



Raja Rammohan Roy, The Father of Indian Renaissance

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Abstract: Just as in Western culture, a revolutionary change in society and state can be observed during the Renaissance, in modern India too, but due to the Renaissance, many intellectuals abandoned the old orthodox ideas and tried to establish the society and state of India on a new foundation. Their thoughts opened up a new horizon in all areas of Indian society, state, education, religion. When reviewing the history of the state philosophy of modern India, one has to mention many thinkers who were interested in forming India in a new way by abandoning all traditional, blind superstitions. In this context, the names of thinkers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi are noteworthy. In this research article, I will try to examine, how India has progressed on the path of modernity by examining the thoughts of Raja Rammohan Roy.

Keywords: Revolution, Religion, Society, Women Empowerment, Modern Indian Philosophy

Raja Rammohan Roy

Raja Rammohan Roy was born on May 22, 1772, in an old-fashioned Brahmin family in Radhanagar village of Hooghly district. His father Ramakanta Roy was a very rich landlord. Raja Rammohan Roy, who was endowed with extraordinary talent, acquired strength and virtue in his character under the influence of his mother Tarini Devi. He was given the title of 'Raja' by Mughal emperor Akbar II. With his higher education, he mastered various languages such as Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, etc., beside this he acquired special knowledge in Hindu literature, religion and law. If we examine the thoughts of Raja Rammohan Roy, we can clearly understand that he was particularly influenced by the ideology of ancient thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, medieval Aquinas and Marsiglio, and modern thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Kant, Hegel, Fichte Bentham.

The main purpose of Raja Rammohan Roy's life was to free people from the bondage of the medieval superstitions and irrational society and to open a new horizon by floating them in the tide of renaissance. For this, he realized the need to prevent the superstitions, dogma and the abundance of meaningless rituals of Hinduism. The main goal of Raja Rammohan Roy's religious reform movement was to establish monotheism in the country based on the comparative analysis of Hindu, Muslim and Christian scriptures to remove religious divisions. On August 20, 1828, he established the Brahmo Sabha, which is also known as the Brahmo Samaj. He established this Brahmo Sabha with the aim of eradication of the religious weakness and mutual isolation of the people of India and to propagate the concept of one God. Roy believed that the root of every religion is this monotheistic consciousness. But over time, the different superstitions of different religions created discord and division among individuals, which resulted in communal riots. He thought that Brahma Sabha would be a meeting place where everyone could lead their lives with monotheistic thoughts, leaving behind the superstitious rituals of all those religions. In 1804, he was appointed as Munshi to the Registrar Woodford Sahib of Murshidabad and at that time he published a book called '*Tuhfat-ul-Muwahiddin*' which means Gift to the Monotheists

It is not that before Raja Rammohan Roy, no philosopher of the medieval period tried to bring about change by opposing the religious beliefs and religious rituals of the Indians. Many have expressed their views on this matter, but the difference between Raja Rammohan and others is that their efforts were limited to the religious field only and they did not analyze religion by linking it to the socio-political context. Raja Rammohan Roy wanted to change the various rules, principles and rituals of religion only after thinking about the social and political opportunities of the people. He argued that if the social freedom and comfort of the individual is endangered because of the religious rituals, then it should be abandoned immediately. In a letter dated 18 January 1828, he mentioned the religious condition of the contemporary society and said, 'I am forced to say with regret that the present religious system of the Hindus is not at all conducive to their political convenience and social interests. It is for the sake of their political convenience and social comfort that this religion needs to be changed.' Even before that, in 1788, at the age of just sixteen, Raja Rammohan Roy wrote a booklet called '*Hinduder Pouttolik Pronali*' in which he attacked the conventional practices of Hinduism. As a result, conservative Hindus and even his father Ramakant Roy got angry and expelled him from his home. Raja Rammohan Roy also rebelled against religious superstitions and social and state subordination. On the other hand, he not only oppose conservative Hinduism but he also raised his voice against other religions specially, orthodox Christian priests who were equally responsible for spreading superstition among Christian community.

