

## ***CHAPTER-6***

# **Muslim Women in Public Sphere**

During the later half of the nineteenth century, with the efforts of the social reformers, colonial government and Christian missionaries women would participate in the public sphere. Public sphere refers to a common and publicly accessible space which serves the purpose of framing public opinion.<sup>1</sup> In pre- colonial India, women participation in public sphere was unthinkable and public sphere was dominated by the men. They were invisible in the royal court, markets and other busiest places.<sup>2</sup> There were some women who participated in the public sphere in ancient and medieval period, such as Gargi, Maitriyee, Sultana Rajia, Nurjahan, Jahanara but there numbers were very small and they all belonged from the royal strata. But most of the women spent their lives within the four walls of home and women's participation in the public sphere were very rare.

In India, there were sharp demarcations between the private and public sphere. Traditionally in Indian society, the women spent their whole life in domestic works, child rearing, pleasant their husbands etc. The women were closely confined within the home. Both the Hindu and Muslim women strictly maintained *purdah*. They could not go outside without the genuine need. Female education was uncommon and they could not go to school and colleges. There were traditional belief prevailed in the society that men continued to deny women's participation in political affairs and decision making activities. According to this tradition, the women should be subordinate to men in all their activities. But the colonial rule introduced new land reform system, social legislation, introduction of female education which moved women towards the public sphere.<sup>3</sup>Surma Valley gradually was awakened by the ideas of emancipation of women and hence it was only much later than other parts of Bengal that Muslim women from the region moved in to the public space. Some prominent women like Subarnaprava Dass, Kalyani Dass and Anjali Dass, Hemantakumari Devi took their first step towards public sphere.

Lila Nag was the first woman who actively participated in the Indian National Movement and also women awakening movement in Sylhet. She fought for women equality, women's

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<sup>1</sup> Niamh Reilly & Stacy Seriver (ed.), Religion, Gender and Public Sphere, Routledge, Third Avenue, New York, 2014, p.150.

<sup>2</sup> Mrinalini Sinha, *Britishness, Clubbability, and the Colonial Public Sphere: The Genealogy of an Imperial Institution in Colonial India*, vol 40, No 4, Journal of British Studies, Cambridge University Press, October, 2001, p.521.

<sup>3</sup> Hancock Mary, *Home Science and Nationalization of Domesticity in Colonial India*, Modern Asian Studies, Vol 35, No.4, Cambridge University Press, October, 2001, p. 22.

right to education and economic independence.<sup>4</sup> She was born in 2 October, 1900 in Panchgao village, Maulavibazar. Her father, Girish Chandra Nag actively participated in the Swadeshi movement. Her mother, Kunjalata Nag, and other female members of the family also boycotted the foreign goods, celebrated ‘*arandhan*’ during the Swadeshi movement. In 1923, Lila Nag established Dipali Sangha for spreading female education and female economic independence with her twelve friends at her home Bakshibazar.<sup>5</sup> She was associated with various women organization. Lila Nag joined in the ‘*Bangiya Nari Samaj*’ for the upliftment of the women status and position. During this time, Kumudini Dass, Kamini Roy, Jyotirmoyee Ganguli, were joined in the movement for the women’s right to vote. She also joined in this movement. She became the secretary of the ‘*Nikhil Banga Votadikar Committie*’<sup>6</sup>. After giving final examination, Lila Nag visited many remote places of Sylhet, Calcutta, and Assam to awake the people from the social evils and inspired them to participate in the freedom movement including women.<sup>7</sup> Lila Nag was a leader of the *Biplabi Samitis* or the revolutionary movements spreading out that time in Surma valley and many women also followed her. But most of them helped the revolutionaries who had gone underground by providing food and shelter. To Lila, the central issue of concern was anti-colonialism. Like Sarala Devi Choudhurani, daughter of the famous Tagore family, Lila Nag was also aware of international politics and placed the whole question of colonialism in India against a larger canvas.<sup>8</sup> Hena Dutta, Suhasini Dass, Saralbala Dev also participated in the freedom movement and found many women organizations for the upliftment of the women status. Education acted as the mediator between the private sphere and the public sphere.<sup>9</sup> It was only after 1940’s Muslim women participated in the process of modernization as the Bramho and Hindu women had done several decades before.<sup>10</sup> The education opened the first door of the participation in the public sphere. Though not in a large scale, but a small portion of the educated women participated in the process of modernization of the society.

This chapter has discussed on the few Muslim women’s participation on the Public sphere from the private sphere, who were born in a colonial period, directly or indirectly participated

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<sup>4</sup>Dipankar Mohanta, *Lila Roy O Banglar Nari Jagiron*, Sahitya Prakash, Dhaka, 1999, p.9., Shamsad Husam & Masum Rahman Akash,(ed.) *Kaler Canvase Jara*, Sekerer Sandane, Sylhet,2002,p.180.

<sup>5</sup> Dipankar Mohanta, *ibid*.p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*,p.22.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*,p.20.

<sup>8</sup> Bharati Ray, *Early Feminist of Colonial India: Sarala Devi Choudhurani and Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, p.13.

<sup>9</sup> Sonia Nishat Amin, art, *The Early Muslim Bhadramahila: The Growth of Learning and Creativity, 1876 to 1939*, From the Seams of History,(ed) Bharati Roy, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997,p.107.

<sup>10</sup> Sonia Nishat Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, Leiden, New York, 2006,p.168.

in the Indian National Movement and also participated in the Language Movement, 1952 and the Liberation war of Bangladesh, 1972.

In Surma Valley an organized political activity started during the time of Swadeshi and Boycott movement. The Swadeshi movement achieved an all India character and like other part of India it was spread every nook and corner of this region. In the last part of the nineteenth century, the social reformers like Kamini Kumar Chanda, Dinnath Dutta, Bipin Chandra Paul, Govinda Soum<sup>11</sup> who were associated with the Indian National Congress from its second session held in Calcutta in 1886<sup>12</sup> encouraged women to join in the political movement. Leaders like Bipin Chandra Pal, Kamini Kumar Chanda, Sundari Mohan Das, Satish Chandra Dev popularized the movement. They visited villages and popularized the Swadeshi cult. The people took pride in using national costume and consuming local products. They encouraged them to use Swadeshi goods. Bipin Chandra Pal encouraged women to participate in the movement and popularized to use the indigenous goods. Thus during the time of Swadeshi movement women also took part in the movement indirectly by using Swadeshi goods and boycott foreign goods. In Surma valley, almost every day protest meetings were organized and the students made large-scale bonfires of British goods during the Swadeshi Movement. Every family members boycotted the foreign goods and used 'khaddar' cloths and other indigenous products. The movement was highly successful and the repressive measures of the government could not in any way suppress the agitation under the leadership of Bipin Chandra Pal, Kamini Kumar Chanda, Dr. Sundari Mohan Das, Shrish Chandra Dutta, Satish Chandra Deb, Dulal Chandra Deb, Shyama Charan Deb. Under their leadership, Surma Valley responded equally with any other part of Bengal to the partition issue. Sylhet and Cachar were joint partners to the Surma Valley Political Conference. In July 1906, the first session of the Surma Valley Political Conference was held at Telihowr under the president ship of Kamini kumar Chanda.<sup>13</sup> The initiative for the formation of the Surma Valley Association was taken by Srihatta Swadeshi Sebak Samiti for promoting swadeshi and swaraj. The conference resolved to form the Surma valley Association as a common forum to promote swadeshi and to press for the withdrawal of the partition of Bengal. The Hindu educated women took different steps to enter the public world. The

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<sup>11</sup> Kamal Uddin Ahmed, *Bangiya Chaturdash Satake Surma-Barak*, Barak Upatyaka Bangha Sahitya O Sanskriti Sammelon, Silchar, 1998, p.10.

