

Rokeya—A Crusader Against Purdah

**Inside Seclusion : The Avarodhbasini of Rokeya
Sakhawat Hossain**

Edited and translated by Roushan Jahan, 1981

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Reviewed by Kamla Bhasin

“MAHATMA Gandhi was moved by the misery of the untouchables... There are people to worry over the lot of animals...But no one cries for the Indian women imprisoned in seclusion. Seclusion is not a gaping wound, hurting people. It is rather a silent killer like carbon monoxide gas. The secluded women are dying silently and slowly by this gas poisoning.” (p. 20) This aptly strong description of purdah was given over 50 years ago by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a Bengali Muslim woman, who herself was subjected to the miseries of purdah from the age of five. However, she not only refused to succumb to this slow poisoning, but also started a jihad or holy war against this killer and against other social and cultural practices which subjugate women.

“Women for women”, a research and study group in Dacca, has done service to the women’s cause by bringing out a volume in English on Rokeya Hossain and her book on purdah. The volume makes it possible for non-Bangla reading people to know Rokeya and her amazing book on purdah “Avarodhbasini” (The Secluded Ones). This book by Rokeya is perhaps the only book documenting purdah practices to be written in Bangla by a Bengali Muslim woman. Most other

books on purdah have been written either by men or by foreign women, that is, by people who did not have an inside view of this terrible custom and hence could not understand all its dimensions.

Life And Time Of Rokeya

Rokeya was one of those rare women who had the intelligence and sensitivity to understand her plight and the plight of other women like herself, and who was daring enough to write about it at great personal risk. Most other women of her time were not articulate about the miseries of seclusion. They were accustomed to it and did not know any other way of life. As Rokeya put it: “If one asks a fisherwoman ‘does rotten fish smell good or bad to you?’, how would she answer that?” (p. 20)

This English volume on Rokeya has a long introduction which gives us some idea of Rokeya’s life and of the times in which she lived. Rokeya was born in 1880 in Pairaband, a small village in the district of Rangpur in the north of present day Bangladesh. Rokeya’s father was an extravagant and conservative zemindar or large landholder whose big establishment was a stronghold of traditional ways. Rokeya’s brothers were sent to elite schools and colleges providing western education, but formal



Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

education was not considered necessary for Rokeya and her sisters. If it was not for her own efforts, and the courage and support provided by her elder brother, Rokeya would have remained illiterate. Rokeya’s brother used to stealthily teach his little sister Bangla and English only after everyone in the house had gone to sleep.

Purdahnashin At Age Five

The terrible burden of purdah was imposed on Rokeya when she was a child of five. In her own words: “Ever since I turned five, I had to hide myself from women even. I could not understand the rationale behind it. Yet I had to disappear as soon as strangers approached. Men,

naturally, were not allowed in the inner apartments. Therefore, I did not suffer from them. But women were permitted to roam around the inner apartment quite freely and I had to hide from them. The village women dropped in for sudden visits. Somebody would make a sign and I had to find the nearest hiding place—the kitchen, inside the rolled mats of the maids, under the beds even... At times, I would fail to interpret signals correctly and be slow in hiding. At such times, the well-wishing female elders of the family never hesitated to berate the 'shameless and immodest conduct of modern hussies' like me...The usual hiding place was the attic on the third floor which was seldom frequented by the family. My ayah would carry me there in the morning and I would stay there the whole day...Once, my aunt sent two maidservants...they decided to look at the attic. My nephew Halu who was also five, ran to warn me of the impending catastrophe. Fortunately for me, the room had an old four-poster. I crawled under it, hardly daring to breathe ...There were a few old boxes and stools stored in the room...We arranged them around me to afford better cover. No one except Halu came to ask me whether I needed anything. He would bring me some snacks or a glass of water when asked to do so. Sometimes though, he would go down and would not come back for a long time...I had to stay in this miserable plight for four days." (p. 55)

Till quite late in life, Rokeya wore a burqa when appearing in public. Though in principle she was against seclusion, she was ready to conform to the norms to a certain extent.