Raja Rammohan Roy also fought against the British rule to uphold the freedom of the press. Just as he fearlessly fought against the unfair processes of the judiciary and revenue system under British rule, on the other hand, Raja Rammohan Roy also protested against the aggressive propaganda being carried out against Hinduism as well as Hindu community by a section of Christian missionaries. He has always been active in issues such as the abolition of the practice of sati, campaigning against child marriage and polygamy, protection of women's wealth, rights of wives over the property of their deceased husband, and women's education.

In 1815, Raja Rammohan Roy formed the 'Atmiya Sabha' where discussions were held on scriptures, monotheistic thoughts and various social problems, and as a result, the conversation was very popular and far-reaching. Raja Rammohan Roy believed that in order to modernize the society, huge changes were also needed in the field of education. He understood that education had to be spread among the people, so he thought deeply about this issue while he was in Calcutta. In 1822, he established the Anglo Hindu School. Because of his respect for the inherent rights and individuality and freedomness of man, he gave special importance and respect to the liberation struggles of individuals and nations in different countries of the world.

To know about the life, ideology and colossal work of Raja Rammohan Roy, it is necessary to be aware of the situation of contemporary society. Why did he take the initiative to transform the individuals in society into a newly awakened human being (Renaissance man)? In this context, we can quote Rabindranath Tagore. He wrote, "Hundreds of years have passed - the forward movement of history has become silent, the great river of thought has dried up in the minds of India. Then the country has become stagnant, you are narrow within yourself, the radiance of its lively mind no longer spreads far and wide. When water does not flow in a dry river, the immobile stones at the bottom of the river; they are incoherent, they are meaningless, they are obstacles to travelers. Similarly, when bad times came to this country, the on-going flow of knowledge was blocked, the intelligence of the new generation became lifeless, and a stagnant mass of rituals, formal futility, and the habitual repetition of thoughtless human behavior appeared arrogantly. They obstructed the broad highway of all; they cut off the relationship of man with man beyond narrow boundaries in pieces."¹

Tagore writes that Raja Rammohan Roy opposed such social stagnation, artificiality of reforms, communal conflicts with his enlightened modern mind. The aim of Roy was the complete reconstruction of everything in the light of intellect. He was committed to the realization of the truth with the help of intellect that we are ignoring the real truth and giving more importance to unnecessary things. That is why we are not interested in understanding the Brahma knowledge expressed in the Vedas or the Upanishads, rather people are concentrating on worship, festivals, etc. Our strong belief in the purification of sins by pilgrimage and bathing in the river Ganges cannot be harmed in any way. Historian Ramesh Chandra Majumdar also mentions that the social condition of that time had become dogmatic and hypocritical. He said, "there was a general deterioration in the Hindu society. Long subjection to foreign rule, lack of contact with the progressive forces of the world, and a stereotyped form of knowledge, based upon blind faith impervious to reason."²

