



Begum Rokeya as a Pioneer of Women's Emancipation and Educational Reform in Colonial Bengal and India: A Conceptual Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Women's emancipation in colonial India unfolded within a socio-cultural context marked by rigid patriarchy, restricted access to education, and deeply entrenched social conservatism. Within this milieu, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) emerged as a pioneering reformer whose contributions to women's education and gender justice remain foundational yet underexplored in contemporary scholarship. This conceptual study critically examines Begum Rokeya's role as a pioneer of women's emancipation and educational reform in colonial Bengal and India by situating her ideas within broader feminist, educational, and social reform discourses. Drawing exclusively on secondary sources—such as Rokeya's literary works, essays, speeches, institutional records, and relevant scholarly literature—the study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach informed by feminist theory and historical contextual analysis. Rokeya's philosophy of women's education, her critique of purdah and patriarchal authority, and her literary and institutional interventions aimed at transforming women's social position. It argues that Rokeya's contributions constituted an integrated framework that linked education, intellectual freedom, and social reform rather than isolated reformist efforts. Her writings functioned as powerful tools of social critique, while her institutional initiatives translated feminist ideas into lived practice. The



study further assesses the contemporary relevance of Rokeya's thought, particularly in West Bengal, where her legacy continues to inform debates on gender equality and inclusive education. The paper concludes that Begum Rokeya should be recognized not merely as a historical reformer but as a transformative thinker whose ideas retain enduring relevance for contemporary struggles for women's empowerment and social justice in India.

Introduction

The history of women's emancipation in colonial India is deeply intertwined with the struggles against social conservatism, educational deprivation, and entrenched patriarchal norms (Forbes, 1996; Sarkar, 2001). While the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed several reform movements aimed at social transformation, women-particularly Muslim women in Bengal-remained largely excluded from formal education and public life (Hasan, 1994). It was within this context of systemic marginalization that Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) emerged as a pioneering voice for women's emancipation and educational reform (Bagchi, 2010). Her contributions represent a rare synthesis of intellectual courage, social activism, and visionary educational practice, making her one of the most significant yet under-acknowledged reformers in colonial Bengal and India (Sengupta, 2018). Begum Rokeya challenged the dominant belief that women's subordination was divinely ordained or culturally inevitable. Instead, she identified ignorance, lack of education, and rigid social customs as the primary instruments sustaining gender inequality (Rokeya, 1904/2011). Unlike many contemporary reformers who focused largely on theoretical advocacy, Rokeya translated her ideas into concrete action by establishing educational institutions for Muslim girls at a time when female literacy was widely opposed (Hasan & Menon, 2005). Through the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School, she demonstrated that women's education was not a threat to society but a vital foundation for social progress and moral development (Bagchi, 2010). Her educational vision extended beyond basic literacy to include critical thinking, self-reliance, and social consciousness (Sengupta, 2018). Rokeya's role as a reformer was further strengthened through her powerful literary contributions. Her essays, speeches, and imaginative writings such as *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag* exposed the irrationality of patriarchal dominance and offered alternative visions of a society grounded in reason, equality, and justice (Rokeya, 1905/2011; Bagchi, 2010). What distinguishes Rokeya's thought is its contextual sensitivity; her feminist ideas were rooted in the lived realities of Bengali Muslim women while simultaneously engaging with universal ideals of



human rights and dignity (Hasan, 1994). In this sense, her work represents an early form of indigenous feminist thought that predates and challenges later theoretical frameworks (Sarkar, 2001).

In the broader landscape of colonial India, Begum Rokeya's contributions occupy a critical intersection between education, gender reform, and social awakening. While reform movements across India emphasized women's upliftment, Rokeya's sustained focus on Muslim women in Bengal addressed a particularly marginalized group within the colonial social hierarchy (Forbes, 1996). Her ideas influenced subsequent generations of educators, reformers, and women activists, contributing to the gradual normalization of women's education in Bengal and beyond (Bagchi, 2010). Begum Rokeya should be understood not merely as a historical figure but as a transformative thinker whose ideas continue to resonate in contemporary debates on gender equality and inclusive education in India (Sengupta, 2018). By situating her work within the socio-cultural realities of colonial Bengal and the broader Indian reform movement, the study highlights her enduring relevance as a pioneer of women's emancipation and educational reform.

