Muslim Women and the Politics of (In)visibility in Late Colonial Bengal

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Abstract The paper attempts to understand ways in which gender and racially defined communal ideologies worked simultaneously to produce Muslim women in colonial Bengal as invisible within nationalist historiography. It argues that the negative representations of Muslim women underpinned the construction of other identity categories in colonial Bengal, and highlights the participation of Hindu/Brahmo women writers in this process.

Introduction

In recent decades there has been an explosion of scholarship on women in India. However, as a survey of this body of literature quickly reveals, much of it is focussed on Hindu women. In contrast, studies of Muslim women are noticeably scarce. What is more, when Muslim women do appear, they seem to be overwhelmingly portrayed as “oppressed” and “backward”. Such images of Muslim women as victims are also common in contemporary popular discourse in India. Even when Muslim women participate in public debates, as after the Shah Bano controversy in the mid-1980s or more recently around the issue of instituting a Uniform Civil Code — their agency is usually ignored. What looms large in both mainstream academic and popular discourses in contemporary India is their apparent difference (read: backwardness/conservatism) from the ideal modern (i.e. Hindu middle class/upper caste) women.

If most studies of Muslim women in India today represent them as passive victims, nationalist historiography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is all but silent about them. It is as if with the end of the Mughal era, Muslim women simply disappear from public discourse and they do not re-emerge as subjects of official history until well into the twentieth century. Hindu women, on the other hand, were constantly the focus of debates between the Hindu orthodoxy, the British government, the reformists, and later the nationalists throughout the nineteenth century. So whatever happened to Muslim women in colonial India?

A common assumption underlying this silence about Muslim women is that very few among them wrote anything in late colonial India which merits attention. And the most frequently invoked explanation for their lack of public involvement is, of course, their...
religion.5 Recent research, however, reveals that by the beginning of
the twentieth century, a fair number of Muslim women in British India
were writing. Their contributions in the form of women’s journals,
articles in many leading periodicals of that time, short stories, poems,
autobiographies, travel accounts — all of which went into changing the
positions of Muslim women within the home and outside — have been
considerable.6 Yet, it is practically impossible to find any mention of
Muslim women, or their contributions in Indian nationalist, or even
post-Independence history. The recorded history of women in pre-
Partition Bengal, for instance, is overwhelmingly a narrative of the
reformist experiments undertaken by a small minority of mostly
Brahmo7 and some Hindu women who actively participated in the
modernising projects of the new “liberal” elite.8 Until recently, the
efforts of early Muslim women writers such as Rokeya Sakhaqat
Hossein9 (1880–1932), or Sufia Kamal10 (1910–1999), published by a
number of periodicals spawned by the vibrant late colonial material
and cultural economy of urban centres such as Calcutta and Dhaka,
have largely remained unnoticed.11 Needless to say, the intellectual
and reform efforts of many other accomplished Muslim women in other
parts of colonial India have gone similarly unacknowledged.12

Recent work by scholars such as Gail Minault and Sonia Amin has
addressed this silence surrounding Muslim women in the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, the focus in
these studies has been mostly on rendering “historical” what, in the
words of Joan W. Scott, has hitherto been “hidden from history”.13
Consequently, identity formations among Muslim and Hindu women
in late colonial India appear as parallel processes that can
apparently be documented separately. And while these studies
provide a wealth of information that was previously unavailable, they
do not necessarily explain why the many accomplishments of early
Muslim women intellectuals and activists were written out of
normative history in the first place.

This paper is an attempt to understand the ways in which gender
and racially defined communal ideologies worked simultaneously to
deny Muslim women even the limited visibility granted to Hindu/
Brahmo women within a Hindu-dominated hegemonic nationalist
discourse, and to produce them either as invisible, or as silent victims,
even when they wrote/spoke. As I argue here, the representation of
Muslim women as “backward/victimised” were intimately related to
the production of the category modern “ideal Indian woman” as Hindu,
upper caste/middle class14 and the category “Muslim” as
predominantly male, violent, dissolute and “medieval” in late colonial
Bengal. These images of the “backward/violent” Muslim and the
“modern/liberated” Hindu woman in turn, underpinned the
reconstruction of the “effeminate babu”15 (Hindu middle class men)
as “civilised”, “liberal” and hence, capable of leading the emergent nation. Finally, the paper draws attention to the central role played by early Brahmo/Hindu women writers in producing Muslim women as the “backward” other, and hence, in bolstering their own image as “liberated/modern”. I will argue that while the literary productions of middle class Brahmo/Hindu women have been much lauded as signs of “progress” and “enlightenment” among the Bengali bhadra-sampradaya, little attention has been paid to their complex ideological functions within nationalist discourse.

Discourses of representation should, of course, not be confused with “material realities”. As I mentioned above, not all Muslim women were silent victims; nor were all middle class Hindu women “modern” even according to the definition of modernity privileged by nationalist discourse in Bengal. The focus of the current paper, however, is not on correcting the problem of invisibility/victim-image of Muslim women in nationalist discourse. Instead, the intent here is to understand the discursive practices that produced that invisibility, and to locate the material contexts in which such discourses were embedded. Elsewhere, I have dealt in some detail with middle class Bengali Muslim women’s own efforts to forge identities against the grain of dominant representations at the end of the nineteenth century. Here, I merely concentrate on untangling some of the links between the invisibility/victim-image of Muslim women, and the specific visibility of both Muslim men, and Brahmo/Hindu women within a hegemonic Hindu nationalist discourse in late colonial Bengal. In other words, this paper concerns itself mainly with an important part of the discursive context that framed the early intellectual and reform efforts of Muslim women writers and social reformers in the twentieth century.

The empirical focus of this essay is on colonial Bengal; however, the problem of invisibility of Muslim women it addresses — admittedly within a limited context — was certainly not unique to Bengal. The paper takes feminist theories of the state and nation as its point of departure. However, it also brings the theoretical insights of Black and Third World feminist critiques to bear on the problem of double exclusion of Muslim women produced by intersecting discourses of gender, community (religious, in this case), and nationalism in late colonial Bengal. In the second part, the paper uses articles from several Bengali periodicals that were circulating in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to highlight ways in which Muslims in general, and Muslim women in particular were constructed in the Hindu/Brahmo nationalist imaginary. Here, I also reflect on the relationship between this economy of representations and the social, economic, and political formations that produced it. The paper ends with some thoughts on
the implications of Muslim women’s relative invisibility within conventional historical scholarship in India.

