

## ***CHAPTER-5***

# **Muslim Women and Social Change**

Like other part of Bengal, both the Hindu and Muslim community in Surma Valley was gradually brought in to the mainstream of modernization through a programme of social, educational and cultural reform. The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed a gradual process of social change among Muslims in colonial Bengal. The colonial connection, and the contact with Western ideas through Western education, provided major motivation for reform, spearheaded by the middle class. <sup>1</sup>The liberal reformers like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Syed Ameer Ali, Syed Latif and many others tried to regenerate Muslim community to accept western ideas and thoughts. Like their Hindu counterparts, the Muslim reformers initiated the process of social change among women through education. In Surma Valley, the views and thoughts of all these social reformers also influenced the minds of the educated Muslims and they were joined by a galaxy of brilliant men, such as, Syed Shaikh Sikandar Ali (1891-1964) Sayyaid Shamsul Islam, Amirul Islam, Abu Jafar Abdullah, Dewan Mohammad Ajraf, <sup>2</sup> Aminur Rashid Choudhury, Sayful Alam Khan, Ashraf Uddin Choudhury advocated female education and tried to modernize the society. Abdul Kadir Sikapani also raised his voice against the prevailing social evils and superstitions such as child marriage and polygamy. <sup>3</sup>

Moulavi Nurul Haq published the first monthly literary magazine '*Al-Islah*' in 1932 in Sylhet where the progressive Muslim intellectuals expressed their views on women issues. The establishment of the Kendriya Muslim Sahitya Sangsad in 1936 in Sylhet also created a new era among the Muslim intellectuals. <sup>4</sup> Maulavi Abdul Karim and Abdul Mazid <sup>5</sup>Eklmur Raja Choudhury, Syeed Mustafa Ali, Syeed Muztaba Ali, Syeed Murtaja Ali, Abdur Razzak, Fojrul Haq, Abdul Gaffar Datta Choudhury, Aminur Rashid Choudhury, Ashraf Hussain gave a new direction to the Muslim society. <sup>6</sup> They sharply criticized certain orthodoxies like polygamy, child marriage, *purdah*, rigorous of widowhood, arbitrary divorce etc. and expressed their views on women's emancipation. They considered education was the first important step for the liberation of the Muslim women, so they advocated mass female education.

---

<sup>1</sup>Bharati Ray, *Early Feminist of Colonial India : Sarala Devi Choudhurani & Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, P.29.

<sup>2</sup> Shamsad Husam and Masum Rahman Akash, *Kaler Canvase Jara*, Shekorer Sandane, 2002, p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.31.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> Dipankar Mohanta, *Sekaler Sylhet: Suhasini Dass*, Sahitya Prakash, Dhaka, 2005, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 26.

The progressive intellectuals like Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, Dewan Abdul Matin Choudhury<sup>7</sup>, Dewan Ajijur Raja Choudhury, Sarafat Ali Choudhury, Maulana Asiruddin Sahib,<sup>8</sup> Dewan Abdul Karim Choudhury,<sup>9</sup> Majhar Choudhury, Motahir Ali, Sonowar Ali Choudhury encouraged female education and they realized that one of the causes of the miseries of the Muslim family as well as society was the early marriage and that Muslim girls were given marriage early by their guardians without the proper consent of their daughters.<sup>10</sup> It was from these families that the first daughters, wives and sisters, went to schools and stepped outside the *andarmahal*.<sup>11</sup>

Criticizing the practice of child marriage or early marriage which was widely prevalent among the Muslims, Aminur Rashid Choudhury argued that the system of child marriage was a hindrance to female education and progress and the general blossoming of a child's life. Considering child marriage specially harmful for girls, Ashraf Uddin Choudhury saw in the custom a lamentable fate for them in the untimely loss of their youth.<sup>12</sup> Martial incompatibility was another of its bad effects and Ismail Hossain Siraji warned that the evil practice would lead to the miseries of the Muslims.<sup>13</sup> He suggested that the age of marriage should be 23-24 for boys and 14-15 for girls.<sup>14</sup> Eklmur Raja Choudhury, Syeed Mustafa Ali, Syeed Muztaba Ali, Syeed Murtaja Ali condemned child marriage on medical and economic grounds.<sup>15</sup> These progressive male reformers also argued that the cause of the present plight of the Muslim society was due to the neglect and contempt of women in contravention of scriptural edicts. They raised their voices against the misuse of divorce which had thrown thousands of women in to indescribable sufferings and which was considered as the violation of the rule of Islam.<sup>16</sup> The Muslims were treating their wives as any other property and divorced them on the most trivial grounds.<sup>17</sup> In Bengal, it was common practice for husbands to beat or divorce their wives simply for some

<sup>7</sup> Abul Mal Abdul Muhit, *ibid.* p. 78-80.

<sup>8</sup> Nibedita Dass Purkayasta, *Mukti Manche Nari*, p. 99.

<sup>9</sup> Fahmida Rashid Choudhury & apurba Sharma, *ibid.* p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Anowar Hossain, *Women's Struggle for Freedom in Colonial Bengal*, Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2008, p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> Sonia Nishat Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, Leiden, Newyork, 1996. p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Shamsad Husam and Masum Rahman Akash, *ibid.* p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> Ismail Hossain Shiraji, *Nari Jatir Durgati*, Al-Eslam, Bhadra, 1324 B.S.

<sup>14</sup> Ismail Hossain Shiraji, *"Bibaha Niti"* Al-Eslam, Kartik, 1326 B.S.

<sup>15</sup> Shamsad Husam and Masum Rahman Akash, *ibid.* p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> Mohammad Karam Chand, *Talaq ba Moslem Stree Barjan*, Islam Pracharak, 1314 B.S.

trifling reasons such as that “ there was either too much or too little salt in the curry.”<sup>18</sup> They argued that the custom of easy divorce, leading to its high incidence , a gross misinterpretation of Quranic injunctions.

Majhar Choudhury, Motahir Ali, Sonowar Ali Choudhury began a campaign against polygamy. They preached that there was no political or religious justification for the continuance of polygamy. In Bengal, almost all the periodicals and journals such as *Nabnoor*, *Al- Eslam*, *Masik Mohammadi*, *Bangiya Mussalman* wrote about the evil practices of polygamy which caused a great deal of controversy among the Muslims. The man belonging from the higher class could remarry whenever they want by misinterpreting the laws of the Quran. The Quran permitted having four wives at a time under special circumstances. The Quran permitted polygamy with strict condition not as a free license.<sup>19</sup> The people misinterpreted and misused the laws of Quran. Nausher Ali Khan Yusufzai in his *Bangiya Musalman* (1890) criticized the practice of polygamy. He said: “Our gaze has not yet turned to the poisonous effects of polygamy, the chief of which are production of too many children, domestic dissension and female suicide... The incidence of polygamy is not small by any count in this country. Among the Muslims of Bengal for every 1000 married males there were 1033 married females, i.e. 4% of marriages are polygamous.”<sup>20</sup> Sayyaid Shamsul Islam and Amirul Islam, appealed the Muslims to stop the evil practice by misinterpreting the laws of Quran. They also raised their voices against the excessive strictness of *pardah* and seclusion of the women within the four walls.

Like the Hindus and Bramho counterparts, though the Muslim male reformers began the women liberation movement in Surma Valley, the Muslim women also became the active agents of this change. The modernization of the Muslim Society drew a section of the Muslim Women out of their confines towards the outside world. Education was the first step to it and new education under colonial rule stimulated in them the idea of emancipation. As a result, with the passage of time, the Muslim women also emerged within the Muslim society who focused their attention on certain social issues from their own point of view in order to change their traditional world and uplift the status of women.

---

<sup>18</sup> Anowar Hossain, *ibid*,p.55.

<sup>19</sup> Ali Asgar Engineer, *Status and Position of Muslim Women*, Economic and Political Weekly, February,1994, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Nausher Ali Khan Yusufzai, *Bangiya Musalman*, Hindu Press, Calcutta, 1297 B.S, p. 34.



This chapter has focused on the impact of social reform movement on the women lives in the Surma Valley and Muslim women response on the new political system and their changing attitude towards purdah, polygamy, marriage, divorce, education etc.

