

Inside Tarini Bhavan: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Padmarag* and the Richness of South Asian Feminism in Furthering Unsectarian, Gender-Just Human Development

Barnita Bagchi

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Bengali novella *Padmarag* (1924), a work belonging to her maturity (she lived from 1880 to 1932), is an extraordinary work. It creates a complex educational and philanthropic female utopia, complementing her earlier short, witty utopian fiction *Sultana's Dream* (1905). *Padmarag* describes a female-founded and female-administered community set in contemporary Bengal, where women from diverse religions, regions, and ethnicities, with unhappy histories of patriarchal and familial oppression, band together with an educative and philanthropic project, their set of activities ranging from formal education to propagating crafts and caring for the sick and the destitute. It offers a series of personal narratives of the women working in the institution, narratives which recount and indict the familial and marital oppression to redress which the institution Tarini Bhavan is founded.

Rokeya's vision in this novella is courageous and bold, showing that Hindus, Brahmos, Muslims, and Christians, black women and white women, all suffer from patriarchal oppression, and all need to receive refuge and education from communities of competent women working together to reform society. The uncompromising, ambitious, and unsectarian nature of Rokeya's vision of feminism and education are revealed perhaps most graphically, among all the works she penned, in *Padmarag*.

Generically, this ambitious and unusual work is very hybrid. It is a free-flowing narrative, and a novella with generous dashes of melodrama and romance, with disasters, coincidences, and stock topoi abounding in its plot line. It is also a polemical, passionate intellectual treatise on feminism, social welfare, and education. Strikingly, cohabiting with the melodrama in the work is a contrasting strand which is realistic and gritty, particularly in its depiction of a female-administered school and institution. Rokeya, richly endowed with her own experience of running a pioneering school for Muslim girls, has wryly humorous descriptions of the thousand trials faced by the administrators of a girls' school. She thus also gives us vignettes of pioneering working women typing, writing, teaching, or taking care of a thousand other duties, trying to create a utopia in an unhelpful, lacklustre workaday world.

The first section of this essay considers the personal narratives of suffering and growth of the Tarini Bhavan workers and inmates. The second section analyses the ideological contours of the reformist, gentlewoman-centred feminist project in the novella. The third section is devoted more

specifically to Rokeya's humorous, realistic account of working women leading and administering an educative and philanthropic institution. The fourth section focuses on the eponymous heroine of the work, Padmarag/ Siddika/ Zainab. The fifth examines the striking and unusual ending of the work, in which Rokeya refuses to give her heroine the conventional ending of the courtship novel, and rejects marriage and heterosexual domesticity as the telos of women's lives: she explodes the romance-style courtship narrative in which the highminded, well-educated, suffering young woman is reabsorbed into the world of patriarchal domesticity. The penultimate section analyses the overarching framework of female-centred education, crucial to this work, to Rokeya's life and thought, and to the movement for women's emancipation in South Asia then as now. The concluding section sees the work and oeuvre of Rokeya as a source of rich insight for unsectarian, gender-just human development, particularly the furthering of education, in South Asia.

The Lightning Within, or 'Biye Fail': Women Educators' Personal Narratives of Suffering and Development

Rokeya creates critique after critique of institutionalised familial, marital, and sexual practices which lead women literally to madness or the brink of death or suicide, as in the case of the eponymous heroine of the work. She throughout the work uses the topos of 'sad stories' or pathetic tales. While Siddika/ Zainab/ Padmarag is regarded in the work as the epitome of mysterious sadness, Siddika comes to realise that other senior members of Tarini Bhavan, who teach in the institution and are responsible for administering the wide range of developmental and welfarist activities carried on by it, also have suffering and pathos in their pasts, despite maintaining a remarkably cheerful outer demeanour. Listening to these women's tales bonds Siddika with the other members of Tarini Bhavan. These women are all, in differing ways, 'biye fail', a pun on 'biye' or marriage, and BA, the academic degree, a play on words that conveys the sadness of women failing at their most common examination, marriage.