**Family-Nation-Woman**

Feminist scholarship in recent decades has repeatedly pointed out that women’s integration into the modern nation-state system has historically followed a path fundamentally different from that of men. According to feminist readings of the Social Contract theory, men’s original political rights in the public sphere, derive not from their rights as “free-born” sons, but from masculine rule or the husband’s unquestioned sexual access to his wife’s body in the private sphere. And it is this “God-given” sexual right exercised over women within the family that defines men as “individuals” or “citizens”, and women as their other, the fundamentally dependent subjects.

The feminist argument about the connection between women’s subordination within the private sphere and men’s claim to political power can be profitably applied to the study of anti-colonial nationalisms. One could argue, for instance, that in a colonial context, which by definition violates the “natural freedom” of colonised men, gaining legitimacy within the private or inner/spiritual realm of the family/nation takes on a certain poignancy for anti-colonial nationalist men. In the context of colonial India, for instance, forging a modern nationalist culture thus involved the re-formulation of precisely this inner sphere and its institutions such as education, language, and especially the family. And, of course, re-forming the family necessarily meant scrutiny and change of women’s positions within it. The ideal woman of nationalist imagination was, therefore, not necessarily the invisible subject confined within the bounds of the family in colonial India. A series of highly contested reform efforts put her at the very centre of public discourse throughout the nineteenth century. She was expected to “modernise” herself in order to be a fitting emblem of the emergent (Hindu) nation.

However, for all the changes that women’s lives underwent in nineteenth century Bengal, in the final analysis their roles were scripted to meet the needs of a male nationalist politics, specifically the twin exigencies of vindicating Hindu men and culture. The reforms in the nineteenth century were ultimately meant to prove that Hindu men were capable of being “modern” and “civilised”, not to allow women to be independent of men. As the debates around issues such as higher education for women in the last two decades of the nineteenth century show, the only context in which women would be allowed visibility and agency was under the guardianship of men, and to further the nationalist cause in some way. Any agency
shown by women that fell outside these acceptable limits was liable to be ridiculed, denounced, and ultimately given short shrift within nationalist historiography.

**Between Women**

Feminist scholars have taken universalist pretensions of nationalist discourses to task by making exclusions (or inclusions) based on gender visible as a constitutive element in the process of nation-building, and the definition of citizenship. However in their efforts to foreground the importance of gender, feminist theories have sometimes homogenised the divergent experiences of different groups of women produced by the mediation of factors other than gender. In recent decades, Black and Third World feminists have made powerful arguments against the definition of women’s oppression purely in terms of gender. Here, I would like to highlight three important insights coming from this internally differentiated, but still loosely identifiable body of literature that are of crucial importance to the present paper.26 First, as many of them have pointed out, the experience of being a woman is necessarily mediated through the simultaneous workings of factors other than gender, such as race, class, nation, or sexuality.27 Second, Black/Third World feminists insist that gender, racial, or class oppressions (or privileges) do not just co-exist, but that they are in fact mutually constitutive.28 As they see it, treating these oppressions as parallel, obscures the compound exclusions faced by poor women, or women of colour.29 Third, and perhaps most importantly, Black/Third World feminist theories argue that gender, racial, and class oppressions/privileges are relational in nature.30 As Kamala Visweswaran puts it, women become “women” not just in relation to men, but also in relation to other women.31 According to this understanding of identity-formation, then, the construction of the “self” is inextricably linked to the definition of an “other”.32

Unfortunately, the relational and contingent nature of identity is mostly ignored in studies of women in India. It is quite common, for instance, to treat the “problems” of different classes/communities (religious or otherwise) of women as distinct objects of enquiry; comparisons of the “status” of one group of women to that of another are also not uncommon. But it is hard to find attempts at systematically relating the “backwardness” or “oppression” experienced by one group of women to the “privileges” enjoyed by another. Gender exploitation is widely defined as a problem of men dominating women. Without in any way minimising that particular equation, I would like to turn our attention here to the problem of unequal relations between different groups of women in colonial India.
In the nineteenth century, the more “liberal”, mostly English-educated sections of the new Hindu middle class embarked on the difficult programme of creating a national culture and history that supposedly originated in a classical past. However, the “myth of the golden age of Indian womanhood”, which was at the very centre of this new history, foregrounded the image of the “Aryan” (upper caste Hindu) woman, not that of the enslaved “Vedic dasi”. The new Indian woman of nationalist imaginations, fashioned after the figure of the “Aryan” woman, had to be educated and modern; her creativity, however, was to be confined to the realm of the family. Women’s participation in any activities outside this social space in performance, religious preaching, or the labor force would mark them out as deviants and prostitutes. In colonial Bengal, for instance, poor women who had to seek work outside the domestic sphere, and could not possibly meet the standards of refinement and chastity required of the bhadramahila, found themselves simply written out of the new nation’s normative history.

Class and caste were not the only mechanisms of exclusion, however. In late colonial Bengal, yet another set of unequal relations which remains mostly unexamined obtained between Hindu and Muslim women. Feminist scholars of colour would contend that it is not possible to understand representations of Black women and their sexuality in the Americas without considering the corresponding constructions of White women as chaste. As I see it, it is similarly impossible to fully appreciate the figure of the Muslim woman represented as victimised, invisible, and immoral without considering the simultaneous foregrounding of the Hindu elite woman as the adarsha bhartiya nari. I will further argue that this hegemonic nationalist discourse also produces “Mussalman” as a violent, and almost exclusively male category by making Muslim women invisible. In other words, it simultaneously genders muslim-ness, and renders Hindu (racialises?) the category “ideal Indian woman”. But first, a few words about the socio-economic, and political contexts, which both gave rise to and were in turn shaped by these discourses of representation, are in order.

**Hindu Constructions of Muslims**

By the mid-nineteenth century, the new Hindu middle class in Bengal had clearly established its position as the indigenous elite in the spheres of both business and education; by all accounts, Muslims were not yet part of this process of middle-class formation. As one author puts it, the nineteenth century “intellectual revolution” in Bengal, and the social reforms that came in its wake were mainly the achievements of a particularly
“enlightened” section of this new middle class; Muslims had little to do with this “renaissance”. Consequently, public debates over reforms in Bengal — as reflected in the pages of a slew of Bengali periodicals and newspapers which appeared from the mid-nineteenth century onward — were mostly preoccupied with issues pertaining to Hindus. Muslims did not participate in these debates on Sati, widow remarriage, or the systematisation of Bengali as the appropriate medium of instruction; they took to the print media much later. Yet, interestingly enough, by the end of the nineteenth century we find these periodicals run by Hindus replete with examples of disparaging representations of both Muslim men and women. How can we explain this sudden interest among Hindus in defining Muslims as the “inferior” other? The answer, I believe, lies partly in shifts in British discourse about Indians, especially from the 1870s onward.

