

Social and Political Thoughts of Rammohan Roy

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ABSTRACT

In the context of modern Indian political thought, Rammohan Roy captures a unique position about understanding the concept of rights and its various dimensions. Modern Indian Political thought starts with his contributions only. This chapter is an attempt to reflect on Rammohan Roy's thought and philosophy, along with its implication in Indian society. This chapter also bears a detailed account of his attempts to bring social reforms in society with particular reference to women. This is also an endeavor to reflect upon Roy's concept of rights and its critical engagement in the Indian context and how he negotiated for socio-economic rights under British rule. In comprehending his ideas, this chapter subsequently engages in the contemporary relevance of his ideas, such as women's rights, unity of religion, education system, and paves the way to understand Rammohan Roy from a contemporary standpoint.

Keywords: Women, religion, rights, reforms, freedom

INTRODUCTION

Rammohan Roy, often hailed as the "father of modern India," is considered to be the pioneer of the Indian Renaissance Movement. Born in the heydays of British rule, Roy made himself apart from the existing political thinkers by criticising Indian traditions and at the same time, critically reflecting on colonial rule. He is a man of various virtues - a social reformer, a philosopher, a religious reformer, an advocate of women's rights. His works have been critically acclaimed especially those published in newspapers like Bengali gazzate, Samachar Darpan, the Calcutta Journal, Miart-ul-akhbar. In his first work published in 1803 named Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhiddin (A Gift to Deists), he criticised religious orthodoxies and corrupt practices of all the religions and proposed for a universal religion on the note of unity of one God. In the trajectory of Indian political thought, Rammohan Roy would always be regarded as a social uplifter and advocate of rights. He is famous for his outspoken attacks on social evils.

Roy was born on 22nd May 1772, in an orthodox Brahmin family in Bengal. His father Ramakanta Roy was a revenue official under British Government, and mother Tarini Devi, commonly known as Phool Thakurani, is a woman of great personality. His early education included learning languages like Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit. He stayed at Banaras till he became sixteen years and learned monotheism related tenants of Vedanta and Upanishads. While learning various languages, he got a chance to read religious scriptures of various religions. His close reading of religious texts made him look into critically the religious practices of Indian society across all religions. He staunchly criticised the Hindu idol worship. He also worked under East India Company from 1803 to 1814. After resigning from his job in 1814, he came to Calcutta and formed *Atmiya Sabha* in 1815 and devoted most of his time to religious, social, and political reforms. After spending a decade in Calcutta, he went to England in 1830 as an ambassador of the Mughal Empire to assure that the banning of *Sati* (Widow Burning) must be enforced. Along with this, he raised concerns regarding the revenue and Judicial system of India and reported it to the House of Commons in England. He was also widely accepted by western counterparts. He was in England till his death on 27th December 1833.

Roy's philosophy also impacted modern Indian history. His views on the unity of God, the abolishment of idolatry, the formation of Brahmo Samaj, the campaign against *Sati* etc. made him remarkable in modern times. Roy seems to be highly influenced by western culture. However, he realised the fact that these cannot be implemented directly in India because Indian societies do function in a different way from the West. So, he prefers an integrative approach where components of western culture should be blended with Indian values. Apart from this, Roy was also a prolific writer. His works were indeed influential and loaded with noble causes. He is a person with the versatility of thought, as well as writing. His works were critically acclaimed and inspire thousands of Indian minds today also. Raja was not only writing in newspapers, but he also wrote a series of books on critically reflecting on religious scriptures of different religions. Some of his works are- Vedanta-Grantha, Kenopanishad, Mukopanishad, Isopanishad, Gaudiya Vyakaran, Sahamaran Visay, etc.