Saudamini is introduced to us as a married woman of 43, beautiful even in middle age. Her name literally means lightning, part of Rokeya's repertoire of significance-laden names in the work (other examples are Dina-Tarini, meaning saviour of the poor, Padmarag meaning ruby, and Almas, meaning diamond).

When Siddika quotes to Saudamini in English

Could my heart be light as thine

I'd gladly change with thee,¹

Saudamini says smilingly that she would be pleased to exchange her heart with Siddika, because its inner reality is 'horrifying'. She asks, 'Do you really think that lightning (Saudamini) does not have fire?

Do you see how beautiful and how terrifying the smile of lightning is, playing across clouds?' Siddika, albeit frightened, asks to be shown her friend's fire. Saudamini's tale is that of the woman constructed into the monstrous stepmother. Her husband's first wife's sister is largely responsible for this construction. Saudamini's narrative reveals the way in which women can be helpless to prevent themselves being turned into a stock female stereotype. The romance-like narrative blocks—the machinations of the dead wife's sister, the death by drowning of the stepdaughter, the attempt to rescue her by Saudamini, her failure, her being washed up on the shore in a state of madness—all these, as in the other stories by women, contribute a quality of the archetypal and of the folk tale, to the personal histories of the women.

Helen Horace, another worker in Tarini Bhavan, has been married to a criminal lunatic who is incarcerated in Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum, and cannot be divorced from him according to English laws. Helen's mother tries to get her a 'decree nisi', citing a Miss Riva Sanders whom Horace had been caught 'in flagrante delicto' with, but Riva succeeds in clearing her name after appealing. Helen is 'tied for life to a lunatic', as a newspaper titled her story, to Lieutenant Colonel Cecil Joseph Horace.

Sakina fails in her marriage because the mistress of her husband says on the wedding day, during the 'subhadrishti', or auspicious exchange of gazes between husband and wife, that 'the wife is not beautiful', so that the husband discards his bride. Usha is not accepted by her in-laws after she is rescued from abduction by robbers—she has lost her character. HER husband is a coward, as she says. She is nearly sold into prostitution by a servant of the family who saves her, but the daughter-in-law of the servant takes Usha to Tarini Sen to be a cook in the school. Usha is now declassed, but is re-elevated by Mrs Sen, who leaves her seat to embrace Usha, clad in dirty clothes: a moment of affect and emotion.

Emotion, indeed, as we find throughout the work, is no stranger to the educative project in Tarini Bhavan. Mrs Sen gives Usha higher education at her own cost, and at the end of it the 'biye fail' Usha fails her BA by just 'three marks'—a wonderfully realistic little touch—to stay on for teacher training, to become the head teacher at Tarini Bhavan.

All these tales are searing indictments of matrimonial despotism and familial oppression. Siddika asks: 'Is there no medicine to cure these running sores of society? To stay bound to a madman all one's life, to be abandoned without reason, to be forcibly sent to live with a drunk husband and a co-wife by one's brother even when one expresses unwillingness.... Is there no remedy for this?' To this, Saudamini replies, in a ringing manifesto of the novel,

There is! That remedy is the 'Society for the Alleviation of Women's Suffering' in Tarini Bhavan. Come, all women who are abandoned, pauperised, neglected,

¹ *Begam Rokeya Racanavali*, ed. by Abdul Kadir (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1993), p. 331.

helpless, oppressed—come all. Then we declare war against society. And Tarini Bhavan is our fortress.

Saudamini says further in the same section,

I want to show people ...there are paths other than keeping house open to us.

Keeping house for a husband is not the essence of women's lives. A human life is a precious gift from God—it is not to be wasted by blowing on the coals of a cooking oven and crying. We must declare war against society.

Usha: Then the pyre of war will be lighted in the homes of peaceloving Bengalis.