<sup>12</sup> J. B. Bhattacharjee, *Cachar under British Rule in North-East India*, New Delhi, 1977, p. 251.

<sup>13</sup> Archana Chakraborty, "Surma Valley Political Conferences (1906-1932)" in N.Ray (ed.), *Public Associations in India*, Sadhana Press, Calcutta, 1977, p.147., J. B. Bhattacharjee, *Cachar under British rule in North-East India*, p.251.



political consciousness grew up among women in 1905 during the Swadeshi Movement. But they could not participate directly. They allowed the political meetings behind the screen and observed purdah strictly.<sup>14</sup> They feed the Congress leaders, freedom fighters, took care and donated their money, property and jewellery for their motherland.<sup>15</sup> The name of Shivsundari Devi and Saudamini Devi deserved special mention. They shouldered the responsibility of collecting funds for the successful running of the movement along with their men folk.<sup>16</sup>

One of the major weaknesses of the swadeshi movement was that Muslim community in general did not directly participate in it. The Hindu nationalism infused the movement with Hindu religious colour and thus restricted Muslim's participation in the cause. Rabindranath Tagore in a song written during this period portrayed Bengal as Goddess *Durga* who had appeared from within the heart of the land. Abinindranath Tagore represented India as *Bharatmata* (Mother Goddess India) in one of his contemporary paintings.<sup>17</sup> The invocation of the Mother goddess, the *Shakti* (primal power), was an appeal to an extremely powerful, pre-Aryan concept in Bengal and the appeal was, in the ultimate analysis, to time-honoured woman-power. The fostering of the identification of the motherland with the goddess of *Kali* and *Durga* and the cult of Protapaditya as a Bengali national hero may have facilitated the emergence of Hindu woman as a political leader at this time. For this Hindu religious flavor in the Swadeshi Movement a large section of the Muslims opposed the Swadeshi Movement for the interest of their community. Naturally the Muslim women had hardly any role in this movement.<sup>18</sup> Besides this, in 1921, Mahatama Gandhi started mass movement, he also mobilized women. Addressing public meetings in different parts of the country, he appealed to women to donate their jewellery for the national cause. Gandhi urged them to take the Swadeshi vow to give up foreign goods and spin everyday. Hand spinning and boycott of foreign goods inspired the women to come out and join the movement. As a result many women came to street and joined in the processions, picketing, boycott the foreign goods<sup>19</sup>. Besides this, during this time, women also established many handicraft industries at their home. In Non-Co-Operation Movement they also stopped the use of British goods and popularize the '*Charaka*' and '*Khadi*'. During this time, revolutionary movement also

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<sup>14</sup> Anurupa Biswas, *Barak Uptyakar Nari jagaron*, Calcutta, 1998, p.17.

<sup>15</sup> Anowar Hossain, *Muslim Women's Struggle for freedom in Colonial India*, Progressive Publishers, p.232.

<sup>16</sup> Manjulika Bhattacharjee, "*Participation of woman of Barak Valley in Freedom Movement*", an unpublished paper presented in a seminar, organized by Deptt of History, Rabindra Sadan Girls' College, Karimganj, 1988.

<sup>17</sup> Uma Shankar Jha & Premlata Pujari, *Indian Woman Today, Vol.1*, Kanishka Publishers and Distributors, 1996, New Delhi, p.109.

<sup>18</sup> Anowar Hossain, *ibid.* p.216.

<sup>19</sup> Bipan Chandra, *India's Struggle for independence*, Penguin books Ltd., 1989, p. 271.

progressed and many young men and women joined to expel the British from the country. Among them Bela Benerjee, Bijaya Nandi Roy, Bina Dutta Majumdar and Renu Dutta Majumdar were most prominent.<sup>20</sup>

Though Hindu women took active part in the politics but the Muslim women kept themselves aloof from the movement spreading out that time. They did not actively participate in the processions, meetings etc. The Muslim women observed *purdah* strictly and thought that it was unfair to participate in the public sphere. Unlike the Hindu women, they used *Burqa*, however the Muslim women motivated their husband, son or brother to participate in the freedom movement and given shelters to the freedom fighters in times of need. In Cachar, Malati Shyam, Saudamini Devi, Nandarani Devi, Kunda Rani, Hiran Kumari Devi, Jotsna Chanda, Matagini Devi were actively joined for the upliftment of the women status and also joined in the movement. ‘*Nari Kalyan Samiti*’ was established in 1938 and Malati Shyam was the secretary of this samiti. She went from door to door to organize the women. As a result many women broke the obstruction and came forward for active participation in social welfare and politics. Besides the Bengali Hindus, many Nepali, Manipuri, Hindusthani and Muslim women were also associated with this organization. Khatimunnessa, Nurunnessa Khatun and Monika Khatun were associated with this organization.<sup>21</sup> In Civil-Dis-Obedience Movement, Jubeda Rahim Choudhury was the first Muslim women who actively participated in the Indian national freedom movement. She was born in 1901 in Jorhat district, Assam. Her father, Sarafat Ali Choudhury, was a police officer. In his early life, he was very loyal to the colonial rule and the British government awarded him “*Khan Bahadur*”.<sup>22</sup> But Gandhiji’s messages touched his hearts and became one of the ardent followers of Gandhi.

Her mother Nurjahan Begum was an intelligent and an educated woman. She knew many languages such as Arabic, Urdu, Parsee and Bengali. In 1905, Jubeda was admitted in Dibrugarh lower primary school when she was only 4 years.<sup>23</sup> The school was run by the Bramho Samaj. During this time, Bengal was partitioned. On that time Sarafat Ali was

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<sup>20</sup> Hena Dass , art. *Sylheter Nari Samaj O Nari Andoloner Bikash*, Brihatar Sylheter Itihas, vol.1, ed by Md. Abdul Ajjij, Md Habibur Rahman, Md. Abul Jashar, Shubendu Imam, Abul Fateh Fathah, Brihatar Sylheter Itihas Pranayan Parishad, Sylhet, 1997,p.171.

<sup>21</sup> Krishna Choudhury , *Sangbad Patra O Nari Samaj*, Dibakar, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Tajul Mohammad, *Sangrami Narir Jibanalekhyas: Jubeda Khatun Choudhury*, Sahitya Prakash, Dhaka,2008. p.11.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p.11.

transferred to Dacca. In Dacca, Jubeda Rahim was admitted in to Eden Girls' High School. She was the first girl student of this school.<sup>24</sup>

Jubeda Rahim Choudhury was married to Dewan Abdur Rahim Choudhury in 1919 at the age of 18.<sup>25</sup> His father, Ahmad Choudhury was a zamindar of Paniumda Village, Habiganj districts.<sup>26</sup> He got LL.B degree and became a successful advocate. He also got promoted as a Public Prosecutor. Abdur Rahim Choudhury was also associated with politics. He was elected twice as the Member of Legislative Council of Assam Pradesh without any contest. Jubeda also devoted herself, along with her husband, to the cause of nationalism, working for the Indian National Congress. Dewan Abdur Rahim Choudhury encouraged her to join in the politics.<sup>27</sup> She completed her education after her marriage. In 1921, during the time of non-co-operation and Khilafat movement, many Hindu women actively participated. But the Muslim women attended the meetings behind the screen with the veil.<sup>28</sup> She made her first political appearance during the Congress meeting held in Sylhet where she gave up her *burqah*.