The progress of female education among the Muslims also had immense effects on the society. It produced a good number of educated women who would participate in the modernizing the society. According to Borthwick the emerging class of enlightened middle-class women was the key to women's `modernization in late nineteenth century Bengal.<sup>21</sup> They raised their voices against the inequality, purdah, polygamy, poverty and education rights. Many women got education from school, colleges, broke the age- old customs and joined many political movements. Sahifa Banu, Khairun Nessa Choudhury, Shamsi Khanom Choudhury, were the most prominent in this field. Like other reformers in Bengal, spreading of female education was given the first agenda among the other women issues. The writings of Begum Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain also stirred the minds of the Muslim women .In Surma Valley, Sahifa Banu was the most progressive Muslim woman during her time. Sahifa Banu played a constructive role in spreading the women education. She established a school in the '*Hajibibi*' house for the elderly women. She urged that women confinement to the four walls of the room should take education for their all-round development in order to serve their own community. She was of opinion that it was not un-Islamic for women if they come out of their domestic boundary. She also established Sahifaganj Government Primary School and Sahifaganj Sultania Dakhil Madrassa and also Sultania Madrassa at Sultanpur of Balaganj Thana.<sup>22</sup>

She was born in 1851 in '*Hajibibi House*', Kuarpar, Sylhet.<sup>23</sup> Her father's name was Dewan Ali Raja, who was the landlord of Sylhet district and mother was Nurbibi. Sahifa Banu's step brother Dewan Ubedur Raja was Persian poet and another younger step brother, Dewan Hasan Raja was a "*Moromi*" poet.<sup>24</sup> As she could not get her formal education due to social obligations but she got her education at home. She was well educated in Urdu, Persian, Nagri and Bengali. In Sylhet, the conservative Muslim women learned Bengali, English, Urdu, Persian, Nagri, Arabic

---

<sup>21</sup> Sonia Nishat Amin, art, *The Early Muslim Bhadramahila: The Growth of Learning and Creativity, 1876 to 1939*, Bharati Roy,(ed), *From the Seams of History*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997,p.107-08.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid,p. 38.

<sup>23</sup> Nur Roushan Choudhury, *Sahifa Banu: Sylheter Pratham Mohila Kabir Jiban O Kabya*, Dhaka, 2010, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.1.

and Hindi mostly at home. Due to that reason British government started *zenana* classes. The “governess” (lady private tutors) was appointed as a teacher.<sup>25</sup> The governess went door to door to educate the girls.<sup>26</sup> Sahifa got her education from P. Bannerjee.<sup>27</sup> From her childhood, she had curiosity for knowledge. Her family encouraged Sahifa to opt for *zenana* education. She was considered as the first Muslim female poet in Surma Valley.<sup>28</sup> She began to write from her childhood. She wrote poems, *Gojols*, *Jaris* etc in many languages. She wrote two books ‘*Sahifa Sangeet*’ and ‘*Sahebaner Jari*’ in Bengali.<sup>29</sup> Besides these, she wrote “*Yadgare Sahifa*” in Urdu language.<sup>30</sup> Her *Sahifa Sangeet* preserved in Sylhet Sahitya Samsad was published in 1907 by Abdul Jabbar, a resident of Saodagartula in Sylhet.<sup>31</sup> Her *Sahifa Sangeet* is a unique poetical creation in which the writer’s deep felling and sympathy to Hindu neighbours have been expressed.<sup>32</sup>

Sahifa administered her zamindar estate.<sup>33</sup> She always worked for the benefit of the people. She took initiative for the establishment of the market, road, *madrassah* etc for the people.<sup>34</sup> She also established *Sahifaganj bazaar*, *Sahifaganj Idgah*. Besides these, she also established “*Kuarpar Jame Mosque*” in Kuarpar. She also established a “*moktab*” near the mosque. The local children got their religious education there. To make woman self-dependence she encouraged vocational education<sup>35</sup> Sahifa often used to ride on horse back, wearing tailored cloths, violating traditional Bengali norms. She was died in 1918.

Next woman who encouraged female education in her locality was Begum Ubed Hasan Banu Choudhury. She was born in Rampasa village, Sylhet in 1911. Her father was a well known landlord Dewan Ajijur Reja Choudhury. Begum Ubeda Hasan Banu Choudhury studied in childhood under the governess. She was expert in Arabic, Urdu, and Bengali.<sup>36</sup> She was married

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 30

<sup>26</sup> Anowar Hossain, *ibid.* p. 30.

<sup>27</sup> Nur Roushan Choudhury, *ibid.* p.30.

<sup>28</sup> Shamsad Husam& Masum Rahman Akash, *ibid.* p.195.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p.195.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.p. 196.

<sup>31</sup> Begum Jahan Ara, *Bangla Sahitye Lekhikader Abadan*, Mukhtadara, Bangladesh, 1987,p.29-30.

<sup>32</sup> Syeda Nazmun Nahar, *Bangla Sahitye Muslim Nari*, Ditya Prokash, Dacca, 1994, p.21.

<sup>33</sup> Nur Roushan Choudhury, *ibid.* p.38.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.p. 38.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>36</sup> Bijin Bihari Purkaystaha, *ibid.* p. 141.

with Alom Moulana Gulam Sonowar at the age of 16. After marriage, she felt pity for the poor and backward people of the society. She tried to solve their socio-economic problems, developed transport and communication system in her village. Her husband also helped and inspired her in those matter. She established a hospital in her locality. She established a primary school in her own home for the development of female education. At this school, she tried to raise consciousness among women the evil effects of polygamy and early marriages. She urged the Muslim women to break in to their social bondage and to come into educational scenario. She made an appeal to the women so that they could take necessary steps for sending their daughters to schools. Later many primary schools (*pathsala*) were also established. Due to her strong willingness, *Bhatipara Yubok Samiti*, a social organization was established. Later her husband became its president. During this time, the educated wives played a greater performance in decision making role in the families. Hasan Banu's husband also took necessary advice from his wife in important matter. She had a sympathy for the poor people of the locality. She was died in 1948.<sup>37</sup>

There were many women who got higher education by breaking the age-old barriers and then dedicated their lives for the upliftment of the women status. Khairun Nessa Choudhury was born in 1914 in Kalighat, in Sylhet. Her father Khan Bahadur Amjad Ali was an advocate. She was born an educated and progressive family where female education got much importance. She was admitted at the age of 5 to educational institution and was one of the earliest Bengali upper middle class girls to go to schools. She passed out her matriculation in 1932. Despite the conservative reaction of the relatives she completed her graduation in 1938 from the Murari Chand College. Another woman Sahera Banu, also completed her graduation in the same year from the same college.<sup>38</sup> She was the daughter of Khan Bahadur Abdur Rahim.<sup>39</sup> Khairun Nessa refused to listen to discussions about marriage for several years as she did not like the man domination's on woman in the name of marriage.<sup>40</sup> Her background enabled her to pursue an unorthodox course. She joined as the teacher of Sylhet Government Girls' High School to get a

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 142.

<sup>38</sup> Abdul Aziz, Mohammad Habibur, Mohammad Abul Bashar, Shubendu Imam, Abul Fateh Fattah (eds), *Brihattar Sileter Itihas*, Vol,ii, Brihattar Sylhet Itihas Pranayan Parishad, Sylhet, 2006 p. 100.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p.100.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with poet Dilwar, referred to above information in Sylhet, dated 06.07.12

feel of gainful employment and to earn ‘an independent livelihood ‘and served as a teacher on that school till 1947. But she was criticized by the conservative people due to her jobs as paid jobs for middle class women was not yet socially favoured. During this time, she fought for the gender equality, and urged the parents to send their daughters to schools. She suggested for the establishment of girls’ schools as they were bound to maintain *purdah*. Khairunessa found that the poverty-sticken Muslim community cannot arrange for the education of their women, and she suggested that female schools would be set up in every town, village and suitable places in the rural areas where girls of good moral character would be appointed as teacher.<sup>41</sup> After partition, in 1948, she promoted as the school inspector in Sylhet. In 1948, she was married to A.S. M Ali Ashraf, the first air- pilot in Sylhet. In 1950 when her husband was transferred to Karachi, she also resigned her previous job and joined as the Head mistress of Gandhi Garden Girls’ High School. She was died in 1972 in Karachi.<sup>42</sup>

Samsi Khanom Choudhury was born in a traditional aristocratic family of Rankeli villaege of Gopalganj, Sylhet. Her father, Abdul Hamid Choudhury was a politician, social worker and social reformer. Her mother was Aakunnessa Choudhury was a dedicated home maker. Her father was well known as Sonamia. He joined Khilafat and Non- cooperative movements. He went to jail for joining the movements. He was elected as a member of Assam Legislative Council from Sylhet Sadar.<sup>43</sup>

Samsi Khanom Choudhury studied in Khairun Nessa Girls’ Primary School in childhood. She passed out matriculation from Sylhet Government Girls’ School in the 1936. Having passed intermediate from Murarichand College in the year 1938, she admitted in the Ladykeane College, Shillong and graduated from here in 1940. After that, she admitted in Aligarh University. She passed her M.A degree from Aligarh University in 1942.<sup>44</sup> She was the first Muslim woman who got this degree from the Aligarh University.