Rafia: We don't want peace. We don't want a peace that is inert and neuter. And we have to crush the head of this custom of 'abarodh' or purdah—it is the root of all evil.

No more keeping the dignity of 'abarodh' and tolerating kicks and broom-beatings.²

The Reformist Project in Tarini Bhavan

The philanthropic institution 'Tarini Bhavan' is named after its founder Dinatarini Sen. The name is significant: 'Dinatarini' means saviour of the poor—literally, 'tarini' is a boatsman, who here rows the distressed out of danger. It is a name infused with the spiritual and the religious, and many Bengali songs are addressed to God imaged as Dinatarini. Indeed, there is a very distinctive plangency to the term: quite often, old women would pray to God to steer them across the sea of life to a haven beyond. Tarini, our character, rescues and looks after many women for whom death has become preferable to life. Tarini is the second wife and then a very young widow of a much older barrister, and founds the institution at the age of twenty-one in the bloom of youth, resolving to go against the wishes of relatives by her act. Rokeya, too, we know, founded her school in Calcutta (though she had started one in Bhagalpur before her widowhood) after her husband's death.

Tarini Bhavan has a school, a workshop or training institute for adult women, a home for widows, and a home for the destitute. The school has both day-scholars and boarders. It is the 'Society for the Alleviation of Female Suffering' that forms the moral, ideological, and institutional core of the project. Some of the inhabitants of Tarini Bhavan are called 'sisters', short for 'sisters of the poor', wear a uniform of saffron or blue, and have no separate rooms: the monastic ideal of service and renunciation is thus as present in the institution as it is in its founder's life.

The space that is created in Tarini Bhavan is indeed somewhat like a nunnery or ashram, secluded from the mainstream social and familial space that most women occupy, even though the workers of Tarini Bhavan have to, by virtue of their improving activities, come into constant contact with the established social milieu.

² *Begam Rokeya Racanavali*, p. 357. All translations are by me.

Tarini Sen's activities are not looked upon with favour by her family, who ostracise her, and spread scandal about her as a consorter with fallen women, lepers, and orphans. In a sense, Dinatarini is an outcaste from society ('samaj-chyuta'), as Rokeya says. The mother-in-law of a student in her school calls her a whore, as does another guardian. The society for which Tarini works, indeed the very families of the beneficiaries of her project, thus abuse her with impunity.

In the workshop or training institute, needy women are trained to earn their own living. Unmarried women, married women, and widows—women from all statuses and classes come here. Bookbinding, spinning, and sewing are undertaken, sweets are made to be sold, teacher training is given, typing is taught, as is nursing: we get a veritable compendium of the various marketable skills for women in Rokeya's time. The women also set out to deliver relief in kind, including through nursing, to places struck by disasters such as famine or floods. Some of the trainees help in running the home for the destitute where refugeless poor and handicapped people receive medical attention.

The school does not take government grants or sponsorship. Nor does it accept donations or help from native states pledging allegiance to the British government. Nor are they taught the kind of colonial history that teaches them to despise their own pasts and culture. Rokeya's nationalist agenda becomes clear through such prescriptions. The pupils are also given an education in all standard subjects, such as mathematics, geography, physical and life sciences, and are taught to be self-sufficient, and not 'wooden dolls'.

Rokeya's Two Utopias: *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*

It is fruitful to consider *Padmarag* as a piece of utopian fiction, like *Sultana's Dream*. This despite the fact that *Padmarag*, unlike *Sultana's Dream*, is no dream-vision, nor is it set in an imaginary country. The setting for *Padmarag* is Rokeya's own time and place, the problems contemporary. But utopia, a European concept and a Greek word which has been used with great richness by feminists, is most of all about embodying a dream, a dream of 'eu-topia', the good place, which is also 'ou-topia', no place, a place which has no existence until it is imagined into existence by those fired with the dream. *Padmarag* is a feminist, and primarily female, utopia as much as, for example, Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1762) is. The figure of Dinatarini is an ideal, imaged in religious-spiritual terms, so strong is the salvific nature of her presence and work.

