

Educational Ideas Of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain In Her Writings

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Abstract:-

The history of women's studies in india has had an indigenous growth. It has emerged more as an consequence of the concern of the society towards women's position and problems. Its birth can be traced to the recognition of a failure on the part of social scientists to enquire into women's issues, their lack of questioning of the assumptions, theories and tools of analysis borrowed from the west and to bridge the glaring gaps in data that might help orient policy changes. This was because many of the social scientists and educational planners had found it necessary to re-examine the concepts and methodological approaches in terms of the social reality obtained in India. Women's studies thus started as part of a larger social movement and the growing social concern among few academicians with the widening issues of poverty, unemployment, inequality and underdevelopment. It gradually evolved the aim of bringing about greater knowledge on the social basis of women's inequality, their marginalization in development and their exclusions from power structures. The introduction of women's studies into the University System has been a path breaking event for social scientists and other scholars who wanted to see a comprehensive and balanced presentation of our social reality. It is viewed as an instrument for social and academic development that will help the university community and the society at large towards a better understanding of the multi-dimensional roles played by women and would look into the causes for gender disparity. For the past few decades, the world community is focusing on the issues concerning gender disparity leading to serious social imbalances. In this context Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain has written about the women emancipation and explained it through her writings in "Sultana's Dream".

Keywords: - inequality, poverty, marginalization, women, education, social reform

Introduction:-

She 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 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, 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 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. Rokeya married at the age of sixteen in 1896. Her Urdu speaking husband, Khan Bahadur Sakhawat Hossain, was the deputy magistrate of Bhagalpur, which is now a district under the Indian state of Bihar. Sakhawat did his BAG 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 suggested that she 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 Motichur (1905) and Sultana's Dream (1908) during her husband's lifetime.

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, popularly known as Begum. Rokeya was a leading feminist writer and social worker in undivided Bengal during the early 20th century. She is most famous for her efforts on behalf of gender equality and other social issues. She established the first school aimed primarily at Muslim girls, which still exists today. She was a notable Muslim feminist; Begum Rokeya also wrote short stories and novels. Her important works are Sultana's Dream and Padmarag. She dedicated her life to the service of mankind. She fought relentlessly against injustice heedless of the consequence to herself. She worked hard to fulfill all the ideals that she had cherished since her childhood. She was very much involved with her ideas, which were precise and illumined with personal warmth. She claimed for equality of women and she was of the idea that men always wanted to make women inferior for their benefit.

Early Life of Rokeya:-

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was a Muslim feminist and social reformer who dedicated her life to education and the empowerment of women. Born in 1880 in Bangladesh during British colonial rule, Rokeya was brought up in a Muslim family that followed the purdah, a strict set

of social rules which required women be secluded from society. However, the support from her brothers and husband would give her the strength to persevere through harsh criticism, and inspire her to become the author of several books and eventually open a school for girls.

Rokeya's father was a rich landowner who had the means to educate his two sons Abul Asad Ibrahim Saber and Khalil Saber. Unfortunately Rokeya's father had little interest in educating any of his daughters. Her brothers, inspired by their Western education, secretly taught Rokeya and her sister Bengali and English. However, before the age of 15, Rokeya's sister would be forced into a child marriage. This would have a strong impact on Rokeya. In one of her personal essays she states "Had society not been so suppressive, Karimunessa would have been a bright gem of this country, as the glow of an electric bulb is dimmed by a thick cover, so the lady described by me could not show her gifts due to the covers of purdah".

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was a pioneering feminist writer, educationist and activist in colonial Bengal, who not only sought to emancipate women from the deeply entrenched values of Indian social and cultural patriarchy through her darkly satirical and provocative writings, but also actively pursued her idea of empowering women through education by setting up a school for Muslim girls. . A subject of the British Indian Empire, Rokeya, and many of her colleagues, wrote back to the empire against both colonialism and patriarchy, and created innovative educational discourses and practices. The history of education is inscribed not merely in the formal school that Rokeya founded, but in her larger career as writer and builder of women's associations. An analysis of the enmeshing of women's writing and women's networks thus yields a creative, nuanced history of women's education. Moreover, she was practical enough to reify her vision by taking steps to eradicate women's ignorance and invigorate their sense of self, by setting up a school in Calcutta and by running programmes to educate slum women through the association for Muslim women, Anjuman-i-Khwateen-i-Islam, which she founded in 1916—all at a time when Indian Muslim women were expected to live in confinement in the zenana and any attempt to educate them was seen as blasphemous. In the 19th century the revolution for reformation that took place in education, culture and literature – its effects also entered into the 20th century.