Shamsi Khanom became one of the most ‘modern’ women of her time. Her parents encouraged her to socialize with educated Hindu and Bramho women in Sylhet. After completing her

---

<sup>41</sup> Anowar Hossain, *ibid.* p. 80.

<sup>42</sup> Shamsad Husam & Masum Rahman Akash (ed), *ibid.*p.70.

<sup>43</sup> M . A. Kadim Choudhury, *Alokit Santander Smarone*, Sylhet,p.152.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p. 152.

graduation she became the teacher of Sekhwat Memorial Girls' School. She joined as an Inspector of schools in 1945. When she was the inspector of schools of the various district of East- Bengal, she found that female education is still an extremely backward condition and needs to be fostered in every legitimate way. She pointed out that it was the urgent need for the establishment of girls' schools and colleges that the parent can send their daughters without any hesitancy. She was promoted as the deputy director of the education department. After servicing 35 years she retired from her service life.<sup>45</sup> After independence, some women send memorandum to khaja Najim Uddin, the then chief minister of the East- Bengal to establish Bengali as the official language. The honourable women who signed at that memorandum, Shamsi Khanom Choudhury was one of them. Beside her, Begum Jubeda Rahim Choudhury, Saiyada Saher Banu Choudhury, Saiyada Lutfunessa Khatun, Rabea Ali, Roku Begom, Jahanara Matin, Nurjahan Begom, Sufia Khatun, Mahmuda Khatun, Samsunessa Khatun, Saiyada Najibunessa etc were also associated with the Language movement, 1952<sup>46</sup>

She was married with Kaisar Rashid Choudhury of Sylhet in 1950. Kaishar Rashid Choudhury joined as Pakistan Foreign Service in 1950. She had two sons and one daughter. Later she was divorced with Kaisher Rashid . Her second marriage was with Dr. Abdul Monin. Dr. Momin was a chemical engineer. He was a general manager of the Fenchuganj fer tilizer factory. Begom Samsi khanom Choudhury died in 1989.<sup>47</sup>

Another progressive woman, who challenged the patriarchal norms and joined in the profession was Faizunessa Khatun. She born in 1927 in Karimganj district. . She was the daughter of Idris Ali. She passed out class five from Madan Mohan Madav Charan Girls' School in 1937, which was the first girls' school in Karimganj. After that she got married with her cousin, Abdul Khalik who was a school teacher. Some progressive males established a primary school at their village and named Khurikhala girls' L.P school which was later had taken by the government and became a co-ed school and named as 31 no Khurikhala L.P school. As she was the only educated female in the village, she became the teacher of that school at the age of twelve in the year 1939. With her untried efforts a large number of girls came to school and thus female

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.p. 152.

<sup>46</sup> Sharif Uddin Ahmed, *Sylhet: History and Heritage*, Bangladesh Itihas Samiti, 1999, P. 297.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 153.

education spread in the village. She also encouraged the village women to participate in the national movement by using swadeshi goods and encouraged to produce khadi.<sup>48</sup>

Malek Chand of Habiganj also challenged the patriarchal values and social norms of the Muslim society by accepting the paid jobs. She was born in 1921, in Bhadikara village, Habiganj. Her father Yunus Ali was the owner of 'Calcutta Hotel'.<sup>49</sup> Yunus Ali was influenced by the thoughts and ideas of the Bramho Samaj and the Aligarh Movement and thought Bengali and some calculations to his wife, Niyor Chand at home. In Habiganj, at that time female education was discouraged by the conservative people and they were not ready to send their daughters to schools. Malek Chand completed her primary education at home. Her grandfather opposed her further education. But her parents were determined to educate their daughter, Malek Chand. So they admitted her in the Bhatikara M.E School, where she read up to class viii. As there was no High school in the village, she could not continue her study and joined as a teacher of Bhatikhara North Girls' Primary School, which was runned by some progressive native people. In 1940, she got married with Dr. Mohammad Firoz Ali, who was a homeopathy practitioner. When he was the student of the Diphu Medical College, he joined in the Indian National Congress. But in 1942, he joined in the Muslim League. Despite of strong oppositions from her laws, her husband never discouraged her to continue the job, as he knew Malek Chand could maintain both her private and public life. Being as the only teacher of the village, she made several campaigns for spreading female education. She visited door to door for the female students and also for the collecting funds for the schools. She was died in 23 November, 2007.<sup>50</sup>

Like education, economic independence was also necessary for the liberation of women. Sirajunnessa Choudhury gave emphasized on women economic independence. For the upliftment of the women status she established Sylhet Women Social Welfare Committee, Sylhet Women Cottage industry. These committees gave the opportunity of many women's employment. The Sylhet Women Social Welfare Committee also organized free distribution of Homeopathy medicine.

---

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Abul Leis Mazumdar, referred to above information in Karimganj, 17-05-2008

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Alhaj Saleh Uddin Ahmed referred to above information in Habiganj, 16-11-2012

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Sanu, referreed to above to above information in Habiganj, 16-11-2012

Begam Sirajun Nessa Choudhury was born on 27<sup>th</sup> November, 1910 in Etah village, Maulavi Bazar. Her father Dewan Abdur Karim Choudhury was a progressive and educated zamindar.<sup>51</sup> Her mother Asmatunnessa was a housewife.<sup>52</sup> She could not get the chance of getting formal education. But her father managed zenana education. Her parents tried to give her Islamic education at her age of 4. She learned many languages such as Bengali, Urdu, Arabic, Parsee, and English. Maulana Ubaidullah taught her Parsi literature and history of Mughal and Turki. Maulavi Riazuddin taught her Bengali and English literature. She continued education at her maternal home till 1925.<sup>53</sup>

In 1926, Sirajunessa Choudhury married to Mr. Abdur Rasheed Choudhury. He belonged to Zamindar family of Durgapasha village, Sunamganj. In his early life, he was loyal to the British rule and joined as Extra Assistant Commissioner. After marriage, he resigned the job and started commercial business. He also joined in politics and became the member of the Indian Legislative Council.<sup>54</sup>

Begam Sirajunessa Choudhury continued her study after her marriage. She got due respect and encouragement from her husband to join in public world. Her husband also taught her how to maintain the workers of an industry and other business policy. In 1928, when Kazi Nazrul Islam came to Sylhet, a meeting was organized by the Congress leaders. Many Muslim Women participated in this meeting. Sirajunessa also joined this meeting. She also participated in many socio-political meetings with her husband and visited many places for the encouragement of the people to participate in the freedom struggle.<sup>55</sup>

Abdur Rashid Choudhury died in 1944 and she became widow only at the age of 34. After her husband's death, she started to look after her husband's business and property. She became the managing director of the Rashid Enterprise Ltd, Hamdard Tea Co Ltd, Sirajnagar and Rashidabad Waqf Tea Estate, vice-chairman of National Tea Association etc. She was also elected as the member of the Pakistan National council and Commissioner of Sylhet

---

<sup>51</sup> Fahmida Rashid Choudhury & Apurba Sharma (ed), *Sirajunessa Choudhury: Birth ceremony*, p.20.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p.161.

<sup>53</sup> Nibedita Dass Purkayasta, *Mukti Manche Nari*, Prip Trust, Dhaka, 1997, p. 127.

<sup>54</sup> Shamsad Husam & Masum Rahman Akash (ed), *ibid*, p.141.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p.127.

Municipality. She was also became the member of the Chattagram Council, Sylhet TB Association and Pakistan Women Council.

