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Rammohan Roy : Vision of a Grand symbiosis (1772/1774 – 1833)

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Rammohan Roy was a pioneer in modern Bengal, who sincerely felt the need for a religious reform. He wanted to adapt the Hindu religion to the changing milieu of the nineteenth century.¹ In his timeframe a spirit of reform had already been induced by the British orientalist and the Christian missionaries. Rammohan represented his own society which revealed a gradual desire to bring about a rational interpretation in the sphere of religion. He was the first non-conformist of Bengal who received attention of the ruling class and beyond. Herein lay the importance of his religious reform. Unlike the Islamic theologians who were gradually vanishing from prominence and unlike the low caste popular cults like the *Kartabhajas*, *Balaramis* and *the Lalanshahis* of his time² (who were not popular among the agriculture-based upper castes and classes of the Hindu society for their 'weird' sort of living), an aristocratic Brahman like Rammohan Roy used his pen, the modern medium to have preached 'pure Hinduism' justified by the scriptures. He tried to modernise his tradition by reconciling individual reason with scriptural authority and thereby antagonised the orthodox Hindu Islamic and Christian societies.

Though we have a scarcity of source about the early years the historical information of the later years of Rammohan Roy are plenty, As a reformer, Rammohan had two main purposes; social and intellectual. There was a deep social consciousness at the root of his religious sensibilities; he was a humanitarian reformer who was partly motivated by the need for social reform. Charles Heimsath commented that under Rammohan religious reform equalled with social reform³ and one cannot agree with Collet that religion only was at the root of his life.⁴ Rammohan rightly realised that in India, the inhuman social customs were perpetuated by the sanction of religion and the domination of the priests who resisted reforms for their own selfish purposes. With the influence of the Vedas the

Mutazalist school of Islam ,and the Unitarian principles of Christianity, he felt that social abuses, being closely associated with idolatry , could be removed only by the principle of monotheism. At the same time Rammohan was an Indian Utilitarian, a religious Benthamite, who aspired for a reform from within. He developed a syncretic system, but presented it in a unitary form. He regarded his Brahmoism as a higher form of Hindu worship and not as a separate entity.⁵

Rammohan never claimed that he was a religious personality. He regarded himself as an intellectual, a man of the world with deep social consciousness and he had an abstract and intellectual purpose behind his religious reform. As a seeker of truth he overcame all barriers of race and creed and wanted to reach the true basis of all religious systems. Max Muller and Monier Williams regarded Rammohan as the first earnest Indian stalwart of comparative theology.⁶ The Mughal Emperor Akbar had possessed some of the similar insights but he was guided by his political ambitions.⁷ Rammohan had some idea of humanism from the theory of Sulh-i-kul of the Mughal times ⁸ as he was coming exactly in the period of transition. Unlike Akbar Rammohan's universalism was based on an actual personal contact with the outer world and not on mere intellectual exchanges. Therefore from the outset Rammohan's religious reforms suffered from a dichotomy of early nationalism and universalism. His Brahmo samaj had a Hindu identity and at the same time it was universally open to all religions. Although it was a new attempt Rammohan never discarded tradition but interpreted it according to contemporary needs. As it was a modern reform he took the help of modern means like private conversations and pamphlets, publication of newspapers and polemics and founding of associations for propagating his views. In his first publication "A Gift to Monotheists" or Tuhfat-ul-Muwahiddin (1803) he appeared more as an iconoclast, emphasising the doctrine of the Unity of the Godhead and radically exposing the falsities in different scriptures. Himani Banerjee refers to the Tuhfat and writes that it belonged to a lost cultural period of Bengal, when Perso-Arabic languages cultures and philosophies were the bases for elite education for both Hindus and Muslims. ⁹ She also points out that Rammohan represented a stage of Indian history where Hindu-Muslim relations were radically different from what they are now. ¹⁰ According to Amiya Prasad Sen Rammohun's polemical work Tuhfat is not harsh on Hinduism or on Brahmins as a devious and self-seeking class though he opens with a dramatic statement that falsehood is common to all religions.¹¹ Rather, says the author, it takes certain general observations about the nature and function of religions and explains what helps