Supportive Brother And Husband

It is really amazing how Rokeya managed to grow in this suffocating atmosphere. Her mental survival and development were in no small measure due to two men in her life—in childhood her brother and later on her husband. Rokeya was married at the age of 18 to Syed Sakhawat Hossain, a civil servant who was educated in Patna, Calcutta and London.

Fortunately for Rokeya, her husband

sought companionship, love and understanding from his wife and not the traditional duty and obedience. Sakhawat encouraged Rokeya to write and also actively supported her fight for the education of Muslim girls. Rokeya's husband died only 11 years after their marriage. His premature death was a terrible setback to Rokeya. She did not write for many years after his death. Fortunately, she managed to overcome this personal tragedy and started again writing and working for the cause of women.

Activist In Women's Cause

Rokeya's generation saw the widening of the gap between men and women of the Muslim elite. The socio-cultural reforms in the situation of Hindu women which started in the early nineteenth century did not touch the Muslim women. Rokeya wrote a number of essays, short stories and novels to highlight the plight of Muslim women and to plead for measures to improve their inhuman situation. Rokeya argued that women, though physically weaker and economically dependent on men for historical reasons, were not inferior to them mentally or spiritually. She believed that by confining women to strict seclusion and neglecting to give them equal opportunity to cultivate their minds, men reduce women to a subhuman species. Rokeya argued that prolonged neglect of half the society is unhealthy and detrimental not only to women but also to society as a whole. According to her, the effective cure for this cancer is to educate women and moderate the rigours of seclusion.

Rokeya not only wrote about women but also worked hard to improve their situation through education and organization of women. According to Rokeya, the only way of redressing the helplessness of women was through education. After her husband's death, Rokeya started a school for girls in Bhagalpur. But she was forced to leave Bhagalpur as a result of the hostility shown by her in-laws. In 1911 she started the first Muslim girls' school in Calcutta with only eight girls in a small building. She laid special emphasis on physical

education and vocational training for girls to enable them to become assets rather than liabilities to their families.

Rokeya knew that formal education could only benefit the upper class women. To counteract this, she initiated an adult literacy programme for the slum women, both Hindu and Muslim, of Calcutta. This work was done through the Anjuman Khwatine Islam association for Muslim women, of which Rokeya was the guiding spirit, till her death in 1932.

Glimpses Of The Zenana

The second half of the book "Inside Seclusion" contains an introduction and translation of Rokeya's book on purdah "Avarodhbasini." This book was first serialized in 1929 in the well-known Bengali monthly "Mohammadi" and in 1931 it was published in Calcutta. In 1963, the Bangla Academy of Dacca published all Rokeya's writings in a volume entitled "Rokeya Rachnavali."

"Avarodhbasini" offers an inside view of purdah as it was practised in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries among elite Muslim families. There are also some references in the book to the practice of purdah among rich Hindu families.

Rokeya gives 47 actual cases when due to the observance of purdah, women suffered humiliation, pain, discomfort and in some cases, even death. Each report exposes the excesses of purdah. The reports show the pathetic, ridiculous and inhuman position of purdahshins. While reading these reports, one does not know whether to laugh or to cry. Girls and women had to hide themselves from men and also from unknown women. Not only had they to hide themselves from strangers, but they had also to restrain their voices, their walk, their laughter, their curiosity. In one of the actual incidents reported, the father of a five year old girl is furious when he sees her trying to climb a ladder. The daughter is so traumatized by his anger that she falls ill and ultimately dies.

The reports show that purdah women never got to see anything of their physical surroundings, cultural and social happenings. Even when they went from one place to another, they went in

layers of purdah. The palanquins, tongas and buses in which they travelled were completely covered. They could hardly breathe in them and their health was often severely affected. To quote one of the reports: "The well born ladies of Behar, customarily, do not board the train directly. While travelling, they get inside a palanquin which is covered with a length of thick brocade. The palanquin is then deposited in the luggage compartment of the train. Consequently, the begums never see anything on their trips. They travel from one place to another packed like tea, tinned by the Brookbond company Ltd." (p. 56). In one aristocratic family of Calcutta, the begums' palanquin was covered and stitched with five layers of thick cloth, which were unstitched on arrival at the destination, under the supervision of a male guardian. The woman inside was always unconscious after such a trip and would take hours to recover.