She had large contribution in educational field also. After the partition, 1947, when Sylhet Women College and Sylhet Madan Mohan College faced a critical financial crisis, due to government negligence, Sirajunessa Choudhury went door to door for the collection of money. She also encouraged parents to send their daughters to college. Besides this, she was the Managing Director of Madan Mohan College, Sylhet Women College, Kaji Jalal Uddin School, and Government Girls' School. She was also secretary of managing committee of Durgapasha Abdur Rashid High School. She was died in 1974.<sup>56</sup>

These new women raised their voices against purdah. Born in a family, which followed strict *purdah*, Sahifa Banu criticized the evil effects of *purdah* and *aborodh* and urged the secluded women to come out of it. She expressed liberal and sometimes radical views on women's emancipation.<sup>57</sup> The "Pardha- protha" was strictly obeyed in the conservative Muslim society at that time and every woman bound to use *burqah*. But she used a hat to cover her hair instead of using *burqah* or *shawl*. Though she weared modern dress but never crossed the barrier of the system.<sup>58</sup> In Sylhet, Jubeda Rahim Choudhury was the first woman who took first step to remove the strictness of purdah.<sup>59</sup> In 1928, Muslim Student Federation organized a meeting. They invited Kazi Nazrul Islam, Shere Bangla A.K. Fazlul Haque, Dr. Muhammd Sahidullah as the guests of the meeting. They also encouraged women to participate in the meeting. They prepared separate place for women under the screen. Many Muslim women participated in the meeting with *burqa*. Jubeda Rahim Choudhury also used *burqa*. But when the meeting was began, Najrul Islam, the famous rebellious poet, sung the chorus song, Jubeda Rahim Choudhury opened the screen and there was no purdah or the screen between the male and females. Jubeda also gave up her *burqah*. This event marked a historical significance for the abolition of the strictness of purdah and seclusion or '*aborodh pratha*' in Sylhet. Some conservative minded people criticized her this act. But her father, Sharafat Ali Choudhury and husband, Abdur Rahim Choudhury appreciated

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.p.22.

<sup>57</sup> Information from Kamal Ahmed, interview dated on 06/11/2012, Sylhet.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p.43.

<sup>59</sup> Nibedita Dass Purkaystha, *Mukti Manche Nari*, Prip Trust, Dhaka, 1999, p.98.



her work. Her younger sister, Shahida Khatun also attended the meeting without *burqa*.<sup>60</sup> Sirajunness Choudhury also attended this meeting without wearing *burqa*. Though Shamsi Khanom Choudhury, Khairunnessa Choudhury, Jubbedra Rahim Choudhury, Sirajunnessa Choudhury did not like to use *burqa*, but they covered their heads with a scarf or front part of the *saree*, which was a new form modesty that is *pardah*. They all were against the excessive strictness of *pardah* but not the modesty of Islam. In Surma Valley, *Purdah* was one of the important factor for the female progress in education and moved outside or participation in the public spheres. During the first half of the twentieth century, many female students passed out their vernacular schools but further progress was impossible due to the *pardah* and early marriages. Many progressive and educated families also followed strict *pardah*. For instance, being a meritorious student, *pardah* became an obstacle of Saiful Nessa's higher education. Her father Sonowar Ali Choudhury was very progressive and educated. He was a C.I.D inspector. Her mother Shayestha Banu Choudhury was a dedicated home maker. She could not read or write in her early age. But after marriage, Sonowar Ali Choudhury started to teach the alphabets and appointed a tutor at home who helped her to learn Bengali literature, writing skills and some numerical calculations.<sup>61</sup>

Saiful Nessa was born on the month of Nov, 1926 in Bodo Hailakandi village, Hailkandi. Her grandfather, Muhammad Hussein Choudhury was a '*mirasdar*'. He was the follower of Gandhi and participated in the freedom movement. Her grandmother Nurjahan Bibi also the supporter of the Gandhian movement.<sup>62</sup> When she was four years old she went to Shillong with her family as her father worked there she started her primary education in Shillong Jail Road Girls' School and completed successfully in 1939. At the same time two elder sisters also passed out eight standards in 1939. On retirement of her father, she came back in Hailakandi with the others members. Here she continued her study and admitted at Indukumari Girls School, which was just born school at that time. She was talented enough and secured first division with three letters. She was the first and the only Muslim female student who passed out metric in entire Hailakandi and she was awarded scholarship Rs. 5 for her meritorious result. After that she got married with Dr Lutfur Rahman Choudhury. After her marriage she did not stop her study and duly

---

<sup>60</sup> Tajul Mohammad, *ibid*.p.18.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Asmat Sultana, 12 nov, 2007.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Abdur Rahman Choudhury, dated on 06-11-2007.

encouraged by her husband. She was admitted in G.C College. But she could not go to college regularly due to conservative attitude of her in laws. Her father-in-law used to veil the rickshaw in which she traveled her home to G.C College with a *saree*, so that she could not come to the view of the general public. So she appeared Pre- University examination as a private candidate. She has to study late at night after performing all the domestics works allotted to her. She used to take help in her studies from her bother-in-law. Thus after her marriage and being as a mother of two child at that time she continued her study and passed out H.S from G.C College.<sup>63</sup> But she could not join in any profession or could not participate in the public sphere.

The western education also reduced the percentage of early marriage. Early marriage was likely to be disappeared among the educated middle class. The age of marriage was raised from 10 to 15-16. The educated women were getting married late. Jubeda Rahim choudhury, Sirajunnessa Choudhury were also married at the age of 18.<sup>64</sup> Parents who cared about female education waited until their daughters were older before arranging their marriages or occasionally allowed young married women to continue their education. Khairun Nessa Choudhury, Shamsi Khanom Choudhury, Ajijunnessa Khatun Choudhury were getting married after completing their education. Both Khairunnessa and Shamsi Khanom Choudhury toured village after village to make conscious women about the evil effects of polygamy and child-marriage. Besides this purdah never became as the obstacle of their progress. They were opposed to extreme purdah which meant to confinement within the four walls. There were few women who were victimize of child-marriage, but it hardly deterred their progress due to co-operation and encouragement of their husband. Among them Khairunnessa Choudhury of Hailakandi was the most prominent. She was born on 29 January, 1933 at Rangauti village, in Hailakandi district. Like other girls, she did not get the opportunity of formal education. She also got married at a very tender age. It was the custom of those days to get marry at an age of 12/13 years old. Though she got married early, but her marriage life never becasme an obstacle to her progress. She completed her graduation after her marriage only.<sup>65</sup> Begam Khairunnessa Choudhury was not only a social worker but also a politician and was the first Muslim female poet in Hailakandi districts.

---

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Saiful Nessa Choudhury referred to above information, 17-01-2008.

<sup>64</sup> Nibedita Dass Pukayastha, *ibid.* p. 98.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Khairunnessa Choudhury referred to above information in Guwahati, 07-03-2008.

Begum Khairunnessa Choudhury belonged from a conservative Muslim middle class family. Her father, Sajidur Reja Laskar was a veterinary surgeon. Though Sajidur Reja did not prefer to send his daughters in a co-education school, but he advocated female education and favoured Zenana education. On those days women of respectable families were not allowed to go outside because it violated purdah but Zenana education was popular to them. He thought Khairunnessa Bengali literature, Mathematics, Science, History etc. She also read her father's diary, personal collection, contemporary magazines and newspapers. Another person who encouraged her in studies was Muslim Choudhury, who was a sub-inspector of schools. Muslim Choudhury was a highly educated and progressive man. He gave Khairun Nessa nineteen Bengali books of Rabindra Nath Tagore, Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay and she became the devotee of various poets. After going through these books she gathered proficiency towards Bengali literature and thus she acquired not only reading habits but also writing skill though not in conscious way.<sup>66</sup>

Khairunnessa was the second daughter of her father. Her elder sister Shamsunnessa also got married at very tender age. She had five step sisters and one step brother. After the death of her elder sister, Shamsunnessa, father Sajidur Reja decided to arrange her marriage with her brother-in-law Abdus Sattar Choudhary. When Shamsun Nessa died, she had two daughters, one was three years and the other was infant. The father had to take the decision as there was nobody to take care of these two kids. Thus in the year 1947, she was of thirteen years of age and entered her martial life not only as a newly bride but also as a mother of two daughters. She had many responsibilities and of course her husband, Abdus Sattar helped her to get adjusted with this new situation and the family.

Abdus Sattar Choudhary was an educated and progressive person. He was a head assistance of the District Transport Office. Abdus Sattar Choudhary hailed from a respectable family of Matijuri village in Hailakandi. His father Abdul Rabbani Choudhary was a '*mirashdar*'. Abdus Sattar Choudhary was transferred in his service to many places covering whole of the North-East India. Khairunnessa was lucky enough that she availed the opportunity to travel all those places where her husband posted and enriched herself with varied experiences in her life.

---

<sup>66</sup> Information from Khairunnessa Choudhury, in Hailakandi, interview dated on 06-04-2008

Though she got married at very tender age but that hardly deterred her from carrying out her studies. In spite of being the mother of four children she was determined to continue her studies. When her children began to go to school, her urges for study raised. She used to study her children's books at night and thus her study continued. In the mean time, she started to write poems but she did not get due recognition.