In 1928, Jubeda Rahim Choudhury joined in the Indian National Congress. She encouraged other Muslim women to join in the politics. In 1930, Srihatta Mahila Sangha was established and she became the president of the Sangha.<sup>29</sup> In the Non- Co-Operation Movement, Jubeda Rahim Choudhury along with Kaishoremanjori Shyam, Shashiprava Dev, Labanyaprova Dutta, Nareshnandini Dutta, Charushila Dev, Hira Prava Choudhury, Snehalata Dev and kusum kumari Dass, Suhasini Dass, Ashalata Sen were picketing the wine and liquor shop, and boycotted the British goods. Many times women were imprisoned.<sup>30</sup> This Sangha tried to awake patriotism among women and hatred against the colonial rule and organized women under a big platform. She gave the leadership of Civil Dis- Obedience Movement, breaking the salt law; boycott the foreign goods, picketing the foreign liquor and wine shop.<sup>31</sup>

In 1928, during the Calcutta Congress Session, Netaji Subash Chandra Basu proposed to celebrate 'Purna Swaraj' or complete independence.<sup>32</sup> In 1929, the Congress Working

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with poet Dilwar , referred to above information in Sylhet, dated 08.10.12.

<sup>25</sup> Tajul Mohammad, *ibid*, p.17.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*. p.17.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*. p.17.

<sup>28</sup> T.H.M Jahangir, *Ratnagarva Sylhet, vol 1*, Jalalabad Communication, Dhaka, 2005 p.18.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*. p.23.

<sup>30</sup> Tajul Mohammad, *ibid*. p.23.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*.p.26.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*. p.27.

Committee in its Lahore session demanded for “*Purna Swaraj*”, they celebrated 26<sup>th</sup> January as Independence Day. The people of all section supported this decision and celebrated ‘Independence Day’ successfully. In 1931, 26<sup>th</sup> January a large number of women floured the flag and supported the Independence Day.<sup>33</sup>

After that, every year the Congress Working committee celebrated the Independence Day successfully. Jubeda Rahim Choudhury organized women and children to participate in the freedom movement. In 12<sup>th</sup> March 1930, Gandhi started his famous Dandi March, along with seventy – eight members of the Sabarmati Ashram and broke up the ‘Salt Law’ by collecting salt from the beach.<sup>34</sup> The defiance of salt laws started all over the country. People walked all the way from Sylhet to Noakhali on the Bengal coast to make salt.<sup>35</sup> In 6<sup>th</sup> May, under the leadership of Direndra Dassgupta, a band of 17 to 18 followers started their journey to Noakhali to break up the salt laws. On that morning, a procession was arranged by the Satyagrahis. Thousands of people joined in this procession along with a good number of women. A famous satyagrahi Nirad Gupta said “The most remarkable thing of this procession was that the secluded women came out from the four walls and broke up the age old customs of *purdah* and entered into the public life in Sylhet.”<sup>36</sup> When Gandhi toured in Sylhet, women also gladly welcome and attended his meetings. During the Civil- Dis- Obedience Movement a large number of women became the member of the Indian National Congress.<sup>37</sup>

In Sylhet, the Surma Valley Women Conference was held in 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1931.<sup>38</sup> In this conference, it was decided that the main aim of the Srihatta Mahila Sangha was to picketing and boycott the foreign goods. The members of the *sangha* popularize the idea of using the swadeshi goods and non co-operating with the British .They organized meetings, processions several times in every nook and corner of the Sylhet. Many women of the conservative Muslim families also joined in these processions and meetings who never move outside home due to the inspiration of Jubeda Rahim Choudhury.

Jubeda began to use ‘*Charaka*’ and produced indigenous cloth at her home. She gave up the use of foreign cloths and used *Khaddar* and inspired all the women to use *Khaddar* cloth and

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.p.100.

<sup>34</sup> Bipan Chandra, *ibid*.p.271.

<sup>35</sup> Hena Dass, *ibid*.p.171.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*.p.171.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*.p.173.

<sup>38</sup> Nibedita Dass Purkaystha, *Mukti Manche Nari*, Prip Trust, Dhaka 1997 p.97.

produced pillow covers, bed sheets, shirts, frocks and other household products at home.<sup>39</sup> With the initiative of Jubeda Rahim and Sarala Deb and other women leaders, 28 branches of Mahila Sanga established in Sylhet. In 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 1930 when Brajendra Narayan Choudhury was arrested, the women protested and joined in the meetings and violated the 144 law.<sup>40</sup> In 1930, another leader Ashalata Sen came in Sylhet from Dhaka to grow up political consciousness among women. Ashalata Sen, Sarala Deb and Jubeda Rahim toured every village and every districts to mobilize the women and organized to participate in the Civil-Dis-Obedience Movement.<sup>41</sup> In 9<sup>th</sup> January, 1931 Sunitibala Dass, secretary of Mahila Sanga broke up the government laws and deliberated her speech in a meeting The police arrested her. She was the first women in Bengal who was arrested by the British police for the participation of the freedom movement. After two days, when Girjabala Dass deliberated her speech in Biyanibazar, the British police arrested her and after that a large number of women were arrested.

Along with the women, students and youth played the most prominent part in the boycott of foreign cloth and liquor. The movement also popularized variety forms of mobilization. *Prabhat pheris*, in which bands of men, women and children went around at dawn singing nationalist songs, became the rule in villages and towns.<sup>42</sup> *Patrikas*, or illegal news-sheets, some times written by hand and sometimes cyclostyled, were part of the strategy to defy the hated Press Act, and they flooded the country. Magic lanterns were used to take the nationalist message to the villages. And, as before, incessant tours by individual leaders and workers, and by groups of men and women, and the holding of public meetings, big and small, remained the staple of the movement. Children were organized into the *vanar senas* or monkey armies and at least at one place the girls decided they wanted their own separate *manjari sena* or cat army.<sup>43</sup> In Cachar, the Civil Disobedience Campaign was carried on by Congress and Jamiat leaders and workers. The Cachar District Congress President Shyam Charan Dev with other Congress leaders Sunil Mohan Endew, Salindra Mohan Dev, Hurmat Ali Badlaskar undertook a number of meetings and picketing at shops selling foreign goods in different parts of Cachar.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p.99.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p.174.

<sup>41</sup> Nibedita Dass Purkaystha, *ibid.*p.99.

<sup>42</sup> Bipan Chandra, *ibid.*p.271.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p.272.



