

Emergence of Women's Associations in Colonial Bengal: A Case Study

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Abstract: In nineteenth-century Bengal, the condition of women in general and Muslims in particular was deplorable due to the prevalent social evils and customs of society. Although the early social reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Debendra Nath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen and other prominent figures took initiatives for the upliftment of women but the Muslims lagged behind due to their deep-rooted conservatism. The efforts of social reformers were largely constrained within a patriarchal framework that reinforced their traditional familial roles and denied them autonomy in both public and private spheres. By the late nineteenth century, as education gradually spread among women, they started questioning their subordinate status. However, the emergence of women's associations from 1865 marked a pivotal shift that offered women a collective platform to articulate their concerns and demands for socio-political rights. At that time, the publication of Bengali periodicals was also often affiliated with such associations and became a vital tool for spreading awareness among women. This article aims to examine the formation and evolution of women's associations in colonial Bengal from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century and assess their role in empowering both Hindu and Muslim women in a patriarchal society.

Key Words: Women's Associations, Periodicals, Colonial Bengal, Patriarchal Framework, Socio-Political Rights.

The question of women was an issue of great concern among the social reformers of the nineteenth century. The condition of women in general and Muslims in particular was miserable at that time because of the prevalent social evils and customs such as sati, child-marriage, female infanticide, dowry, kulinism, *purdah*, etc. The lack of education among women was also a major issue, due to which they were ignorant about their rights in society. Although various efforts were made by the enlightened men such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, Debendra Nath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen and many more to improve the condition of women. However, all changes were made within the notion of patriarchy. Thus, the type of

education which was imparted to women emphasised their familial role such as an obedient daughter, a dutiful wife, a responsible mother and so forth. At that time, the women were not given any opportunity to claim their selfhood as they were fully dependent on men in every aspect. The reformers made their efforts to bring women into public to raise their status in society but as the power imbalance was there in patriarchal society, the subject of women was placed within the patriarchal framework.¹

However, with the spread of education among women in the late nineteenth century, they became conscious about their social status and demanded socio-political rights. The emergence of women's associations in 1865 became a turning point which raised their issues and provided a common platform to those downtrodden women who had suffered through the ages. Earlier, the women only took part in associations started by men and attended the meetings along with men. Later on, they came forward to form associations of their own. The publication of periodicals by the associations was one medium which provided a new space to the women through which they spread their message in society among women. The present article aims to highlight how women's associations served as a crucial platform for fostering the socio-political awakening of women from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century Bengal. It also analyses the role of women in the early phases of the associations and traces how the nature of these associations changed with the passage of time.

By the end of the nineteenth century, many women's associations were formed by women from elite backgrounds which marked the emergence of the women's movement in Bengal. In this regard, we find the name of the eminent Swarnakumari Devi, sister of Rabindranath Tagore, who organised the '*Sakhi Samiti*' (Ladies Association) in 1886. It was the first women's association run by women that worked for needy women and gave them the opportunity to earn money. This association helped poor women to make themselves self-sufficient².

About the early women's association, one of the leading monthly Bengali periodicals of late nineteenth century Bengal, namely *Bamabodini Patrika*, reported that these organisations were initially dominated by the Brahmo women, although Hindu women gradually joined their ranks. The journal noted

upon the death of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar that the association organised a meeting attended by three hundred women, where a resolution was passed to build the memorial of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in Bethune College. The initiative was proposed by Swarnamayee Devi and seconded by Saraswati Sen who also helped to collect funds. The renowned lady Dr. Kadambini Ganguly supported the resolution to select Bethune College as the site for a memorial of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. At the meeting, another prominent figure, Jnanadanandini Debi, advocated for establishing a shelter for homeless women in the name of Vidyasagar but the suggestion did not receive unanimous approval. These discussions reveal how effectively women ran their own association at that time.³