BACKGROUND

“The social condition of the people in Bengal was also deplorable. The rigid Caste-system of India, with its blighting influence, reigned in its full vigour. The horrible rites of Suttee and Infanticide were the order of the day”.(Ghose, 1901, p.299)

The above statement from Rammohan Roy's work can depict the era he belongs to that is full of religious dogmas. He was born into a raid Brahmin family. In nineteenth-century Bengal, they played a vital role in social and reforms and nationalism. Rammohan and his contemporaries, such as Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, came from this caste only. Brahmin was the influential caste in Bengal at that time. Raja's interest in women's upliftment could be understood better if it centered on the experiences of women in the brahmin family of Bengal. When it comes to marriage, this community followed hypergamy. From a very young age, he acme familiar with the condition of women in Bengal society because of his rootedness in that society (Mukharjee, 1996, p.49). His in-depth knowledge about all religions makes him internalised that God has created everyone equally. There is no doubt that his social background, intellectual traditions at home, his education, and his understanding of Western philosophy influences Rammohan's view.

RAMMOHAN ROY AND RIGHTS: EXPLORING DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS:

The present-day we are living in is unimaginable without the attributes of Rammohan Roy. He is often regarded as the “father of the Bengali Renaissance.” He contributed immensely in various aspects of society, including education for all, upliftment of women. He is the first one to talk about women's rights in the Indian context. His significant contribution towards extending rights in various dimensions is pertinent to the process of understanding his works and ventures. Most of his social reform-related works have an ardent underpinning to promote rights. The kind of rights he talked about also influenced by the British system of constitutional Government and their preference for civil liberties (Pantham & Deustch 1986:45). It is indeed said that the philosopher's ideas were the product of the time he belongs (?). In this context, Rammohan's thoughts are the result of societal problems that prevailed in Indian society and the presence of British rule in India. His contributions can broadly understand under four domains. They are as follows—

A) Religious Rights: Unity of One God

“It is repeatedly declared in the sacred writings, that he cannot be defined either by the intellect or by language. This appears from inference also; for, though the universe is visible, still no one can ascertain its form or extent. How then can we define the Being whom we designate as its Author and Governor?” (Ghose, 1901, p.190)

Roy believed that religion has tremendous effects on ordinary people's life. People never question religious authority and tend to follow it blindly. Similar was the case with the Indian society of Rammohan's time. His birth in a religiously diverse family of Vaishnavite and Shivaite, make him subjected to study many languages. He realised that evil practices in society do have origin from religious beliefs only. His great achievement was to do away with the idol worship and introduce one supreme being. His close readings of scriptures made him realise that unity of one God, which is omnipresent, omniscient is the principle everyone needs to follow. He questioned the irrational religious beliefs and practices of the Hindus. He also pointed out that Hindus should avoid these practices, which leads to self-destruction (Mukhopadhyaya 1979:23). He is also critical of the dogmas within Islam religion. He exposed the evil nature of religious ceremonies and its adverse effects on society. Nevertheless, while criticising Hindu practices, he somewhere proposed a form of the divine deity, which is very similar to that of Christianity (University of Northern Iowa 1818:392).

He promoted a vision of monotheism and wanted to restore the moral basis of Hinduism. However, his most significant contribution was founding Brahmo Samaj in 1828 to promote the vision of Hindu monotheism. The foundation of Brahmo Samaj lies in Rammohan Roy's concept of universal worship. The Brahmo Samaj played a vital role in the Indian Renaissance movement. It was founded in 1828 to worship the preserver of the Universe. It opposed idol worship, priesthood, and sacrifices of any kind. They worship one God through prayers and readings from Vedas. Though the literal meaning of Brahmo Samaj is a committee of people who worship Brahmins, in reality, it opposed all forms of discrimination based on caste, class, religion, etc. It is one of the earliest movement who helped usher the wave of the reformist movement and contributed towards the creation of

modern India (Farqur 1915). Among conservative Hindus, Roy was criticised and denigrated for his interference in Hindu religious practice such as Sati. His footings on the secularistic views of religion also impacted his attempts to reform society. Though Raja explicitly did not discuss religious rights, his stand on One God and its universal nature make him closer to realise the ideal of secularism.

