as enunciated in the Qur'an, and believed that modern Islam had been distorted or corrupted; Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam organised many events for social reforms based on the original teachings of Islam that, according to her, were lost.

Rokeya remained busy with the school, the association, and her writings for the rest of her life. She died of heart problems on 9 December 1932, which was her 52nd birthday. In Bangladesh, 9 December is celebrated as Rokeya



Statue of Begum Rokeya in Begum Rokeya Memorial Centre, Pairabondh, Mithapukur, Rangpur

Day.

Rokeya's grave in Sodepur was rediscovered due to the efforts of the historian Amalendu De.^[11]

Works

- *Pipasa* ("Thirst", 1902).
- *Matichur* (essays, 1st vol. 1904, 2nd vol. 1922). The second volume of *Matichur* includes stories and fairy tales such as *Saurajagat* (The Solar System), *Delicia Hatya* (translation of the Murder of Delicia, by Mary Corelli), *Jnan-phal* (The Fruit of Knowledge), *Nari-Srishti* (Creation of Women), *Nurse Nelly*, *Mukti-phal* (The Fruit of Emancipation), etc.
- *Sultana's Dream*
- *Padmarag* ("Essence of the Lotus", novel, 1924). A feminist utopia.
- *Abarodhbasini* ("The Secluded Women", 1931)
- *Boligarto* (short story).
- *Narir Adhikar* ("The Rights of Women"), an unfinished essay for the Islamic Women's Association
- *God Gives, Man Robs* 1927, republished in *God gives, man robs and other writings* Dhaka, Narigrantha Prabartana, 2002
- *Education Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl*, 1931, republished in *Rokeya Rachanabali* Abdul Quadir (editor), Dhaka, Bangla Academy, 2006

Begum Rokeya wrote in a number of genres, short stories, poems, essays, novels and satirical writings, developing a distinctive literary style, characterised by creativity, logic and a wry sense of humour. She started writing in the *Nabanoor* from about 1903, under the name of Mrs. R S Hossain. However, there is an opinion that her first published writing *Pipasa* appeared in the *Nabaprabha* in 1902. She wrote regularly for the *Saugat*, *Mahammadi*, *Nabaprabha*, *Mahila*, *Bharatmahila*, *Al-Eslam*, *Nawroz*, *Mahe-Nao*, *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika*, *The Mussalman*, *Indian Ladies Magazine*, etc. Her writings called upon women to protest against injustices and break the social barriers that discriminated against them.^[12]

Legacy

Begum Rokeya is considered as the pioneer feminist of Bengal.^{[13][14][5]} Universities, public buildings and National Award has been named after her in Bangladesh. The country also observe her birth and death anniversary.^{[15][16]} She was an inspiration for many later generation female authors including Sufia Kamal, and others.^{[17][18]}

Eponyms

- Begum Rokeya Day, a commemoration of the birth and death anniversary of Begum Rokeya, observed annual on 9 December in Bangladesh.^[19]
- Begum Rokeya Padak a Bangladeshi national honour conferred on individual women for their exceptional achievement.
- Begum Rokeya Memorial Center an academic and cultural hub in Pairabondh, Bangladesh.^[20]
- Begum Rokeya University a government financed Public State university in Bangladesh.^[21]
- Rokeya Hall, the largest female residential hall of Dhaka University



Statue of Begum Rokeya on the premises of Rokeya Hall, University of Dhaka

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4. "Begum Rokeya Day today"(<http://www.thedailystar.net/begum-rokeya-day-today-1745>) *The Daily Star*. Retrieved 25 June 2016.
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