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to keep them alive and useful to society. Sen finds Rammohun's views on God and religion marked by a penetrating rationalism manifest in his writings after 1815, when he founded the Atmiya Sabha.¹²

In a recent writing Rudrangshu Mukherjee has argued that as the information about Rammohun's early life is very scanty, it is difficult to explain why and how Rammohun, had composed an erudite tract like the Tuhfat in Persian with an introduction in Arabic. He has referred to Rammohun's Islamic education and also to the Calcutta-based Islamic intellectual influence of Rammohun's time.¹³

It is true that this intellectual influence had been waning in a later period and perhaps for this reason Rammohun appears to be more progressive in the period of the Tuhfat than in the later years. Later Rammohun himself repudiated some of the comments of the Tuhfat except his firm faith in monotheism. At the same time it must be noted that even in these early years, the Perso-Arabic literary tradition itself was elitist in character and it was never rooted in the masses. The authenticity of Rammohun's next work, "Discussions on various Religions" is doubtful even today.

At Rangpur Rammohun faced the orthodox opposition of a group led by one Gourikanta Bhattacharya, when he held informal discussions over problems of religious and social reform. His first formal association was the Atmiya Sabha (1815) founded in Calcutta, for discussing theological subjects with an inner circle of aristocratic and new middleclass liberals. The name "Atmiya" or "Relative" is significant and Rammohun was meaning his own intellectual group by it. That was a deviation from the traditional caste-based relationships of early colonial Bengal. Also he was making the Upanishads democratically accessible to the commoners by translating them (1816-1819) into the vernacular. There was a typical 'new time' approach in this vernacularisation and translation projects. It was further exposed when he wrote to Amherst in 1833 against the foundation of a Sanskrit college in Calcutta. There he had pointed out the falsities in the system of the Vedanta and the Sankhya. His philosophical ideas however suffered from the ambivalence of his own time. In 1825 Rammohun founded the Vedanta College where along with the Vedanta, western philosophy and science were also taught. He brought out an English abridgement of the Vedanta where he showed the futility of the inhuman customs and superstitions of the Hindus. Shri Saumyendranath Tagore, in his lecture on Raja Rammohun Roy in the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, on 17 March, 1972, defended Rammohun's tolerant attitude towards the Saiva marriage sanctioned by the Tantric texts on the ground that he had great respect for the opinion and practices of the multitude, even though they might be objectionable from his point of view.¹⁴ Ramesh Chandra

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Majumder informed about the above mentioned fact and raised the following question :
“ Is it not very strange that Rammohan did not show the same liberal or tolerant attitude to the Hindu religious texts and the worship of images in deference to the views of hundreds of millions of the Hindus (as against barely a million of the Tantriks) who followed this religious practice for at least two thousand years?”¹⁵

Actually Rammohan was critical of his own hereditary caste faction. He said, “*By taking the path which conscience and sincerity direct, I, born a Brahmin, have exposed myself to the complainings and reproaches even of some of my relations, whose prejudices are strong and whose temporal advantage depends on the present system .*”¹⁶ Just as he insisted upon the monotheistic aspect of Hinduism as its true form, so he did in the case of Christianity. He criticised the Christian content of divinity and trinity in his work *The Precepts of Jesus the Guide to Peace and Happiness* and was involved in a controversy with the Baptist missionaries of Serampore .*The Friend of India* ,in its volume 13 of the year 1823 refuted Rammohan’s argument in the *Precepts* as one put forward by a typical orthodox Hindu , It writes