In an article titled '*Mahiladiger Sabha Samiti*' published in the *Bamabodhini Patrika* (Association of Women), Amritalal Gupta mentions another women's association, the Bharat Mahila Samiti established in 1895 by Kadambini Lahiri, a Brahmo widow. Its membership had increased to about ninety-five in 1904. Within this association, the social duties of women gained recognition and the members regularly read newspapers, exchanged their thoughts and sought information on various issues.⁴ Alongside this, various smaller women's associations emerged in rural (*mofussil*) areas.⁵ The monthly Bengali journal *Antahpur*, in a special supplement listed the names of a few such women's associations, including the Bhagini Samaj, established by Sushila Debi, daughter of Annapurna Chattopadhyay of Bogura and the Sumati Samiti, founded by Banalata Debi, daughter of Sasipada Banerjee. These associations raised subscriptions to support poor girls and tried to link with Hindu women living in *zenanas*. Banalata Debi, the founder of Sumati Samiti, received numerous letters from women and personally replied to each of them. Her elder sister, Sukatara Debi, became the secretary after her death in 1900.⁶ Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, many women's associations were being managed autonomously by women, marking the beginning of women-led movement in which women not only organised collective activities but also edited the journals. Therefore, this period marked the early formation of a distinct female public identity.

The early twentieth century witnessed the gradual rise of women's associations in Bengal, in which the Bengali

periodical *Bangalakshmi* played a significant role. It served as a platform that informed women about the social issues affecting their daily lives and advocated for greater gender equality. This journal provides detailed coverage of one of the prominent women's political associations in Bengal, Sarojnalini Nari Mangal Samiti, founded by the social reformer Saroj Nalini Dutt. It also documented the extensive networks of this association which connected the women across urban as well as rural Bengal.

The monthly periodical *Bangalakshmi*, started in 1924, was edited by one of the leading ladies of Bengal, namely Kumudini Bose, for two years, followed by Hemlata Tagore, a prominent figure from the Tagore family. Their editorial work provides useful information on the activities of women's associations in early twentieth century Bengal. This periodical played a very noteworthy role in politically awakening women across both districts and rural villages. Its transformative influence is particularly visible in the writing of Indira Debi Choudhurani⁷, titled '*Meyeder Parivartane Desher Parivartan*' (changes among women and change within society). She highlighted the importance of women's associations in fostering awareness and collective strength among women. The periodical urged women at the district as well village levels to form such associations which worked for their social, economic and educational emancipation and inspired them to become self-independent⁸. It also reported the growing networks of women's associations and their connection with similar sister associations that were establishing branches across various regions of the country. In this context, the periodical mentioned the eminent social reformer Saroj Nalini Dutta⁹, who made every possible effort for the upliftment of rural women in Bengal. Her efforts were closely associated with the formation of Mahila Samitis (women's associations) in Bengal. She aspired to form such organisations in every district, town and village so that the women could meet with each other, share their thoughts and progress towards achieving their goals. She lamented to see the miserable condition of rural women in Bengal, who were mostly uneducated and unaware of their rights. She wanted to establish the Mahila Samitis as centres for collective work. Their activities included visiting the local hospitals to check the issue of health and domestic hygiene, establishing industrial homes, vocational classes for widows, running schools within the *zenanas*, awarding prizes to girls' schools,

training midwives and setting up child welfare centres.¹⁰ With these initiatives, Saroj Nalini urged the downtrodden women of Bengal to organise themselves under the banner of the Mahila Samitis and to strive for progress in social, educational and economic fields.

Saroj Nalini started a women's movement in 1913 that was not only confined to Bengal but gradually expanded to other regions which brought the women from rural and urban areas to discuss issues of education, domestic science, lessons on health, hygiene, maternity, child care and vocational skills such as embroidery, etc. As a part of this movement, she first established the Mahila Samiti in Pabna (now in Bangladesh) in the same year. Its objective was to promote friendly co-operation among the purdah-observing women and encourage their participation in activities outside the home, organise lectures on practical subjects such as domestic hygiene, domestic economy and train widows in domestic industries to enable them to become self-supporting.¹¹ Subsequently, the Mahila Samiti expanded its network across various districts of Bengal such as Birbhum, Sultanpur (1917), Rampurhat (1918), Bankura (1921) and Darjeeling (1924) respectively.