In 1872, the colonial government published the first census reports, followed by settlement reports in an attempt to enumerate and categorise Indian populations. In these reports, the British made a crucial distinction between the “foreign-born” ashraf or supposedly “authentic/original” Muslims, and the atrap or “low-caste converts” from Hinduism. According to these official accounts, the atrap apparently formed the bulk of the Muslim population in colonial India. In order to prove the original “hindu-ness” of the majority of Indian Muslims, the British introduced the ethnographic scale of measurement (Cephalic index), thereby further intensifying an already racialised discussion. W.W. Hunter’s characterisation of the atrap as “fanatic” and “jihad-seeking” in an influential book published in 1872 further consolidated the picture of a population, hostile to British interests. It also produced the majority of Muslims in India as both low-caste, “no longer Hindu” (read/Hindus who no longer want to be Hindu/traitors), and “inauthentic Muslim”, thus creating pressures among Muslims and Hindus alike to calcify identities that were relatively fluid until then. Religion, thus, emerged as a complex combined code for class, caste and race in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in colonial India. It also became a vital axis around which “loyalty” to the (Hindu) nation would henceforth be measured.

The second half of the nineteenth century also saw a marked change in British attitudes towards Indians in general. The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, in which Hindus and Muslims came together in a spontaneous expression of hatred and mistrust for the British, consolidated in the eyes of the colonisers an essential “Indian-ness” that was irrational, untrustworthy, superstitious, and intrinsically, racially different. To the British, one of the most important signs of the primitiveness of Indian men, and by extension their incapacity
for Reason and progress, was their tendency to have a plurality of wives.\textsuperscript{44} The availability of new “knowledge” about the invisible “dark zenanas”, produced by the increasing numbers of British women who came to India after 1857, further undermined the “manliness” of Indian men in colonial discourse. Even the western educated Hindu \textit{babu} — the erstwhile trusted allies of the British — were increasingly ridiculed as “effeminate” in colonial discourse. By the 1880s, the British could no longer count on these “little brown Englishmen” to help them rule in a foreign land as they became more politically conscious and vocal. Consequently, the \textit{bhadralok}’s\textsuperscript{45} western ways, so encouraged by the British earlier in the nineteenth century, began to appear “unnatural” amidst hardening beliefs about the intrinsic inferiority of the “Indian”.\textsuperscript{46}

The Hindu \textit{bhadralok}’s perceptions of their own manliness also suffered as both profits from land ownership, and their hold over foreign and local trade, dominated respectively by the British and the \textit{Marwaris},\textsuperscript{47} declined significantly at the end of the nineteenth century. As a result, the \textit{bhadralok} found themselves more dependent on administrative and professional employment under the colonial government than ever before. By the beginning of the twentieth century, and especially after the first partition of Bengal (1905–1911), even this last bastion of economic security was threatened by swelling numbers of educated Bengalis, among them members of a slowly developing Muslim middle class. The increasing interest in representing Muslims as the “inferior other” at the end of the nineteenth century should therefore be read as part of the Hindu middle class’s attempts to establish/salvage its legitimacy as leaders of the nation within a rapidly shifting discursive and material context. As we shall see presently, the contemporary literary efforts of the Hindu \textit{bhadramahila}, that I concentrate on here, must also be understood as fulfilling a complex set of ideological functions within this same context of flux and uncertainty.

The publication of vernacular periodicals and newspapers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is typically considered to be part of the intellectual awakening of the Bengali middle class. In the light of the preceding discussion, however, these periodicals appear to be much more than the intellectual coming-of-age of a colonised people. Together, they represented an important space in which the idea of India as a national community could be imagined and experienced simultaneously by a growing vernacular readership.\textsuperscript{48} They also provided a discursive site in which battles over defining the ideal Indian woman (symbol of the nation) and man (the normative citizen-subject) were fought. As the following discussion will show, fledgling elements of right-wing Hindu political rhetoric — so common in contemporary India — can already be found in the
pages of popular periodicals run by the most educated and “enlightened” sections of the Hindu/Brahmo bhadrasampradaya both men and women — in late colonial Bengal. Of the four periodicals I quote from here, three — Antahpur, Mahila, and Bharat Mahila had women editors. The articles taken from the first two were published at the turn of the nineteenth century; those quoted from Bharat Mahila were all published in 1913. The fourth, Bamabodhini Patrika, a monthly periodical meant explicitly for women, was established as early as 1863. Each of these periodicals was chosen because of its explicit interest in women’s issues, and because women regularly contributed to them. Apart from the four periodicals mentioned above, I also draw on the Nabanoor — one of the early influential periodicals published by Muslim intellectuals, which was in circulation between 1903 and 1906.

A close reading of the articles, written mostly by Hindu and Brahmo women at that time reveals certain common tendencies. First, Muslims are overwhelmingly portrayed in these articles as unscrupulous, debauched, and abusive — in short, an uncivilised “jati” — a word that translates variously as “caste,” “race,” “community” or “nationality”. Second, the real aim of these articles seems to be to explain the “fall” of Aryan/Hindu “civilisation” from its “glory” in a supposed “classical” antiquity to a period of “medieval” backwardness; Muslims are introduced into these discussions mostly as agents of this “tragic downfall” of Hindu civilisation. Third, the authors, who were mostly “liberal” in their outlook, frequently pick on very specific institutions such as pardah, child-marriage, and polygamy — which were at the heart of hotly contested contemporary debates — and blame Muslims for having introduced them to “India”. This maneuver served the dual purpose of both vindicating the essential “humanism” of “Hindu culture” in the eyes of the British, and strengthening their own arguments regarding the illegitimacy of such practices in the struggles against the Hindu orthodoxy. For instance, an essay published in 1891 in Bamabodhini Patrika, claims with perfect certainty that the institution of pardah was not even known to India before the arrival of Muslims.

It was in emulation of this Muslim practice, and to save themselves [or their women] from the reckless exploitation of Muslim rulers that Hindus gradually adopted the practice of pardah.

In another article, which appeared a decade later in a women’s magazine in 1902, themes such as nostalgia for an Aryan (read/Hindu) past, hatred for Muslims, and the projection of the modern idea of an “Indian nation” on to a mythical, timeless, past find
forceful expression. Note also the use of the word ‘jati’ to signify innate difference in this case. As the reference to Europeans would suggest, the difference being invoked here is racial difference.