A number of persons were arrested for participating in unauthorized meeting, processions etc. The agitation was mostly observed in defiance of repressive laws and ordinances, boycott of British goods and use of indigenous materials. Many swadeshi goods like caps, umbrellas etc were found in the house of Congress agitators. At Silchar a liquor shops was burnt and destroyed. A number of people were arrested in violation of law and order in the Cachar district. In Hailakandi, Abdul Matlib Mazumdar with other Congress men like Bidyapati Sinha, Harendra Kumar Chakrabarti and others carried the movement.<sup>44</sup>

Efforts were made to strengthen Congress in the village level and enlarge the number of Congress volunteer groups. Consequently a number of meetings were held in different parts of Hailakandi. 'All India Kisan Day' was observed in Sylhet, Badarpur, Karimganj, Habiganj, Silchar, Sunamganj etc. Several meetings took place in rural areas in this connection. Hindu women actively participated in these agitations. Malati Shyam, Saudamini Devi, Nandarani Devi, Kunda Rani, Hiran Kumari Devi, Jotsna Chanda, Matagini Devi, Amita Kumari, Anurupa Biswas were actively joined for the upliftment of the women status and also joined in the movement.<sup>45</sup> Though many women in Sylhet participated in the freedom movement with the encouragement of Jubeda but the Muslim women in Cachar kept themselves aloof from the movement due to the conservative attitude of the Muslim society. But they indirectly participated in the national movement by boycotting foreign goods as called by the national leaders. They used the indigenous products and also motivated their either husband, son or brother or any other male member of the family to participate in the freedom movement and given shelters to the freedom fighters in times of need. Ajibunnessa and Kulchuma Bibi boycotted British goods and weaving the *Khadi* cloths and used *swadeshi* goods. They motivated the women of their villages by singing '*Jangiar geet*' encouraged other women to use the *swadeshi* goods and boycott the foreign goods. Kulchuma Bibi very tactfully saved her family and educated her children when her husband imprisoned by the British police. She gave shelter many revolutionaries at her home.<sup>46</sup>

In 1935, due to the influence of Marx and Lenin, some young energetic men formed the communist party in Sylhet. Peasants, labours, students and women also participated in this party. They determined to organize a movement against all the oppression, inequality between the capitalist and workers and improvement of the women status. But the communist

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<sup>44</sup> J.B.Bhattacharjee, *Cachar Under British Rule in North-East India*, Delhi, 1977, p.281.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.p.281.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Kulchuma Bibi referred to above information in Kaliganj,dated 02.09.09.

party was banned till 1942. Sashiprava Dev was the first women who joined in the communist party. She was also associated with the Trade Union Movement and visited tea-gardens to organize women tea- garden labourers. She also participated in the peasant and workers movement. She visited door to door to distribute the leaflet of the communist party, with a hand bag in the name of selling the women jewellerys.<sup>47</sup>

In 1930, when All India Student Federation was formed, the communist leaders founded 'Nikhil India Student Federation'. Many girls students also joined in this organization, worked along with male members. Most of them were the students of the high schools. Among them, Bela Sen, Bela Bannerjee, Bina dutta Majumdar, Milan Shashi Majumdar, Hena Dutta, Maya Gupta, Shanta Sen, Kalyani Dutta, Kanok Purkasthya, Mukthi Bhattacharjee, Aparna Paul were most prominent. They all are higher educated. After few days, Girls Student Association was formed all most all parts of the Surma Valley under the leadership of Hena Dutta and Anjali Dass.<sup>48</sup> The Girls student Association fought for the upliftment of the women status, to remove the inequality and social evils against the dowry system, child-marriage, polygamy etc.<sup>49</sup>

In 1932, the spirit of Civil Dis-obedience became slow and in 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1933 Mahatma Gandhi suspended the civil- Disobedience movement.<sup>50</sup> During the Quit India Movement, 1942, many women became as a *satyagrahi* and a large number of women participated in the Quit India Movement. In Sylhet a *Styagrahi* Council was formed for the beginning of the movement and Saralabala Dev was selected as a director of this council. They started to boycott the courts. In 31<sup>st</sup> August, the women began picketing the court under the leadership of Saralabala Dev. Among them, Snehalata Dev, a volunteer forcefully captured the judge's sit. The police tried to expel her from the court, but could not. To discontinue the movement, the police open fired through their rifles but the public attacked the police. They also attacked the post-office, telegraph, railway station etc. The movement continued till the evening. In the next morning, Snehalata was arrested and imprisoned for one year. Saralabala Dev was arrested after few days and she was also imprisoned for one year. From 1942- 43, all the renowned leaders and workers of the Indian national Congress were arrested including a good number of women. In

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<sup>47</sup> Dipankar Mohanta, *ibid.* p.99.

<sup>48</sup> T. H.M Jahangir(ed), *Ratnagarva Sylhet*, Sylhet Ratna Foundation, Dhaka, 2008, p.32.

<sup>49</sup> Hena Dass, *ibid.* p.175.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* p.175.

1943, Nareshnondini Dutta and Charushila Dev were also arrested. All the leaders including women were imprisoned till 1945.

During the Second World War, when German Fascist came towards the North-East India, another women organization named '*Mohila Atmaraksha Samiti*' was formed in 1943. Jubeda also joined in the Mahila Atmarakshma Samiti. Anjali Dass, Hena Dutta, Maya Gupta, Moni Dutta, Sadhana Dasgupta, Dr. Kalyani Dass, Shasiprova Dev, Shanta Sen, Sushma Purkayastha, Bilangomayee kar, Matgini dass were the most active members of the Samiti<sup>51</sup> The members of the *samiti* visited door to door to popularize the movement against the colonial rule. They also encouraged women to join the *Samiti* and collected members for the *Samiti*.<sup>52</sup> The *Samiti* trained women how to defense themselves during the war, volunteer, nursing, to organize adult women education centre, economic independence of women, establishment of cottage and handicraft industries, establishment of women co-operative centre, organize relief funds during famine or any natural calamities, distribute foods and medicine, distribute milk for the poor children. Jubeda believed that improvement in the health and physique of the youth was an essential step for the success of the freedom movement.

In Kuarpar, during the time of famine, Jubeda Rahim Choudhury founded a relief camp to distribute food, medicine and milk to the poor and helpless people. Jubeda encouraged Muslim girls to join in this Samiti. Jubeda did another great thing. She stood beside the helpless women. The Muslim women lived in a miserable life due to the easy procedure of '*talaq*' and domestic violence. The women often left their home due to this domestic violence. During that time, there was a very little social consciousness to protect this helpless women. Illiterate women could not go to the court against the members of their in-laws family. But the Atmaraksha samiti helped these women. Jubeda Rahim Choudhury, personally meet with these women and made them conscious about their rights and gave them shelter that left their home. In many cases, the leaders of the Samiti tried to resolve the problems and sent them to their home.<sup>53</sup> Jubeda also participated in the Bhanubil Peasant movement. The peasant raised their voices in Bhanubil village, Maulavibazar against the oppression of the zamindar. Women were also participated in the movement. The Manipuri peasants seek help the leaders of the Indian National Congress. The members of the Srihatta

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid,p.176.

<sup>52</sup> T.H.M Jahangir(ed), *ibid*,p.33.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*,p.175.



Mohila Sangha also supported them and they organized the Manipur women. Lilabati Sharma took the leadership of this movement.

