

## **The Quest for Learning: Five Learned Bengali Muslim Women of the Early 20th Century**

**Saika Hossain**

### **Abstract**

Bengali Muslim women in colonial Bengal were among the most disadvantaged, economically impoverished and marginalized section of the society. In the traditional Bengali Muslim society, women were the victims of the age-old bondage and were segregated completely, from the outside world. The so-called Quranic injunction and fatwas imposed on them by the orthodox Mullahs and Maulanas prevented most of the Muslim women from receiving the rudiments of education. Throughout the nineteenth century, there were strong prejudices against Muslim women's education and even in the early twentieth century, the education of the Bengali Muslim girls was in a deplorable state. Most of the discourses on women in India has therefore ignored or dismissed Bengali Muslim women's role in society as insignificant as they remained subjugated and invisible in the society. The social prejudices which had hindered the education among Muslim women till the 19th Century began to disappear gradually in the 20th Century. The traditional idea of female education began to change, *aborodh* or seclusion of women lost its force and traditional family life of the Muslims began to enter into transition. With the progress of education in the Muslim community of Bengali, a group of 'new women' emerged in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Many of these 'new women' were no longer contented in their static role of domesticity and they were attending schools and colleges in large numbers for education. This article mainly focuses on the lives of five such first generation educated Bengali Muslim women who emerged out of their confines into the outside world.

Keywords: Bengali Muslim women, colonial Bengal, early 20th century, backwardness, marginalization, *aborodh*, education, empowerment.