Raja Rammohan Roy believed that all the positive effects of British rule would overcome all the evil forces, weakness, inferiority, ignorance, blunt thought and blurred vision, fear and limitations of the Indians. Therefore, for him, the British rule was auspicious in a way. Raja Rammohan Roy believed that the British rule was not an autocratic rule, but a constitutional monarchy established on the basis of the recognition of civil rights, which had saved the people of India from the previous autocratic rule. In the past, under the Muslim rule, the common people had political rights, but there was a complete lack of state support in the field of religion, property and personal security. But during the British rule, the common people, despite losing political rights, gained freedom in performing religious rituals in daily life, protecting property and personal life. Although this does not mean that he welcomed the British rule with respect, wherever the British rulers tried to forcefully dominate the people of India, Raja Rammohan Roy directly opposed it. Just as getting the help of the British rule in the abolition of the practice of sati was a positive aspect, he also stood up against the government in the matter of banning the press. Realizing that the Indians lacked political freedom during the British rule, he first inspired the countrymen to think politically. He wanted to make it possible to politically connect the individual with the state, the society with the state and similarly the state with the individual and society. According to him, such a situation was possible under the British rule. But when he saw the government interfering in individual's freedom and freedom of expression, he clearly opposed it. There was a great need for publication of vernacular newspapers to shape public opinion in the interest of the people of the country, which is why Rammohan Roy took the initiative to establish the right of fearless publication and dissemination of the media. In 1819, Lord Hastings relaxed the restrictions imposed on the press by Lord Wellesley in 1799. He started publishing two weekly newspapers in 1821 and 1822, Sangbad Kaumudi in Bengali and the Persian version was the Mirat-ul-Akhbar. In both these newspapers, he explained the dire social, religious and political conditions of the society at that time and showed the way out of them. But again, considering it to be in conflict with administrative or colonial interests, the British government curtailed the freedom of the press. They argued that a free press was necessary only in a democratic regime; since there was no democracy in India, there was no question of freedom of the press. Since public opinion did not exist in India, the British officials were not accountable to the public. If they needed any administrative discussions, it would be in England and not in India. Moreover, the influence of the government on the free expression of the people's opinions may be undermined, the people's hopes may be destroyed and there is a possibility of rebellion, which was not favourable for British rule. Therefore, in 1823, the new Governor General Adam issued the Press Ordinance, making it mandatory to obtain government permission for the publication of periodicals. Raja Rammohan strongly opposed this and a few contemporaries jointly filed a petition to the Supreme Court, situated in Calcutta at that time. Since, this petition was not accepted, he directly submitted a memorandum to the British ruler in favour of the freedom of the press with some arguments. There, he said that since there is no democratic system of governance in India, it is necessary to have more freedom of the press, because only through newspapers, one can present his opinion to the ruler. It is not possible for the higher authorities, living in England to govern properly if they are not aware about the condition of the Indians. The activities of the civil servants, their behaviour towards the public should not go unnoticed because it is directly related to good governance. Only if the educated people of the country get the opportunity to discuss freely, then that educated class would be able to present the positive activities of the authorities to the public. If the purpose of a government is pure, then there is no reason to fear the freedom of the press. On the contrary, the glory of that government can be sung through the newspaper and its durability is also increased. But if the voice of the newspaper is suppressed, if anger is aroused among the people, it can soon take the form of a great revolution and the fall of the government may be inevitable as a result.

He gave special importance to the establishment of the rule of law in India, because he understood that only then could an environment of equality be maintained in society. The rule of law has two conditions - one, the law must follow the interest of the common people and secondly, laws are not biased and are equally applicable to all - the legislator must also follow the same law. He hoped that the British regime would enforce the same laws in this country, which would open a new chapter in the Indian state system. In view of the current discriminatory attitude in the real situation, he demanded that no legislature be established in India. Because he understood that if a separate legislature is established in India, it will be controlled by the British Governor General and his councillors; strict laws will be imposed on the Indian citizen and they will be forced to follow. As a result, the British regime will become autocratic. Raja Rammohan Roy understood that some changes are needed in the contemporary judicial system in India, otherwise the establishment of the rule of law is not possible. Therefore, he commented on the language of the judiciary, the qualifications of the judges, etc. Raja Rammohan Roy introduced the jury system to prevent judges from assuming the role of dictators. This system would make it possible to curb perjury, fraud, and corruption in the judiciary.

When the discriminatory jury law was enacted in 1827, which stated that jury from Hindu or Muslim or any other religious community jury had no right to involve in the trial of a Christian criminal, but a European jury would trial a native criminal, Raja Rammohan strongly opposed this discrimination and presented his petition to the British Parliament, and in 1832, the conditions of the discriminatory jury system were changed and a new jury system was introduced. Raja Rammohan Roy accepted this jury system as a "modern replica of the Panchayat system". He mentioned this to the Select Committee of Parliament.³