B) Social Rights: Upliftment of Women:

The present-day India we are living in is unimaginable without the attributes of many remarkable persons. One of them is Raja Rammohan Roy, “the father of Bengali Renaissance”. He contributed immensely to various aspects of society including education, women upliftment, etc. He is the first one to talk about women as equal human beings in the Indian context. Roy’s attributes as a social reformer can be understood in the context of his contribution towards education system in India. In the field of education, he is probably the first one to recognise the value of Western education. He equally advocated the cause of women’s education. In fact, Brahmo Samaj contributed in removing prejudices against women's education prevalent in traditional Hindu societies. The majority of the male population and women were living in the darkness of ignorance, and men were subjected to a little amount of education required for East India Company’s clerical works. Caste and class privileges were there. To encounter such situation, Roy planned to open an educational institution to make the youth generation aware of science and literature. Thus Hindu College was born and later renamed as Presidency College (thebrahmosamaj.net).

Roy is famous for the good deeds he had done aiming at the betterment of women in Indian society. Then, traditional Hindu society performed derogatory practices towards women in the most inhumane manner. The most horrific one is “Sati System,” in which the wife burned herself in the funeral pyre of her dead husband. He said that

“There were indeed many instances of true Suttees to whom the death of their lord was the end of all desire of life and its pleasures, and who went joyfully into the fire with vermillion on their forehead and other bridal decorations, without casting one longing lingering look behind. But it should not therefore be forgotten that in a great the Suttee was the victim of her many instances, greedy relatives, and in

more, of rash words spoken in the first fit of grief, and of the vanity of her kindred who considered her shrinking from the first resolve an indelible disgrace. Many a horrible murder was thus committed, the cries and shrieks of the poor Suttie being drowned by the sound of. tomtoms, and her struggles made powerless by her being pressed down with bamboos.”(Ghose, 1901, p.vi)

The condition of women was unimaginable because of evil practices. Apart from this understanding, there is another way to look into the conditions under which the Sati system was channelizing women's fear of life after her husband's death. There were multiple factors such as greedy relatives, no right over husband's property, dependence on her sons, which make the widow's life miserable and considered her as a mistress. This fear of losing one's position and being dependent on others after the husband's death make women believe that they will go to heaven after performing Sati. Roy utterly condemned Sati not only because of its cruel nature but also following Vedas and Shastras, where sacrifice one's life never seen as a reward. He instead believes in the ideal of self-forgetfulness. The abolition of Sati was opposed by many from the conservative Hindu society, especially by the members of Dharma Sabha. They decisively quote Vishnu and Manu, which only allowed women to austerities or to practice Sati. A counter-demonstration was there. In this context, Rammohan said that

“Suttie refers to the introduction of jealousy and selfishness, acting under the cloak of religion, but in defiance of the most sacred authorities. It rehearses the more barbarous abuse of this barbarous rite. It rejoices at the prospect of the most ancient and purest system of Hindu religion being no longer set at naught by the Hindu themselves.”(Collect, 1919, p.151-152)

In Indian culture, women's purity, virtue, and chastity have considered being the highest ideals. Following these values wife was ready to immolate herself to show her loyalty towards her husband. Sati means “a woman who is sure to her ideals,” which derives from the ancient Hindu Goddess Sati, the wife of Lord Shiva and mythologically regarded as the epitome of wifely devotion. After the death of her husband, maintaining women's chastity becomes a critical concern, and they considered to be a threat to society.(Not required) Roy strictly opposed the idea on the ground that it completely ignores women's right to live as

an equal human being in society (Basham 1975). His multiple efforts to ban the practice of Sati finally sees the rays of hope when Lord William Bentick banned Sati by law in 1829. With this, an era of discrimination against women when it comes to their right to life came to an end. Women's existence as human being was realised. Though the members of the conservative Hindu society did not like this intervention. However, for women of that time, it was a big move in the direction of women's rights and their fundamental rights over their bodies (re construct the entire sentence)

Along with this, Rammohan Roy also opposed practices like child marriage, polygamy. He also advocated widow remarriage. (Polygamy also affected the scenario adversely. In ancient Hindu scriptures, polygamy was only allowed under certain conditions such as incurable sickness, deception, etc. Nevertheless, in Bengali Hindu society, polygamy was prevalent at a vast rate, which led to the destitution of women and also subjected to extreme dependence on their son. NOT REQUIRED) Roy's attempt to empower women also includes advocacy widow remarriage. At that time, widow was seen as danger and anomaly to society because if the possibility that her unrestrained sexual vigour may resulted in immoral acts.(TONE IT DOWN) Widows were subjected to a life that is painful and isolated also. To end such biases towards women, he promoted widow remarriage(delete it). Late times (?), his idea of Hindu widow remarriage propagated by figures like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and finally in 1856 Hindu Widow Remarriage Act 1856 was passed.