Mrs. Khairunnessa Choudhury, a cultured lady was not far behind in the field of literature also. Her first poem was published in '*Ishara*' a magazine which was published from Silchar in the year 1961 and earned a name in the field of literature. Later her poems started publishing in different magazines such as "*Aranya Pushpa*", "*Belabhumi*", and "*Ishara*" etc. Her poems also published in "*Sarani*" a magazine which was published from Calcutta. Her writing also started publishing in the weekly paper like "*Purbayan*", "*Janakranti*" etc. Some poems written in her childhood was published in *Ishara*, the monthly Bengali magazines published by Gulam Kibria in 1960, after her writings poems etc were published in some more magazines name as *Barak*, *Aryanapuspa* from Silchar/ Calcutta *Janakranti*, *Samayprabah*, *Agraduth* from Guahati.<sup>67</sup>

When her husband was in service at Tejpur, she set up her mind to appear for matriculation examination and took help from a private tutor. Ultimately, in the year 1965, at her age of thirty-two, she passed her matriculation as a private candidate from there. Then there has been no looking back. She passed out P.U in 1968 and she did her graduation in the Arts stream from Darrang College, under Guahati University in the year 1970. It is fine to mention that her second son; Ikbal Hussein Choudhary was the student of the same college at that same time. She also passed Kobid in Hindi. Topped amongst the successful candidates appeared in the Osmia Bhasa Gyan Parikhsha conducted by Osom Sahitya Sabha in the year 1970.

Besides this successful educational career, she rendered commendable services in the field of social welfare which started while she was at Tejpur with her husband. She founded 'Shishu Kalyan Samiti' at Tejpur, associating with Srimati Lili, wife of former minister Gulak Chandra Rajbanshi. Gradually she became the secretary, vice- secretary and president of Tejpur Mahila Majlish 1960. Through this organization she and other middle class Muslim women organized Milad-un- Nabi every year.

---

<sup>67</sup> Information from "Anayna" compilation of her articles, ed by Nripendra Narayan Choudhury, 2002

Khairun Nessa was associated with 'Tezpur Mahila Samiti' which was founded by Meera Agarwal. She was also associated with Nari Shilpo Samiti which was founded by Tarulata Saikia. Khairun Nessa was influenced by the social services of Mrs. Agarwal and Mrs. Saikia and through this organization she learnt knitting, stitching, embroidery etc. After her husband's retirement in 1971, she settled down at her native village Matijuri in Hailakandi district. She adjusted herself in village environment very easily. She was deeply moved by the plight of women in her locality. Within a short span she involved herself with all the issues concentrating women. She spearheaded a powerful women's body called 'Mahila Unnayan Samiti' with the help of a large section of women who were victims of male dominated society. Besides these, she was involved with child welfare. The miseries of village people caused great pain for her. She founded a social welfare committee named 'Matijuri Shishu Kalyan Samiti' and supplied nutrient food and medicines to the poor children and women. Through "*Mitali Mayna Parizat*" organization, she conducted educational tour in various places of Assam for the poor students for acquiring hand out knowledge. She believed that 'children are the future of our country, so perfect education is necessary for them'. So she gave importance to the pre- primary education and for that she donated her own land for the construction of a pre-primary school. She established Matijuri Shishu Kalyan Pre-primary School. She also applied to the State Government for an approval and a grant for her school. Being a respectable lady, belonging to a renowned *Mirashdar* family of Hailakandi, the said school blossomed with all its fragrance and subsequently attained Government grant.<sup>68</sup>

She encouraged the backward village women to come forward and thus given stress to women education. With her great effort a condensed course of education began for Adult women in undivided Cachar District with the aid of CSW Board. With her effort the poor village women received financial assistance for continuing education. The programmed became a very successful one. Abdus Sattar Choudhury helped women to prepare their lesson and thus many women passed out H.S.L.C successfully. She knew the importance and necessity of formal education, as she was deprived of that in her personal life, so she gave impetus for formal education among women. She was constantly busy for the upliftment of village women as she understood that without education and participation of women in all spheres of life, a community

---

<sup>68</sup> Information from Khairunnessa Choudhury, interview dated on 10.4.09, Guwahati

cannot progress and prosper. She also rendered services by starting many rural voluntary social organizations which were running Balwadi Schools and feeding children within the age group of 2 to 6 years scattered all over the district of Cachar and even the outside the districts in Tejpur.<sup>69</sup>

She was also associated with 'Anti Dowry Committee' which organized meetings from time to time for the prohibition of dowry system. The committee discussed about the demerits of the dowry system and advised people not to encourage dowry to the bridal party. She was also the member of 'Anti Drug Prohibition Council'. She was also associated with various religious and educational institutions. She was associated with Lok Adalat, Hailakandi. She is the President Sishu Kalyan Pre- primary School, Hailakandi and founder member of Sishu Sadan English medium school, Hailakandi. She was associated with land reform committee and legal aid committee, Hailakandi. She was also associated with Fish Farmers' Development Agency.

She was the organizing secretary A.I.F of B.P.S.W.W, N.E Region. Through this organization she got the chance to travel many countries of Europe. She implemented her knowledge attained by her traveling of many European countries as a delegate of A.I.F of B.P.S.W.W. The main reason for this tour was interaction between western and eastern culture. This traveled effect his personal life. After the tour she upgraded scientific technology in her native village. With her help the villages got government financial assistance for poultry farm etc. She wanted to establish a Orphan House but could not succeed. She had traveled many European countries and attained vast experiences.

She was associated with a lot of organization like the member of Assam State Social Welfare Advisory Board; Member of Khadi Board, Assam, Member of Artfed , Assam, Member of Telecom Advisory Board, Assam; Member State Co-operative Bank; Member of P &T, Assam; Member Railway Users' Consultative Council, Member State anti dowry Committee, Hailakandi; Member anti drug and prohibition Council, Hailakandi, Member managing Committee of Fish Farmers' Development Agency, Hailakandi, Member A.I.R ; Member Governing Body of S.S College, Hailakandi; Member Governing Body of Silchar Medical

---

<sup>69</sup> Information from khairumessa Choudhury, dated on 10.04.09, Guwahati

College; Member Sishu Sadan English Medium School, Hailakandi; President Sishu Kalyan Pre-primary School, Hailakandi ; President Hailakandi Mahakuma Parishad.<sup>70</sup>

Prof. Ashraf Ali, D.P.I of Assam, Nominated Mrs. Khairunnessa Choudhury as a member of the Governing body of the first Women's college at Hailakandi. Mrs Choudhury was President of Mahukuma Parishad and actively took part in various social welfare organization of Assam. The various constructive works in various field of her public life will keep alive her memory in the minds of many enlightened people not only of the people of Barak Valley but also many parts of Assam. She also was the member of Silchar Medical College governing body, Hilakandi S.S.C College.<sup>71</sup>

She attended the conference of chairman and Members of Central Social welfare Advisory Board from all the states of India held at New Delhi in the year 1975, an international women year. She was also the member of 'Assam State Culture Committee' through which she traveled Kanchipuram, Madurai, and Tanjavore for the substitution of interstate culture where she achieved immense popularity.

She is associated with Air and DD. Her valuable talks were interviewed and broadcasted time to time. She is one of the Directors of Board of Directors, Cultural Affairs, Assam. She visited several parts of India with cultural troops of Assam and honored. Her discussion about women rights and social reform often broadcasted by All India Radio, Silchar.

This prominent social worker also did not lagging behind in politics. During that time she had to face many obstacles in her life as it was not possible for a Muslim lady to embark upon the field of politics. Mrs. Choudhury mastered enough to come out of these social and conservative barriers.<sup>72</sup>

Actually Khairunnessa Choudhury was the pioneer of Hailakandi Muslim women who have entered the field of social activity and politics. As a result, she fell under the wrath of the fundamentalists who criticized her vehemently. But she paid least attention to such criticism she was the member of Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, Vice-president of Hailakandi District

---

<sup>70</sup> Information from Swapna Choudhury, interviewed dated 18.09.09, Hailakandi

<sup>71</sup> Interview with K.H. Choudhury, referred to above information, dated 12.08.08, Hailakandi

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Swapna Choudhury, dated 18.09.09, Hailakandi