In another report, a man wanted to sit on a bedding roll lying on the platform. He was frightened when the bedding moved, and the owner of the bedding started shouting: "What do you mean, sit on my bag? That is my wife." (p. 54) Rokeya cites instances of women being burnt to death because they could not run out of a room on fire for fear of being seen by strangers. The fear of being seen was stronger than the fear of death.

She reports how, around 1900, her "aunt-in-law stumbled on her voluminous burqa and fell on the railway track. Except for her maid, there was no woman at the station. The railway porters rushed to help her up but the maid immediately stopped them by imploring in God's name not to touch her mistress. She tried to drag up her mistress by herself but was unable to do so. The train waited for only half an hour but no more. The begum's body was smashed, her burqa torn..." (p. 47).

Some reports are about women who could not shout while in danger. What if strangers should hear their voices? Thieves had an easy time with such women. They could go about their business undisturbed.

It is evident from the reports that over-protection offered by seclusion turned a woman into a shy, timid person who would hide from anything unfamiliar. By the time she was nine, she became a totally dependent, timid and ignorant person for whom even routine tasks became difficult. Any attempt to know the world was actively discouraged and severely punished. Rokeya tells how in 1924 she went to visit some relatives who pleaded with her to ask the menfolk to allow them to go round the town, as



they had seen nothing of it, though living there for seven years. After much persuasion, she finally managed to get permission but found that "the carriage had been completely covered by three heavy silk saris. The door of the carriage was opened and closed by my son-in-law who tied the sari ends securely with his own hands...After a while, the girls did discover a tiny tear in the sari cover. Mangu, Sabu and their stepmother eagerly took turns in peering through that little tear. I just could not bring myself

to compete with them." (p. 58) She also tells of a case where an ayah who dared to peep through a window to see a musical performance going on for the entertainment of male members was beaten up, because she was carrying the zemindar's sleeping three year old daughter in her arms at the time. On another occasion, the women of a family looked through a window at a performing bear, for which they were so severely rebuked that "they were trembling in fear and misery... wishing they were dead." (p. 70).

Purdah not only reduced the chances of women's education but also of their keeping good health. While sick, they could not be examined by doctors, not even by women doctors. Doctors had to hear their pulse and heartbeat through a hole in the purdah. Worse than this, purdah women could not exercise their right to marriage, divorce and inheritance. There are reports in the book about women who did not want to marry a certain person and so refused to say "I do" at the wedding ceremony. Since the girl's assent is necessary for a Muslim marriage to be valid, the girl would be pinched or slapped and her cries interpreted as assent.

Marriage brought more confinement. A bride did not have the freedom to move around in the in-laws' house, nor could she eat when she pleased or what she pleased. Before the wedding, the girl used to be kept confined in a closed room. In Calcutta, this confinement was for a few days but in Bihar, it extended to six or seven months. It would last a year if the wedding was delayed. The girl was supposed to keep her eyes closed and someone else had to feed and bathe her, even comb her hair. If the family neglected her, her eyesight would be severely impaired. When Rokeya visited her stepdaughter's two daughters who were in this *maiya khana*, she says "I could not stay in Mangu's cell for long. I felt suffocated in that close room...I failed to stay in Sabu's cell for even a minute. Those poor girls at that time, had already stayed in those rooms for six months. Ultimately, Sabu had a spell of acute hysteria. This is how we are trained

to endure seclusion.” (p. 45).

What Logic Demands

In her short story “Sultana’s Dream” written in 1905, Rokeya imagines an Utopian women’s land where men are kept in seclusion and women run the affairs of the country. In this story, she makes the point that if women are considered vulnerable, and seclusion is the means of sheltering them from possible male aggression, then a more logical and effective way of achieving this end would be to contain the potential aggressors, men, rather than rounding up the potential victims, women.

As she puts it:

“Sister Sara : Suppose some lunatics escape from the asylum and begin to do all sorts of mischief. In that case, what will your countrymen do ?

