Empowered Voices: The Freedom Struggle of Muslim Womens in Colonial Bengal

Hilal Ahmad Tantray

Research Scholar, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

Email:hilalmohiuddin614@gmail.com

Abstract:

In Indian history, women have achieved great strides. Female freedom fighters of India have been an eminent and integral part of Indian History. The history of the Indian freedom struggle would be incomplete without highlighting the contributions of women. During the colonial era, female freedom fighters from Bengal played a critical part in India's campaign for independence. These strong women actively engaged in various types of resistance against British rule, defying social norms. They made significant contributions to a variety of endeavors, including political activism, advocacy, and underground movements. The Muslim women freedom fighters contributed their lives to the country's freedom and will forever be a part of our Indian history. The struggle for independence in Bengal, India, during the mid 20th century was marked by the fervent participation of Bengali Muslim women who played a pivotal yet often overlooked role in shaping the course of history. As the Indian subcontinent sought liberation from British colonial rule, these women faced a dual challenge not only combating external oppression but also challenging deeply entrenched societal norms that restricted their agency. Bengali Muslim women found themselves at the intersection of religious and gender based marginalization, yet their commitment to the cause of independence remained unwavering. Many women became strong leaders, organizers, and participants in the nationalist movement, in spite of the orthodox social systems that kept them in traditional positions. Their contributions spanned from political advocacy to grassroots mobilization, enabling them to break free from stifling and make their voices heard.

Keywords: Patriotism, Freedom, Women, Bengal, National movement.

Introduction

Patriotism and nationalism have no gender, caste, colour or religion. It is a well to assert our identity and love our country which is as much our as it is of every fellow citizen who dared to question injustice. When we go by this factual knowledge the contribution of women in India's

independence movement was in no way less than men. Women in history are rarely given the recognition they deserve, which is why their accomplishments must be highlighted now. However, most texts on Indian history did not mention many women independence warriors who were regarded as war harbingers of change and embodiments of women's strength. Many names of these bold reactions have been lost, and the list is particularly short on Muslim women liberation fighters. Historians have completely neglected the role and contribution of Muslim women in the fight of independence and later movement, despite the fact that they fought valiantly and suffered greatly.

In point of fact, the women movement firstly was organized in the eve of nineteenth century and again it took place after hundred years in the second decade of twentieth century. In the first half of 20th century Indian deployed revolutionary action for resistance. And this method was robustly manipulated by both men and women folk of Bengal. In this field Muslim women were not in behind. They contributed to this kind of struggle either through hiding revolutionaries or through funding or through acting as messenger. Muslim women played a significant but often overlooked role in the freedom struggle of colonial Bengal. Many actively participated in protests, joined political movements, and contributed to the social and educational upliftment of their communities. History of the national movement would be incomplete without the mentions of Prominent figures like Raziya Khatun, Halima Khatun, Samsunnesa Begum, Raisa Bano Begum (wife of Asaf Ali Beg of Dacca), Badrunnesa begum (wife of Akhtaruddin Hossain of Dacca) Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Shaista Ikramullah, Doulatunnesha of Gaibandher, Rousunara Begam, etc. all these women participated in all the political movement from the Partition of Bengal to the Partition of India with congress banners in their hands. They were imprisoned, fine and lati charge and suffer for a caste. There life story itself is a part of national movement which cannot be denied at all. The collected works of Gandhi speak of their magnificent contribution to India’s struggle for freedom. Several monographic in which Santimoy Ray’s ‘freedom movement and Indian Muslims’ or P. N. Chopra’s ‘Indians struggle for freedom’ and Kanta Chaubey’s ‘Muslims and freedom movement in India’ and few regional studies like ‘role of Muslims in national movement’ by Md. Muzaffar Imam and Hasan Imam ‘Indian national movement’ regarding the role of Muslims have been published. But the subject is very vide and needs a comprehensive study.

Bengali Muslims Women's integral role in Indian National movement:

