CHAPTER-VI

EDUCATIONAL AWAKENING AND OPENING OF GIRLS’ SCHOOLS

Due to the endless struggle and strife of the Ashraf (noble families) of North India, the visionaries like Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah and his wife ‘Ala Bi received the whole-hearted support from women of different walks of life in creating educational awakening in their personal and public life.

One of the supporters of female education, Maulvi Mahboob Alam in his article Táalim-i-Niswan aur Uski Gharaz (Women’s education and its Purpose) in journal Sharif Bibi writes about the purpose of female education in the following words:

Khwaja Hasan Nizami in the editorial of journal Ustani expressed the views about bringing awareness of education in the illiterate mothers.

To quote:

In one of the article, journal Zeb-un-Nisa also highlighted the importance of education.

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While considering the other aspect of the female education like ‘which type of education should be given to women’? Akbari Begum in her article published in Purdah-Nashin was against similar type of education both for men and women. She was also against establishing big Madrasahs at distant places and special attention should be given to them and neither they need boarding life nor any special residential arrangement. There should be small Madrasahs for religious education, mathematics, history, Geography and household information is necessary for them.

To Quote:

When the need for opening girls’ school was felt by Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah and his wife, it had become a debatable topic for different segments of society. Some were in favour of female education and according to some which type of education should be imparted to girls? and some were totally against female education.

Miss Nawab Zakia Sultana from Moradabad in journal Awaz-i-Niswan writes about the importance of religious education among women which is necessary for the proper upbringing of the children.

To quote:

Commenting on the need of female education journal Niswani Duniya gives the following views:

An interesting article in journal Naheed, Begum Niyazi Moradabadi discusses the importance of knowledge in human life and throws light on its different aspects.

After going through the different views of Ashraf families and editors of Urdu journals about the importance of female education, the ground was ultimately prepared for the opening of girls' school (Zanana Madrasah) at Aligarh and with the passage of time a number of girls' schools opened at different places in North India.

Thus, the Aligarh Zanana Madrasah (Girls' School) was opened on 25th October, 1906 in a small rented house located at Mohallah Qila in Aligarh town. There was strict observation of purdah in this school. Three closed palanquin (dolis) were hired to carry the girls and six servants were appointed for security. When the school was opened seventeen students were enrolled, mostly the daughters of Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah and his friends but after a few months, their strength had increased to forty-five. Twenty girls came from the Sharif Muslim families.

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among them few belonged from Syed, few from Mughal, Pathan and Sikh community etc. The other twenty five girls came from poor families. Among them, few families observed the veil and others did not but these girls came to the school in closed palanquin (dolis)⁹.

In this school, the students were taught the Holy Quran, Urdu reading and writing, basic arithmetic and house hold activities like needle work. In an editorial Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah mentioned a draft curriculum which included the translation work from English, Arabic, Hindi and Sanskrit into Urdu. The three Risalas of diniyat (Muslim religious studies), one related to fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence) and special emphasis was given on female problems, another Hadith (Sayings of Prophet) and the Quranic verses with Commentary (tafsir). Besides it gives a brief history of Islam, Britain and other nations, the geography of India and other Muslim countries, hygiene, science, physics, astronomy, mathematics and the other household information like Indian and English cooking etc¹⁰.

In this venture, Waheed Jahan Begum (‘Āla Bi) wholeheartedly supported the cause along with Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah and she became the role model of sacrifice and dedication. Initially, the parents were not prepared to send their daughters to the school. In order to provide them homely atmosphere and to convince the parents, she sacrifice herself and preferred to live with the girls in the hostel and left her own children under the charge of servants¹¹. The students called her ‘Āla Bi with respect and Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah was called Papa Mian¹².

Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah remarks about Waheed Jahan Begum in his autobiography:

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اسلام، یہ بہت امیدوار نہیں ہے کہ خدا نے یہ قاسم ہمارے خاتمہ کرنے لگا نہیں ہے۔
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Information have taken from the article of Khatun Jahan Qamrain, daughter of Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah cited in Papa aur 'Āla Bi Ki Yaad, Muslim University Girls' High School Magazine, Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah Centenary number,(1974),pp-24-32.

Mushahidat wa Taasurat, op.cit,p-330.

Waheed Jahan Begum was so kind-hearted that when some poor girls could not afford to bring lunch, she gave them her own tiffin and went home without the mid day meal. This sacrifice affected her health adversely. The two sisters of Waheed Jahan Begum also co-operated with her and they lived in the hostel for three years. The eldest sister, Sikander Jahan Begum taught handicrafts to the girls, the other sister Saeed Jahan Begum was very helpful in the household activities and in giving religious instructions to the students with Waheed Jahan Begum.14

In the school, special attention was given to religious education. Waheed Jahan Begum herself taught Holy Quran and Urdu. Later on, a teacher was appointed to teach theology. The Milad Sharif (religious gathering) and Amen (ceremony marking completion of Quranic Study) ceremonies were a regular feature of school in which Waheed Jahan Begum herself participated and highlighted the important aspects of Prophet Muhammad’s life (Sirat)15.

