

# Nawab Faizunnesa Choudhurani: A Trailblazer in Women's Education and Philanthropist

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## ABSTRACT

Through the Bengali Renaissance, a positive change remarked in the attitude towards women development in the nineteenth century. During this time, Nawab Faizunnesa Choudhurani established a Girls' School in Kandirpar area of Cumilla with the intension to spread education among Muslim women of East Bengal (present Bangladesh). She contributed all the expenses of the school from the earnings of her own zamindari. As a strict purdah (veiling) system was prevailing in the society, all of the Muslim young women were not interested to study in this school at first. But, her educational and literary works belong to the chronic era when Muslims in Bengal started having the full thrust of colonial acrimony and were of the rock bottom of deprivation and discrimination. However, a magical change occurred in very short time due to her tireless efforts. The enthusiasm of Nawab Faizunnesa had a unique contribution regarding the women's education and creating women's awareness in Bengal. Along with her primary concern was the welfare of human beings irrespective of gender and faith. She was such a great philanthropist with respect to the strengthening of the Bengali society.]

**Keywords:** Zamindar, Renaissance, Missionaries, Institutional Education, Nawab, Women Emancipation, Benevolent, Metaphorically

## INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Nawab Faizunnesa Choudhurani (1834-1903) appeared in Paschimgaon village of Cumilla district of East Bengal. At that time the Bengali Muslims lost their political power to the British colonial ruler and became economically destitute. They were deprived of education as well. On the other hand, the awakening that started in the Hindu society in Bengal in the nineteenth century took a long time to touch the Muslims. Towards the end of this century, a renaissance can be observed among the Bengali Muslims. And at this time, Faizunnesa Choudhurani showed great bravery by establishing a girls' school in Cumilla district. She founded not only school for girls but also different educational institutions, madrasas and mosques for boys. Additionally, she set a brilliant example in social service and literary composition. Her creative writings played a pioneering role in the awakening of women and in showing the way of light by freeing them from various social superstitions. In the discussion article, an attempt has been made to analyze the role of Nawab Faizunnesa Choudhurani in the expansion of women's education in East Bengal as well as her philanthropic acts.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Literary works authored by Nawab Faizunnesa Choudhurani, Government Documents, Ph.D dissertation and contemporary newspapers as primary sources and distinct informative writings of modern researchers have been used as secondary sources to prepare this article. It should be noted that in the composing of the article, an attempt has been made to follow both the methods of review analysis (Analytical & Empirical) which can be followed in the field of humanities research. Here analytical method is given importance.

## Aims and objectives of the research

1. To analyze how women's education was promoted by a Muslim woman in East Bengal in the nineteenth

century in spite of long-standing deadlock of conservatism.

2. How women progressed by receiving this education that add new dimension to the women-awakening, movement and women's emancipation in Bengal.
3. Enriching the knowledge base of history students, interested in working on gender equality and readers by presenting information and data on the subject through research. Above all, to make women aware.

Incidentally, before proceeding to the main discussion, the development of institutional education for women in Bengal is briefly discussed.

In 1757, Bengal has lost independence with the battle of Plassey. Later, in 1765, after the *English East India Company* gained *Diwani*, the life of the Muslims of Bengal suffered an extreme disaster. Apart from being economically independent, Muslims were left behind in terms of education and employment due to their reluctance to accept British-introduced English education. The Hindu community took English education and progressed a lot in respect of education and employment. However, this situation began to change at the end of the nineteenth century. Inspired by the renaissance brought about by the Hindu society in Bengal, Muslims became aware of their decadence. During this time, Muslims started taking assorted steps for education and social development. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) played a leading role in this connection. He established the first educational institution for Indian Muslims. In 1875, he started the *Anglo-Oriental College* at *Shamiullah High School* in Aligarh. Later, Nawab Abdul Latif (1826-1893), Syed Amir Ali (1849-1929) and some more literate person played an effective role in the field of institutional education. They tried to free the Muslims from their centuries-old ideas, superstitions and ignorance. Nawab Faizunnesa Choudhurani was the pioneer of women's education and women's awakening at the same level as all these thinkers.<sup>1</sup>

During British rule, Christian missionaries from Europe and employees of the English East India Company started formal education programs for girls in Bengal. They established two schools named *Upper Orphan School* at Khidirpur and *Lower Orphan School* at Alipore in 1782 to educate the children of deceased officers and employees of the *Bengal Army* (Begum, 1993: 97). In 1787, a Swedish missionary established the first girls' wing of a school in Calcutta (Basu, 1398: 228). After that missionaries have continued to establish girls' schools in and around Calcutta, where Bengali female children began to study. But the curriculum of the schools is related to Christianity, Muslim families are reluctant to send their daughters to these institutions for education (Amitabha, 1968: 15).