Rokeya's utopia, arguably, is a realm of highly syncretic spiritualism, with respect for and images drawn from all religions, particularly those aspects which are beneficial to women's education. Thus, we have the Brahma women with whom Siddika instinctively seeks refuge, the Hindu founder, the Christian-influenced notion of a nunlike sisterhood, and the many Muslims, including the heroine Siddika herself. An element of austerity, of empathy with pain, of renunciation of worldly pleasures, a dedication to the suffering, all these mark out Rokeya's vision in *Padmarag* as highly spiritualised.

Tarini Bhavan is a good place and a godly place. It is a refuge of the oppressed and the weak, its name itself showing the salvific, spiritual, and utopian charge.

How does *Padmarag* compare with *Sultana's Dream*? The utopian imagination in *Sultana's Dream* is fresh, funny, delightful, and witty. In the earlier work, too, as in the later, education holds the key to women's empowerment and progress. The role of knowledge, science, technology, and the fact that the 'lady principal' of the college directs the strategy that leads to men willingly going to seclusion in the *mardana* all highlight Rokeya's faith in women's education as holding the key to a world where women are happy and powerful. *Sultana's Dream* is cheery, cunningly cocks a snook at male militarism, and shows that the intelligence of women helps them triumph. It is short, and generically structured as a dream-vision.

Padmarag is at one level more grounded in social reality, delineating the thousand little details of an actual, real-life female-led reformist project. The nitty-gritty of a mundane workaday world is present in every page. *Padmarag* colours in the often grim contours of the context women must learn in, and how the learning they undergo will shape their life.

Padmarag's non-realism, at another level, lies in its use of melodramatic plot details and the unconsummated romance between Siddika/ Zainab/ Padmarag. Unlike *Sultana's Dream*, *Padmarag* is also, as I have shown, highly spiritualised, with this spirituality forming a constant undertow to the unsectarian welfarist work portrayed in its pages: such a combination is most striking, and unique in Bengali literature.

The Daily Grind, The Daily Adventure: Working Women Wielding Leadership

The picture of office life and working women is a wonderful feature of *Padmarag*. Women sit and tap away at typewriters, preparing reports of the school jubilee, or dealing with the everyday hassles of running a girls' school in the face of conservative parents ready to take umbrage at the slightest hint of a threat to the girl's 'character' or respectability. Parents complain about their children not winning a prize, or threaten to turn over to the police a teacher who had slapped an erring student. The housepainter demands more lime for the walls, the coachman reports that a wheel needs to be changed, and the gardener demands money for paints. The Tarini Bhavan women need an important lady, connected with officialdom, to preside over their prize distribution, but none is available, so Usha suggests tongue-in-cheek that their local constable's wife should distribute the prizes!

A lot of hackwork and planning goes into planning the route of the school bus or coach: some houses are so snuck away in lanes that the coach cannot reach them, Sometimes the coachman, if he does not receive 'baksheesh', lies and reports a house to be inaccessible when it is not, so that Tarini Sen has to appoint someone to prepare a detailed report on the houses of the students and their

accessibility to the coach. This is community mapping and micro-planning, in the language of modern educational policy.

Some of the girls who come to school are ill and not cared for medically by their family. The neglect of the South Asian girl child is graphically shown in these accounts. One wets her bed at the age of twelve years, and is diagnosed as ill by the school doctor, while another comes to school with high fever—and their parents, refusing their daughters the medical attention they need, instead complain to the school that they are not being adequately educated.

Saudamini, faced with such incessant problems, exasperatedly suggests that they should have two other sections—Tarini Nursery and Tarini Lunatic Asylum. And perhaps even a Tarini Maternity Home. A school cannot adequately fulfil the range of activities needed to right the wrongs of woman, bodily and mental. Rokeya's own lifelong experience of forming associations and linkages among women, including the Anjuman –e – Khwatin-I-Islam, and the school for girls she ran, is the real-life basis for the confidence and humour with which she portrays the exasperation and efficiency with which working women educators and philanthropists must do their work.