Today when we talk of civilised jati, we usually refer to inhabitants of Europe and America. But how old is this civilisation in England and America? Indians had reached the highest level of civilisation much before [the Westerners], . . . At that time . . . many women were equal to men in learning and thinking. Women used to participate in academic discussions with men in public forums . . . Mussalman . . . attacks and Mussalman rule put an end to the flow of progress in this country, and it fell into the clutches of moral degeneration and miserable times. [The Mussalmans] indulged in all kinds of debauchery. They also practised seclusion of women. . . .

The theme of degeneration under Muslim rule, be it moral, political, cultural, or social, was common enough at this time. As the following excerpt from an article written by a male author shows, accounts of a “glorious Hindu history” often came with prejudicial statements about Muslims. It is also worth noting that the Muslim subject foregrounded in all these “historical” accounts was always male and tyrannical, an object of only fear and hatred.

By the 15th century, Bengali literature . . . which had already reached a certain maturity, was . . . wiped out by the destructive practices of oppressive Muslim [rule]. If the destructive policies of Muslims had not ruined it, Bengali literary tradition would certainly have been acknowledged as both an ancient and a great tradition. So many invaluable manuscripts have been lost under the torture and oppression of Muslims. . . .

Clearly, the author sees Muslim rule only as destructive and subjugating. And from where did these authors derive their ideas? They cite various “historians,” interpreters of Vedas, and of course, both Orientalist and other European scholarship — which was accepted as the most authoritative source on India’s history. Thus, in the closing years of the nineteenth century Bamabodhini Patrika carried the following translation of a speech given by Mr. Bethune almost fifty years earlier at the inaugural function of the Bethune School, ostensibly in support of the claims made by contemporary Hindu authors in its pages:

The practice of secluding your women and their present ignorant state are not sanctioned by your ancient [Aryan] society. I believe that it is in emulation of the conquering Muslims that this practice started here. . . . The women of your sages and of the nobility enjoyed considerable freedom . . .

Where did Mr. Bethune get this information that allowed him to speak with such certainty about a Vedic past? We do not know. Most of the writers apparently were unconcerned with the authenticity of these sources, or the claims they made. It was quite acceptable,
fashionable even, to openly air negative opinions about Muslims in late colonial Bengal, without having to furnish supporting evidence. There is considerable debate, for instance, surrounding the beginnings of *pardah* as an institution in the subcontinent. Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, who was widely known as an exceptional scholar and social reformer of that time, believed that the practice of excluding women was already in place in what is India today as early as the sixth century BC. Not one of the authors quoted above, however, even as much as engaged this debate. A few Hindu authors did protest against this tendency to fabricate histories to fit the increasingly dominant story about India’s past. In an article titled “*Gotadui Katha*” (A Few Words) published in 1904, Nirmal Chandra Ghosh commented on the unfair representations of Muslims by Hindu authors. He pointed out that many articles, which come out in monthly magazines, are presented in the guise of history, but in fact have little to do with “reality”. However, Ghosh seems to have been in the minority.

From numerous such articles which were published at that time, it appears that the only history that the Hindu Bengali nationalist elite would allow Muslims in India was one of shame, of immorality, of misrule, and finally of defeat by a superior power. It is as if the Hindu intelligentsia of nineteenth-century Bengal was entirely in denial about the traditions of secularism, rationalism, and non-conformity of pre-British Muslim India. What is more, the category “Muslim” is not only vilified, but also almost always masculinised. The dominant trend at the end of the nineteenth century seems to have been to blame “Muslims” for inventing all oppressive practices against women, thereby absolving Hindus of any responsibility for the most severely criticised aspects of “Hindu society”.

**The Zenana and the Woman Question**

And how were Muslim women represented? In a recent article on the writings of Englishwomen on Indian women Janaki Nair has discussed the importance of the *zenana* — the “cavernous depths of ‘idolatry and superstition’” as a trope in colonial discourse on India. As she argues, the *zenana* had come to be practically synonymous with “Indian womanhood” and women’s “oppression”. Given the centrality of this trope in colonial criticisms of “India’s culture”, it is not hard to comprehend why self-professed “liberal” Hindu/Brahmo writers, men and women, would be keen on distancing themselves from the institutions of seclusion or *pardah*, and polygamy that the *zenana* symbolised. It is also easy to see why they would want to pin the invention and widespread adoption of these “primitive” practices on Muslim rule.
However, following Nair I would argue that for Hindu/Brahmo women, representing Muslim women as “hapless victims” of lustful Muslim men served two important purposes. First, by portraying Muslim women as “sexual servants” unable to resist Muslim men, and hence somehow weak, both morally and physically, Hindu/Brahmo women highlighted their own emergence outside the home as chaste, strong mothers/consorts. More importantly, it provided them with an opportunity to “count” their “blessings” as members of the “dominant community”, rather than advance a thorough criticism of their own continued subjugation by Hindu/Brahmo men.

By the end of the 19th century, Hindu and Brahmo women from educated “progressive” Bengali families were participating enthusiastically in the project of (re)writing history. Not surprisingly, many of the articles written by them at this time focus exclusively on women; other essays deal only with Muslims, and are full of negative allusions to “dissolute Muslim men”. Muslim women, however, are rarely mentioned in these articles, except in oblique references in relation to Muslim men. When they do appear, mostly in the writings of Hindu/Brahmo women, Muslim women are almost always portrayed as helpless victims of male oppression on one hand, and their own moral, sexual ignorance/weakness which allowed such oppression in the first place, on the other. For example, one article, published in 1903 in a periodical for women claims:

“Each badshah, nawab or amir would keep hundreds of wives imprisoned in the inner quarters. . . . One man could do anything that pleased him, . . . he would keep hundreds of helpless women enslaved in dark prisons — what terrible exploitation, what injustice!”

For all her apparent compassion, the author here clearly distances herself from the masses of “helpless women”, who appear strictly as objects of sexual exploitation, and hence by implication, somehow inferior. In another essay titled “Child Marriage and Seclusion”, published around 1901, the author Shyamasundari Debi actually spells out the “difference” between “backward” sexually exploited other women, and “liberated” women like herself. According to her, in societies that are against female education and “liberty”, and advocate pardah, women tend to have “loose morals”. She then goes on to cite “Muslim society” as an example of such a society. Shyamasundari Debi’s article was so well received within bhadralok intellectual circles that it actually won an award.