The Srirampur Mission's contribution to the spread of formal education for young women in Bengal in the nineteenth century is noteworthy. By 1824, they established 13 schools in Srirampur, 7 in Birbhum, 5 in Dhaka and 3 in Chittagong for the education of girls (Chapman, 1839: 95-99; Shahanara, 1978: 2). A missionary girls' school called 'Nari Sangha' was established in 1827 under the patronage of British educationist Miss Mary Ann Cook, where 160 students studied and their most of them were Muslims (Bagal, 1944: 29). In 1828, it is known from the *Missionary Intelligence newspaper* that Mrs. Ligu (she was the wife of Mr. Ligu, District Judge of Jashore, East Bengal) founded a school for women in Jashore with her own money. Here she used to teach sewing to females for two hours every day (*Proceeding of the Government of Bengal*, 1925: 21-22).

It can be easily assumed that Muslim girls studied in educational institutions of Muslim areas established by Srirampur missionaries. Unfortunately, most of the schools were closed by 1838 due to lack of funds (Amin, 1996: 145). In 1860, the *Alexander Duff Girls' School* was established in Mymensingh in East Bengal (Arifa, 2001: 136-137), later known as the *Vidyamoyi Girls' School*, which still exists today. On May 11, 1863, the first government normal girls' school was established at Sutrapur in Dhaka (Ahmed, 1986: 79). However, Muslim students did not have the opportunity to study here. The school defunct in 1872 and 17 women are said to have trained as teachers before it close (Amin, 2002: 101).

Bama Sundari Devi established a girls' school at Pabna in 1863 to promote women's education in East Bengal and she herself taught in this institution. It is known that Hindu-Muslim children used to study here (Islam, 2015: 46-47). On the contrary, in 1863 there were 3 girls' schools and one youth school in Dhaka. The youth school

was later known as *Banglabazar Girls' School* (Islam, 2015: 45). It should be noted that the contribution of *Brahmo Samaj* to the expansion of women's education in East Bengal is unparalleled. In 1873, a school was established in Dhaka under the auspices of the *Shubasadhini Sabha* for the education of women of the *Brahmo Samaj*. Staffs of the *Brahmo Samaj* established another school in Dhaka. Miss Mary Carpenter visited this school and recommended the setting up of another similar school in Dhaka. Within a short time these two educational institutions were merged and named as *Dhaka Female School* or *Eden Female School*.<sup>2</sup>

Nawab Faizunnesa Choudhurani, the zamindar<sup>3</sup> of Paschimgaon in Cumilla district, played a leading role in expanding institutional education for Muslim women in East Bengal. She gained more fame by initiating girls' schools. Faizunnesa realized that without modern education for women, the overall development of the countrymen is not possible. She established two separate primary schools for girls in Cumilla town. One in the west side of Nanuadighi in Cumilla (the school was later renamed *Shailrani Balika Vidyalaya*)<sup>4</sup> and in 1873 another girls' school was founded at Kandirpara. The school provided accommodation to the girls and also provided monthly stipends to them of East Bengal (Begum & Haque, 2001: 46). Nawab Faizunnesa wore a burqa and used to go door to door in a palanquin requesting the parents to send their daughters to her school (Basu, 2016: 104). It is particularly noteworthy that this primary girls' school was the first government institution for education of Muslim women in the Indian subcontinent. Therefore, the school played a major role in expanding the institutional education of Muslim women in East Bengal. According to the Government Education Report of 1880-81 this school recognized "The best girls' School" except the *Eden Female School* (*General Report on Public Instruction in Bengal, 1880-81*: 85). In 1889, Faizunnesa upgraded the school to a Junior High School up to Class VIII (Begum, 1993: 29). Initially, Bengali medium of instruction was provided here, and long after Faizunnesa's death, around 1931, the school began teaching female students through the medium of English. Then, this institution was upgraded to High School.