In 23 March, 1940 a famous resolution drafted by Sikandar Hayat Khan, moved( after considerable modifications) by Fazlul Haque<sup>54</sup> and supported by Khaliqezaman, Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, Abdul Matin Choudhury, Khaja Najim Uddin, Liyakat Ali Khan, president Md. Ali Jinnah<sup>55</sup> demanded for the formation of one or two independent Muslim states.<sup>56</sup> In this resolution, neither Pakistan nor partition were explicitly mentioned, but it was the press and media misinterpreted it as ‘Pakistan resolution’.<sup>57</sup> Many Muslim joined in the Muslim League. In 1943, Jubeda Rahim Choudhury founded ‘*Muslim Mahila Samiti*’ with twelve members.<sup>58</sup> Sayyaid Sahera Banu Choudhury and Sayyaid Lutfunnessa Choudhury became the first vice-president and general secretary of the *samiti* respectively.<sup>59</sup> Through this *samiti*, the Muslim women began raise their voices against the gender equality and other oppression. Sirajunnessa Choudhury, Begum Abdul Matin Choudhury, Begum Munim Choudhury, Samsi Khanom Choudhury, Jerina Rashid Choudhury, Jahirunnessa Choudhury, also worked for the upliftment of the women and grew consciousness among them about their rights.<sup>60</sup> In 1947, Jubeda Rahim Choudhury founded ‘*Mahila Muslim League*’ and became its president.

Anurupa Biswas, Aparna Paul Choudhury, Lili Dutta were joined in the Quit Movement and became the member of “Student Federation” and “*Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti*” of Silchar wing .Besides these elite class women, the peasant and worker class women also participated in the anti colonial rule. They also actively participated in the freedom movement.<sup>61</sup> In the Quit India Movement, Jyotsna Chanda among others took part.<sup>62</sup>

The declaration of the Mountbatten Plan and proposed partition of Sylhet created a great stir in the Surma Valley. The people of Sylhet and Cachar were bound by a common language, culture and way of life and since the separation from Bengal in 1874; the Surma Valley was

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<sup>54</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, Macmillan, Madras, 1983 p.379, Abul Mal Abdul Muhit, art, *Sylhete Pakistan Andolon, Brihattar Sileter Itihas*, (ed) Md Abdul Aziz, Md Habibur Rahman, Md, Abul Bashar, Shubhendu Imam & Abul Fateh Fattah, Brihattar Sylhet Itihas Prayan Prishad, 2006, Sylhet, p. 54.

<sup>55</sup> Abul Mal Abdul Muhit, *ibid*, p.54.

<sup>56</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *ibid*. p.379, Abul Mal Abdul Muhit, *ibid*, p.54.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p.379.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p.100.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, p.100.

<sup>60</sup> Hena Dass, *ibid*, p.190.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, p.190.

<sup>62</sup> Bhattacharjee *ibid*, p.251-58.

but a ‘little Bengal’ in Assam. No wonder, the people in the Valley received the cruelest shock by the declaration of the Government. Satindra Mohan Dev, M.L.A and Chairman of the Silchar Municipality, immediately convened a meeting of the political leaders of Surma Valley at Silchar. Held on 8 June 1947, the meeting was presided over by Basanta Kumar Dass, The Home Minister of Assam.<sup>63</sup> Bhrojendra Narayan Choudhury, Rabindranath Aditya, Baidyanath Mukherjee, Abdul Matlib Mazumdar, Lalit Mohan Kar, Kamini Kumar Sen, Harendra Narayan Choudhury, Mazzumal Ali, Labanya Kumar Choudhury, Girindra Nandan Choudhury, Gopesh Chandra Pal in their in their fiery speeches demanded the retention of Sylhet in India. The leaders then organized public meetings in various parts of Sylhet and urged upon the electorate to vote against the partition. But all went in vain, the cruel irony of history being predestined. The partition of Bengal and Punjab was affected by two commissions appointed by the Government under the chairmanship of Justice Redcliffe. Sylhet, with the exception of four *thanas* of Karimganj, Rathabari, Patharkandi and Badarpur was put to referendum. Altogether 2, 39,619 votes were polled in favour of the partition and 1, 84,041 against. The Karimganj Subdivision, consisting of the Karimganj, Rathabari, Patharkandi and Badarpur, was transferred to Cachar which was continued to be a part of Assam. After independence, Cachar had four sub-divisions, namely Silchar, Hailakandi, Haflong and Karimganj. The Haflong Subdivision was subsequently separated from Cachar and eventually constituted in to the present district of North Cachar Hills.<sup>64</sup>

After the partition of India and Pakistan, Jubeda joined in the ‘Women National Guard’. She was also elected as the president of the ‘All Pakistan Women Association’. In 1948, Jubeda Rahim Choudhury, and others opposed the Government of Pakistan for its discriminatory policy over the language issue. They met with Abdur Rab Nishtar, the communication Minister of Pakistan, and made a strong plea to make Bangla as the state language.<sup>65</sup> Jubeda Rahim Choudhury, the president of Sylhet District Muslim League, vice-president Sahera Banu, secretary Syeda Lutfun Nessa Khatun, Syeda Najibun Nessa Khatun and Rabeya Khatun, the head mistress of Sylhet Government Pilot Girls High school and other prominent ladies sent a memorandum to the chief minister, Khwaja Najimuddin. In their memorandum they demanded the acceptance of Bangla as the state language. When this news was published, the *Eastern Herald*, and weekly that opposed Language Movement, made filthy

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.p.291.

<sup>64</sup> J.B. Bhattacharjee, ibid.p.292.

<sup>65</sup> Sharif Uddin Ahmed, *Sylhet: History and heritage*, Bangladesh Itihas samiti, 1999, p.297.

remarks against the memorandum and Jubeda Rahim.<sup>66</sup> Syeda Najibun Nessa , a signatory of the memorandum lodged protest against the filthy remarks of the *Eastern Herald* and observed in a protest note, which was published in the Nao- Belal that ‘those Bangla speaking people East Pakistan who oppose their mother tongue are but traitors and spoiled sons.’<sup>67</sup> Abul Kashem, the secretary of Tamuddun Majlis sent a letter to Jubeda Rahim congratulating her and the women of Sylhet for their role in defending the mother tongue.<sup>68</sup> She was died in 26th January, 1986.<sup>69</sup>

Jubeda Rahim Choudhury attended many political meetings without wearing *burqa*.<sup>70</sup> This event marked a historical significance for the abolition of the strictness of *purdah* in Sylhet. Some conservative minded people criticized her act.<sup>71</sup> When she moved out without *burqa* conservative people called her “*behaya*” or ‘shameless’. Jubeda was not against *purdah* but against strict seclusion of women. She moved outside to cover her heads with her *saree* or *churni*. The *Moulana* and *Ulemas* tried her to stop the political participation. They imposed *fatwa* on her. They declared women’s participation in the public sphere was illegal. Home was the best place for them. But her father and her husband encouraged her to participate in the politics. Traditionally, the *Sylheti* Bengali Muslim women lived in the inner compartment of the home and they were expected to cover their faces in front of men who were not members of the family. *Purdah* was vigorously followed here and many social and religious injunctions also imposed on women. Women were not allowed to travel unescorted. The so called Quranic injunction and *fatwas* imposed on them by the orthodox *Mollahs*, *Moulavis*, *Ulems* prevented women from attending any school outside their home and attending the public sphere or politics was unthinkable.<sup>72</sup> Those women who got some formal education at the primary or middle vernacular school, after marriage they also put under the strict code of *purdah*. They could not go their maternal home without the permission of her husband or mother-in-law or any other family member of the laws house. For the majority of Muslim women home was their only world. She would spend most of her time looking after her family and children. Her economic position, emotional security and social position, everything is accorded to her by her family, so much so that her role and functions in the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. p.297.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p.297.