I: They will try to capture them and put them back into their asylum.

Sara: You do not think it wise to keep sane people inside an asylum and let loose the insane ?

I: Of course not !

Sara: As a matter of fact in your country this very thing is done! Men, who do or are capable of doing no end of mischief are let loose and the innocent women are shut up .. !” (p. 17).

Reasons For Imposing Purdah

Fortunately, purdah was observed so strictly only by upper class Muslims. Since observing strict purdah involved lots of expenditure, it became a status symbol. The better a family’s socio-economic position, the stricter the purdah observance. In Rokeya’s words: “Among women, whoever succeeds in hiding most in the corner like an owl proves to be the most ‘aristocratic’ by breeding.” (p. 35)

Although Rokeya exposes the all-pervasive and oppressive nature of purdah, she does not offer any explanations for the imposition of purdah in Islam. The editor of “Inside Seclusion” has filled this gap to some extent. She quotes some people who have written on purdah. According to one of them, restriction of women’s mobility and sexual self-determination “was actually a protective measure, introduced to protect men from women’s inherent great

powers of seduction. If unchecked, these might result in swerving the allegiance of the Muslim male from Allah, his sole lord and master. This fear, coupled with anxiety about the paternity of a child—which might arise where women are permitted to divorce and remarry—perhaps led to tightening of the customs restricting women’s mobility and self-determination.” (p. 11).

Because Islamic-law has granted women rights in marriage, divorce and inheritance of property, men found it necessary to impose strict purdah on women, so that women could not exercise

these rights.

Rokeya’s life and writings are significant because they show that in spite of everything, not all women submitted to purdah willingly.

Rokeya was subjected to a lot of criticism. She received angry letters, threats. But she did not give up. Fortunately, she found powerful male advocates for her cause. Unfortunately, the need for the struggle started by Rokeya about a century ago, is not yet over. This struggle has to be continued in the Indian subcontinent by women and men, who want to see women lead a more human, fulfilling and creative life.

The Woes of Anonymous...*

“Now what shall we do ?” My mother sounded flustered.

“Your father has got an attack of asthma again, and his medicine is finished. And tomorrow’s Sunday so the chemist will be closed.”

“We can still get it—it’s only seven” I replied.

“Yes, but who’ll go? I’m exhausted with running around all day, my head is splitting, and dinner is half-cooked...”

“I’ll go, of course” I said, surprised, since I was quite in the habit of running errands.

“You’ll go” growled my grandfather from the next room. “Just listen to the young lady! And who’ll go with you? Have you seen the time?”

“But—it’s only two blocks away and I’m always going there and...”

“No, Beta, not in the Dark” agreed my mother, “You’ll have to pass the cinema and there are all kinds of men hanging around there at Night.”

“Oh come on, Mummy, it’s not dark yet.” I refrained from telling her that those kinds of men didn’t appear only at night. Several of them happened to travel with me on the overcrowded bus to college every day. “I can look after myself. The road is so brightly lit...”

“No, no, you’re not to go alone” called my father weakly, between bouts of coughing.

“I suppose I’ll have to go then” sighed my mother.

“What’s the matter?” Bahanji from the flat upstairs peered in at the door. And on being told: ‘Arre, what is there in that? Munna will go with her—not to worry.’

“Munna !” I gazed at her speechless, but fortunately, everyone else in the house was not similarly afflicted. A chorus of relief and gratitude broke out. “Oh thank you, thank you so much! That really solves the problem” cried Mummy while my grandfather nodded approval and my father searched for his prescription. “What’s there to thank ?” beamed Bahanji, “Arre, if my son is not the brother of your two girls, then what is he there for ?” And off she went, to prepare my gallant escort.

“Munna says he is afraid of the dark” remarked my small sister solemnly. Of course no one heard her. They were all too busy planning my expedition, while visions of sheltering a sleepy Munna from cows, hurrying him across the road, and placating him with toffees, besieged my mind.

“But Mummy,” I burst out, “Munna is only six and I am 17 !”

Back came the placid answer : “Yes darling, but he’s a BOY, after all!”

*who is always a woman.