The Birbhum Mahila Samiti, established in 1916 during the First World War, supported the local girls' school by awarding prizes in domestic science and arranged examination to assess the girls' abilities. The useful contemporary magazines such as *Bharti*, *Manasi*, *Prabasi*, *Shashtya Samachar* etc., were circulated among its members to raise awareness on various important issues for women. The Samiti also conducted special classes for purdah-observing illiterate women and the members visited local hospitals to extend financial and material support to patients. The Samitis also organised fund-raising activities for the troops who were affected during the war and sewed garments destined for soldiers in Mesopotamia.¹² Saroj Nalini founded additional branches of the Mahila Samitis at Sultanpur (1917) and Rampurhat (1918) in Birbhum.

Another Mahila Samiti was established by her at Bankura in 1921, which played a significant role in promoting social welfare and education. It organised training programmes for midwives (*dais*) as the rate of infant mortality was high in the district of Bankura. Thus, various efforts were made to arrange training classes for the midwives (*dais*). Through these initiatives, the trainees regularly received medical

supplies such as catheters, scissors, nail brushes, vaseline, carbolic soaps, etc. In addition, the Samiti held baby shows and maternal welfare exhibitions¹³. A similar exhibition was held at Barisal by the initiatives of '*Barisal Mahila Samiti*', supported by female doctors and the local Baptist missionaries. The women from the middle and lower middle classes of Bengal participated freely without any religious barrier.¹⁴

The Mahila Samities also extended their activities to include women from the Muslim community and they actively participated in the Samities of Hooghly, Natore, Madaripur, Kalna, etc. Kalitara Dasgupta, in her write-up '*Mahila Samitir Sangbad*' (News of Women's Associations), reported on the Mahila Samiti of Madaripur, noting that its president was a Muslim woman.

Another notable organisation was Tangail Mahila Samiti headed by the daughter of Nawab Bahadur Saiyad Nawab Ali Chaudhury.¹⁵ These associations mainly worked to spread adult education, promote cottage industry, encourage gardening and improve girls' schools.¹⁶ Their different branches provided a friendly platform to the women from villages and district towns, encouraging them to learn about adult education, domestic science, lessons on health, hygiene, maternity, child-care, training in embroidery, etc., to improve their living conditions.

Saroj Nalini Dutt was also keen to establish a Kendriya Nari Mangal Samiti (Central Welfare Association for Women) in Calcutta for interaction with other sister associations across India. After her premature death on 19th January 1925, her husband Guru Saday Dutta, along with her followers, founded the Saroj Nalini Dutt Memorial Association on 8th February 1925.¹⁷ The organisation began with only seven or eight branches, but within a year its network expanded to fifty branches through the formation of a central committee. However, the number increased annually and reached around two hundred and fifty branches.¹⁸ Thus, the Mahila Samitis soon spread almost to every district of Bengal.

The other branches of Mahila Samitis were established in Kurigram (Rangpur district), Bankura, Tala, Nimta, Jalalpur, Sreerampur, Margram, Dasora, Brahmarandhriya, Barasat, etc., with the objective of promoting women's education. The Calcutta Mahila Samitis also played a significant role in this regard. The Bhabanipur Rajbala Samiti made arrangements

for training in art and craft for adult women¹⁹ and the Bowbazar Mahila Samiti strengthened women's education by founding a *Zenana School* (Girls' school) in Bowbazar²⁰.