Women's awareness grew around the end of the nineteenth century. As a result, when Bengal was partitioned in 1905, the achievements of Bengal's women were no less significant in the unforeseen response of the swadeshi movement in and outside Bengal. The swadeshi movement benefited immensely from the backing of the women's community in its early stages. They then gathered in their respective homes and villages and pledged to support local products while avoiding foreign products. Gandhi's special call to women granted them the right to participate in the National Movement, which had previously been exclusively the domain of men, and the Swadeshi movement in Bengali gave women the first socially acceptable opportunity to enter politics. While Muslim women have been involved in the Freedom Movement since the beginning of Indian colonialism, it wasn't until 1905, following the division of Bengal, that the Nationalist Movements began to have a significant impact on Bengali Muslims' political beliefs. Muslim women were first prominent in the swadeshi and anti-partition movements the masses of Bengali women of the time lived a life of the strict seclusion, many nevertheless, enthusiastically supported the boycott during the swadeshi movement. Married women and girls emerged from the houses of worship with their veils lifted in protest. Bengali women participated in a women's strike that was similar to an anti-imperialist one during the swadeshi Movement. Women made up a substantial portion of the participants in the Barisal district, where there was strong opposition to imported goods and severe social oppression experienced by Muslim and Hindu women alike. In the Murshidabad district, some five hundred women from both communities gathered at Jonokand hamlet to express their disapproval of the government's decision to divide the country and to advocate for the use of domestically produced items. It is unexpected that Khairunnesa, a Muslim woman from Bengal, spread swadeshi ideas since the Partition of Bengal distanced itself from the movement.

In Bengal, early step from Muslim women in the way of spreading Nationalism was taken by the writers like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein, Sufia Kamal, Samsunnahar Mandal and others. Begam Rokeya was one of the most outstanding Muslim role model for Bengali women during the early decades of 20th century. During her times there were several writings which reflected the separatist tendency as they were influenced by the contemporary Muslim separatist politics in Bengal. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was politically conscious but she did not engage herself in

politics directly. But she inspired the women to join swadeshi movement. Some Indian women went foreign for taking training from international freedom fighters for organizing struggle to free our country from the bondage of British rule. Among them the name of Ambika khan Luhani should be noted. In 1911, the partition of Bengal was banned because of the result of the immense struggle of the large people our country. The success of the national movement inspired the women movement. The causes of the involvement of the Muslim women in this national women movement were their social consciousness and political awareness. We can see the positive perception of Rokeya about nationalism in her article entitled "Sugrihini". She said: 'we are Indians, we are Indian first and then thereafter we are Muslims, Sikhs, or some other'. They were not directly or actively involved in the nationalist politics. However their certain writings reflect the sense of patriotism and nationalism. There are many references we have, about Muslim women' participation, even from behind the veils of purdah, in Khilafat and Non cooperation movement. Gandhi's appeal for joining women folk in the National Movement stimulated Muslim women extensively. Here Gandhi applied secular tactic to provoked Muslim women to join in the mainstream of national movement. He essentially modified his message for Muslim women. Here he dropped the reference to the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and simply he asked women to participate and encourage their husbands to join the movement. In 1920, Gandhi formally launched the Non-Cooperation Movement, culminating in the participation of women in the mass movement. Congress had distributed large number of charkhas among the Muslims in Comillah, Chitagong, Nadia (Kusthia), Noakhali, which were mainly operated by women.

Khairunnessa was probably the first of the early Muslim women writers to formulate her ideas on social and political issues of the time. Khairunnesa Khatun is known to have walked from village to village, promoting Swadeshi among women living in Bengal's villages. Khairunnesa Khatun, the principal of Sirajgunj Hossainpur Girls' High School (now in Bangladesh), published an article titled for The Love of the Motherland, in the magazine Nabanoor. 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. Khairunnessa pointed out that Swadeshi would help the poorer section of the Muslim community because it would stop

economic drain and help industrial development. With the Gandhian swadeshi movement, women across India came to the forefront, with millions boycotting British-made goods and promoting Khadi as well as other Indian weaves. The stories of women giving up their gold ornaments to fund the nationalist movement during the 1920s is popular enough to stay in all of our minds.

Bengali Begum Shaista Ikramullah was a well-known purdah liberated woman of the twentieth century. She became the first Muslim woman to receive a Ph.D in 1940. She had patriotic sympathies and had a secular mindset. She was a regular at women's groups and had even given a passionate statement at one. After returning to Delhi in 1940 and being acquainted with Muhammad Jinnah, she became active in the formation of the Muslim League's Women's Subcommittee and the Muslim Women's Student Federation. In 1946, she was chosen to serve in the Indian Constitutional Assembly as a member of the Muslim League.

Patriotic female students protested the Simon Commission in 1928, when revolutionary parties were active in the anti-Simon Commission movement. Women have been politically involved since this era. Many motivated women were drawn to the revolutionary party's activities and participated in a variety of secret groups as well as armed revolutionary organizations. The university's female students attempted to assassinate the autocratic governor, deputy commissioner, and police commissioner. Women students risked their lives and got involved in the terrorist activities of the revolutionary party. When the peasant society was crushed by police torture, arrests, and the terrorist oppression of landlords, the peasant women and the men formed a peasant organization and strongly protested against it. For this reason, apart from building their resistance force, in order to strengthen the movement, they always courageously stood beside the men, rang the bell to inform the farmers of the arrival of the enemy, spontaneously joined various farmers' meetings, and above all, overcame all obstacles and engaged in direct struggle with infinite courage and sacrificed their lives.