In a nutshell, his idea of women's rights begins with considering women as equal one man as opposed to inferior position prevailed in the society. To reinforce women's rights properly, he felt that they should be given the right to inherit property. He is interested in four crucial issues about women— Sati, women's rights to property, polygamy, and indirectly on women's education. His arguments on women's rights found similarities with that of liberal feminism. His emphasis on the upliftment of women finds a solution in imparting education and giving her the right to inheritance. This leads to understanding the next aspect of Roy's conception rights, i.e., economic rights.

C) Economic Rights: Right to Inherit Property

Roy's idea of rights can also be understood in the context of economic domains. In general terms, economic right denotes a range of rights such as the right to property, equal job opportunities and wage, etc. Roy deals with the inheritance aspect of economic rights in detail. He realised that the condition of women, especially after the death of her husband, is also related to the aspect that women do not have a right to inherit father or husband's property. Drawing inferences from ancient Hindu Vedas and Upanishads, he said that

“The ancient lawgivers unanimously award to a mother an equal share with her son in the property left by her deceased husband, in order that she may spend her remaining days independently of her children” (Roy, 1832, p.271)

After thousands of years, women are no more allowed to have inheritance rights. In short, a widow can receive nothing if her husband did not issue. Moreover, the situation becomes more tricky when the son or more than one son does not want to divide the property. In this case, the mother is not entitled to any property. So, after the death of her husband, along with husband's wish, the son's wish also matters when it comes to having a share in the property. This seems very rare. Ultimately, women, after the death of her husband, left with only three options — live life miserably, do immoral things(?), and perform Sati. It is unimaginable how distressful it is for a woman who is not only losing her husband but also her right to entitlement. (He shed light on the fact that a widow as a daughter wishes to secure her right to maintenance, that is also limited difficult to attend a lawsuit. NOT CLEAR) As a result, women were forced to forget her rights and continued to live a life depending on others, full of destitution?)(Roy, 1832)

Rammohan's economic ideas were shaped by two crucial aspects of British colonial system. The first one is the Permanent Settlement Act 1793 and the Agency Houses of private trade. The Permanent settlement act did contribute to increasing the area of cultivable land, but at the same time, it created powerful Zamindars who exploited the peasants. Precisely, this system resulted in setting up a semi-feudal system of land ownership to cater to the interests of semi-feudal and semi-capital zamindars. (Rammohan himself involved in the process of zamindari and money lending business. While defending property rights he said that every man is entitled to enjoy the fruits of his labour and the benefits of proper

management DISCUSS THIS IN HIS CRITICISM). Peasants were subjected to miserable condition that made Roy to criticise the zamindari system. He points out that cultivators were left with no surplus. He pleaded the British government to reform the system by lowering the amount of rent and security which peasants were supposed to give to the tenants. He suggested that this loss in revenue could be compensated by taxing luxury goods (Pantham & Deustch 1986:44-45). People criticise Roy for his biases towards the zamindari system but he vehemently pointed out the injustices done to cultivators and demanded for its rectification. Therefore, Raja's conception of Economic rights can help to interpret his attempts of social reform and how its solution lies in guaranteeing economic rights.

D) Political Rights: Quest for Civil Liberty

The history of political thought in modern India begins with Rammohan's ideas. In general sense, political rights connote a range of rights, including liberty from oppression, the right to civil liberty, being a part of decision making, etc. Understanding the concept of political rights in the context of Roy also involves having an understanding of the background. In the 18th century, the British in India were limited to trade, and they tried to maintain their relationship base on society by maintaining a relationship with the one who does not interfere in their business. So, they adopted a mixed constitutional government. Republican in spirit but also have space for prevalent monarchies. They facilitated a limited role in the press and local forms of representation. Along with this, they also needed specific figures from the Indian community to do their duties. Situating in this context, Roy served as the linkage between East and the West, the British government, and the Indian population.