This attempt on the part of “modern” Hindu/Brahmo women to distinguish themselves from “other” women marks many of the articles written at the turn of the nineteenth century. In yet a prize-
winning essay, which appeared serially over ten months in Bamabodhini Patrika, Mankumari Basu, one of the more accomplished, well-known, and respected women writers of late nineteenth-century Bengal, discusses the “situation of Indian women in the past hundred years.” Mankumari was an educated woman, a poet. Yet her essay features the same predictable figures of the accomplished Aryan woman, the tyrannical Muslim ruler, the weak Hindu men, and the British as saviours from the clutches of Muslim rule. It is remarkable how she effortlessly equates “Indian” with Hindu, so that Muslim rule itself becomes yet another incarnation of colonial rule. Through this narrative maneuver, the story of Hindu middle class women becomes the story of “Indian” women. Muslim women are clearly not a part of this national imaginary that Mankumari and her middle class/upper caste Hindu contemporaries shared. However, although Mankumari does not explicitly mention Muslim women in her essay, I would argue that their presence is still palpable. Consider the following statement about the beginning of the Bethune school, for instance:

At that time there was much agitation around the issue of women’s education in this country. Many men, who realised that Mr. Bethune was . . . providing education to women with the help of Hindu pundits, in an atmosphere in which there was no fear of contact with the daughters of lowly, and dishonest people, sent their daughters and sisters to school.71

As discussed earlier, by the third quarter of the nineteenth century ideas about the low-caste origins of most indigenous Muslims, and by extension, their “innately untrustworthy”, even “violent” nature had been authenticated by colonial discourse.72 It is thus fair to assume that in the above article, Mankumari is probably referring to both low caste Hindus and Muslims when she talks about “lowly and dishonest people” against whom the Hindu bhadrasampraday defined itself.73

One could go on, but I will only cite one more set of examples of Hindu/Brahmo women’s perception/representation of Muslim women from the turn of the century. In 1903, Mahila — a women’s periodical — carried a provocative essay by a then unknown Mrs. R. S. Hossain, a Muslim woman. The essay, titled “Alankar or the Badges of Slavery”, was a severe criticism of gender inequality in which Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain compared the gift of jewelry, the ultimate sign of a husband’s affection, with chains of bondage. The essay shocked and infuriated progressive Brahmo and Hindu women, many of whom responded angrily in writing. In one article, the author wrote

It seems that the author wants to see wanton behavior amongst women. Instead of womanly modesty, grace, gentleness, devotion, [and] the willingness to serve . . . [she] wants to see the development of a harsh, abnormal independence. . . .74
Almost everyone who responded felt that women ought to be “governed” by their husbands, and that “too much freedom” was not good for women. As another woman commented,

Accepting one’s subordination to one’s husband is not slavery, it is a woman’s [most prized] ornament. . . . I don’t know what kind of a woman would equate serving one’s husband with slavery. . . . A woman must always be subordinated to her husband, there is nothing wrong with that. . . .75

These assertions of women’s “natural subordination” to men clearly show that the authors, all of whom were “recuperated” and “modern” female subjects who enjoyed the privilege of both voice and visibility outside the zenana, were nonetheless fundamentally uncomfortable with the idea of women’s independence. What is even more interesting, however, is that a majority of the respondents sought to explain away Rokeya’s criticism as a kind of rabid reaction precipitated by the extreme exploitation that Muslim women were subjected to within “Muslim society”, rather than seriously engage her criticism. As the editor of Mahila wrote,

For various reasons, women and daughters in Muslim families have to put up with many different forms of torture and hardship from their menfolk. . . . Perhaps this is why [Rokeya’s] attack on them has somewhat crossed [accepted] limits. But . . . not all men are . . . against the education and overall progress of women. . . . In fact many among the bhadralk [educated/civilised men] are quite in favour of such changes.76

By invoking the familiar images of extraordinary oppression faced by Muslim women, the author refuses to deal with the implications of Rokeya’s trenchant criticism of women’s collusion in perpetuating gender and sexual exploitation for a more critical understanding of Hindu women’s position. Nor was every article quite as tempered in tone as the editorial quoted above. For instance, one respondent attacked Rokeya for her apparent “unreasonableness”:

The way in which the Muslim sister . . . has painted men as cruel and selfish . . . I can swear that no bhadramahila can agree with her. . . . I don’t know about the Muslim community, but there is quite a wave of advancement amongst Hindu women throughout Hindu society these days. In India, women are treated as goddesses by Hindus; they worship women. . . . If the Muslim sister could demonstrate even one improvement . . . [that she suggests in her essay] with her own life, then many of the problems of society would be solved of course. When will this terrible practice of pardah, so common in her community, stop? . . . It is so ridiculous to cover one’s beautiful body entirely with an ugly veil such as the burqa.77 . . . [It is] grotesque.78

But is it really true that women’s oppression was no longer an issue among the Hindu bhadrasampraday? Or did Rokeya’s criticisms touch upon an issue that did not bear scrutiny? How can we account for the stark contrast, for instance, between these assertion of...
women’s exalted positions in Hindu society, and the descriptions of abject misery of the “high caste Hindu woman” denounced so eloquently in the contemporary writings of Pandita Ramabai?79

The irony of course is that contrary to what her critics assumed about the “oppression that she must have faced as a Muslim woman”, Rokeya Sakhwat Hossein had a happy, if short marriage. After the untimely death of her husband, Rokeya, who herself had never attended school, spent the rest of her life struggling to help women, particularly Muslim women, achieve education and self-sufficiency, even within the context of pardah. What is unfortunate, however, is that while Rokeya’s Hindu critics were quick to pity Muslim women for their “backwardness”, they were still unwilling to share their social space and privileges with Muslim women. At the end of the nineteenth century, fifty years after the Bethune school was started, it was still inaccessible to Muslim women.80

Recent scholarship on colonial Bengal suggests that although reform efforts of elite Hindu/Brahmo men in the nineteenth century benefited women, equality of the sexes was never part of the reformist/nationalist agenda.81 In fact, by the end of the nineteenth century, once some of the more obvious oppressions faced by women were removed, the bhadralok became increasingly uncomfortable with the prospect of further reforms that could affect the private domain, especially their control over women.82 As Kamla Visweswaran has argued, the reaction of the bhadralok must be understood not just as opposition to colonial interference in the “inner autonomous” realm of the nation, but also as a move to contain women’s agency.83