“*The images of Hindooism he has discarded and its gods and goddesses but the essence, the soul the substance of the system, he still retains and with it encounters the doctrines advanced from scripture. Nothing in nature can be more opposite than the spirit of Hindooism, whether manifested in its grossest idolatry or in the highest refinements of the Vedanta*” .¹⁷ Rammohan refuted the arguments of Marshman in three consecutive tracts named *Appeals to Christian public*. In the *Brahmanical Magazine*, he pointed out that the Vedas and even the Puranas and the Tantras were more rational than the Trinitarian doctrines of Christianity. He fought against orthodoxy, either Hindu or Christian, and defended the Hindu tradition against Christian proselytism. He also abused those injunctions in the Koran which sanctioned the persecution of the polytheists. Thus judged by the most liberal standard, Rammohan was a tolerant man and he was groping towards a universal religion initially through the Unitarian committee founded by him with Reverend Adam in 1821. He wanted to bring an effective social mobility in India. As David Kopf remarks, Rammohan tried to use Unitarianism in an Indian way to purify the Hindu tradition.¹⁸ But soon he realised that the Hindu society could not be reformed through a foreign system and so he gave his universal theism a national manifestation in the Brahmo Samaj, founded on 20th August, 1828. The Samaj was distinctly Hindu in character. Also Rammohan preserved the Hindu identity in his personal and public life. Theoretically he denounced the caste system, while translating the *Vajrasuchi* but publicly retained his sacred thread and followed all the caste rules. He thus consciously proved that his main aim was to reform the Hindu

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Samaj. Naturally therefore Rammohan's reforms were severely criticised. Krishnamohan Banerjee, the radical reformer of the Young Bengal regarded Rammohan's movement as vague, confusing and leading to nowhere. The Young Bengal regarded it as only coming halfway between orthodoxy and reform. The *Englishman* commented in June 1836 about the Brahmos that before the bigots they were bigots and before the liberals they were liberals i.e. before the Whigs they were Whigs and before the Tories they were Tories. . Hence Sivanath Sastri once commented that the people were roused and agitated but were not drawn into movement .Sivanath Sastri declared that Rammohan's work was reformatory and not constructive theism.¹⁹ Among the early historians of Bengal, Salahuddin Ahmed opines that in this context Rammohan lacked the courage or conviction of a Martin Luther and had failed to bring about a religious revolution.²⁰ Ramesh Chandra Majumder, inspite of his adherence to the 'Renaissance syndrome' of the nineteenth century, commented that the Raja's movement could hardly be called a movement of religious and social revolt.²¹ Later historians had criticised Rammohan for creating only a temporary stir in the Bengali Hindu society or in the metropolitan elite society in and around Calcutta.

Rammohan was not alone in this field. An interest in the scriptures had already been created by the missionaries. In 1824 a meeting was held by Radhakanta Deb and Dwarakanath Tagore to consider the proposal for instituting a few scholarships to encourage the Vedic studies. Rammohan's movement had failed to affect the life of his coreligionists deeply. It is doubtful, whether even the close associates could perceive and follow his teachings. During his lifetime, his son Radhaprasad participated in the idolatrous festivals and Dwarakanath Tagore celebrated the Durgapuja in his honour. After the departure of Rammohan for England, none of his followers except Dwarakanath and a small numerical group took any active interest in the Brahma Samaj. Thus the Samaj was decaying even when Rammohan was alive. As a result of his movement, there was no radical change in the Hindu society and religion. The faith of the common people in polytheism and idolatry remained unshaken. Judged from its immediate influence on the bulk of the Hindu society, the Brahma movement of Rammohan had only a partial success. This is due to the failure of Rammohan to realise that the orthodox religious beliefs were still popular in Bengal. Hinduism was to be understood not only in monolithic terms but also as a pluralistic religion suitable for different persons at different 'spiritual' levels. Rammohan himself once admitted it and neutralised the effects of his protest against idolatry in a country where the majority of the people were illiterate. He admitted that the Puranas and the Tantras were suitable for the masses and alienated his own identity from the people. He was elitist and pragmatic to allow only the Brahmans to come and join the Vedic recitals of the Samaj. Sumit Sarkar