Education for women:-

Begum rokeya wanted all women to be independent. She exposed the glaring inequalities present between sexes not only among the Muslims but also among other communities. She compared ornaments with the chains of dogs. She was of the view that ornaments are mere marks of slavery. Begum Rokeya wanted women to come out of their confinement and take

part in all spheres of life. In her words, “We constitute one half of the society and if we are left behind, how can the society progress? If a person’s one leg is tied, how far can he go? The interests of men and women are the same. The goal of life is the same for both.” In various articles Rokeya talked about the need for social reformation and showed how that can be achieved. She enumerated the steps to be taken for baby and childcare, for prevention of infant mortality and training of housewives for ideal management of the family.

She strongly believed that to gain freedom of women, three things are obvious: education, economic independence and mobility with moderate purdah, and she worked towards that end with the intellect of a teacher, zeal of a social reformer and conscience of a humanitarian throughout her life. Begum Rokeya led the way to empowering and enlightening women by founding two major institutions – sakhawat memorial girl’s school and Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam. She could feel that uniting the womenfolk along with education was important to establish their rights in the society.

Rokeya’s personal life was overwhelmed with tragedies with the lack of her mother’s affection, early loss of her husband and loss of her two daughters in infancy. But these pathetic incidences couldn’t stop her journey for women’s right of Muslim community. Begum Rokeya’s systematic and undaunted devotion for women liberation from subjugation of the society inspired her to start educational institutes.

Begum Rokeya: A fierce feminist critic of patriarchy:-

Begum Rokeya single-handedly ushered in Muslim women’s reform in Bengal. The most interesting element of her work is the duality where she on one hand fiercely criticises patriarchal institutions, rejects religion as authored by men, and displays utter disgust towards institutions of purdah, on the other hand, her reform agenda comes around to follow the similar middle path as the Begum of Bhopal whereby gradual change was introduced in accordance to social reality and with respect to social practices. The most important features that distinguish Rokeya from her male counterpart reformers are her sharp feminist critique of patriarchy in her writing, her emphasis on women’s physical fitness and development of mental faculty, her recognition of women’s education as means of economic independence, and finally, her distinction between abarodh and purdah. Whereas abarodh was understood by Rokeya as the negative and extreme application of purdah, the practice of purdah in itself was not condemned, rather welcomed as female propriety. As she dismissed abarodh as a practice where women were “shut off from public space, or any healthy participation in society” (Amin 145, 2001), and purdah as means of female modesty with mobility and public

participation, she broke down the demarcation of women into the private sphere in the name of purdah or modesty. It is this sharp analytical ability of Rokeya that echoes in her work and writing that still makes her into the only female feminist icon contemporary Bengali Muslim women look up to even today.

The resilience of Begum Rokeya's social impact lies in that fact that her writings, actions and resistances strategically pin point, analyse, and to some extent resolve gender biased social, cultural and political practices. Besides establishing a girls' school, she was also the founder of Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam (1916). Rokeya's personal life was overwhelmed with tragedies with the early loss of her husband, and the loss of her two baby daughters in infancy. She suffered immensely from a wave of criticisms and various obstacles in initiating social change for women, but she worked relentlessly literally till her last breath to bring changes to women's downtrodden status. Begum Rokeya offered Bengali Muslim women books instead of kitchen utensils. She told them about the vast world outside the bundles of saris and jewellery, inspired them to break out of the patriarchal framework and taste their own individualities, and finally she called out to them with a sense of feminist sisterhood — Jago Go Bhogini or Wake Up Sisters!

