

Female Education Now And Then

Begum Sultana Islam

IN man's struggle for existence reason and intelligence have been the primary instrument of survival and such an instrument can be sharpened only through education. Education not only widens knowledge and wisdom of a human being but it increases productivity of a person.

Islam laid great emphasis on education. If necessary one should go as far as to China in search of knowledge is Islamic instruction. In spite of this injunction the situation of education in our country is deplorable among the people in general and women in particular. This is the case with almost all developing countries.

The life of a woman is under absolute control of a man in a man dominated society. She has to play the role of a housewife and mother. She has no opportunity to get formal schooling. Traditional knowledge and wisdom for being a good wife and mother were handed over to a girl by her mother, grandmother or other relatives from generation to generation. Accordingly, the girls are prepared from childhood for home-

life only and not allowed to participate in outside life. She is however, given religious education in a traditional way.

There were feeble attempts for female education in this sub-continent. During the beginning of this century, while under British rule, with a few philanthropists and social reformers the administrators tried to set a favourable atmosphere towards female education. A few reformatory acts were introduced including the Sati-Daha Act preventing the burning of wife also, with the dead husband) and the Sarda Act (the child-marriage restriction act) in 1933. This was the first turning point; and the public outlook began to change. The conservatism, superstition, purdah system and traditional attitude were some of the main obstacles to girl's education. Lack of schools, communication difficulties, non-availability of women teachers were other factors that stood in the way. Female education was also considered as a threat to feminine qualities both by mothers and mother-in-laws and it was also

considered unadjustable to the family situation. Under this oppressive situation girls remained silent and had no courage to challenge. In rare cases they got male support. Awakening about education started much earlier in the Hindu society. As a result they were more progressive in education. Along with this movement, a few girls' schools and colleges were established for the spread of female education; such as Bethun School and College, Victoria Institution for girls etc.

In the late nineteenth century scattered and isolated efforts for female education were made by a few Muslim women from behind the purdah, being supported by their educated husbands. This movement inspired and encouraged the two outstanding Muslim ladies; one was Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the other lady was Nawab Faizunnessa. Begum Rokeya established Sakhawat Memorial Girls High School in 1911 at Calcutta, and Nawab Faizunnessa opened Faizunnessa Girls' School in Comilla. Slowly

the number of educated women increased and along with them increased the number of girl's schools. In 1939 the establishment of Lady Brabourne College at Calcutta by Sher-e-Bangla Fazlul Huq, then Chief Minister of un-divided Bengal, opened a new era facilitating higher studies by the girls specially Muslims.

The author belongs to the pioneering groups of women who was fortunate enough to get educated in the face of tremendous social resistance but survived due to high family support. Her grandmother was educated in Arabic and Persian in a traditional society whose influence was a great encouragement to the granddaughter. If a mother is educated, the children get better opportunity to leap forward and that is why her children are all highly educated; particularly the girls availed of the maximum benefit.

Now the educated mothers of Bangladesh do not make any discrimination in matters of education of boys and girls. Both the children get equal

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facilities and encouragement to show their abilities in different fields. Today we find women in medicine, engineering, law, science, architecture, accounting, police, army and even in aviation which was unthinkable earlier. Only teaching and midwifery were earlier acceptable as professions.

Just after the partition of India in 1947-48 there were only three girls' high schools in the then East Pakistan. These institutions were filled with Hindu students. But due to sudden change in the situation there was a lack of teachers and regular girl students and the enrolment of girls suddenly dropped. The number of primary schools was reduced from 4778 to 1984. But after 50% there was a rush for education and girls were gradually enrolling themselves in schools and aspiring for higher education under government patronage.

Although girls were getting education in urban areas education in rural areas was neglected. Government recognised the need to educate the girls and

female children work with their mothers all day. Recurring pregnancy and household work from the early childhood wear them out.

Education is a long and continuous process. It has been found that in 1911 the percentage of male literacy was 16.4% in the sub-continent. Today after 70 years it has reached approximately 34% and female literacy to 16.4% in Bangladesh.

Since 1947, specially after liberation of Bangladesh, there has been a rapid change and girls are attending schools, colleges and professional institutions in an increasing number. But all this seems insignificant when one finds that 13.7 per cent of the women of Bangladesh are literate.

Bangladesh is a rural society and 92.05 per cent of the women live in the villages where literacy has remained stagnant and the progress is very slow. Our Government has realised that the national development cannot be achieved unless women, half the population of Bangladesh, come forward side by side with the men.