There is a happy informality among the women: the familiar form of address 'tumi' is used by them to address each other, except the founder-leader Dinatarini who commands universal respect, and is called, and uses to others, 'apni'. There is much humour and badinage, a lot of it about Siddika's developing though eventually unconsummated romance with Latif. There is constant camaraderie, as one might expect. The bonds of work, of sisterhood, of sympathy, of love, and competence are all strong. There is also, as I have outlined in my account of the 'biye fail' narratives, a vast burden of sadness and pain underlying the reformist project. The loss of innocence, the disrespect of love, and the sacrifice of domesticity are a part of the history of Tarini Bhavan, as much as the immense sense of purpose and mission.

The Ruby, or the Mysterious Heroine: Siddika/ Zainab/ Padmarag

Padmarag, in the style of a romance, keeps the reader on tenterhooks about the mystery surrounding its heroine Siddika, nicknamed Padmarag. We first encounter her when her brother comes to a railway platform and requests some of the women who work for Tarini Bhavan ladies to take his sister with them to Calcutta and give her refuge. Her story, we come to realise, is somehow connected with that of yet another recipient of Tarini Bhavan's charity—a man named Latif Almas, whom the Tarini Bhavan women rescue when he is found bleeding and wounded. Padmarag the ruby and Almas the diamond (the literal meanings of their names) are revealed to have been betrothed, and then torn apart by family greed and misunderstanding. An unhappy, bitter marriage for Latif, a white man's nearly successful attempt to frame Siddika (also called Zainab) for her beloved brother's murder which he had committed, Latif's attempt to rescue Siddika from suicide, Siddika/ Zainab's disappearance from

the world, and fact that the 'brother' of 'Siddika' was in fact she herself disguised as a man: Rokeya's spirals of imagination in this romance-plot are dizzying.

Rokeya shows the process of Siddika's self-development movingly once she enters Tarini Bhavan. Having gone through a bewildering and unpredictable series of misfortunes and persecutions, Siddika is used to solitude, gravity, and secrecy, and keeps herself a recluse even within the already somewhat rarefied world of Tarini Bhavan. She is described by the sisters and workers of Tarini Bhavan as a stony woman, and a cursed goddess forced to come down to earth. Although a very young woman, Padmarag, the precious yet hard ruby, is seen to behave like a 'sanyasini'.

Nonetheless, Siddika does soften into slowly revealing her sensitive core as her stay in Tarini Bhavan lengthens. Three simultaneous processes shape the unfolding and maturation of her personality into the strong, self-sacrificing, hardworking young woman we leave at the end of *Padmarag*. First and foremost is her desire to be useful and to work in the busy hive of Tarini Bhavan. Then comes her bonding with the older sisters of Tarini Bhavan, as she learns from their personal narratives that they too, like her, have undergone much misery and pain before finding their vocation at the institution. Thirdly, she both reawakens to love for Latif, and simultaneously determines not to accept the path of conjugality or conventional domesticity.

When Siddika requests the Tarini sisters to find her some work to do, she is shocked to realise that she has no useful or functional skills that can be used in the institution. She is not strong enough to chop wood, one suggested task. She does not really know mathematics, so she finds herself severely handicapped. She asks if she can sew, but her kind of sewing is fine embroidery and fancy work, while she does not know how to do the work she is set, namely, to cut and tailor petticoats, blouses, and shirts. In the end, she decides to do stitch pillow covers, curtains, and sheets for the poorer patients—simple, coarse work. She does other little things, such as preparing medicine mixtures, cooking food for patients, and by practising whatever she does, slowly becomes an adept and useful member of the community. But she keeps stumbling across her own incompetence, as when she assumes she will pick up typing very quickly, only to find that this is not the case.