Other branches of Mahila Samitis were established in Manikganj (near Dhaka) and Kurseong (in Darjeeling district) where women were trained in self-employment schemes.²¹ Thus, the Mahila Samitis founded by Saroj Nalini Dutt not only interacted with other district-level associations within Bengal but also extended their networks beyond Bengal into Bihar, Assam, Orissa and the United Provinces. The journal *Bangalakshmi* in an article *Amader Mahila* reported in detail the activities of these Samitis.²²

In this way, the women's associations founded by Saroj Nalini Dutta opened a new avenue for native women by fostering educational consciousness among them.

Although the Bengali Hindu women came to the forefront through various associations to enhance their social status, the Muslim women, by contrast, lagged behind due to their limited access to education and conservatism. Many elite Muslim families resisted social change and they were not ready to give up their traditional way of living. However, inspired by Hindu women, a few women's associations emerged through the initiatives of enlightened Muslim elites such as the Sreehatta Sammilani (1876), National Mohammadan Association founded by Ameer Ali in 1877 and the Bangiya Pradeshik Musalman Siksha Samiti founded by Syed Wahed Hossain in 1903, which played a prominent role for the upliftment of Muslim women.²³

Besides these, the earliest Muslim women's association was Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam (Mohammadan Ladies Association) founded in Calcutta in 1916 by Rokeya Shakhawat Hussain, a pioneering advocate of Muslim women's education. It emerged as the most influential Muslim women's association of the early twentieth century, which enabled them to raise their voice for socio-political rights and empowerment.²⁴

About the objectives of this association, one of the leading newspapers of Bengal, *The Mussalman*, stated that,

Its objects are to promote unity, social intercourse and friendly feeling among Mohammadan ladies resident in Calcutta, by providing them with a common meeting ground, to better the condition of Moslem women in general by

eradicating pernicious social customs and by diffusing proper and useful knowledge and to establish and conduct an industrial school for poor and needy Mohammedan women with a view to qualify them to earn their own livelihood.²⁵

At the beginning, the eminent ladies such as Nawab Begum Salimullah, Lady Shamsul Huda, Lady Abdur Rahim, Lady Ghaznavi, Nawab Begum Badruddin Haidar, Mrs. A.K. Fazlul Haq, Mrs. Abdul Karim *et al* joined it. Later on, Mrs. M.A. Momin, Nawab Begum Faruqi, Mrs. Azizul Haq, M. Fatema Khanum, Mrs. Sufia, Shamsunnahar Mahmud, Anwara Bahar Choudhury, Nurunnesa, etc were participated in it. The other members of this association were Sayed Kaneez Shukhra Sharajawari, Mrs. A. Rejaur Rahman Khan, Mrs. R. Ahmed, Mrs. Nurnabi Choudhury, Mrs. Reshad, Begum Ashia Khatun, Mrs. Rasheed, Mrs. Ghaffar, etc.²⁶

The annual meeting of this association is held every year. The first session of Anjuman-e-khawateen-e-Islam was held on 15th April, 1917, under the Presidentship of Mrs. Abdul Karim at the office of Lower Circular Road in Calcutta. There were fifty Muslim women who participated in it. The second annual session of this association was held on 7th June, 1918, where sixty women participated and it was chaired by Mrs. Shamsul Huda. This organisation was also known as Mohammedan Ladies Association which established its centres in different areas and provided financial and educational support to deprived Muslim women. They imparted practical skills such as sewing, child-rearing, health-care and also offered instruction in religious education. During the time of the Swadeshi and Khilafat movements, this association spread the message of Swadeshi under the leadership of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. The women of this association used the charka to prepare Khaddar (coarse cotton) cloth and boycotted the foreign products. Sometimes exhibitions were arranged to showcase the hand-made products of the poor women such as hand-made clothes, woollen products, handicrafts, jute works, etc. The main purpose of these exhibitions was to give financial support to widows and deprived unmarried girls by selling their handmade products in it.²⁷

About the activities of this association, one of the writers, Usha Chakrabarty, in her work *Condition of Bengali Women Around the 2nd half of the 19th Century* states that,