The articles I discuss above were written in this climate of growing hostility toward the prospect of women’s independence. The visceral responses to Rokeya’s criticism of women’s continued subservience — economic and sexual — must therefore be read as the panicked reaction of elite women who had gained certain privileges, symbolic or otherwise, through their membership in the dominant class and community at the expense of the possibility of gender equality. Making Muslim women “visible” as oppressed and ignorant allowed these elite women to flaunt their own relative privileges, even as it rendered “invisible” their own continued subservience to men. By focusing on the supposed “greater misfortunes” of other women, Hindu/Brahmo women hid, perhaps even from themselves, their own collusion in foreclosing the troubling question of women’s equality that was superseded by the putative greater cause of national independence. It is not hard to see why a majority of the Hindu bhadramahila, for whom education was a way to ensure acceptance by educated husbands, found Rokeya’s call to “self-sufficiency” threatening, perhaps even incomprehensible.84
By the second decade of the twentieth century, the ideas about Bharat (India) as a nation, and its essential Hinduness seem to have condensed further in the minds of the Hindu middle class. As a survey of essays published in a prominent periodical, Bharat Mahila (Indian Woman) from 1913 shows, most of the issues discussed were all focused on the experiences of Hindu/Brahmo women. And if the articles from the turn of the century seemed anxious to establish the “superiority” of Hindus, the tone of the articles in 1913 seem to be one of quiet confidence. Muslim women are almost never mentioned in these articles, as if such explicit comparisons are no longer necessary. Thus, for example, in a report on the Bangiya Sahitya Sammelan (Bengali Literary Conference), the editor writes:

Bharat [India] is currently absorbing the lights of all the civilisations of the world. This will change the Bengali ideals of women’s lives as well. The great Indian ideals of Sita, Sabitri, Subhadra, Damayanti, Gargi, Maitreyi, Gautami, Sanghamitra will also once again find expression in us.86

Or as another article from the same journal argues,

In the middle ages . . . women’s lives were entirely subject to the mercy of men . . . . Who does not know about the [in]famous practice of Sati, or the infanticide of little girls in Rajputana? And everyone knows about the cruel, hard oppression of women by the Muslims. . . . When will those days of Sita-Sabitri’s devotion [for their husbands], Gargi-Maitreyi’s divine knowledge, Lilabati-Kshana’s learning and intelligence, or Draupadi-Subhadra’s caring arrive in Bharat [India] once again?87

Note how easily the authors invoke mythical Aryan women as the ideals for modern Indian womanhood in these essays. All the women mentioned as potential models for emulation and respect are Aryan/Hindu. In contrast, not even one Muslim woman is acknowledged as accomplished in any way. There is no mention, for instance, of Gulbadan, the daughter of the first Mughal emperor Babur, who wrote the famous panegyric Humayun-Nama88 (c. 1587) among other pieces; or of Salima Sultan Begum — a highly educated woman and a poet — known as “Khadeja”89 of that era” for her wisdom; or the politically astute Nur Jahan who practically ruled the Mughal empire as emperor Jehangir’s wife between 1611–1628; or even of Aurangzeb’s daughter Jahan Ara — a woman of great learning and wisdom who commissioned the building of the Jumma Masjid90 in 1647.91

Conclusion

It can be argued that this combination of outright silence, overtly unflattering representation, and oblique, negative allusions over
time consolidated a picture of Muslim women as “backward,” or simply “invisible” in the national imaginary. In fact, it is in the figure of the traditional woman — silenced and victimised by the barbarity of Muslim men — that Muslim women make one of their few appearances in Hindu nationalist discourse. Once they are incorporated into the larger story of Indian womanhood in this particular capacity, everything else they do simply becomes invisible to a Hindu-dominated normative historiography. It is as if the subcontinent was colonised, the nation was born, the lives of Hindu (middle class/upper caste) women changed immensely, and all these tumultuous changes simply passed by Muslim women, who continued to languish in their misery arising from their religion. In turn, these constructions of Muslims as the quintessential others of ideal Indian citizen-subjects, put forth by Hindu men and women, facilitated the appropriation of several centuries of Muslim rule in the subcontinent simply as an unfortunate chapter in the otherwise glorious career of the Hindu nation.

Notes

1 I have incurred many debts in the process of writing this paper. The archival research presented here was made possible by a travel grant from the Program in Comparative International Development, Department of Sociology, Johns Hopkins University. This paper has taken shape through many discussions with Antoinette Burton, David Scott, and Beverly Silver. I am grateful for their insight and thoughtful comments. Prasad Kuduvalli, Patricia Landolt, Indira Ravindran, Bilgin Ayata, Sarah Khokhar and Michael Dorsey have all commented on various drafts of this paper. I thank them too. I would also like to thank the staff of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Calcutta, Bangladesh Mission Library, Calcutta, Asiatic Society, Calcutta, National Library, Calcutta, and Bangla Academy, Dhaka for their patience and help. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Department of Sociology, Johns Hopkins University in April 1998, and the American Anthropological Association Meetings in Philadelphia, December 1998. I thank the participants for their comments. I have also benefited from the comments of the members of the Coloniality of Power Collective at Binghamton University, SUNY, especially Vandana Swami and Israel Silva-Merced. Finally, my deepest thanks to my parents, Bhabani Bhushan and Lily Sarkar for their encouragement and support during my fieldwork.


3 Recent feminist and postcolonial scholarship in India too have followed the general trend within Indian historiography in focusing mostly on Hindu women. See for instance, Radha Kumar, The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women’s Rights and Feminism in India, 1800–1990 (London: Verso, 1993). Even the Subaltern studies collective which has dealt with tensions between different religious communities, is curiously silent about Muslim women.


5 It is worth noting here that Bengali Muslim women in Bangladesh — an Islamic nation — are far more actively involved in the public sphere than Muslim women in West Bengal — the half of Bengal that became part of India after the Partition in 1947.


7 A faction amongst Hindus in Bengal who were influenced by Unitarianism, and were against the ritualistic excesses of Hinduism as it was practiced in Bengal in the nineteenth century. Brahmos were especially against idolatry. See David Kopf, British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); David Kopf, The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of Modern Indian Mind. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

8 According to Joya Chatterji, the bhadralok or Bengali (predominantly Hindu) elite comprised only about five percent of Bengal’s population. Joya Chatterji, Bengal Divided: Hindu communalism and partition, 1932–1947. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). See also Ghuilam Murshid, Reluctant Debutantes (Rajshahi, 1983). Needless to say, an even smaller proportion of this already small group actually supported the reform
initiatives of the nineteenth century.