Rokeya thus shows the uselessness of the amateurish, half-hearted, dainty, unrigorous education given to the Bengali gentlewoman. Educating oneself in useful skills is a difficult and heuristic process for all the women in Tarini Bhavan, and only when they act as auto-didacts in this way can they go on to work with and educate others. This constant tension between the functional or vocational, and the ornamental and 'liberal' in education continues in our times to be a problem for education. Indeed, how to impart skills that can be useful is a particularly acute problem for the poor, the girls, or the backward castes and classes, who need to have the assurance that their education will not be a mere ornamental luxury, but will empower them to be useful and competent in society.

Rokeya understood the critical nature of this issue, and attempted to integrate women's education with their developing themselves to be in turn the educators of others. If women teach and

work for the social welfare of others, the demanding and exciting nature of the process creates a rich and dual dynamic of adult women's self-education and their professional role as educators and social workers in the realm of human development.

Rejecting Marriage and Patriarchal Domesticity, Retaining Romance and Renunciation: *Padmarag's* Novel Ending

That Siddika internalises this process of self-development and this fervent quest for a useful vocation that will help others is readily evident by the end of the novella. Most of her Tarini Bhavan friends hope that she and Latif will reunite and live happily ever after. But Siddika is adamant in her resolve to reject married domesticity, and proud in her resolve to devote her life to making herself useful to the women of her own community and to the welfare of society.

Having given us a moving romance, with benevolent hero, mystery plot, and beautiful, wronged, accomplished heroine, Rokeya thus gives her heroine a novel ending. Siddika wants to 'show society that married life is not the only goal of a woman's life.' She hopes that her self-sacrifice will contribute to the welfare of womankind. She decides to go back to her landed estate in Chuadanga, bring up her brother's eight-year-old son, and supervise the estate. And she declares that she will spare no effort to awaken Muslim women. She leaves Tarini Bhavan, but for a far more difficult existence, in a sense, choosing to act as an empowered woman who will ameliorate the deprivations of those on her estate. If this is not independent competence chosen with great resolve and renunciation, what is?

Siddika will *also*, however, consider herself the widow of Latif Almas, and remain devoted to him in her mind and heart. She refuses the divorce he offers to grant her once he realises that she will indeed choose to renounce him. After Latif and Siddika travel on a train together, with Siddika going to her 'zamindari', we get the final line of the novella: 'Latif took Siddika's hand and helped her to alight from the train. This was their last meeting.'³

Padmarag: A Dazzling Compacting of Women's Issues with Education in Highlight

Education is for Rokeya, as it has been for post-Enlightenment feminists all over the world, the key way in which women can breach the public and the private spheres. At one level couched in a domestic, private, refining, and improving idiom, education also, however entails a whole range of public questions such as women's vocations, women's work, what women are educated for, the independent life of the mind that educated women aspire to, and indeed, in the widest sense,

³ *Begam Rokeya Racanavali*, p. 428.

knowledge as a tool of women's empowerment in civil and political spheres as much as the domestic and the private one.

I argue elsewhere⁴ that particularly generative for understanding the intersection of women's emancipation and education is a continuous, unresolvable dialectic inherent in the very etymology of the word education, between 'ex' or a movement outwards towards freedom, and 'ducare' or leading, guiding, and control. Education properly imparted offers women a guided, supervised, controlled, solid set of rigorous skills; simultaneously, it also allows the free unfolding and development of a self which can dare to be adventurous, and break over-rigid, over-controlled patriarchal and sexist norms and bounds. Rokeya's oeuvre, particularly *Padmarag*, is an imaginative, complex delineation of this dialectic.

The education of young girls in a school, the self-education of women through the school of adversity, the mutual education of women telling their personal narratives, the solace and sympathy generated by narrating stories of personal pain, the brisk competence, and the wide, non-sectarian vision embodied in a huge array of activities— all these produce a work about education, philanthropy, feminism, personal narratives of growth and development, familial and sexual oppression of women, and female utopias: in sum, in a slim volume, a dazzling compacting of issues about women's education, development, communities, and personal histories.