<sup>68</sup> Tajul Mohammad, *Bhasa Andolone Sylhet*, Dhaka, 1994,p.25-26.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.p.100.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p.19.

<sup>71</sup> Tajul Mohammad, *ibid*.p.20.

<sup>72</sup> Anwar Hossain, *Muslim Women’ Struggle for Freedom in Colonial Bengal*, Progressive publishers, Kolkata, 2008,p.25.

family determine her position in society. The role of women in society was still defined largely by their functions as wife and mother.<sup>73</sup> There was a notion prevailed in the society that for a married woman heaven was under the feet of her husband and he was the supreme guardian. Every woman should spend their lives in husband's house and, though he was very cruel never think to leave him. It was only after her death, her body will leave the house. Besides this, all the important decisions were taken by the male members. They never discuss important matters with their wives. There were many *Sylheti* proverbs which reflect the status and position of women.

(a)

*“Lal saree pariya suamir ghare dhukiyo*

*Sada kapad pariya ghar tane baroiyo.”*

( This proverb says that women should spend her life with her husband. She should left his home only after the death.)<sup>74</sup>

b)

*“Betintar Gargari nai, hakal mat phunaio na.”*

( This proverb point out that not to discuss important matters with the woman as the woman are stupid.)

(c)

*“Hakeler age utio, Hakeler pare ghumaio”*

( This proverb meant that women should do household work properly.)

(d)

*“Betiin gharer sundar”*

(This proverb meant that women are the beauty of the home)

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid,p.11.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Badrun Nessa Khanom, referred to above information in Karimganj, dated 11.05.13.

The entire proverb suggests that women should remain confined within the home. In Surma valley, there was none but Jubeda Rahim Choudhury actively participated in politics during the Civil Disobedience Movement. Few other women belonging from the aristocratic class such as Sahida Choudhury, sister of Jubeda Rahim, and Sirajunnessa Choudhury sometimes joined in the political meetings but did not actively participated in the processions, strikes, picketing the British goods etc. Unlike Hindus, they confined themselves within the four walls. But after 1940s the situation was likely to be changed. With the progress of education, many Muslim women participated in the public sphere and the Muslim women assumed a new role within home and outside. They accepted at the outset some respectable jobs and careers. It was only during the Sylhet Referendum; a large number of Muslim women participated in politics to make a public opinion to vote in favour of the formation of Pakistan and later on joined in the Language Movement of 1952 and the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1972. In Sylhet referendum, Muslim women participated due to the encouragement of Jubeda. Hajera Mahmud, Lutfu Khanom, Jebunnessa Ahmed, Faojia Samad, Sahana Choudhury, Ayesha Khatun, Hasna Choudhury and Rubi Choudhury, Jeba Rashid Choudhury, Falak Ara Begum, Rabeya Islam also joined in the Sylhet referendum and voted in favour of the formation of Pakistan.<sup>75</sup> Sayyaid Sahera Banu and Sayyaid Jahirunnessa, Jerina Rashid were attacked by the furious mob during the Sylhet Referendum. On that time the women from the lower strata came forward and helped them to polling the vote.<sup>76</sup> Anowara Basit, also participated in politics with the encouragement of Hajera Mahmud and Jubeda Rahim Choudhury. She was born on 7<sup>th</sup> May, 1937 in Rangirkhari, Silchar, Assam. Anowara Basit belonged from a middle class family. She was the daughter of Mostafa Khan and Habibunnessa. Her father was a tea estate manager.

Anowara Basit completed her primary education in Silchar. Her mother was expired when she was very young. She had one brother and one sister. They brought up under their father's care and supervision. In 1947, during the time of independence, Mostafa Khan left Silchar bag and baggages and settled in Sylhet. Many well-established Muslim families left Karimganj and Cachar and migrated to Sylhet and many Hindu well established families left Sylhet and settled in Karimganj and Cachar during the time of independence. The partition

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<sup>75</sup> Abul Mal Abdul Muhit, *ibid.* p.101.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* p.100.

would cause great miseries for the common people who left their business, property and lived like a refugees and it also determined their social position.<sup>77</sup>

In Sylhet Mostafa Khan joined in Kalighat Tea Estate. Anowara Basit admitted in Fenjuganj Kasem Ali High School in class VI. She passed out Matriculation with good marks under the guidance of her teacher Kanai master who was father's close friend. Mostafa Khan was English educated and progressive person who supported the female education. In Sylhet, during this time, Muslim female education was felt unnecessary and the conservative section people strongly opposed female education. Under such situation Mostafa Khan seek help Dr. Kalayani Dass ( Kalayani Mishra), daughter in law of Sundari Mohan Dass, encouraged her higher education. She admitted in the Sylhet Women College. Dr. Kalayani Dass inspired her to join in the social reform movement. Anowara Basit met with the well Known democratic leader Hajera Mahmud and Shuroshi Chakrabarti. Under their inspiration, she joined in the Sylhet Redcross Nursing School for the welfare of the society. Besides this, during that time, nursing school was the assembly of the communist political leader. When she was reading in Nursing School, she actively supported Purnendu Kishore Sen Gupta, leader of the United Front Party. As a result she faced a critical situation because of, on that time Muslim League was the ruling and most powerful political party in Sylhet. Some prominent leaders of the Muslim League tried to expell Anowara Basit to appear in the final examination and also tried to prohibit her further education. But she could not succeed. Shayesta Khan, Anowara's uncle tried to continue her education. He requested Sadruddin Choudhury, the then president of the Awami League and other ministers to support Anowara Begum and cancelled the order. After six months, the Health minister canceled the order and Anowara could appear the final examination and passed out in 1955. After that, she got a permanent job as a Health visitor in the Sylhet Red Cross Maternity Welfare Society.<sup>78</sup>

She brought up in a well to do family and every family member was associated with the political movements .Her uncle, Shaista Khan was the active member of the Indian National Congress, Balaganj branch. After the partition he joined in the Awami League. Her uncle always encouraged her political participation. In February, 1952, when Language movement began in Sylhet, she organized meetings in Gopalgang and Hetimgang which were presided over by Hajera Mahmud.

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<sup>77</sup>Interview with Anowara Basit ,referred to above information dated 03.11.12., Sylhet.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

In 1956, she got married with the Fazlul Basit. He passed out engineering course (electric subject) from the Assam Polytechnic in 1945. His father Sajid Ali was the communist leader and a prominent person of the society. In 1958, her first son, Dr. Nur-E-Islam Shelu Basit was born. She had six son and three daughters. Though her family was too conservative, but she crossed the barriers and joined many movements such as movement against the dictator rule of president Ayub Khan of Pakistan, movement for the establishment of the Sylhet University and others democratic and progressive movement. She was also associated with the Sylhet Sahitya Sangha which was established in 1954. Her writings were also published in newspapers like *Jugvery*, *No-belal*, *Ittehad*. During the Bangladesh War of Liberation, 1972 she gave shelter many freedom fighters at her home. In 1975, she became the general secretary of the 'Sylhet Mahila Parishad'. Through this organization, she along with Usha Dass Purkaystha and Mrs Lateef Sardar encouraged adult women education, encouraged women for economic independence.<sup>79</sup>