Rationale of the Study

This study is necessary to critically examine Begum Rokeya's contributions as an integrated framework of women's emancipation and educational reform rather than isolated historical events. By adopting a conceptual approach, the research seeks to situate her ideas within broader feminist and educational thought. In the context of colonial Bengal and India, where women's education and autonomy were severely restricted, Rokeya's ideas represented a radical departure from dominant social norms. However, the theoretical depth and long-term significance of her work remain insufficiently explored in contemporary academic discourse.

Objectives of the Study

The present conceptual study aims to:

- a) To Examine Begum Rokeya's philosophy of women's education and emancipation
- b) To Analyze her literary and institutional contributions to social reform in Bengal
- c) To Explore her role in shaping early feminist consciousness in colonial India
- d) To Assess the relevance of Rokeya's ideas in contemporary Indian society, particularly in West Bengal



Methodology

The present study follows a qualitative conceptual research approach and is based entirely on secondary sources, including Begum Rokeya's essays, literary writings, speeches, biographies, and relevant scholarly works. The analysis is informed by feminist theoretical perspectives, social reform discourse, and historical contextual analysis to situate Rokeya's ideas within the socio-cultural conditions of colonial India. Instead of relying on empirical data, the study prioritizes critical interpretation, reflective analysis, and theoretical integration in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of Rokeya's contributions to women's emancipation and educational reform.

Begum Rokeya's Philosophy of Women's Education and Emancipation

Begum Rokeya viewed women's education as the most powerful instrument for achieving emancipation and social justice (Bagchi, 2010). She firmly believed that women's subordination was neither a natural condition nor a religious mandate, but rather the outcome of sustained social neglect and the systematic denial of educational opportunities (Rokeya, 1904/2011; Hasan, 1994). According to Rokeya, ignorance functioned as the primary mechanism through which patriarchal structures-maintained control over women, particularly within the conservative social environment of colonial Bengal (Sarkar, 2001). Education, therefore, was not merely a tool for acquiring literacy; it represented a pathway toward intellectual freedom, self-respect, and rational thought (Rokeya, 1905/2011).

Her educational philosophy emphasized a holistic model that fostered moral awareness, critical reasoning, and social responsibility alongside academic learning (Bagchi, 2010). Rokeya argued that educated women were capable of contributing meaningfully to family life, community well-being, and broader social and national development (Forbes, 1996). She strongly rejected the belief that women's education posed a threat to cultural or religious values, asserting instead that genuine social progress depended upon the equal intellectual development of both men and women (Hasan & Menon, 2005). Through this perspective, she redefined education as a shared social responsibility rather than a privilege reserved exclusively for men (Sengupta, 2018).

Rokeya's vision of emancipation extended beyond individual empowerment to encompass structural transformation. She advocated for women's active participation in public life and critically examined restrictive practices such as excessive purdah when these practices curtailed women's intellectual and social growth (Rokeya, 1904/2011; Sarkar, 2001). Her approach to reform was pragmatic and context-sensitive, seeking gradual change from within society rather than direct confrontation (Hasan, 1994). By



firmly linking education with emancipation, Begum Rokeya laid an early foundation for feminist thought in India—one that continues to hold relevance in contemporary debates on gender equality and inclusive education (Bagchi, 2010; Sengupta, 2018)