The Tarini Bhavan sisters are at one level saints in a secular world, and it gives a deep dimension of affect, pathos, depth, and compassion to South Asian feminism. The strings in the work sound and chime in cheerfulness, militancy, and competence, as much as in anger, pain, loss, desolation. To be able to chime in all these keys and create a polyphony marks out *Padmarag* as a major feminist enterprise. And the musical metaphor is apposite in a book which celebrates art as much as work, the 'dulce' as much as the 'utile', and the private and plangent as much as the public and brisk.

Integrating Women Educators' Narratives of Life-long Learning and the Furthering of Basic Education: The Relevance of Rokeya's *Padmarag* for South Asian Feminism and Human Development

The multifaceted life and work of Rokeya provides inspiration and a rich source of insight to all those committed to furthering equity in education. At once a writer, feminist, novelist, essayist, polemicist, teacher, manager of a school, and social worker, Rokeya furthered women's emancipation using both her pen and her commitment to concrete welfarist

⁴ Introduction and Conclusion in Barnita Bagchi, *Pliable Pupils and Sufficient Self-Directors: Narratives of Female Education by Five British Women Writers, 1778-1814* (forthcoming, New Delhi: Tulika, 2003).

and human developmental work. To those working in the field of education and development such as the present writer, who think that processes of development in a patriarchal, multifaith society must be taken up and furthered by activist women intellectuals investing energy in furthering formal education (particularly school education for girls), Rokeya is a particularly important figure to learn from.

In the history of women's emancipation and education in South Asia (a sub-continent that far too often sees the various countries in conflict, rather than cooperating to raise the shamefully low human development levels), a figure such as Rokeya is a diamond. Bangladesh celebrates her by observing Rokeya Day on December 9 each year, while India too boasts of many and growing numbers of admirers and scholars.⁵ If the Dhaka Bangla Academy publishes Rokeya's collected works, so too do publishers in Kolkata.

Those working in adult education as well as those working in formal education can benefit richly by analyzing Rokeya's oeuvre, *Padmarag* in particular. As a crusader for girls' education, Rokeya saw the integral link between adult women's life-long learning and growth, that is women's own self-development and emancipation, and the education of millions of girls who even today lack access or security in schooling.

Today, the problem of girls' education in South Asia is urgently and worryingly acute. As the Education For All UNESCO initiative noted in 2000, half the girls in South Asia (as in sub-Saharan Africa) never attend school, over half the female population above 15 is illiterate, and South Asia has the highest gender gap in education.⁶

Meanwhile, international education and development experts are increasingly advocating that to progress in primary or basic education, one needs grassroots-based, community-based educational movements that heavily involve adult women from the community acting as motivators, participants, galvanizers, and teachers. Recent success stories in school education, whether the schooling revolution involving hill women in Himachal Pradesh in India, or the success of community-based, women teacher-based, civil society organization-based movements such as BRAC in Bangladesh or Pratham in India, demonstrate the effectiveness of women taking charge of their own lives and entering teaching and community mobilization, with a special sensitivity to girls. Women make great unleashers of social capital in the realm of education, and a re-examination of Rokeya's

⁵ See, for example, Bharati Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), which also (pp. 88-89) briefly discusses *Padmarag*.

⁶ http://www.unesco.org/courier/2000_03/uk/dossier/txt03.htm, accessed 13 October, 2003.

oeuvre brings out both the immense difficulties and great achievements faced and won by such active, educative women.

The heritage of Rokeya's multifaith, multicultural, gender-just vision, boldly and sensitively delineated in *Padmarag*, needs to be retrieved and learned from by those who have a similar unsectarian, feminist ethos, and who want urgently to bring millions of South Asian children and adults, particularly the neglected girls and women, into the fold of education.

barnita@iqidr.ac.in

barnita@lycos.com