Though the Muslim women participated in the national movement and took some respectable job and careers but the notion of the society towards them remained same. They faced serious opposition and attacked by the conservative people when travelling outside their home unescorted or without wearing *burqahs*. One day, when Mariam went to school without veil, a group of young men started to tease her and a *maulavi* complained her father and scolded him for giving permission Mariam to go outside the home. The village headman opposed her education but she was determined for her study so she agreed to use *burqah*.<sup>80</sup> She was born in 1916 in Habiganj.<sup>81</sup> Her father Munshi Mohammad Sanaullah was a progressive man of the village who encouraged secular education for both the male and females. Despite of the conservative reaction of the relatives, her father paid due attention to her only daughter's education. Her mother Ayesha Khatun was a dedicated home maker. Her primary education began at home under the guidance of her father. He taught her Islamic education.<sup>82</sup> After that she admitted into the Baniyachang Lamapada Girls' L.P School, which was the only girls school of the village and got a scholarship of Rs.3 per month in 1931.<sup>83</sup> Then she admitted in the Paschim Pada Girls' Middle Vernacular School. Very few Muslim girls' students read on this school. Among them, Afifa Khatun and Sharifa Katun, daughters of Nurul Hussain Khan, were her close friends. They went to school every day at least 3 kilometers on foot due to the

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<sup>79</sup>Interview with Shelu Basit, referred to above information dated 10.04.12, Dhaka.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Dipankar Mohanta, referred to above information dated 12.04.13, Habiganj.

<sup>81</sup>Interview with Selim Aiwal, referred to above information dated 06.10.12 Sylhet.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Mahbuba Samsud Bulbul, referred to above information dated 08.10.12, Sylhet.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Selim Aiwal, referred to above information dated 06.10.12 Sylhet.

lack of proper transport and communication. Mariam Khatun was a meritorious and she got the first position in every class. Her headmaster Paresh Chandra Barua helped her to prepare for the examination. She again got scholarship in the middle vernacular school in 1935. But she could not continue her studies due to the social obligations.<sup>84</sup>In 1934, she got a special prize in an art exhibition held in Silchar. She also got scholarship for further education in an Art Institute in Calcutta but could not go due to the socio-and economic problems.

In 1936, she joined as the teacher of Baniachang Topkhana Primary School and got only Rs.12 per month as remuneration. She got married with Maulavi Mohammad Abdullah in 1936. He was one of active member of the All India Muslim League of Assam Pradesh. In 1940's he became popular as one of the top ranking leader of the Muslim League. Many political meetings were held at their residential home. With her husband's encouragement, she also took interest in the political meetings. In 1938, when Sir Mohammad Saddullah, toured in Baniachang, she delivered a speech behind the screen which was appreciated by all the members attended in the meeting.<sup>85</sup> Abbasuddin Ahmed, Jasim Uddin Choudhury, Khalekujamman, Moulana Sakhwatul Ambia, Moulana Abdul Kadir Sinkapani, Moulana Abdur Rahman Sinkapani, Moulana Abdur Rahim, Farid Ahmed, barrister, professor Gulam Azam also appreciated her works and invited her to join in the political movements. But due to some un avoidable circumstances she could not participate politics actively. But she motivated her husband, helped the other members of the Muslim League to feed them, and gave them shelters in times of need. Besides this, she compiled her father's '*Moromi Sangeet*' (more than 100 songs) in a book which was unpublished. She was died in 27<sup>th</sup> February, 1999.<sup>86</sup>

Another progressive woman contemporary to Anowara Basit was Najnin Begom who dedicated her whole life for the spreading of education and upliftment of the women status. She is not only an educationist; a social reformer and a good politician also. She actively participated in the Language Movement in 1952 and Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1972.<sup>87</sup> She was born in 1938 in Maulavibazar. Her father Md. Yusuf was an advocate and worker of the All India National Congress. He participated in the Swadeshi movement. He was the first post graduate in the Maulavi bazaar sub-division and also got L.L.B degree from the Calcutta University in 1914 and got M.A degree in 1916. In 1919, he joined in the Indian National

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<sup>84</sup>Interview with Selim Aiwal, referred to above information dated 10.10.12., Sylhet.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Poet Dilwar, referred to above information dated 11.10.12, Sylhet.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with Mahbuba Samsud, referred to above information, dated 10.11.12., Sylhet.



Congress. He left the profession and joined in the freedom movement. He became the principal of Nagar High school. During the non- co- operation movement, Deshbandu Chittaranjan, Netaji Subash Chandra Bose and Hossain Ahmed Madani came in Maulavibazar to encourage the common people to popularize the national movement. A meeting was organized and Mohammad Yusuf was its secretary. In 1937, he joined in the Muslim League. He retired from Poltan Memorial Girls' High School.<sup>88</sup> In 1937, he joined in the Muslim League.

Her mother Khudeja Khatun was well educated. She was the author of two children text books. She established Swadeshi School at her home to educate children, girls and older women. She participated in the Swadeshi movement. Khudeja Khatun was born in 1903 in Dhaka. Her father, Khan Bahadur Sarafat Ali, was a S.P. He participated in the Swadeshi movement. She established 'Swadeshi School' at her home for the old women and children . She used khaddar *saree* and broke the foreign bangles. She was well educated and a meritorious student. Khudeja got first position in the entire Assam Pradesh Essay competition. Her father did not permit her to appear in the HSLC examination due to social obligations. There was a fear that if girls were highly educated, none would marry their daughter. She read Sharatchandra Chottopadhyay's '*Grihadaha*', '*Bishbrikha*' and Rabindra Nath Tagore's Novel etc. She learned the whole '*Gitanjali*' and taught her children. She wrote poems and short stories which were unpublished.

Najnin Begum's well educated and progressive parent tried their best way to brought up their children with good care and supported to become well established. Najnin completed her primary education from Giyasnagar primary school, Maulavibazar. She got a scholarship in class viii and secured first position among the females in the entire Assam Pradesh in 1947.<sup>89</sup> She passed H.S.L.C from Kumilla Faizunnessa Government School in 1954 and also got a scholarship. In 1957, she passed out I.Sc from the Rajshahi Government College. In 1958, she joined as a teacher in the Wills Little Flower School, Dhaka. After that, she got married with Salem Matin who worked as the Director of the education department. He is also modern educated and progressive person. He supported Najnin to continue her study and job. After her marriage, she joined as a teacher in Sahin School, then Vikarunnessa Noon School, Dhaka and worked there up to 1968. After her first daughter's birth, she completed her graduation in science stream with major form the Dhaka University in 1960. But she was not

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<sup>88</sup>Interview with Najnin Begum, referred to above information, dated 7.11.2012., Maulavibazar.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

satisfied with this academic career. Her curiosity for knowledge increased day by day. As she was interested in politics, again, she completed her graduation in Arts stream with Political Science Honours from the same university in 1968. In 1969, she joined as a lecturer of Political Science in Chattagram Government Women College. But she resigned the post during the Liberation War of 1971 and joined in the '*Mukhtiyudha*'. She recalls, "My life is full of variety. I never stagnant in one profession or in one place."<sup>90</sup>

After the Bangladesh Liberation War, she engaged for the upliftment of women status side by side to give relief funds to the refugees, who were really suffered due to the war. In 1972, she established a women college in Gafargaon, Mymensingh and joined as the principal of this college.<sup>91</sup> In 1973, she went to England and Scotland and got a diploma in Education sponsored by the British Council scholarship for one year. After that she came back in Bangladesh and joined her previous job. In 1976, she joined as a professor of the Murari Chand College, Sylhet and also joined as the member of the Bangladesh UNESCO National Commission. Her fortune is in favour of her and she again got another fellowship in Educational Management Programme sponsored by UNESCO- Paris and Bangkok and got another diploma and certificate in 1978.