9 Rokeya was born into an orthodox Muslim aristocratic family in East Bengal in 1880. Like most women of her class, she grew up observing strict *pardah*. After her husband’s death, Rokeya started a school for Muslim girls in his memory first in Bhagalpur, and later in Calcutta in 1911. Apart from numerous essays published in a whole array of periodicals run by both Hindus/Brahmos and Muslims, Rokeya also wrote a novel (*Padmaraga*), and various short stories. She was also active in social work, mostly involving women. Her works include, *Sultana’s Dream* and *Selections from the Secluded Ones*, tr. R. Jahan, 1988; two volumes of collected essays, *Motichur*, 1905 & 1921; *Pipasa*, 1922; and one novel *Padmaraga*.


10 Sufia Kamal was born in 1910 in Shaistabad, East Bengal. She came from the local *nawab* family — a well-known and respected rural aristocratic family in undivided Bengal. Sufia never went to school, but learnt to read and write at home. Although cultivation of Bengali language and literature was frowned upon in aristocratic families like hers, she still managed to master the language secretly. Sufia was one of the first Muslim women writers who won wide acclaim in the literary circles of Bengal. After the Partition, Sufia played a crucial role in the *bhansha andolan* (language agitation) in the 1950s in East Pakistan, against the Urdu-speaking political elite. Until her recent death, she had been centrally involved with social and political reform and activism, not to mention the vibrant intellectual life in Dhaka.

11 For a welcome exception to this pattern of ignoring Muslim women’s work, see the invaluable collection, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (eds.) *Women Writing in India, 600 BC to the Present* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995). It is important to note that most of the existing scholarship on Bengali Muslim women is published out of Bangladesh.


17 The Bengali term for the educated middle class coined in the nineteenth century. Literally it means the “civilised class/community”.


19 Muslim women from poorer, working class backgrounds were of course entirely invisible to this discourse. The nationalist project in British India, as in most other parts of the world, was dominated by the middle classes. Because of its particular focus on this middle class discourse, this paper does not deal with Muslim women from the working classes. The concern here is to show that Hindu dominated nationalist discourse in colonial India rendered Muslim women — even from the middle/upper classes — invisible.


21 Bengal, before partition/independence, was one of the few Muslim-majority provinces in India. Calcutta was also the main seat of colonial power and so not necessarily representative of the rest of India. However, because of particular socio-political configurations in Bengal — especially the presence of one of the first, and more vocal nationalist elites, and their strident efforts to create a national culture — the divides between modern/traditional, national/communal, Hindu/Muslim become sharpened here. It thus provides a good site to study these processes. Also, as recent research has pointed out, similar problems of silence and invisibility of Muslim women obtain in the written history of other parts of colonial India as well. See Shahida Lateef, Muslim Women in India: political and private realities (New Delhi: Kali for Women/London: Zed Books Ltd., 1990); Gail Minault, “Political Change: Muslim Women in Conflict with Parda: Their Role in the Indian Nationalist Movement,” Chipp and Green eds., Asian Women in Transition, (College Station: Pennsylvania University Press, 1980), 194–203; Gail Minault, “Begamati Zuban: Women’s Language and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Delhi,” India International Quarterly, Vol. 11, no. 2 (1989): 155–170; Metcalf, “Reading and Writing about Muslim Women, 1994.


24 Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and

25 In mid-nineteenth century Bengal, for instance, modernisation for middle class Hindu women entailed learning to read and write, picking up various hobbies including music, gardening, sewing, and more significantly, leaving the seclusion of the inner quarters, and playing hostess to their husbands’ guests. In time, women began attending schools, and even taking up jobs outside the home. See Murshid, Reluctant Debutante, 99–127; Meredith Borthwick, The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849–1905 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984).


33 In “Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dast?” Recasting Women, 46–47, Uma Chakravarti documents the instrumental role played by European Orientalist scholars in popularising a racist Aryan version of the Hindu golden age.

34 Sumanta Banerjee, Dangerous Outcast: The Prostitute in Nineteenth
35 The women of the bhadrasampraday.
36 Directly translated, “ideal Indian woman”.
37 Tharu and Niranjana also discuss such masculinisation of the category Dalit (untouchable), and the marking of the category “woman” as upper caste. Susie Tharu & Tejaswini Niranjana, “Problems,” *Subaltern Studies IX*, 243.
40 Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 106–132. Muslims, in fact were quite wary, if not dismissive, of the sanskritisation of Bengali in the middle of the nineteenth century, because it delegitimised mussalmani Bengali used in the punthi or manuscript literature that was popular among Muslims in Bengal. Mussalmani Bengali is distinct because of its use of Arabic and Persian words.
45 Bhadralok is used to refer to educated Bengali middle class men. The term was first coined and used by Hindus, who apparently reserved it to refer to themselves only. See Sonia Amin, *The World of Muslim Women* (1996).
50 Ghulam Murshid describes the objective of Bamabodhini as an attempt to “educate its readers in subjects such as Bengali, History, Geography, Elementary Science, Hygiene, Astronomy, Childcare, Housekeeping, and Religion” Murshid, *The Reluctant Debutantes* (Rajshahi, 1983). 233. The *Bamabodhini Sabha*, the association behind this enterprise, also began a correspondence course for women through the *Patrika*, known as *Antahpur shiksha* (or education in the zenana or women’s quarters). Until the 1860s, zenana education had been mainly carried on under the aegis of Christian missionaries. See also Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849–1905* (1984); Dagmar Engels, *Beyond Purdah? Women in Bengal 1890–1939* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996). For an account of early

51 Although I have consulted many other periodicals of that time, in this paper, I have focused on these four only. It should be mentioned here that it is in fact increasingly difficult to obtain such records because of problems of preservation both in Calcutta and Dhaka.

52 All translations from Bengali are by the author.

53 In this context the following clarification offered by Partha Chatterjee is useful: “Significantly, the word *jati* in most Indian languages can be used to designate not merely caste, but caste agglomerations, tribes, race, linguistic groups, religious groups, nationalities, nations” Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 166.

54 Literally curtain. *Pardah*, also spelt as *purdah* or *parda*, refers to the seclusion of women. Seclusion itself can take various forms ranging from women’s confinement within the home, to the use of veils by women in public places.