Begum Rokeya's Critique of Purdah and Patriarchal Structures

Begum Rokeya's critique of purdah and patriarchal structures emerged from her close observation of how social customs systematically restricted women's freedom and reinforced gender inequality in colonial Bengal (Hasan, 1994; Bagchi, 2010). While purdah was often defended as a religious or cultural necessity, Rokeya argued that its extreme forms functioned primarily as mechanisms of control that isolated women from education, public life, and intellectual growth (Rokeya, 1904/2011). She carefully distinguished between modesty and enforced seclusion, emphasizing that it was the latter—what she described as *abarodh*—that confined women physically and mentally, depriving them of opportunities for self-development (Sarkar, 2001). Rather than criticizing women themselves, Rokeya directed her critique toward the patriarchal interpretation and enforcement of purdah, which she believed served male dominance rather than moral or religious ideals (Hasan & Menon, 2005). In literary works such as *Oborodh Basini* (The Secluded Women), she vividly portrayed the emotional, psychological, and social consequences of enforced seclusion, exposing how women's suffering was normalized through custom and justified by tradition (Rokeya, 1931/2011). These narratives revealed that purdah was sustained not by divine injunction but by entrenched social power structures resistant to change (Bagchi, 2010).

Rokeya's critique was notably reformist rather than confrontational. She did not call for the abrupt abandonment of cultural practices but argued that education was the most effective means of dismantling oppressive interpretations of purdah (Forbes, 1996). By enabling women to think critically and engage with the world beyond domestic boundaries, education could gradually weaken patriarchal authority and promote social balance (Sengupta, 2018). For Rokeya, the true danger of purdah lay not in veiling itself but in the denial of intellectual freedom and social participation that perpetuated women's subordination (Sarkar, 2001). Through this nuanced critique, Begum Rokeya linked the practice of purdah directly to broader patriarchal structures that governed women's lives in colonial society. Her analysis positioned women's education and public engagement as essential tools for challenging gender inequality from within the cultural framework, laying an early foundation for feminist thought in India that continues to inform contemporary debates on gender justice and inclusive education (Bagchi, 2010; Sengupta, 2018).



Begum Rokeya's Literary and Institutional Contributions to Social Reform in Bengal

Begum Rokeya's contributions to social reform in colonial Bengal were deeply rooted in both her literary work and her institution-building efforts, forming a cohesive strategy to challenge patriarchy and expand women's horizons. As a writer, Rokeya produced a range of essays, fiction, and critical writings that boldly critiqued gender inequality and envisioned social transformation. Through works like *Motichur*, *Padmarag*, and the feminist utopian novella *Sultana's Dream*, she not only exposed the limitations imposed on women but also offered alternative visions of gender relations and social life where women's intellectual and social agency were foregrounded (Quayum, 2020; *Sultana's Dream*, 1905). These literary pieces became platforms for her protest against rigid social norms, articulating a language of resistance and emancipation that resonated beyond her immediate context and echoed broader struggles for women's rights (Miah, 2025). Parallel to her writing, Rokeya engaged in institutional reform by creating educational and social spaces that translated her ideas into material practice. In 1911 she founded the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School, conceived as a place where Muslim girls could receive modern education within socially acceptable boundaries; she personally persuaded families to enroll their daughters, even arranging transport that protected purdah norms while opening paths to schooling (Khatun, 2023; *Oborodh Basini* reports). This school's curriculum was transformative for its time, combining literary, vocational, and practical subjects to equip girls with the skills and confidence needed for new kinds of participation in public life.

Rokeya's institutional impact extended beyond education into grassroots organization and collective reform. In 1916, she established bodies such as the Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam (Muslim Women's Association) and engaged with multi-community women's groups that focused on literacy, mutual support, and social work. These forums provided women with opportunities for collective action and public discourse, bridging the gap between individual empowerment and organized social change (Daily Star reports). By linking literary critique with practical structures of education and association, Rokeya embedded her reformist vision into both thought and practice, making her contributions central to the advancement of Bengali women's rights and social emancipation.