In their daily routine students offered prayers and recite Quran, studied Urdu, mathematics and English, in afternoon they spent some time in playing games. Special classes of embroidery and cooking were managed once or twice in a week. The girls from the third standard learned English daily apart from other subjects such as history, geography and theology. Besides the curriculum of studies, Waheed Jahan Begum also took special interest in cooking, taste the food before it was served to the students and maintained cleanliness16. If the girl was minor, her clothes and other belongings were looked after by a senior girl. Waheed Jahan Begum personally kept the account of every girl’s pocket money and also supervised her hygiene and punctuality17.


Also cited, Sawanish-Umri Waheed Jahan Begum, p-72.


15 Also cited, Sawanish-Umri Waheed Jahan Begum, pp-63-66.

Qamrain, Khatun Jahan, pp-24-32.


Ibid, p-49.
However, within a short span of three months the number of students raised near about fifty and Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah informed Lt.Governor who managed to send the school inspectress Miss Ganja. She was very much impressed to see the enthusiasm for study among the students and the daily supervision of Waheed Jahan Begum. Thus, after the favourable report of Miss Ganja, the government offered a grant of Rs. 17,000/ and a recurring monthly grant of up to Rs.250/ to the school.

There were a few incidents recorded in Khātoon which show that the opponents of female education tried to harass the girls on street by raising the curtain of the dolis.

In 1908, the number of girls’ increased tremendously and the Madrasah was shifted to another place from Balai Qila to Mohallah Bani Israilan. At this juncture, Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah felt the need to start a residential school where non-resident girls were also accommodated and arrangements for strict purdah were maintained. For that purpose, he purchased a land in Nanak Rai Ka Bagh from merchant Lalit Prasad. Later he bought fourteen bighas of land for the school and boarding house. The Principal of Aligarh College, W.A.J Archbold was anxious about the discipline as the chosen place of boarding house was closed to the M.A.O College. Though an open discussion was held and Dr. Ziauddin Ahmad was a supporter of girls’ education and a former ally of Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah and Viqar-ul-Mulk, the Honorary Secretary of the College supported Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah and the plan to build the residential house was started.

A committee was formed which included Haji Muhammad Musa Khan, Nawab Habibur Rahman Sherwani, Muhammad Sarfaraz, Syed Buniyad Husain, Syed Abdul Haq Engineer, Viqar-ul-Mulk and Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah himself. They collected the funds for the school and hostel.

Also cited, Muhammad Abdullah, Shaikh, Biography of Begum Abdullah, tr. by Abid, Attia, Aligarh University Press, pp-53-60.

Kazim, Lubna, pp-59-60.

18 Khātoon, vol-4, no-3, (March, 1907), pp-140-143.

Also cited, Mushahidat wa Tasawurat, op.cit, p-323.


20 Ibid, p-3.

Also cited, Sawanih-Umri Waheed Jahan Begum, pp-46-47.

21 Mathematics Professor.

22 Younger brother of Haji Muhammad Ismail.


Also cited, Sawanih-Umri Waheed Jahan Begum, pp-54-55.
Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah started his plan for boarding house which consisted of living rooms for about seventy-five students, dining facility, class room and the quarters of teachers and the verandahs in Anglo-Saracen style with a quadrangle and surrounded by a double wall. On 7th November, 1911, Lady Porter, wife of the acting lieutenant Governor of United Provinces came to Aligarh and laid the foundation stone of the school hostel and the construction began in full swing. The journal *Purdah-Nashin* also gives information about the visit of Lady Porter in the *Muslim Zanana Normal School*.

The foundation stone of the girls’ school and boarding house was laid by Lady Porter. A huge gathering of Indian purdah-observing ladies and European ladies attended the occasion. Some ladies from Hyderabad, Deccan, Karachi and Calcutta also joined the occasion. All arrangements were made by the ladies. Lady Porter was introduced by Mrs. Toll and Mrs. Mahmud read the address in which she mentioned the progress of the girls’ school and the importance of boarding house. At the end Lady Porter thanked the Secretary and all the well-wishers.

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25 Also cited, Mushahidat wa Tássurat, p.237.

26 *Purdah-Nashin*, vol.5, no-10, (October, 1911), p.28.

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Also cited, Ibid, vol-10, no-9,10(September,October, 1914), pp-61-63.
17 Ibid, p-49.
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"سَلَّمُ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَرَحْمَتُ اللَّهُ وَبَلَاءَ اللَّهُ وَلَيْسَ فِي نَفْسِهَا نَفَسٌ أَحَدٌ مَّ،ُو مَنْ تَعْمِلُ مِنْ فَاحِشَةٍ مِّنْ بَعْضٍ بَيْنِيَّ وَهَذَا لَيْسَ كَثْبًا كَثِيرًا إِلَّا مَّا كَذَّبَ الْعَالَمُ."  
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¹⁰ Mushahidat wa Taasurat, op.cit,p-330.
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