Committee and president of Hailakandi District Women Front. A devoted Congress worker as active member of the All India National Congress right of Vice-president of D.C.C, Hailakandi and Convener Hailakandi Congress Women Front. During the split in Congress in the year 1978, she joined Congress (I) and became the organizing secretary in charge of the districts of N.C. Hills and undivided Cachar district. She was also a member of Minority Cell, A.P.C.C. She was an active worker of the party during the A.I.C.C. Session held at Jawahar Nagar, Guwahati in the year 1975. She also attended the A.I.C.C Session held in Chandigarh in 1976. She attended the Planery Session of Congress held at Calcutta. She was the first Muslim lady in Barak Valley who took part general election in 1971. As she was the life time member of congress she got nomination for contesting in Mahukuma Parishad. Though she was a fresher but she defeated heavy weight Minister Abdul Muhib Mazumdar by a margins of 4 votes, former MCA Abdul Rahman Choudhary by 2 votes, former chief councilor Abdul Haque Laskar by 6 votes and she was declared first. This indicates a great triumph of her political life. After this victory, the State Committee paneled her name and send central parliamentary approval for the member of legislative assembly for Hailakandi district. But she did not get nomination due to some unaboidable circumstances. She had cordial relation with Indira Gandhi, the then prime minister and Fakru Uddin Ali. Fakru Uddin Ali treated her as his daughter and called her as 'Beti'. Again in 1970 when she was selected for nomination as candidate of Hailakandi constituency but again she deprived due to interference of other influential political leader. Just after submitting her nomination she received a message by telegraph that she should be contested in Katlicherra instead of Hailakandi constituency. But she did not accept this proposal and as a protest she contested the election as an independent candidate in Hailakandi constituency. Though she lost the election but she considered this as her another victory because the Congress candidate also lost the election. On those days Congress party was much popular party and as a Congress nominee, it was unimaginable think to get lost the election. But due to much popularity of Khairunnessa, the congress high command realized that due to not giving nomination to Srimati Khairunnessa, Congress candidate was defeated. In 1992, she elected as a president of Jilla Parishad in Hailakandi without any contest. She was only women who adorned the post.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> Information from K.H. Choudhury, interview dated 12.08.08 , Hailakandi



Her husband encouraged in every step of her life. Her husband death caused a great mentally disastrous for her and though she began keep herself isolated from the political life but she completed her duty as a candidate of Jilla Parishad upto 1997. In 2000 the Congress high command requested her to take the change of a speaker of Congress Mahila Front and she kept the request.<sup>74</sup>

She was more interested in traveling. She traveled in whole India, beginning with Badrinath in North Himalayas, Bangalore, Madras, and Tirupati in South India, Mumbai, Punjab, and Rajasthan in Western India, Orrissa, and Bengal, Nepal in North-East India. She was associated with many cultural organizations. She traveled in the seven European countries USSR, France, Germany, Great Britain, Switzerland, Belgium, Italy and Netherland.

In the year 1996 her first book "*Mithye Noi Shristir Bedona*", a compilation of her poems was published from Guwahati in Mrs. Choudhury's literary forte was most appreciated when her travel story *Sat Sagarer Parey* was published in 1997. It is written in Bengali and based on her own experiences of the world tour which she had made with the International Women's Organisation. She received literary award for the book.<sup>75</sup>

Her book *Marudeshe Shantinir*, which was based on her own experience of the Haj Pilgrimage. . It was another achievement where she narrated how the fire broke out in Mina in 1997 in very lucid and descriptive way. The book was released on May 2, 1999 at the Bishnu Nirmala house in the city by former Sahitya Sabha president Lakshyadhar Choudhury in the presence of a large number of eminent literatures of the state.

Her other traveling book "*Himalayer Pathe Pathe*". It was published in 2000. In her book she narrated the bad condition of Badrinath and the attractive scenaries in Himalayas. She also wrote books in Assamese *Mica Jano Sistir Bedana* in the year 1999. Another book, "*Kudi Shatikar Shesh Dasake*", a compliation of poems published in 2003.

Her books "Mithye Noy Shristir Bedona", 'Sat Sagarer Pare', 'Morudeshe Shantineerh', "Himaloyor Pathe Pathe' etc reflects her talent in the field of literature. This multifaceted

---

<sup>74</sup> Information from Swapna Choudhury, interview dated 18.09.09, Hailakandi

<sup>75</sup> Information from Khairunnessa Choudhury, interview dated 15-03-2008

personality was duly honoured for her brilliance in literature by the then Deputy Commissioner of Hailakandi on 26 th January 1998. She was awarded a Certificate of Honour and a medal for her contribution in the field of literature. Later in the same year, she was honoured by the “Barak Upotyoka Bongo Sahitya O Sanskriti” and conferred her with the rare distinction of “First Muslim Lady Literature of Barak Valley” with an “Avinandanpatra”. She recently bagged another Laurel “Nandita Nandini” conferred by “Barak Upotyoka Nandini Sahitya O Patrochakra.” In the year 1997 Srimati Khairunnessa Choudhary decided to retire from politics and took more attention in religion. She performed the Haj along with her eldest son and daughter-in-law in 1997. <sup>76</sup>She was died in 2011.

In Surma Valley, though in earlier times, polygamy was widely prevalent among both the higher and lower caste Muslims. The social reformers raised issues against polygamy. There had been a considerable change in the Muslim social structure. The educated men also realized the evil effects of polygamy. Education has helped Muslim in moulding their attitude from polygamy to monogamy. Besides this, economic considerations make it comparatively rare for Muslim men to have more than one wife at a time, for not every man could provide the separate establishments which the custom and expediency as well as the laws demand. Moreover, the growth of public conscience and the women liberation movement made such an impact on the Muslim community that marriage with more than one wife at a time considered undesirable. As a result, the percentage of polygamous people had became low and the practice of polygamy was being replaced by the ideal of monogamy.<sup>77</sup> But these practices were widely practices among the lower and illiterate people. Sainur Bibi, who was born in 1931 in Kaliganj. Her husband ,Abdur Rajjak was a farmer. He had four wives and sixteen children. Sainur Bibi was the first wife, but her husband never took her consent before marrying another woman. The poor economic condition, illiteracy ,ignorance and social obligations bound her to live with other co-wives.<sup>78</sup> In Cachar, Rashida Haque Choudhury began campaign against the polygamy and talaq in her village. After completed her Higher Secondary from Lady Brabroune College, Kolkata she motivated herself for the social work. Her sisters and sisters in laws were also engaged to make conscious the

---

<sup>76</sup> Interview with from Khairunnessa choudhury, dated on 15-03-2008

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p. 56.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Rahena Islam, dated on 07.07.11. Karimganj

illiterate women about their rights and protest against the patriarchal domination.<sup>79</sup> In Cachar she was first Muslim female who got the opportunity of getting higher education. She was born in 1926 in Tezpur districts of Assam. She belonged to a family which was highly progressive and had a liberal and modern outlook. Her father, Nasib Ali Mazumdar was an excise commissioner. He was the son of Abdul Ali Mazumdar who settled at Dudpatil village in Cachar district. He passed out Metric from Narsingh School. He was the first Muslim Graduate in Cachar district. In his service tenure Nasib visited many places spreading all over Bengal and at last he settled in Silchar in 1939. Her mother Badrun Nessa Mazumdar was also literate. After her marriage, Nasib Ali appointed a private tutor for reading Bengali books and numerical calculations.<sup>80</sup> Rashida had two sisters and eight brothers. She was the second daughter of her parent.<sup>81</sup>

Rashida's primary education started in a Bengali school at Tezpur, later on she continued her study at Habiganj and ultimately in Silchar where she admitted in a Missionary school. It was possible only for the appreciation and encouragement of her parents that she could continue her studies. Her parents gave an equal opportunity to their sons and daughters.<sup>82</sup> She also learned the Islamic education under the guidance of a Maulavi with her sisters. From her childhood days she was very intelligent and devoted in her studies. She passed out H.S.L.C in 1944 from a private missionary school in Silchar. Thus when her friends and relatives forbidden her to study further, she was very determined to continue her study. Her parent admitted at Lady Brabroune College, Calcutta and from there she passed out Higher Secondary in 1946. After her marriage she completed her graduation from Women College and she was the first Muslim female graduate in Cachar. Her career had not stopped here only, it has gone beyond that. Unlike other women, after her marriage she did not spend her all time in kitchen but her informal studies are going on. She equally maintained her domestic duties and social obligations.<sup>83</sup>

Rashida's family was one of the most progressive families and every member of her family had modern outlook which had recorded a good number of educated male and females. While the

---

<sup>79</sup> Information from Muzammil Ali Laskar, dated on, 08.07.09, Silchar

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Shahidul Hussein Mazumdar referred to above information in Silchar, 05-02-2008

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Anni Mazumdar referred to above information in Silchar. 13.03.2008

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Nuruessa Mazumdar referred to above information in Silchar , 11-01-2008

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Rashidul Hussein Mazumdar referred to above information in Guwahati, 16-03- 2008

society discouraged female education, Rashida's family was an exception during that time. Her study at Calcutta, far away from home was an example of breaking the bondage of four walls.