It is worth mentioning that there is no exact trace of whether any Muslim female studied in Faizunnesa Choudhurani's school for the purpose of imparting institutional education. Until the first decade of the twentieth century, young ladies from Hindu and Brahmin families mostly studied here (Amin, 1993: 659).

However, a government report shows that in Tripura district in 1877-78, six girls passed the preliminary scholarship examination and one of them was a child of a Muslim peasant family (*General Report on Public Instruction in Bengal, 1877-78*: 81). Muslim women's education program started in Cumilla within Tripura district at that time. So the presence of Muslim female students in *Faizunnesa Girls' School* was not unusual (Masum, 2008: 535). Nevertheless, in the naming of the girls' school founded by Faizunnesa Choudhurani, it can be seen that the institution existed in Cumilla for a long time as *Faizunnesa High English Girls' School*. Away it was named as *Faizunnesa Govt. High School* through the then government (Begum, 1993: 30). Later on, with the permission of the Government of Bangladesh, the *Nawab Faizunnesa Memorial Trust* (established in 1919) and the efforts of the head teacher and other philanthropists, the institution was renamed as *Nawab Faizunnesa Govt. Girls' High School* by adding the word 'Nawab' to its name (Board of Secondary Education, Cumilla, Circular, Memorandum 481(14), Tang- 22/12/2001). Aiming at the Bengali speakers of the lower level of the society at that time, she established the school, which is a unique achievement of Faizunnesa Choudhurani in the expansion of institutional education of Muslim women in East Bengal in the nineteenth century (Murshid, 1983: 39). Even today, the school continues to play a dominant role in the expansion of women's education in Cumilla district of Bangladesh (Amin, 1996: 115).

In addition to Faizunnesa Choudhurani founded primary schools for boys in several mauzas (places) of her zamindari (own land area) such as Vauksar, Bhatra, Chatar Paya, Manikmura and Bangadda. She also contributed to the educational institution that exists today. To all intents and purposes, Nawab Faizunnesa Choudhurani's family had a 'toll' (small scale educational institution) which was later unexpectedly destroyed by fire (Begum, 1993: 35). It was not easy for the educationist Faizunnesa to accept the destruction of the mentioned toll. She requested her daughter Badrunnesa to sustain the toll again. With the encouragement of her mother, Badrunnesa donated 95 decimel lands and renovated the old toll into a medium English school. After ages (in 1909) the institution became a *High English School* under the *University of Calcutta* and was named *Badrunnesa High English School* after the founder (Begum, 1993: 37). That institution is still existing in Paschimgaon (under Cumilla District) and imparting knowledge to thousands of local students.

Nawab Faizunnesa Choudhurani also established a non-paying Madrasa for higher education to local students.

She herself used to manage all the expenses of running the madrasa. A brief list of cost estimates for this madrasa is as follows:

Madrasa Expenses	Monthly	Annually
Maulavi (Teacher)	12 taka	144 taka
Qur'an, Darud (Duaa) recitation thousand times a day	6 taka	72 taka
for lighting oil for students studying at night	1/10 taka	9 taka
Total	18 taka and 1/10	225 taka

[Source: Nawab Faizunnesa Choudhurani, *Waqfanama*, p. 12]

Note that this madrasa was later (in 1943) converted into *Nawab Faizunnesa Higher Secondary Islamic College* (Mohiuddin, 1978-79: 53). Nonetheless, at the same time the old madrasa was shifted to a place called Gazimura and named as *Gazimura Alia Madrasa* (Masum, 2008: 526). Till now the mentioned madrasa continues to impart religious knowledge in Cumilla as well as the *Nawab Faizunnesa Higher Secondary Islamic College* was converted into a degree college in 1965 (Begum, 1993: 36).

Furthermore, Faizunnesa Choudhurani instituted a mosque with ten domes next to her residence in Paschimgaon. Here Islamic knowledge was discussed and Holy Qur'an was taught to the locals. The mosque built with fascinating and exquisite architectural features, still exists in a dilapidated condition. Nawab Faizunnesa built a zenana hospital in Cumilla for the treatment of women as well. She also assembled 'Musafirkhana' (passenger cabin) in the premises of her own house. Any traveler could take shelter there so far. Even Faizunnesa Choudhurani, while performing Hajj in the holy Mecca, re-excavated *Zobayda Canal* at her own expense (Basu, 2016: 105). The canal dug by Begum Zubaydah, wife of the Abbasid Caliph Harun-ur-Rashid (786-809), to supply water to Hajj pilgrims in Mecca is known as 'Nahre Zubaydah'. That was a significant contribution to Islam as well as humanity.