“The Muslim Community under the patronage of Rokeya Begum founded a Society called by the name ‘*Anjuman-e-Khwateen-e-Islam*’ in Calcutta in 1916 for the upliftment of Bengali girls. Cottage industry training was given by it along with literary instruction. Women used to attend there mostly from the bustees.”²⁸

This organization offered middle-class women a platform to enter the slum areas of Calcutta to educate destitute Hindu and Muslim women, enabling them to pursue a more dignified life. Rokeya recognised the elitist nature of the formal educational system and sought to uplift impoverished women by extending learning opportunities to them. She introduced an adult literacy scheme for the slum women which was to be implemented by the members of the Anjuman. The women from the Anjuman, irrespective of religious background, visited the household of the urban poor to impart elementary skill in reading, writing, personal hygiene and child-care.²⁹ Through these initiatives, Rokeya transformed her organization into a platform of social outreach and proved the societal value of women led organisations. Apart from Begum Rokeya's engagement in Anjuman-e-Khwateen-e-Islam, she served as the President of Nari Shilpa Vidyalaya (Women's Arts and Industry School) and Naritirtha (Women's Institution for Destitute Women and Prostitutes).³⁰ She was also associated with the Bengal Women's Education League (BWEL) established in 1927, an inter-communal platform which brought together women educators from diverse religious and social backgrounds across Bengal to collectively promote women's education.³¹

In the political field, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain preferred to work at the local level, encouraging women to engage actively in public affairs. In her essay ‘Sugrihini’, she writes that a good housewife should embrace the belief that ‘we are first and foremost Indians then Muslims or Sikhs’ and emphasises the idea of a national identity before a religious identity for the sake of independence. She urged women to understand their voting rights and to participate in elections. However, since the introduction of the women's franchise in 1926, only four Muslim women voted, which disheartened Begum Rokeya. She drew attention to Turkish women who had entered political life alongside their men and urged Bengali Muslim women to take inspiration from their example.

Although the organisation Anjuman-e-Khwateen-e-Islam was a social reform association, it gradually started its movements for educational and political rights of women. The Government eventually acknowledged the Samiti and its demands. According to the Government of India Act, 1935, a committee was constituted under Sir Laurie Henderson, Governor of Bihar-Orissa and representatives of the Samiti met him to press for women's rights. As a result of its advocacy, some seats were reserved for women in the Bengal Legislative Assembly.³²

The International Women's Conference held in Calcutta in 1936 which brought together delegates from numerous countries like Ireland, Great Britain, Belgium, Romania, Switzerland, France, Denmark, Greece, Holland, Australia, New Zealand, China, etc., to deliberate on women's welfare. The Anjuman-e-Khwateen-e-Islam showed the active engagements of Muslim women in this conference.³³

Thus, the Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam emerged as the most significant women's association for Bengali Muslim women, advancing their socio-political rights and identity formation. In fact, Rokeya's initiatives were instrumental in redefining the social position of Muslim women in India.

The association Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam also attracted the participation of another prominent lady, Sufia Kamal, who was inspired by Rokeya's vision of social upliftment. She dedicated herself to community service in the slums of Calcutta. She worked under Rokeya's supervision for four years along with numerous young Hindu and Muslim women. Sufia recollects the experience of her involvement in this association as follows:

We, the Muslim women, visited the slums wearing a burqa. Begum Rokeya often reminded us that organizing a meeting among a few women was not enough, as reform needed to work with the women in the slums. I, too, had worked in the slums of Calcutta. Begum Rokeya paved the way for us. During this time, I first encountered the sufferings of people living in a slum. Their living condition was very terrible. Often, the men did not allow us to enter the slums and they wanted to turn us away. There were many Urdu-speaking people in Calcutta's slums. They would say, 'They are Hindus, they are Bengalis. It was disgusting. We tried to educate the slum women and taught them certain vocational skills like stitching, pottery and handicrafts. I was with '*Anjuman-e-*