Rammohan Roy was interested in introducing a science-based education in the Indian education system that would allow the young society to learn or understand the truth of the universe and life from a scientific perspective. Therefore, instead of establishing Sanskrit colleges, he believed that there was a need for English and science education. Raja Rammohan Roy believed that the source of the vitality of western civilization was this science-based education system. Therefore, in order to instil that vitality among Indians or to gain the strength to oppose the British ruling class, they had to master Western education first, which is why he spoke about mastering the education of English, mathematics, natural sciences, chemistry, physiology, etc. Although the British rulers did not accept this demand. The contemporary scholars and clerics also made demand to the government because they felt that all this education was not rational. In his letter to Lord Amherst opposing the establishment of a Sanskrit college, he said, "If it had been intended to keep the British nation in ignorance of real knowledge, the Baconian philosophy would not have been allowed to displace the system of the Scholman, which was best calculated to perpetuate ignorance. In the same manner, the Sanskrit system of education would be best calculated to keep this country in darkness".⁴

By putting pressure on the government, Raja Rammohan Roy succeeded in fulfilling his goal. The British government agreed to introduce the Western education system in India. This expansion of the education system brought about several changes in the political sphere of India.

First, the younger generation of the country who received this Western education got the opportunity to be directly acquainted with the rational theory, individualism and ideals of freedom of European civilization.

Secondly, under the influence of this education system, a group of young people became prominent personalities who would be able to properly manage or lead the country and society in the future. That is, despite being educated in Western education, many of them devoted themselves more and more to the work of preserving the country's tradition and culture.

Thirdly, citizen educated in Western education started to serve as a medium of communication between the British government and the common people of the country. Although some of them continued to work as an obedient servant to the British government. But it was also based on this education system that later David Hare, Vidyasagar, Alexander and others took the initiative to spread education.

Raja Rammohan Roy, though he wanted to educate the young society in Western education, did not disrespect or despise Sanskrit language in any way. Rather, he advised students to adopt various methods on how people can learn Sanskrit language in a short time. According to him, "The world was indebted to us for the first dawn of knowledge, which sprang up in the east. We still have a philosophical and copious language of our own, which distinguishes us from other nations who cannot express scientific or abstract ideas without borrowing the language of foreigners".⁵

Realizing the backwardness of women in the then social system, the role that Rammohan Roy played in protecting the dignity of women will be unforgettable in the history of the world. In all the customs and rituals that were followed in India at that time, the place of women was very miserable. A real example of which is the practice of Sati. When we review the history of Indian culture, we notice that from ancient times, women were sometimes described as the power of men, sometimes as goddesses, sometimes as wives or as Lakshmi of the house. However, in medieval society, the practice of burning women alive on a burning pyre is not unknown to us. Such a scene burned the hearts of Raja Rammohan Roy and his other friends. Raja Rammohan Roy was the first to oppose the practice of Sati. In addition, noticing the tendency to deprive widows of their husbands' property, he also strongly raised his voice against it. In various newspapers and books, he raised the issue of such plight of women and forced government intervention in this matter. As a result, the government considered the practice of sati as an illegal activity, a crime and made provisions for punishment for those involved in these cruel practices. Later, the Widow Remarriage Act was also enforced, which was a very beneficial step for young widows. Besides, what Raja Rammohan Roy says about women's education is, "Women are almost inferior to men in physicality, and men, considering them weaker than themselves, have been depriving them of the good positions they were naturally qualified to attain....(But) when did you test the intelligence of women and easily calling them less intelligent?...You hardly give women education, knowledge and instruction, so how can you be sure that they are devoid of intelligence? Rather, Lilavati, Bhanumati, the wife of the King of Karnat, the wife of Kalidasa... are famous as the masters of all scriptures, and there is evidence in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad that Yajnavalkya advised his wife Maitreyi on the extremely difficult knowledge of Brahman."⁶