In the nineteenth century, Faizunnesa Choudhurani also showed considerable skill as a Muslim woman writer. On February 10, 1876, the autobiographical literary book 'Rupjalal' written by Faizunnesa was published from Dhaka Girish Printing Press.<sup>5</sup> Through this, she became distinguished as the first Muslim woman writer of Bengali literature. Metaphorically, she sought to rescue the women community from the menace of despair and permission by portraying a Muslim hero in *Rupjalal* and thus gave them hope and confidence. In a time when the Victorian morality imposed on Indians was trying to ban frank sexual expression in literature, Faizunnesa Choudhurani writes about female sexuality, desire, female gaze, and even raises a voice against the patriarchal notion of chastity in women. She also plays with narrative technique and incorporates many genres in her fiction (Choudhurani, 2004: 39). In this full-length poetry book, she hopes for the complete establishment of the social status of women along with the description of the form of them. She wrote two more books named 'Sangeet Sar' and 'Sangeet Lahri' as well. Unfortunately, no printed copy of these two books is available (Kuddus, 2004, p. 61).

Fortuitously, it is necessary to mention here that the contribution of the *Dhaka Muslim Suhrid Sammilani* to the expansion of women's education in East Bengal is important only after Faizunnesa's school. It was established on the initiative of some students of *Dhaka College* on 24 February 1883. In a short period of time, this organization achieved success by adopting the spread of women's education in the Muslim society as its main program (Ahmed, 1974: 248). Thinking that it was impossible to teach girls through schools due to the strict veil system, it embraced this collective home education and arranged for the women to be taught at home by tutors and to take annual exams. It must be noted that in the annual examination of the first year of establishment of the association, 34 candidates were successful and all of them were daughters of Muslim families (Masum, 2008: 536). In this way, the position of *Dhaka Muslim Suhrid Sammilani* was after Faizunnesa Choudhurani's girls'

school in terms of the development of institutional education for Muslim women in East Bengal (Ahmed, 1978: 125).

Conversely, on January 19, 1897 a Muslim girls' madrasah was established in Calcutta for Muslim women. This institution started with 25 female learners under the patronage of Zamindar Nawab Shamsi Jahan Ferdaus Mahal of Murshidabad (*The Moslem Chronicle*, 1896: 222). A survey of 1903 showed that 100322 girl pupils received formal education in the whole of Bengal, of which only 1% was Muslim. The total number of female students engaged in higher education was 816, out of which 439 were Hindus, 5 were Muslims, 286 were native Christians and 89 belonged to other religions (*Bamabodhini Patrika*, 1903: 6-8). From 1881 to 1901 in *Bamabodhini Patrika*, a statistic of female education in Calcutta alone can be seen here-

	1881	1891	1901
Hindu	6%	7%	9%
Muslim	1%	1%	3%
Christian	7%	7%	7%
Brahma	64%	65%	53%
Buddhist	12%	25%	15%

[Source: *Bamabodhini Patrika*, issue no-477, May-June, 1903, p. 8]

It is clearly evident from the above mention table that not only in East Bengal but in the whole of Bengal starting from Calcutta, the rate of Muslim female education in the nineteenth century was very negligible. This situation changed rapidly from the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1911, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1888-1932) sat up the *Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School* in Calcutta ignoring strong opposition from the conservative Muslim community (Murshid, 2006: 244). Young women gradually started receiving formal education from Rokeya's School. That girls' school served as a milestone in the expansion of Muslim women's education in Bengal from its inception.

Nawab Faizunnesa initiated a charitable dispensary in her village for women in purdah, particularly for impoverished women. She built mosques and contributed towards the development of roads and overall infrastructure growth. She patronized different newspapers and periodicals, including *Bandhab*, *Dhaka Prakash*, *Musalman Bandhu*, *Sudhakar* and *Islam Pracharak*. Before her death in 1903 she donated her entire property to the nation. Her humanitarian gestures are worth remarkable and a landmark of the social history.