When it comes to the political philosophy of Raja, he followed an inductive and historical method. (?) His political ideas are to be found d mainly in writings like Brief remarks regarding modern encroachment on the Ancient Rights of females (1822), Petition against the Press Regulation (1823), and many more (Majumdar, 1934,p.38) (Publications are to be italicized). He appealed to the historical experience of the people when there is a need to reform arises to recognise the rights of the common people. He is well versed with the historical trajectory of Indian society and that gives him the benefit of analysing societal conditions while drawing instance from history. In a way, his reformist activities find its

logical validation not only from current society but from history also (reformulate the sentences)

Roy has favored constitutional liberalism. He worked continuously towards the reforming of the Indian Parliament by separating the authority. Rammohan's trend of political thought is highly inspired by Montesquieu than Bentham (meaning?). He was aware of the present situation and knew that British authority is going to be there (?). Therefore, he was advocating mixed constitution where the aristocratic government is controlled by a limited popular check (Baylay 2007:32). Rammohan hoped for a Parliament where British politicians, along with the Indian population, sit together. Moreover, Rammohan Roy's concept of right is related to realising one's self. His notion of the right has a humanistic undertone.

He also suggested having a mechanism to express people's concern and ensuring the law in India(?). That is where he promoted freedom of the press in India. He also stated reasons in favor of freedom of press—firstly, public having the power to place their opinion before the government on matters relating to the community; secondly, the people would be able to express their concern through press to express their concern through press; thirdly, freedom of press would enable the people of India to appeal honour and justice of British nation against any public oppressive acts of India government (MEANING NOT CLEAR); and lastly, it would help the British officials to assess the working of any system they introduced (Majumdar, 1916, p.61). Here, it is realised that Roy argued for freedom of the press in India to generate public opinion in India. His quest for political rights demanded two major changes— one is freedom of expression though Press and the other is ensuring civil liberty to the people of India.

CRITICAL EVALUATION:

“It is very cheering to note that the gradual commingling (?) of the best in the east and the west for the ultimate perfection of both, aye the whole humanity, as being Heaven's method, is realised in an increasing degree of all hands.”(Collect, 1914, p.27)

Raja Rammohan Roy, the “Bharat Pathak,” and his intentions in realising and enforcing

rights in Indian society can be reflected from various angles. The first and foremost one is that he is an excellent synthesiser of the West and the Indian values in various contexts. Roy knew that there were limitation understanding British rule in India, but at the same being realistic he also knew the unavoidable part of it(what unavoidable part?). So, rather than looking into the adverse effects of it, he tried to get the maximum benefit from British rule by propagating specific constitutional ideas of the West, such as civil and political liberty, and extending it to Indian society. At the same time, he was not in favor of blindly following and applying every Western concept in India. Rather he preferred a synthesis of transnational humanistic culture. Hw was in favour of reforming the religious beliefs, cultural practices such as Sati, polygamy, etc., which were leading India to darkness. Though his talks about western values at the same time he criticised the dogmas of Christianity and emphasised of reforming one's self. In this way, he became the precursor of synthesising social values of the East and the West and directed to a universal humanity.

After Roy's immense contribution to Modern Indian Political thought, he has also criticised certain grounds. He was criticised by people such as Radhakanta Deb, Henry Derozio of his time. In recent times also many critical pieces of writings came critically analysing his various thoughts. He was being criticised for favoring British rule in India. A person named Ashok Sen criticised Roy's idea of Modernity in terms of extending British economy. In his excellent study, Sen came up with the conclusion that Roy's favour for British trade was an unavoidable part of that time as British were expanding in all lengths and breadth . So his thought is circumscribed to the conditions of that time as they were an inevitable part. Authors like Sumit Sarkar also criticised Roy for being a pioneer of transition from pre-capitalist society to bourgeoisie modernity, but a weak and distorted one which permitted all sorts of colonial subjugation. Despite the shortcomings, authors like Rajat Ray praised Rammohan Roy his philosophical views and social vision. He nurtures the filed of India with the seeds of modern culture on which Indian nationalism grows (Patham & Deustch 1986:48). (MAKE THIS ENTIRE PARAGRAPH A LITTLE MORE CONCISE BY ORGANIZING IT)