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was born in 1880 in Rangpur. Her father was a local zamindar and preferred to maintain strict purdah for the women in his family. Women in the household were taught only Arabic in order to read the Holy Quran, but as Rownak Jahan pointed out, "defying custom, and valuing their Bengali identity over their religious one, Rokeya and her gifted elder sister, Karimunnesa persisted in learning Bangla."⁸ Rokeya continued her studies with her elder brother Saber without the knowledge of other members of the family and continued to feed her passion for knowledge after getting married at the age of 16 to Syed Shakhawat Hossain, a widower of 39, in 1896. Rokeya was well-versed in Bangla, English, Urdu, Arabic and Persian, but chose to write the bulk of her literature in Bangla except for a few pieces in English, including her first novel *Sultana's Dream* (1905). Rokeya started writing her reformist pieces for various different magazines starting from 1903, which were later published under the title *Motichur* in 1908. *Motichur* part two was published in 1921, *Padmaraga* (novel) in 1924 and *Oborodhbashini* or the *Secluded Ones* in 1928. Rokeya *Racanavali* published by the Bangla Academy in 1973 included her unpublished writings and letters both in Bangla and English including her unpublished poetry. Begum Rokeya died on December 9, 1932, and up until 11 pm on December 8, 1932, she was working on an unfinished article titled, 'Narir Odhikar' or Women's Rights. Two major organisational

contributions Rokeya made for attaining women's rights were her school and 'Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam' (Muslim Women's Association). Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School started off with eight students in 1911 in Kolkata, and by 1915 the number of students increased to 84. By 1930 the school had become a high school, including all 10 grades. The curriculum included physical education, handicrafts, sewing, cooking, nursing, home economics and gardening, in addition to regular courses in Bangla, English, Urdu, Persian and Arabic.

Rokeya emphasised on physical education because she believed that it was important to make women physically stronger, fit and confident. Rokeya also recognised the importance of women's economic independence. Her curriculum therefore, included vocational training in crafts and sewing. She realised the importance organised action for changing women's position and raising public opinion for it, therefore, she founded Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam in 1916. The activities of this organisation related directly to the disadvantaged and poor women. It offered financial support for widows, rescued and sheltered battered women, helped poor families to marry their daughters, and above all helped poor women to gain literacy. Rokeya ran a slum literacy programme in Kolkata by forming work teams to visit women in the slums to teach them reading, writing, personal hygiene and child care. Even though Rokeya made important contributions through her organisational effort, her writing remains her most significant gift to Bengali Muslim women.

Begum Rokeya believed that men and women were created differently, but equally. In her views, the subjugated position of women was not due to Allah's will, but due to men's immorality, "there is a saying, 'Man proposed, God disposes,' but my bitter experience shows that, 'God gives, Man robs'." Rokeya believed that, "Allah has made no distinction in the general life of male and female — both are equally bound to seek food, drink, sleep and pray five times a day." Rokeya used a fascinating logic to enforce the notion of gender equality within an Islamic framework, "[h]ad God Himself intended women to be inferior, He would have ordained it so that mothers would have given birth to daughters at the end of the fifth month of pregnancy. The supply of mother's milk would naturally have been half of that in case of a son. But that is not the case. How can it be? Is not God just and most merciful?" Begum Rokeya coined the term 'manoshik dashhotto' or mental slavery to describe the loss of individuality in women, and identified this psychological phenomenon as the main force behind women's subjugation. She believed that social systems like seclusion and purdah intentionally make women unfit and weak for survival in the public realm. Rokeya believed

that men deliberately refuse women equal opportunities to cultivate their minds with the purpose of sustaining women's dependence on men and further perpetuating women's dependence on their own inferior status. Rokeya used examples of women who earn more than their husbands, but still submit to the men folk at home to point out that the framework of women's subjugation exceed economic parameters. In Begum Rokeya's view, manoshik dashhotto is at the core of women's subjugated position. She summoned women to overthrow the invisible bondages of our brains, to strip off the transparent patriarchal exploitation, "The seeds of higher attributes have been destroyed in the female minds. Our inside, outside, brain, heart — all have become enslaved (dashi hoiyaa poryiachee)." We are not entitled to have the freedom of our heart or perform the actions of our choice. Neither do we notice any effort to gain our freedom as women. Therefore, I want to say: Jago, Jago Go Bhogini!"