Khwateen-e-Islam' for a long time but after Partition, I came to Dhaka.³⁴

Another notable female activist, Shamsunnahar Mahmud, also became actively involved in the work of Anjuman-e-Kawateen-e-Islam as well as the Nikhil Bharat Mahila Sammelan (All-India Women's Association). On behalf of these organizations, she began agitation for women's legislative representation after the Government of India Act of 1935, which enfranchised women. Shamsunnahar's write-up on 'Women's Political Rights' in the magazine *Mahila Saogat*, 1935, highlighted the inadequate allocation of women's seats in the Bengal Council, despite the Act extending voting rights to literate women and wives of property holders. She advocated for greater representation of Bengali women and through her efforts with other prominent women leaders before the Indian Delimitation Committee in Calcutta, succeeded in securing a few reserved seats for women in the Legislative Assembly.³⁵

Shamsunnahar also represented Bengali Muslim women at the '*International Women Conference*' held in Calcutta in 1936 under the sponsorship of the International Council of Women. The delegates from Britain, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, China and many other countries assembled to discuss the major issues concerning women and Shamsunnahar effectively articulated the challenges faced by Bengali Muslim women, particularly their limited progress in education.³⁶

Thus, the emergence of Muslim women's associations initiated largely by the efforts of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain also encouraged several of their members to participate in the editorial works of contemporary Bengali periodicals, many of which served as the mouthpiece of such associations. Among them, one was Karim-un-nesa Khanum, the elder sister of Rokeya who became the only woman involved in the publication of Mir Mosharraf Hossain's work entitled *Aziz-un-Nehar* in 1874, published under the name of the author's wife. She further contributed to the production of the periodical *Ahmedi* from Tangail in 1886, marking one of the earliest instances of Muslim women's involvement in Bengali print culture.

A major breakthrough came with *Annesa*, the first periodical edited by a Muslim lady Sufia Khatun in 1921. Initially, it was published from Chittagong, later on Kolkata for the social

welfare of women. Following her, other women also entered the editorial sphere. Tohfath-un-nesa published *Suniti* with her husband, while Jahanara Choudhury published *Ruprekha* in 1932.³⁷ Thus, their participation in editing and periodicals production became a significant instrument in shaping the public voice of Muslim women in colonial Bengal.

To conclude, it can be said that the formation of women's associations from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century Bengal with the publication of Bengali periodicals, significantly contributed to developing a sense of group identity. Initially, the leadership given by Brahmo women gave way to a growing leadership among Muslim women who assumed a visible role in public spheres by the early twentieth century. Over time, the agendas of these associations became more formulated than they had been. As men became increasingly engaged in the political arena, the educated women found an opportunity to step into public roles as their access to other spheres of public work remained restricted. The women's welfare organizations began to grow rapidly at that time and the women also received more visibility in the pages of the contemporary Bengali periodicals. Thus, the nature of women's magazines changed from home management to public spheres which discussed the works of women and their occupation in various fields. The women became conscious of their social rights and also searched for their political rights which are intimately connected with social rights. Thus, the women demanded their equal socio-political rights along with men and questioned the prevalent patriarchy of society and they also moved forward to build up an organizational network of their own. The women also took up the leadership role in these associations, for instance, the women from Tagore family, specifically Swarnakumari Devi and Sarala Devi whose political engagement shaped the direction of these associations. Through these associations, they promoted the ideas of Swadeshi and emphasised women's self-dependence, marking some of the earliest collective initiatives in colonial Bengal against women's oppression. Similarly, prominent Muslim women like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Sufia Kamal, and Samsunnahar Mahmud formed their identity through their social activism and inspired the other Muslim women to pursue empowerment. Thus, the emergence of women's associations in Bengal played a significant role in raising the socio-political rights of women in general and Muslims in particular and enabled

them to construct their own identities through collective actions, leaving a lasting influence on the next generation.

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