Roy and his counterparts, like Vivekananda both work on religious reforms. While talking about reforms, both of them has emphasised a lot on the positionally of women in Indian society. Roy referred to ancient texts to validate the needs of rights for women. As he writes," according to the following ancient authorities, a daughter is entitled to one-fourth part of the portion which a son can inherit (Roy, 1832,p.276). Therefore, we can internalised that Roy's ideas on women's rights and reform based on old traditional values such as humanity, equal moral worth, etc. Vivekananda, like Roy, also discussed the need of ancient teachings for men and women. However, his underlying motive was to impart sacred traditions and religious authority to both men and women. When it comes to admiring western culture, Vivekananda also appreciated the position pf women in western societies. He imagined Indian women as the ideal mother as opposed to the West as an ideal wife. He visualised Indian women as the epitome of purity. Nevertheless, for him, the solution to improvise the condition of women should be come from Indian tradition only (Vivekananda, 1994, p.231).(discussion on Vivekananda not required, or you can just make passing references in order to compare) If we compare Roy and Vivekananda's thoughts on women rights, it is evident that both of them refer to ancient texts to justify the point that women's equal position in society should be given. But Vivekananda's idea of women's upliftment is rooted in Brahminical tradition whereas Roy draws his inspiration from humanistic traditions and universal religion.

The relevance of Roy's work can be seen in the field of education in India as well. He opened various schools and colleges in Bengal which still operates and seen as an institution of eminence. His last book published was on Bengali grammar. He contributed a lot in the development of Bengali literature and also expanded his thoughts through novels and Bengali prose to a vast audience.

He ushered a new era in the freedom of expression in the Indian sphere. After many attempts, the freedom of press was given. As we all know, media is the fourth pillar of democracy, and Roy helped India realising this spirit much before. He started rousing political consciousness in Bengal by starting a newspaper named Sambad Kaumadi in the year 1829. After that, he published a range of newspapers in various languages which helped people from all linguistic backgrounds in forming their opinions about British rule,

evil practices of Indian society, etc. This, in a way, led to the emergence of Modern India.

He appreciated the benefits of the British as he believed that the ideals of liberty and freedom they exercise back their country would eventually come to India when they will rule us. However, when he observed an encroachment in the rights of the people, he was the first one to fight back against the British rule. It seems his admiration is not for the British rule but for the constitutional values they follow in their country. Majumdar wrote that Raja was fully aware of his limitations while demanded liberty for Indians. He demanded civil liberty instead of political liberty. He could not think of Indian people's capacity to self government as their minds were full of ignorance and superstitions. If we have to look into Roy's perspective of rights from contemporary point of view, it is noticed that freedom as our birthright in his appeal to natural rights (Majumdar, 1934, p.40-42). Therefore his quest for liberty is not motivated by autonomy, it was just an appeal to recognise rights and liberties in a limited way. He is a realist in this sense as his understanding of liberty and rights is entirely contextual and not following any dominant philosophical schemata. (REORGANIZE AND CUT DOWN)

CONCLUSION

The understanding of modern India is incomplete without the attributes of Raja Rammohan Roy. His versatile personality got reflected in his thoughts and his imagination of India as a nation of free people reflected in his attempts to reform India. Rammohan Roy falls under the category of social reformer and the pioneer of Modern Indian Political thought. A critical engagement of his writings and works lead to the view that Roy outrightly did not reject any beliefs or practices. He provided a ground for doing so and also not a blind follower of modern traditions. He tried to validate any required change in society drawing inspirations from ancient text and traditions. Though he criticised the evil practices of Indian society at the same time, he was not ready to do away with the long-standing customs of India. He believed that while ruling the country, the legislator should be conscious about the customs of the people, but he resonates the customs if only adheres to two principles— reasonable and general welfare of the people. His approach towards religious toleration as a principle also relevant in present times and generates an

atmosphere of hope and religious harmony in India. He believes in specific constitutional values such as equality, liberty, rights, freedom. In his entire lifetime, he tried to inculcate these values in the lives of Indians.

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