Educational ideas conveyed through Sultana's Dream:-

Sultana's Dream follows the usual conventions, codes and formulas of a utopian narrative and has a simple and minimal plot outline. Sultana, the first-person narrator of this text comes to Ladyland (the utopia, 'no place' or 'good place') and meets Sister Sara, a scientist, who lets Sultana know of the ways of life and activities of her fellow-citizens in Ladyland. When Sultana returns to her own country, it becomes clear that the journey took place in a dream. For Rokeya, however, the genre is not only a literary or linguistic practice, but also a social practice: new textual attributes and linguistic forms have been employed to highlight her concern for dismantling gender bias in her contemporary patriarchal social formations. Sultana's Dream is generally described as a utopian fiction – 'probably the first such work in Indian Literature.' Sultana's Dream is categorized as a female utopia in the sense that it is a reworking of a classical genre from the female or feminist perspective. Rokeya has inflected the textual conventions of utopian narratives in new ways, replacing the conventional male-supremacist content with the elements that prioritize women's desires and valorize women's capabilities. It is interesting to note that in Sultana's Dream the narrator's name 'Sultana' means a female sovereign, but ironically she lacks autonomy and has to live in virtual confinement: she rules the fact that women in her native land 'have no hand or voice in the management' of their social affairs. She feels shy and nervous to walk alone on a crowded street in broad daylight without her veil. But this purdanishin woman in her dream meets Sister Sara and the Queen of Ladyland who as her foils show what woman can achieve when they have opportunities for education and can act autonomously. Indeed, Sister Sara, the independent minded, self-confident working woman, and the Queen with her scheme of

education for all the women of her country and other social reform programmes and to some extent the Lady Principals are projections of the multiple identities of the author Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. In her utopian fiction *Sultana's Dream* Rokeya has presented her vision of womanpower. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's dream* is a unique blend of both the classical or traditional and the technological utopias. It represents an imaginary land, ladyland, its system of governance, social status of and relations between men and women, scientific and technological attainments, norms and practices in trade and commerce, geographical and natural environment. In this utopian narrative Rokeya has reversed the concept of a 'zenana': it is no more a place of seclusion and confinement for women. Women in ladyland have come out of zenana in the public arena and assumed the responsibilities of governance, education (from the elementary to the university level), scientific researches and technological innovations, military strategy and tactics, and trade and commerce, too – which in *Sultana's* world are regarded as men's abolished and replaced with a new signifier – 'mardana' - for now men ('mards') stay indoors secluded from the public space, engaged in the looking after babies, cooking and all other domestic chores. Going through the text her husband's boss Mr. McPherson, the then divisional commissioner in Bhagalpur remarked:

“The ideas expressed in it are quite delightful and full of originality and they are written in perfect English I wonder if she foretold here the manner in which we may be able to move about in the air at some future time. Her suggestions on this point are most ingenious.”

Conclusion:-

There is little doubt that the Indian women's education like the women's movement would never have become a reality if Indian men in the nineteenth century had not been concerned with modernizing their women's roles. By focusing on female education they had endeavoured to bring women, especially women from their own families, into the new world created by the colonial rule. The outcome was that women, whether they wanted or not, became part of this new society (Geraldine Forbes, 1998. p. 252). Notwithstanding the courageous attempts made by individual women writers and reformers to seek greater social power for women, it would be fair to say that the patriarchal/nationalist accommodations of the 19th century were more about men changing their ways, and women adjusting to such changes, than any fundamental alteration in the organization of power resulting from initiatives undertaken by women (Sarkar Mahua, 2008, p. 72). The daughters of reform contributed in many ways to the greater visibility of women in educational, social, and political action in the 1920s and 1930s. Some came out of the purdah with the backing of

their families. Many were active professionally, in starting schools, in teaching, medicine, and educational and social work among the less fortunate. Some wrote in the magazines and journals that had emerged early in the century, or they became authors of short stories and novels depicting women's lives. Others became involved in the nationalist movement, or worked for other political causes. The men who had championed Muslim women's education and foreseen women who would be better wives, better mothers, and better Muslims had reasons to be satisfied with the outcome of their efforts, and other reasons to be perturbed. Women once given a voice did not always turn out to be dutiful daughters, although most of them did. Elite women had many reasons to uphold the honour and status of their families, and few reasons to defy them. They too knew about the art of the possible (Minault Gail, 1998, pp. 306-330). As more and more educated women participated in the public sphere, the power of the purdah seemed to relegate to the background. Yet, a new concept of the purdah seemed to emerge as the external purdah was internalized in the form of a code of conduct. The concept of spiritual intellectuality free of vibrant sexuality was the new purdah that covered the new woman. Any deviation from this would be frowned upon by a society that was still dominated by the patriarchy. The search for a new identity for the Muslim woman had traversed a long way, but many milestones remained to be covered.

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