Razia Khatun, the revolutionary worker's daughter, was a member of the Jugantar party. She was the first Muslim lady in Bengal to stand up to the British, and she was captured and brought to Kalapani, where she died. Chittagong and Mymensingh revolutionaries had a sizable Muslim following.

During the Civil Disobedience Movement, women took to the streets in large numbers for the first time to fight for Swaraj. Generally women of Bengal showed much enthusiasm during Civil Disobedience Movement. Some Calcutta women made and sold salt, picketed cloth and liquor shops, preached the value of khaddar, and took procession into the street. Many people were jailed and imprisoned for taking part in these activities. However, the Indian National Congress was hesitant to allow women to take positions of leadership within the organization. Their presence at the party was purely symbolic. Even Mahatma Gandhi believed that it was the responsibility of women to care for their houses. Muslim women from upper class conservative families in the towns of Comillah and Noakhali in eastern Bengal played notable role. They courted arrest, occupied official buildings, organized demonstration and assumed charge of picketing, flag demonstration and procession

Many peasant women, accompanied by their husbands and brothers, left their homes to demonstrate against taxation, land tenure, and landholder privileges as the Quit India Movement expanded to rural areas. They participated in protests, broke up telegraph lines, and attacked police stations. During the Second World War, Aruna Ganguli, the courageous wife of Asaf Ali, led clandestine revolutionary societies in Bengal. She had previously participated in the civil disobedience movement and, in 1941, made an individual Satyagraha offer. She led the effort, oversaw the Bombay session of the Indian National Congress, and raised the Indian flag at the Gowalia Tank Maidan in 1942, earning her the title of "heroine of 1942." She established the National Federation of Indian after independence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, women have played a significant, albeit underappreciated, part in our nation's history. Thousands of women have done it all, from taking up arms, the pen, and the power of protest against our British occupiers. The crucial involvement of Muslim women in colonial Bengal's freedom struggle demonstrates their undying dedication to independence. These women defied stereotypes by displaying perseverance, tenacity, and advocacy that exceeded social expectations. They made major contributions to the rich fabric of the fight against colonial rule via their participation in movements and sacrifices. Their efforts highlight the inclusivity and unity inherent in India's quest for independence, providing a lasting legacy that resonates with the spirit of empowerment and common goal for a sovereign nation. A significant part of the

larger tale of India's independence movement is told through the perspective of Muslim women in colonial Bengal. In the years between 1905 and 1947, women's society was able to play a significant role in the national revolutionary movement by actively taking part in important tasks like providing the revolutionaries with shelter at home, concealing or delivering weapons, confusing the police, or planning their escape.

References:

Mallick, A.R., *British Policy and the Muslims in Bengal,1757-1856*, Dhaka, Agomani, 1977.

Sarkar, Jadunath, *History of Bengal (1200- 1757),* Dhaka, The University of Dhaka, 1972.

Sarkar, Mahua,"Muslim Women and the Politics of Invisibility in Late Colonial Bengal", *Journal of Historical Sociology,* 14. 2 June 2001.

Rahim, M. Abdur, *The Muslim Society and Politics in Bengal, 1757-1947*, Dhaka, 1978.

Chitra Ghosh, *Women Movement Politics in Bengal*, Chatterjee Publishers, Calcutta, 1991.

Ray, Santimoy, *Freedom Movement and Indian Muslim*. New Delhi: People's Publishing House, reprint, 1983.

S. N. Banerjee, *A Nation in Making,* Delhi, Rupa Publication, 2016.

S.M.H. Zaidi, *Muslim Womanhood in Revolution*, Book Tower, Calcutta, 1937.

Kaur, Manmohan, *Women in India's Freedom Struggle*, first edition. New Delhi: Sterling, 1968.

Lateef, Shaheeda, *Muslim Women in India: Political and Private Realities: 1890s to 1980s*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1990.

Gail Minault, *Purdah Politics: The Role of Muslim Women in Indian Nationalism, 1911-1924* Chanakya Publications, Delhi, 1982.

Meredith, Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984.

Geraldine, Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, New Cambridge History of India, Vol. IV, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1996.

Jayanti Maitra, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1855-1906*, K.P. Bagchi & Co. Calcutta, 1984.

Mustafa, Nurul Islam, *Bengali Muslim Public Opinion as Reflected in the Bengali Press, 1901-1930*, Bangla Academy, Dacca, 1973.

Sumit, sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, New Delhi, Peoples Publishing House,1977.

Aparna, Basu, *The Role of Women in The Indian Struggle for Freedom, In Indian Women: From purdah to Modernity*, New Delhi, Vikash Publishing, 1976.