After coming back, she joined as the professor of the Jagannath University in 1978 and worked there up to 1995. In the meantime she was associated with different social organization and also started a movement for the fulfillment of the demands of all the teaching staffs of the different colleges and universities. She worked as the general secretary of the Government Professors Association. In 1991, she was the pioneer of Girls in scouting movement and found a unit of Girls in Scouting in each college in Bangladesh. In 1995, she was honoured as the Member, Girls-in – Scouting Bangladesh Scout.<sup>92</sup> In 1995, when movements start for the formation of the independent Sylhet division, she became the vice-president of the central committee and elected as the president of the women organ. In 1997, she got another scholarship "Graduate Equity Fellowship" from the California State University for two years. In the meantime, she again completed her Masters in Education with gold-medal in 1999.<sup>93</sup> In 1999, she joined as the teacher of the Kumilla Teachers Training College and retired from this college. In 2000, she became the chief advisor of the Development of Primary Education Programme- stage 1 under the department of the

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<sup>90</sup> Interview with Najnin Begom, referred to above information dated 08.11.12., Maulavibazar.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Dipankar Mohanta, , referred to above information dated 10.12.12., Maulavibazar.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Mahbuba Shamsud, referred to above information dated 12.12.12., Sylhet.

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Najnin Begom, referred to above information, dated 07.11.12., Maulavibazar.

Education, Bangladesh. In 2001, she established a school in Giyasnagar, maulavibazar for orphans and poor student to offer free education to them. She had spent her 62 lakh *thaka* for this school which is now promoted as college.<sup>94</sup>

Though these women participated in the public sphere, but they faced strong opposition from the *Ulemas*. During the time from Jubeda Rahim Choudhury to Najnin Begum , a transition took place among the Muslim community. The Muslim women entered from purdah to modernity. After independence, the percentage of Muslim girls participating in the public sphere became increasing and many women joined in the professions. These women moved outside cover their heads instead of wearing *burqah*. These new and modern women maintained both the public and private sphere.

With the passage of time, the Muslim women also participated in the field of medicine and became successful doctors. Dr. Afia Khatun Choudhury, was the first Muslim female gynecologist in the Surma Valley. She was born in 1925 in Vadeshwar village in Sylhet.<sup>95</sup> Her father Madris Choudhury, was the employee of the Assam Civil Service. Her primary education began in Shillong. She passed out her H.S.L.C in 1941 from the Shillong Government High School. After that she admitted in the Shillong Saint Mary College. During that time, there was the political unrest in the country, as the Second World War began. Her father shifted his family to Vadeswar village from the Shillong. As a result, she could not complete her intermediate degree.<sup>96</sup>

In 1944, she got married with Mominul Haq Choudhury, who was a civil servant.<sup>97</sup> Though she became the mother of the three children but that hardly deterred her from carrying out her studies. In 1950, she admitted in the Sylhet Medical College with the due co-operation of her husband. She secured first position in the first medical intermediate examination.<sup>98</sup> But her husband was died, seven days before her final examination. On such a situation, she was not ready to appear the final examination. But luck was in favour of her, the final examination was postponed for some unavoidable circumstances and it would be held after one month later. In the meantime, she was prepared for the final examination and got the highest marks in five subjects and secured the second position in medical examination.<sup>99</sup> After four months

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<sup>94</sup> Interview with Najnin Begum, referred to above information dated 08.11.12., Maulavibazar.

<sup>95</sup> Shamsad Husam & Masum Rahman Akash, *ibid.* p.86.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* p.86

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* p.86

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* p.86

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* p.86

later she joined in the ‘Sylhet Matrimongal’ under the Redcross Society and became a renowned doctor.<sup>100</sup>

Another female doctor Dr. Sharikunnessa Choudhury also came out from the four walls. Her father Ajfar Raja Choudhury took a job under the Calcutta Corporation.<sup>101</sup> Her primary education began in the Rokeya Sakhawat Memorial girls’ School. At that time, Begum Rokeya was the principal of this school. In 1942, there was the political unrest in the country, Ajfar Raja Choudhury left Calcutta with bag and baggage and started to live in Sylhet. Then she admitted in Sylhet Agrabami School and passed her HSLC and got a scholarship. After examination, she was married with Gulam Iahia Choudhury. Her husband was the lecturer of the Murari Chand College, Sylhet. Her husband suggested that she became a school teacher but she had higher aspirations. As the mother of six children, it would impossible for her to become a doctor, but she was determined to do so. Her brother Malikur Raja Choudhury who was a medical student at that time encouraged her. She entered the Medical College, completed her studies and became house surgeon in Sylhet Redcross ‘Matrimongal Society’ for the welfare of the women and children. After long struggles she became a successful doctor and joined in the ‘Matrimangal Society’. But after few days, she left the job and started private practices due to better look after her children.<sup>102</sup>

Thus we see that there began a change in the lives of the Muslim women. The Muslim women gradually came out of their homes and *purdah* to join others in the public space. The twentieth century’s witnessed the emergence of “new women” within the Bengali society.<sup>103</sup> With the change of time, the Muslim society was imperceptibly accepting the fact that women have the rights to education and public participation. Either they were educated or illiterate but they tried to communicate with other women. The education opened the first door of the participation in the public sphere. The Muslim reformers wanted the participation of Muslim women in the public sphere almost for similar reason as their Bramho- Hindu counterparts. They realized that without the improvement of women status and position, the advancement of the Muslim society would be impossible. Muslim educated men increasingly desired educated wives for almost the same motive that had actuated their Hindu- Bramho counterparts. Education would make women better companions to their husbands, better

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.p.86

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.p.100

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.p.100

<sup>103</sup> Anowar Hossain, *ibid*, p.170.

mothers to their children and better home makers.<sup>104</sup> The participation in the Indian national movement gave them the legitimate cause for fought against the colonial rule and also for the upliftment of their legal and political status. Though not in a large scale, but a small portion of the educated women participated in the modernization of the society. The presence of women in politics, of course did not create a significant change in the lives of the majority of the female population. Women politicians however made it acceptable for women to be involved in activities outside the home. These educated modern women could maintain both the private and public worlds.

Thus the advocacy of female education by the Muslim reformers, and the inspiring participation in the field of education by the Muslim reformers, and the inspiring participation in the field of education by the Christian, Bramho and Hindu women brought the Muslim women out of *pardah* to modernity. Like Rokeya in Bengal, Jubeda Rahim Choudhury, Sirajunnessa Choudhury, Anowara Basit , Najnin Begum stressed on women's economic self sufficiency. Husband-wife relationship, child education and above all, call for revolt against patriarchal society included the main theme of their thought process. A kind of feminist consciousness thus began to grow gradually among Muslim women. Their participation in politics and joined in the profession bore an example for the future generation to led them in their journey towards the uplift of their socio- legal and political status.

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<sup>104</sup> Bharati Ray, *ibid.* p.52