Her elder sister Hamida Laskar also passed out HSLC in 1938 and after that she got married. Her younger sister Rajia Choudhury also passed out B.A from Dhaka. She passed out HSLC from Government Girls, Higher Secondary School. They completed their primary education from Junior Basic School near the Ghaniala Mosque. Her parents never thought about their marriage when they were immature and social evils like polygamy, purdah, talaq were not practiced in their family. Besides that her all sister –in-laws were also educated. Her elder sister in law Nurunnessa Mazumdar, wife of Nurul Hussein Mazumdar was a literate woman. She passed out Lower primary school from Jagdishpur village, Cachar.

Rashida's second sister- in –law, Salma Mazumdar, the wife of Faizul Hussein Mazumdar, was the classmate of Rashida. She passed out HSLC from Government Girls' Higher secondary School in 1946. After that she passed out Pre university examination from G.C College. She also belonged from a distinguished family. Her father Abdul Karim Mazumdar was the lecturer of Arabic department in G.C. College.

Her third sister –in- law Hasna Mazumdar, wife of Rashidul Hussein Mazumdar was a Master in Arts. Rashidul himself was an A.C.S. Rashida's fourth sister in law Rahatun Mazumdar, wife of Rafiqul Hussein Mazumdar passed out B.Sc, who was the first Muslim female science graduate in Cachar. She was the third daughter of Abdul Karim Choudhury and sister of salma Choudhury. Her other sister in law Hasna Ara Mazumdar and Manowara Mazumdar were graduate also graduate.<sup>84</sup>

In 1947, she got married with Mainul Haque Chudhury. Mainul Haque Choudhury was born in 13 May, 1921 at Sonabarighat. His father Montajir Ali Choudhury, had a respectable position in the society. He was famous as political leader in Assam and also in India. He was also a good lawyer. He passed out Matriculation in first division in 1940.<sup>85</sup> Then he admitted in Cotton College, Guwahati. After that he studied at the presidency college, Kolkata and completed graduation from there. Then he admitted at Aligarh University and passed post graduation degree

---

<sup>84</sup> Information from Badrul Hussein Mazumdar, dated on 09-02-2008

<sup>85</sup> Information from Nilofar Choudhury, daughter of Rashida, dated on 05-04-2008.

from there. He passed L.L.B degree from the same university. During his student life he took part in debate and established himself as good orator. He also took part in student politics. He was elected as general secretary in All India Muslim student Federation in Aligarh.

He joined at Silchar bar council in 1948 and established himself as good advocate. He also joined in Gauhati High court in 1951. He joined in Congress in 1951. He was elected as M.L.A. in Assam in 1957, 1962 and 1967 and elected Cabinet minister in the ministry of Late Bishnu Ram Medhi in 1957 and Late Bimala Prasad Chaliha in 1962, 1967. In 1971 he was elected the M.P. (Member of Parliament) from Dhubri Constituency and joined as Cabinet minister in Industry under the ministry of late Indira Ghandi.<sup>86</sup>

While he was Central minister of industry, he put up proposal to setup the Cachar Paper Mill at Panchgram and got Cabinet approval of it and consequently the said paper mill was set up. It was the first largest industry in Cachar district. He took initiative to set up the Central University in Cachar. He also took active part in many ways to improve the socio- economic status of Cachar district. So he was rightly called the founder of Cachar which was now called as the Barak Valley. He died only at the age of 55 years. His premature death was an irreparable loss to the Barak Valley. Rashida used to encourage her husband in social and political works. So, she knew the first lesson of politics from her husband but she never participated in the direct politics. After her husband death, she actively came into politics and people voted her to become the M.P, minister of state of Education and Social Welfare department under Charan Singh Government in 1974.

She spent her whole life by helping poor and distress people. She always stands besides her husband works .She was not only a good daughter and perfect wife but also a good mother and a good daughter-in law. She was too popular among the common people that when her husband people requested her to participate in the politics and her win over the election proved her immense popularity. She was died in 26 October, 1984.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> Muzzamil Ali Laskar, Haque Choudhary : *Prasangik Kichu Katha*, published in Dainik Samayik Prasanga,13feb, 2008.

<sup>87</sup> Information from Sonar Cachar, 26 Oct, 1984.

In Islam, there was the provision of widow remarriage.<sup>88</sup> After the death of one's husband, the widow can remarry only to observe waiting for four months and ten days. The Muslim women did not spend the miserable life like the Hindu widows. But in Surma valley, most of the cases, women did not remarry due to the welfare of their children. For instance, Aftabunnessa Khanom, who was born in Fenjugang, Sylhet. Her father Ayub Ali was a mirashdar. Her mother Rashida was a house wife. She got only Islamic education at her home. She could not go to school as there was no school in their village. She got married with Motahir Ali, when she was only eight years old. Her husband was a police and he taught her some basic education in English and Bengali as she could teach her children. When she was very young, her husband was died in an accident, leaving six children. She brought up her children by needle work and established a small cottage industry at her home with her husband's compensation money.<sup>89</sup>

As the education was the mediator between their private and public spheres, literature was vehicle of their thoughts.<sup>90</sup> Like Bengal, the Muslim women in Surma Valley, began to communicate with each other and produce a good number of literature. They realized that the education was the most important factor for the liberation of women. So they advocated female education in their local area and expressed their views on women emancipation through the literature.

Samina Banu was the first Muslim female poet in the East Bengal and Assam. But very little was known about her.<sup>91</sup> Sahifa Banu was considered the first Muslim female poet whose writings were published. Besides this there were many Muslim female poets who stepped the public sphere through their writings. Sayeeda Habibunnessa Khatun was born in 1907 in Maulavibazar. She was the daughter of Khan Bahadur Sayeed Sikandar Ali.<sup>92</sup> She was born in a family where literary works were appreciated. Her book "*Jibaner sathi*" published in 1933. In her poems, she expressed the picture of a simple women life, sorrows, happiness and also the greatness of Islam.

---

<sup>88</sup> Al- Quran, Nissa, Sura xxxiii, p, 59

<sup>89</sup> Information from Hussain Ahmed, interview dated on 06/11/2012, Sylhet

<sup>90</sup> Sonia Nishat amin, *ibid.* p. 107.

<sup>91</sup> Shamsad Husam, *ibid.* p. 197.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* p.221.

She was died in 1954.<sup>93</sup>Hazi Ariza Khatun was the wife of (Sadak) poet Rakib Shah. Her folk song, “*Binay Kare Katar Sure*” was very popular. She was born on 15<sup>th</sup> Feb, 1912.<sup>94</sup>

Another Muslim female poet was Sitara Begam was born in 1924. Her father late Asraf Hossain was a distinguished personalities and a patron of literature. He himself was a great poet. Her father was a progressive man who encouraged female education. She brought up in a village where education for women was unthinkable. But her father admitted her in a boy’s school. She was the only girl who studied in this school in Rahimpur village, Maulavi Bazar.

Her father encouraged her literarily works. She started to write articles, essays, short stories which help her to establish a separate identity. She was an exceptional woman. She published many articles in Parsi and Nagri. She also published many Islamic books. But due to the excess pressure of the family and for brought up the children she could not continue her writing. Before independence her two book published ‘*Prathom Bhag and Dvitiya Bhag*’ by the Assam Government and included it in the syllabus of the primary schools. She got married in 1944 in Sikandarpur village. In this village there was no school. The boys went outside the village. She established a school at her home in Sikandarpur. She worked very hard for running the school. She taught girls Arabic. She was died in 25<sup>th</sup> January. 1950.<sup>95</sup>

Poet Jeb-un Nessa Ahmed was born in 1926 in Shekhghat. Her father Abdul Latif was a learned person who was a Maulavi. She passed out B.A from Calcutta University and M.A in Bengali literature from Karachi University. She was the director of *zenana* section of monthly literary magazine ‘*Al-Islah*’. She was too much meritorious and also the editor of monthly magazine ‘*Pravati*’. She was also actively participated in the politics. She was died in 1971.<sup>96</sup>

Another prominent Muslim female poet was Begam Jebu Ahmed who was born in 1928 in Sylhet. She was bought up in Maulavibazar. She published children’s monthly magazine ‘*Khelagad*’ in 1955 in Dhaka. She published many books, such as *Jadugarer Kella*, *Swarnadviper Rajkanya*, *Intari Bintiri Tintiri*, *Phuta Phool* , *Garopaharer Antorale*, *Samaraniya Baraniyo Jhara*, *Bijayani*, *Alibaba* , *Insaf* , *Akkel Selami*, *Tahmina* , *Aghat se Je*

---

<sup>93</sup> Lovely Choudhury, art. *Sylhet Bibhager Mohila Kabi O Lekhak*, Al-Islah, Dec, 2000, Kendriya Muslim Sahitya Sangsad, Sylhet, p. 108.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p.109.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.P. 109.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. p. 109.