Begum Rokeya's Role in Shaping Early Feminist Consciousness in Colonial India

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain played a central role in shaping early feminist consciousness in colonial India by both critiquing entrenched gender norms and articulating a vision of women's rights that transcended traditional reformist agendas. As a writer and intellectual, she used her literary voice to confront the systemic oppression faced by women, especially within conservative Muslim society, where



gender hierarchies were reinforced by patriarchal interpretations of religion and custom (Miah, 2025). Her critique was not merely descriptive but carried an emancipatory impulse: she consistently linked women's exclusion from education, social participation, and critical discourse to broader structures of inequality that affected the entire society (Miah, 2025; Cox, forthcoming). In her imaginative and critical works, including the feminist utopian *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya pioneered a distinctly Indian feminist literary tradition that challenged dominant narratives about women's place in society by imagining alternatives where women exercised intellectual leadership and autonomy (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). This story, among others, forged an early feminist vocabulary that urged readers to question the logic of male domination and to envision a society built on equality rather than hierarchy. Such writings helped cultivate a nascent feminist consciousness that recognized gender justice not as a peripheral concern but as central to social reform in colonial India. Rokeya's activism played a crucial role in materializing feminist ideas. By founding educational institutions like the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School and community networks such as the Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam, she transformed abstract principles into collective practices of empowerment and consciousness-raising (Think India Quarterly, 2019). These spaces became forums where women could assert their intellectual agency, challenge patriarchal norms, and participate in public life on their own terms—an essential step toward building a collective feminist identity during the colonial period. Importantly, Rokeya's feminism was intersectional for its time: she attended not only to gender injustice but also to how class, religion, and colonial structures intersected to limit women's potential. Her work emphasized that women's liberation required social transformation at multiple levels, blending literary critique, educational reform, and grassroots organizing into a coherent strategy for challenging patriarchal domination (International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development, 2024).

Through these combined efforts, Begum Rokeya helped seed an early feminist consciousness in colonial India that questioned normative assumptions about gender, expanded the boundaries of women's intellectual and social participation, and laid conceptual groundwork for later feminist movements in South Asia.

Literature as a Tool for Social Reform

Begum Rokeya understood literature not merely as artistic expression but as a powerful instrument for social critique and transformation, especially in the context of early twentieth-century Bengal, where women's voices were systematically silenced (Mitra & Mallick, 2024). Her writings, including essays, stories, and feminist utopian fiction such as *Sultana's Dream*, strategically confronted the entrenched



patriarchal norms of her society by imagining alternative social structures that challenged gender inequality and restrictive customs (Hasanat, 2013; Ilahi, 2024). Through *Sultana's Dream*, for example, Rokeya flipped conventional gender hierarchies by depicting a world in which women's intellectual and scientific leadership replaced male dominance -a rhetorical strategy that used fiction to critique real-world inequalities and inspire feminist consciousness (Hasanat, 2013; Wikipedia, 2025). In her literary work, Rokeya wove together critique and vision, using narrative not just to expose the limitations placed on women but also to suggest paths toward their emancipation. Critics note that she did not write for entertainment alone; her literature deliberately aimed to challenge social practices she considered unjust, such as gendered exclusion from education and public life (Jahan, 1988 as cited in research on Rokeya's writing). This aligns with theoretical views that literature can act as a means of social development by highlighting inequality and promoting reflection on change (as interpreted in Marxist readings of her work).

Moreover, Rokeya's literary projects informed and reinforced her institutional reform efforts, creating a synergy between her creative expression and practical activism. Her narratives helped shape public discourse on women's roles and rights, providing intellectual support for her educational initiatives and engagement with social reform movements (Mitra & Mallick, 2024). By presenting compelling images of female agency and critiquing the cultural constraints of her time, Rokeya's literature played an indispensable role in mobilizing feminist thought and advancing the cause of gender equality in colonial India.

