

Fazilatunnesa Zoha : First Bengali Muslim Women Mathematician

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Learning Objectives:

1. SWBAT learn the contributions of Fazilatunnesa, a Muslim woman mathematician, upon reading her narrative.
2. SWBAT use the website to learn about the contributions of Fazilatunnesa to education in order to counter misconceptions and address stereotypes that students might carry about the abilities of Muslim women in STEM classes.
3. SWBAT presents the life of Fazilatunnesa to recognize that Islam and education are not mutually exclusive.

20th century India witnessed three Bengali Muslim Women scholars: Begum Rokeya (1880-1932), Sufia Kamal (1911-1999) and Fazilatunnesa Zoha (1899-1977). The former two criticized religious injustices that prevented women from pursuing education by staying within the boundary of Islam. For example, Begum Rokeya reluctantly wore a Hijab to protect the school she founded in 1911, Sakhawat Memorial School. Fazilatunnesa, however, criticized religious injustices by staying outside the religious norms. She even refused to wear a hijab while attending Dhaka University in 1927-thus taking a risk of getting injured from the rocks that fellow Muslim men used to throw at her.

She was born in 1899 in British India, now Tangail, Bangladesh. Her father's name was Wazid Ali Khan and Mother Halima Khatun. She earned matriculation—equivalent to 10th grade— in 1921 and completed 12th grade from Dhaka Eden College in 1923. She moved to Kolkata to

study at Bethune College—the first women's college in Asia. However, like other educational institutions in India, Bethune College had a policy to exclude Muslim women until they were placed under the new regulations of Calcutta University Act of 1904. Under new rule, Muslim women were allowed to study at Bethune College and Fazilatunessa was Bethune College's first Muslim student.

After earning a BA in mathematics, in 1925, from Bettun College, she returned to Dhaka to study a master's degree in mathematics at Dhaka University. She was the only Muslim woman at Dhaka university at that time. The year also started with Hindu Muslim violence in many Indian cities including Dhaka which eventually turned to a bloody riots. In the midst of this riot, Fazilatunessa fought for a common dining room at Dhaka University for Hindu and Muslim students. Upon earning a master's degree in mathematics from Dhaka University in 1927 with first class first, she revealed her intension to go to England to pursue a PhD in Mathematics but Dhaka University refused to provide her any help fearing protest from Muslim men. By doing so, Dhaka University failed to support its best student aspiration for higher education because its administrators felt that sending a Muslim woman to Britain would be seen as an act against Islam. Dhaka University missed an opportunity to inform Muslim people in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) about Quranic injunctions which commands Muslims to go as far as China for the sake of education.

However, Fazilatunessa did not give up. She reaches out to Mohammad Nasiruddin, the editor of Saogat, who became a reformer of Indian Bengali Muslims in the early 20th century and provided a platform for female scholars. Fazilatunessa wrote: “You must have heard the extent of torture I had to withstand during the course of my mission to complete my post graduation. Now I wish to go to England for higher education. But I have no capital other than my gritty

determination. The Dhaka University has declined to send me abroad as I am a Muslim woman. They think that Muslim society will react to this, with violence, as it is against religion.”

Mohammad Nasiruddin was not a wealthy man. He wrote a letter to Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah, the Minister of Education and co-founder of Dhaka University, who agreed to provide a scholarship to Fazilatunnesa. While studying in England, she met Sham-us-Zoha, the son of Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah. She broke the social norm again by choosing him as her husband. After the marriage, she took the last name of him and became known as Fazilatunnesa Zoha. In 1937, she had to return to East Bengal to stay with her dying father. After the death of her father, she did not return to England; instead she joined Bethune College as a professor of Mathematics and later she served there as vice principal until 1947 India Partition. She decided to move to East Bengal (East Pakistan) to join as a principal at alma mater, Eden College.

Fazilatunnesa’s success as the first Bengali Muslim women who earned higher degree in mathematics from abroad because of people like Naseeruddin Shah who understood that it was not Islam itself that prevented Muslim women from pursuing education; it was the misinterpretation of Islam that create a negative feedback loop in the society which affects many institutions such as Dhaka University.

In her essay, “The Need for Education Among Muslim Women,” she reminded the teaching of her great predecessor Begum Rokeya “By education, I do not refer only to the degrees one earns from colleges and universities. We need education that removes the prejudices from men’s minds and widens them.” Like Sofia Kamal, Fazilatunnesa was respectful of religion but she did not shy away pointing out the inconsistencies between Islamic ideals and Islamic practice: “Islam does not direct women to stay cocooned. it rather directs women to acquire knowledge. The system of purdah under false pretension of religion is the best of the worst weapons to kill

women. It is a strong deterrent against women's enlightenment and employment. Such social blockades and lack of education are pushing the women to the doorway of death.”

Although Fazilatunnesa was outspoken, nevertheless in her writing, instead of expounding her personal opinion, she used Quranic verse to facilitate a more liberal society for Muslim women. She died peacefully in 1977 in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

1. Bethune College. <http://www.bethunecollege.ac.in/BethuneCollege.htm>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2022.
2. Siddiqua, Fayeka Zabeen. “Blast from the Past.” *The Daily Star*, 27 Jan. 2017, <https://www.thedailystar.net/star-weekend/blast-the-past-1351450>.
3. Shehabuddin, Elora. *Sisters in the Mirror: A History of Muslim Women and the Global Politics of Feminism*. Univ of California Press, 2021.
4. Paul, Nilanjana. *Bengal Muslims and Colonial Education, 1854–1947: A Study of Curriculum, Educational Institutions, and Communal Politics*. Taylor & Francis, 2022.