*parash Tab ,Hajrat Abu Bakar (RH) , Hajrat Omar (RH) , Hajrat Osman (RH), Hajrat Ali (RH), Idd ,Idd-e- Miladunnabi , Muharram ,Maru Nirjar , Akash Pathe ,Imaner pariksha , Abu Hossain ,Iran Desher Galppa , Meg Ranga , Sunar Tiye , Sunar Apel.*

Sayma Choudhury was born in Daroga area on 11<sup>th</sup> March, 1931 in Sylhet. Her parental home was Piyan Village in Habiganj district. Her father was Asraf Uddin Choudhury who was a Maulavi. She was passed out in matriculation from Sakhwat Memorial School and after that she passed out I.A from Eden College. She published three books- *Nir Nirjan, Kopoter Swapna Shanti* and *Rang Damiker Deshe*. Her writings were published in many news papers, magazines. She got “*Nurunnessa Khatun- Bidyabinodini*” literary award in 1977.<sup>97</sup>

Foijiya Samad was born in Shillong in pre- independence India. Her father Safar Ali was a Government employee. She admitted in Shillong School and passed out matriculation from Sylhet Government School. Under her leadership ‘*Mukul Fauj*’ was established in Sylhet. From her childhood, her writings were published regularly. When she was student, she took the responsibility of teaching in Sylhet Government High School, as the Hindu female teachers left Eastern Bengal during the time of independence. Her husband M.A Samad was also a great poet and a patron of literature. She published a monthly little magazine ‘*Minar*’. She was also associated with ‘*zenana mehfil*’ section of ‘*Al-Islah, Chotoder Khelagarh*’.

Salma Choudhury was born on 19<sup>th</sup> May, 1933 in Kazitula village in Sylhet. Her father was a school principal, Habibur Rahman and mother Sayeed Hafijunnessa Khanam was a housewife. She secured Masters in M.A from Dhaka University in 1963. She was the lecturer in Eden Government Girls’ college. She published many books for children such as *Panditer Paglami, Tumar janya Angshidar Ami*.<sup>98</sup>

Fahmida Rashid was born on 17<sup>th</sup> June 1938. Her father Muhammad Ibrahim and mother Sayeeda Hamida Banu. Her husband Aminur Rashid Choudhury was a great social worker and a editor of weekly newspaper ‘*Jugvery*’.<sup>99</sup>

---

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.p. 111.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ed by Shamsad,ibid.p.127



Fahmida Rashid also associated with the newspaper and after her husband's death she became editor and promoted it to a daily newspaper. She was the member of the Sylhet Sahitya Sangsad and also associated with 'Al-Islah' monthly magazine published by Nurul Haq.<sup>100</sup> Sayeeda Mamotaj Begum was born in 1940 in Aushpada, village in Habiganj. She was the daughter of Sayeed Tajmul Islam. She published a song book, "Kalame Momotaj" in 1992 which composed of 114 gajal and prayers.<sup>101</sup>

Chemon Ara was born on 1<sup>st</sup> July, 1935. She was a social worker and a novelist also. She spent her childhood in Maulavi Badi, Chandgaon, in Chattagram. She was a lecturer. When she was read in class X, she was married with a poet Shahed Ali in 1950. After her marriage she passed her matriculation from the Kamrunnessa Girls' school in 1951 and passed out I.A from Dhaka Eden College in 1953. After that, she also passed out B.A. with Bengali major and M.A in Bengali from the Dhaka University. She was the active member of the cultural institution 'Pakistan Tamaddun majlis' which was established after independence 1947. When she was studying in university she also the president of "Chatri Parishad" established by Political Science professor Dr. Mahfujul Haq. She also participated in the 1952 language Movement, and that time she was 2nd year student of Bakshibazar Eden College.

Chemon Ara joined as a headmaster in Nabiganj Girls' High School after completing her graduation. Since 1952 she served various colleges as a professor such as Dhaka College, Chattagram Government College, Titumir College, Eden College in Bengali department almost 32 years. She was also served as a principal Chattagram Government Girls' College for 5 years. She also established an organization named 'Sabuj Sena' for the physical and mental development for children. She was also the care taker of Eden Girls' Hostel for ten years.

Her first short story "Ora Jage" was published in 1948 in weekly newspaper "Sainik". Her another writings "Sukh Dukher Melay" was published in 1987 in monthly magazine 'Agnapathik'. Her another writings "Jiban Tarang" was published in literary magazine "Dainik Inkilab" in 1993. She also associated with Dhaka, Chattagram Radio and T.V station and

---

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. p. 111.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. p. 112.

participated in various programmes. Her books were published such as “*Swagat Bhavna*”, “*Ananya Jiban Sadak*”, “*A.S.M. Muffakhar*”, “*Ridoy Namer Sarobar*”. She was also the writers of three novels.<sup>102</sup>

Chaya Ahmed was born on 5<sup>th</sup> May, 1940. Her father was Dr. Gulam Jilani Choudhury and mother was Lutfunnessa. Her husband Nasiruddin was a manger of Tea Estate. Her paternal home was in Nawabganj. She was a singer, composer and a social worker. From 1972 she was associated with Sylhet Radio Station, Bangladesh. She also directed many radio station programme such as “*Kishalaya*”. She was also a renowned poet. She was also the president of Sylhet Sangsad and Sylhet Lekhika Sangha. She was also associated with almost twelve different organizations.<sup>103</sup>

Thus the first half of the twentieth century witnessed a gradual process of social change in women lives. But the ulemas and theologians disfavoured these new changes of the society. Resistance also from a powerful section of traditional men who feared change resulting in a loss of social control. They argued that education was inherently de-feminizing or Westernizing. It would foster in women a distaste for domestic duties, a love of luxury, selfishness and disrespect for traditional culture. It would also give them greater facility to engage in unfaithful liaisons because of their ability to write letters, a husband’s control over his educated wife would be less secure and she would certainly want to live away from the joint family.<sup>104</sup> Opposition also came from the older generation of women who were not educated themselves and feared the intrusion of unfamiliar and unconventional elements as a threat to their control over domestic affairs and as an invasion of Western culture into the sanctity of the home.<sup>105</sup> They thought that women economic participation was value less. It was the duty of the males to earn for their family. Moreover the Ulemas and Jurists instructed that women should confine within the four walls. They interpreted that women were nothing more than an instrument of perpetuating one’s progeny. It was their responsibility to raise children and provide for the much sought after pleasure of their husbands. This was not the interpretation of the Quran. Yet, the

---

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.p. 121.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p. 121

<sup>104</sup> Bharati Ray, ibid.p.36.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.p, 3.

pronouncements of the Quran were misunderstood.<sup>106</sup> There was the traditional seclusion that keep the majority of indoors and prevented them from taking any part in political activities. Purdah was a real drag on women' social progress.<sup>107</sup> The Quran never intended to place undue restrictions on the movements of women nor did it require women to completely hide their faces while moving out of their houses. But the leading jurists required women not to move out of their houses except in an emergency and that too with their faces hidden.<sup>108</sup> The Ulema preached that women should observe *purdah* even before a blind person. Though conservative reactions were there but liberal views got much popular among the educated people. Modern education produced some outstanding women like Shamsi Khanom Choudhury, Najnin Begom, Khairun Nessa Choudhury. These modern women were not the same, as they were in the past. They were no longer prepared to accept their subordinate role. They were being radicalized and demand a status equal to that of men.<sup>109</sup> To them, the politics of gender demanded greater attention than the politics of colonialism. Access to formal education gave them the opportunity of participating in the public world and fought for their other sisters. They also published many books, journals and organized many women organizations through which they communicate with each other. Thus in terms of education and culture and of dress reform that made it possible for women to go out, these women set an example of progress to other women of Bengal. The rapid economic and social changes transformed the lifestyle of Muslim elite which created conditions favourable to the emergence of an articulate women's movement for the future generation.

---

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. p.2 .

<sup>107</sup> Asgarh Ali Engineer, *ibid.* p.2.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.p. 12.

<sup>109</sup> Asghar Ali Engineer, *Problems of Muslim Women in India*, Orient Longman, Mombai, 1995, p. 2.