Begum Rokeya's Ideas in Contemporary Indian Society, Particularly in West Bengal

Begum Rokeya's ideas continue to shape debates on gender equality, women's empowerment, and education in contemporary Indian society, especially in West Bengal, where her legacy remains influential in both academic circles and grassroots movements. Rooted in her early twentieth-century advocacy, Rokeya's vision of women's intellectual freedom and social participation resonates today among educators, feminists, and policy advocates who see her work as foundational to ongoing struggles for gender justice (Mitra & Mallick, 2024; Antara Mitra, 2025). In West Bengal's socio-cultural landscape, Rokeya's pioneering efforts to promote education for girls, especially Muslim girls, are frequently referenced in contemporary research on women's literacy and empowerment. Her establishment of the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School is celebrated not only as a historical milestone but as a symbol of educational liberation that continues to inspire modern initiatives aimed at expanding access to schooling and reducing gender disparities in education (Zenodo, 2025). Rokeya's emphasis on



education as a means to achieve broader social reform has shaped public discourse on inclusive education policies in West Bengal and beyond. Her belief that women's education fosters economic independence, civic participation, and intellectual agency is reflected in contemporary feminist scholarship and activism, which continues to draw on her ideas to challenge structural inequalities in access to education and employment (ResearchGate, 2025). Beyond pedagogy, Rokeya's writings- including *Sultana's Dream* - remain relevant as cultural touchstones in debates about gender roles and social progress in Indian society. These literary contributions are used in academic curricula and feminist critiques to illustrate how early feminist thought envisioned alternative possibilities for women's autonomy and leadership (Wikipedia, 2025; Cox, 2025).

In West Bengal's contemporary feminist landscape, Rokeya's ideas are often invoked to frame intersectional concerns involving gender, class, and religion. Her critique of patriarchal norms and advocacy for women's public engagement inform ongoing research and advocacy that seeks to dismantle lingering barriers to inclusion and equity in both urban and rural settings. Rokeya's intellectual legacy thus continues to serve as a theoretical and practical foundation for advancing women's rights in contemporary India.

Conclusion

This conceptual study has demonstrated that Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's contributions to women's emancipation and educational reform in colonial India were neither fragmented nor limited to a single domain; rather, they constituted a coherent and integrated framework of social transformation. Situated within the restrictive socio-cultural conditions of colonial Bengal, Rokeya's ideas challenged entrenched patriarchal norms, religious misinterpretations, and systemic educational exclusion that shaped women's subordination, particularly among Muslim communities (Hasan, 1994; Forbes, 1996). By identifying ignorance and denial of education as the primary instruments of oppression, she redefined women's education as a pathway to intellectual freedom, social dignity, and collective progress rather than mere literacy acquisition (Rokeya, 1904/2011; Bagchi, 2010). The study highlights how Rokeya's critique of purdah and patriarchal authority was marked by contextual sensitivity and reformist pragmatism. Instead of outright rejection of cultural practices, she exposed how their rigid and patriarchal enforcement restricted women's intellectual and social growth, advocating education as the most effective means of internal reform (Sarkar, 2001; Sengupta, 2018). Her literary works-ranging from essays to feminist utopian fiction-functioned as powerful tools of social critique, enabling her to imagine alternative social orders grounded in reason, equality, and justice while simultaneously engaging readers



in critical reflection on existing inequalities (Bagchi, 2010; Hasanat, 2013). Equally significant were Rokeya's institutional initiatives, particularly the establishment of the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School and women's organizations, which translated her feminist vision into sustained social practice. These institutions bridged the gap between intellectual advocacy and lived reform, contributing to the gradual normalization of women's education and public participation in Bengal (Forbes, 1996; Khatun, 2023). Through this synthesis of thought and action, Rokeya played a crucial role in shaping early feminist consciousness in colonial India, laying conceptual foundations that anticipated later feminist and intersectional debates (Sarkar, 2001; Sengupta, 2018).

Finally, the continued relevance of Begum Rokeya's ideas in contemporary Indian society-particularly in West Bengal-underscores the enduring value of her educational philosophy and feminist thought. Ongoing discussions on gender equality, inclusive education, and women's empowerment continue to draw upon her vision of intellectual autonomy, social responsibility, and justice (Mitra & Mallick, 2024). Thus, Begum Rokeya must be understood not merely as a historical reformer but as a transformative thinker whose ideas remain vital to contemporary struggles for gender equity and social reform in India.

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