55 Unknown, “*Abarodhprathar Utpatti*” (The Beginnings of Pardah), *Bamabodhini Patrika*, July-August, 1891.

56 See Viswanathan, “Ethnographic Politics,” 121–39. It is important to remember, however, that “race” as it was used in the South Asian context does not necessarily carry the same meanings with which it is invested in the West. See Robb, “South Asia and the Concept of Race,” *Concept of Race in South Asia*, 1–76.

57 Sri Mrinmayee Sen, “*Bharatmahilar Shiksha*” (Education of the Indian Woman), *Antahpur*, August-September, 1902.


59 The first girls’school meant exclusively for the Hindu middle class in the country. It should be noted that in 1849 Bethune School was known as the Female Normal School.

60 Speech by Lord Bethune, reprinted in *Bamabodhini Patrika* in 1895. Translated from the Bengali reprint by author. See also the *Bethune College Centenary Volume: 1879–1979* (Calcutta, 1979).

61 According to Tharu and Lalitha, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati was a “legend in her own lifetime(and) one of the few nineteenth-century women who were able to support themselves with their writing” Susie Tharu and K. Lalita eds., *Women Writing in India*, 243. Her books include her autobiography, *My Testimony*, 1907; *Stree Dharma Neeti* (Morals for Women), 1882; and *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, 1888. For a recent thoughtful discussion of Ramabai’s life and work, see Antoinette Burton, *At the Heart of the Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late Victorian Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

62 According to Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, the deep-rooted distrust and low opinion for women revealed in the laws of Manu—the source of much of Hindu opinion about women—is: “... at the root of seclusion of women in India, “This mischievous custom has greatly increased and has become intensely tyrannical since the Mahometan invasion; but that it existed from about the sixth century, BC, cannot be denied ... All male relatives are commanded by the law to deprive the women of the household of all their freedom ... ” Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, *The High-caste Hindu Woman* (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1888/1984), 29–30.

63 *Nabanoor*, January/February, 1904.

64 Muslim responses to these allegations against them can be seen in the pages of Muslim-edited periodicals which began to appear from the beginning...


67 Both the terms refer to Muslim regents.

68 It is important to mention here that life in the zenana was not always as oppressive for all women, everywhere, as it is generally assumed. According to Brajendranath Bandopadhyay, “It is generally assumed that women in the Mughal harems lived a miserable, degenerate life filled with only luxury and mindless pleasure. Historically, however, many of the Mughal women we come across astonish us with their learning, the breadth of their knowledge . . . and their many literary and artistic achievements”. Bandopadhyay, Mogul Juge Strishiksha, 1–3. [Translated from Bengali]. I have also come across similar arguments in conversations with Muslim and Hindu women who had spent some part of their lives in seclusion.

69 Unknown, “Mahiladiger Aborodhpratha” (The Practice of Secluding Women) Mahila, September–October, 1903.

70 Cited in S. Emdad Ali, “Mussalmaner Prati Hindu Lekhaker Atyachar” (The Unfairness of Hindu Writers toward Muslims), Nabanoor, August–September 1903. This article by Syamasundari Devi elicited a sharp response from the editor of Nabanoor in one of the earliest known public written protests by Muslim intellectuals.


72 Hunter in his much quoted book The Indian Mussalman (1872) divides Muslims into essentially two categories: the aristocracy or Mughal ashraf, and the fanatical jihad-seeking masses of converts. According to Hunter, the Mughal ashraf, who had suffered due to the economic and political changes brought by British rule, had little in common with the indigenous Muslims.

73 It should also be noted here that in 1822, a Muslim woman had started a school for girls in the Shyambazar area of North Calcutta. The school started with 18 students, but did not last long. In December 1823, Samachar Darpan, a newspaper, reported an examination held for 150 Hindu and Muslim girls. Unfortunately, schools at that time only attracted girls from poor and often low-caste Muslim, Christian and Hindu families. Students were lured into schools mainly by the small compensations offered to them for attending See Binay Ghosh, Bidya Sagar O Bangali Samaj, cited in Morshed Shafiul Hasan, Begum Rokeya: Samay O Sahtiya, 1982. Given the uniqueness of these attempts, it would be surprising if the Bengali intelligentsia, of which Mankumari was a prominent member, was unaware of it.

74 Unknown, Mahila, July/August, 1903.

75 Unknown, Mahila, July/August, 1903.

76 Editorial, Mahila, July/August, 1903.

77 Velling gown designed to cover the whole body of a woman, from head to toe. There are two holes for the eyes; sometimes a separate piece of cloth is attached to the front that can be flipped back to expose the face.

78 Mahila, July/August, 1903.


81 As Mr. Bethune succinctly put it in his speech at the inauguration of the Bethune School in 1849, women’s education was important first because educated men wanted and needed educated wives. Moreover, women’s education was also a significant measure of the level of civilisation in any society, and since women had an immense influence on the minds of children, educated mothers were essential for proper upbringing of children. See *Bamabodhini Patrika* (1895).


84 For a comparison of the work of Rokeya and that of other Bengali women, see Ghulam Murshid, *Rassundari Theke Rokeya*, Dhaka, 1993.

85 The issues discussed in Bharat Mahila in 1913 were: the activities of various women’s organisations in major urban centres in Bengal (*Calcutta Mahila Parishad*, *Dhaka Mahila Samiti*, and the *Maimansingh Samiti*), the backwardness of women in the previous generation, and the problems of widows, prostitutes and low-caste Hindus.


87 Sri Pratibha Nag, “*Mahilar Karjya*”, *Bharat Mahila*, December-January, 1914.

88 The manuscript for *Humayun-Nama*—a long panegyric in Persian written by Gulbadan about her brother, the emperor Humayun—is preserved in the British Library. A Mrs. Beveridge has also translated it to English. For a rare study of education among Mughal women, see Brajendranath Bandopadhyay, *Mogoljuge Stree Shiksha* [The Education of Women in the Mughal Era] (Calcutta: Manashi Press, 1919).

89 Khadeja was the Prophet Muhammad’s first wife. An independent, wealthy woman, Khadeja—herself a widow in her forties—married Muhammad when he was a young man. She was instrumental in the development of both his person and his vocation. See Leila Ahmed, “Women and the Advent of Islam.” *Signs*, 11, no. 4 (Summer, 1986): 665–691.

90 A famous mosque in Delhi.

91 These are only a few examples of very accomplished elite Muslim women who are nonetheless routinely ignored by nationalist historiography. There were many others, even within the Mughal aristocracy, who could be inspiring symbols of Indian womanhood. See Bandopadhyay, *Mogul Juge Strishiksha* for further discussion on this subject.