## Importance

The establishment of girl's schools by Nawab Faizunnesa Choudhurani is of infinite importance in the history of Bengal. It was not until the first half of the nineteenth century that independent schools for females were originated in East Bengal and institutional education for Muslim women was not observed. In the context of the social conditions at that time, Bengali women fell behind in thousands of hindrances due to the prevailing strict veiling and blockade system. It was at such a time that Faizunnesa Choudhurani established schools for the formal education of girls. Note that the *Eden Female School* was established in Dhaka in the same year as her school. Notwithstanding, the *Eden Female School* was founded by the male representatives of the Brahmo Samaj. In this case, setting up a female educational institution by a woman in a remote town like Cumilla is a breakthrough as well as adventurous activity. It is a fact that *Faizunnesa Girls' School* has played an exceptional role in the expansion of women's institutional education in East Bengal. In the early days of its establishment, Hindu girls studied here, but within a short time, daughters from Muslim families came forward to receive education spontaneously. This number is gradually increasing. Many noble women were made from the students of *Faizunnesa Girls' School*, who played a strong role in the development of women education, awakening and women emancipation movement in East Bengal. Even today, this institution continues to take part in relentlessly spreading the light of knowledge among women in Cumilla as *Nawab Faizunnesa Girls' High School*. Moreover,

Faizunnesa Choudhurani was played a pivotal role to the betterment of her contemporary society of East Bengal. She was reached the summit of generous and benevolent Landlords in her contemporary era.

## CONCLUSION

In the nineteenth century, the Muslim society of Bengal was politically oppressed, economically distressed, deprived of education and full of various superstitions. In the patriarchal and male dominated society, the condition of women was more miserable due to strict restrictions and purdah system. In other ways, the leaders who emerged in the Muslim renaissance of the late nineteenth century were more active in changing the status of male society, and had very little thought about women. In such a situation, the advent of Nawab Faizunnesa Choudhurani was a boon for the Muslim women's society of East Bengal at the juncture. Ignoring the miscellaneous problems of personal life, she set an example by establishing girls' school to educate Muslim women. Nawab Faizunnesa's school played a leading role in the expansion of women's education during the period. Particularly, it can be mentioned that she is a trailblazer of Women's education in East Bengal. Then again, her poetic talent contributed in gaining equality with the male writers of that time and in the women's awakening and women's emancipation movement in East Bengal. Other than, she works in many ways for public welfare. Given the social conditions at that moment, Faizunnesa Choudhurani spent money on women's education programs and other revolutionary activities. For all these contributions she was given the title of 'Nawab' by British Queen Victoria. She is the first and last woman 'Nawab' of Bengal.

## Notes

Nawab Faizunnesa Choudhurani was born in 1834 in Paschimgaon village of Cumilla (then Tripura) district. Her father's name is Ahmed Ali Choudhury and mother's name is Afrannesha. Born into a zamindar family, Faizunnesa was tutored in Arabic, Persian, Bengali and Sanskrit by Ustad (Teacher) Tajuddin Sahib. Abandoned at the age of ten, she was brought up under the care of a prudent mother. In 1860-61, she was married to Mohammad Gazi Choudhury, a prominent zamindar of Tripura (Cumilla) district. Unfortunately, the truth is that her married life was not a happy one.

1. This school was introduced as a Government institution in 1878 as *Eden Girls' School* after the name of then British Governor Sir Ashley Eden.
2. Homnabad was a prosperous pargana of the then Tripura (now Cumilla) district covering an area of 140,874 acres and comprising 552 villages. Nawab Faizunnesa was one of the chief zamindar of that pargana, Homnabad No. 08 Villages- 552, Acres- 140874, Decimal : 38 Square Miles 220, Robert B. Smart, E.S.Q. (Revenue Surveyor, *First of Northern Divisions Lower Provinces : Geographical and Statistical Report on the District of Tippera*, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Office, 1866, p. 15)
3. Around 1930, a local female Shailrani Devi's husband was a lawyer in the Cumilla Income Tax Department. He secretly managed to change the name of the school established by Faizunnesa Choudhurani to his wife's name for only ten thousand taka.
4. Earlier, the names of two other Bengali Muslim women writers and their literature were known, but in all aspects Faizunnesa Choudhurani gained distinction as a writer.

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