Regarding the fidelity of a wife to her husband, he says... "Consider in every city and every village how many women have been cheated by men, and how many men have been cheated by women, we feel that the number of cheated wives will be ten times more. However, men (who do it)... do it everywhere with ease, but men do not consider it a sin if they cheat on women. I see almost two, three, ten or even more wives for each man, and if a woman has one husband, when that person dies, they give up all their happiness and wish to die with him..."⁷ Rammohan Roy not only said it with his mouth, he also demonstrated it with his actions. She taught the girls of her family all the mantras that were forbidden for women in society. She was modern in her education, thinking and taste and in her religious life, she was a true Brahmin above all superstitions who tried to give the women the respect they deserve in society, let their individuality be revealed and make them worthy partners of men in the work of nation building.⁸

The decisions taken by Raja Rammohan Roy in the field of trade and commerce of the country were particularly criticized, although his aim was to develop the country's economy through free trade. When the East India Company demanded free trade in the country, Raja Rammohan Roy and his associates welcomed such proposal. They argued that this would increase business competition in the Indian market, reduce the price of commodities, and increase the supply of more different goods in the market. As a result, Indians would benefit economically. They welcomed the Industrial Revolution in India. Moreover, during the East India Company's rule, the expenses of the India House, the purchase of various government goods, the wages of European royal servants, their pensions, and the interest on the money borrowed from England would be borne by the English living in India. They hoped that a large part of this money would activate the Indian economy. Their main goal was to formulate a liberal policy or a free market policy. Therefore, he supported the proposal of the Indigo farmers to purchase land in India and the Europeans to establish colonies in India. He thought that this would firstly improve the living standards of the Indian peasantry under the indigo farmers, freeing them from the control of the native landlords. Because earlier, it was impossible for them to survive as they worked under the native landlords without wages or in exchange for very little grain. But the indigo farmers arranged a fixed monthly salary for the farmers, and the farmers felt somewhat free and comfortable with it. In other words, the issue of the farmers' transition from being land slaves to being wage labourers gained importance for Rammohan and his associates. But in reality, if we review history, we see that in reality, the indigo farmers took advantage of the free trade policy and became the owners of more wealth. And many Europeans, greedy for this wealth, brought the demand to do business in India and it was accepted. Secondly, the indigo farmers completely destroyed the feudal infrastructure and established a capitalist system, in the second half of the nineteenth century; colonial businessmen exploited the people by transforming India into an import area for raw materials and a market for manufactured goods to fulfill their own interests. Industries that were completely dependent on and engaged in British services developed and the market for indigenous goods was destroyed. As a result, indigenous industries were destroyed and the livelihood of indigenous people was affected, and India became dark. According to critics, Raja Rammohan Roy helped strengthen the stability of the Europeans by bringing about such a dark industrialization in India.⁹

Against this criticism, it can be said that Rammohan Roy's intentions were honest. He was in favor of modernizing the Indian economy. Although his approach was not fruitful, at that time some new industries developed which benefited the people of the country. For example, the textile industry, paper industry, production of printed goods, mineral production, engineering materials, etc. benefited people from all walks of life. It was possible to purchase various products at low prices. Therefore, it is not appropriate to blame Rammohan Roy completely.¹⁰

Conclusion: Discussing the life of Raja Rammohan Roy, we noticed that he was committed to social reform with his modern mindset. He realized the need for independence, but at the same time he considered the establishment of equality as necessary. Realizing that political independence cannot be achieved without social and economic equality, he talked about reforming the legal system and also gave importance to the freedom of the press. In this context, we see that he supported the indigo growers in theory, since the economic development of India through the expansion of trade would benefit the common people as well. Raja Rammohan Roy's modern attitude can be particularly seen in his rebellion against the social and family injustices against women that were prevalent in the society of that time. Realizing that the real progress of society is possible only through the progress of all, he focused especially on the welfare of women. He strongly opposed the oppression of widows that was considered normal and appropriate at that time and formulated appropriate laws to protect the lives of women. He actively participated in various efforts to free women from family and social oppression, such as the spread of women's education, support for widow marriage, etc. His liberal, judicious mentality clearly emerged in such activities.

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