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points out that Rammohan never tried to line up with the popular low caste monotheistic sects of his own time²² and Pradyumnya Bhattacharya remarks that Rammohan adopted a Sanskrit-based diction, quite different from the linguistic perception of the common speech.²³ A commoner could never also understand the utilitarian aspect of Rammohan's reform. Over intellectualism and lack of emotional fervor resulted to a limited appeal of his movement in a multicultural discursive space like Bengal. He could attract only a few educated Hindus of the upper castes and classes who were already doubtful of their existing religion. His philosophical liberalism was perhaps not understood by his contemporaries and even by the later Brahmos the movement. Rammohan was a cautious philosopher who lacked the consuming fire of a prophet. Had not the cause of Brahmoism been championed later by other leaders like Debendranath and Keshab Chandra Sen and by the Sadharon Brahmo Samaj, the Brahmo Samaj itself would have passed into oblivion. Sumit Sarkar argues that Rammohan's limitations were basically those of his times which marked a transition from pre-capitalist society to a distorted bourgeois modernity.²⁴ In a conversation with Alexander Duff Rammohan himself compared his own time with Reformation Europe and commented : " I begin to think that something similar might have taken place in India". But this optimistic analogy is incorrect. The Protestant Reformation in Europe had united the intellectual arguments of Erasmus with less sophisticated but more virile dictum of medieval heresy. Unlike the Indian Brahmans the Catholic hierarchy of the sixteenth century was an organised and economically exploitative body. Also religion was hardly the most crucial problem of nineteenth century Bengal under colonial rule. The Reformation in Europe succeeded mainly for the apparently secular backings of incipient nationalism, ambitions of the princes and the quest of the new bourgeoisie for supremacy.²⁵ All these factors were not present in colonial Bengal. The *bhadraloks* could never be compared with the new bourgeoisie or the early merchant capitalists of Europe. Is correct in his analysis of Rammohan Roy's background from the *kulin* Brahmans of Rarh or but his classification of two different economic groups under the opposing ideological leadership of Rammohan Roy and Radhakanta Deb is not supported by historical evidence. Facts show that there was no watertight compartmentalization of ideologies on the basis of their economic privileges, between a so-called progressive and a conservative in nineteenth century Bengal. Often two contradictory parties went hand in hand on the issue of a particular reform, sometimes they departed from each other. Economic issues can be explained on the basis of a rift between the higher classes and the masses but the individual non-economic perceptions of the elite reformers were much deeper and complicated as issues to be discussed in broad generalization. That was natural in a colonial ambiance.

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At the same time Rammohan was a pioneer and like many other pioneers in history, he was little understood in his own time. Rammohan served as the nodal point of all the tensions of contemporary Bengal. He is to be credited for his first concerted attempt to give an alternative to those upper class Hindus who already had doubts. Already Ramram Bose and others were questioning their religion and Rammohan satisfied the need for a leader who would turn this negative feeling into a positive and alternative form of worship. In this way he effectively met the ethical challenge of Christian proselytism. The need for conversion or Christianisation of the Hindu society was prevented thereby. As to Hinduism, his unique contribution was to reassert its own essence and make it stand on its fundamental truth. On the other hand the ethos of world-affirmation propounded by Rammohan was very significant. He was the first Indian to introduce western techniques or approaches for the study of different religions. His Brahmo Samaj became the meeting place for all the elite religions and social principles of Indian thought. He perhaps hoped that this united congregational worship would provide India with a deeper basis of national integration. His group symbolized a gradual relaxation of orthodox spirit and blind adherence to tradition and acted as a pressure group in the cognitive revolution of Bengal. This entire ethos was the product of growing urbanization and western education. In fact inspite of inner contradictions Brahmoism was one of the progressive forces of the nineteenth century. Rammohan's religious reforms should be understood from that perspective as he came just at the right moment to be a torch-bearer of the Indian culture. He suffered from an identity crisis of a colonised intelligentsia but he is noted for his deeper intellectual insight in favour of liberalism and justice. He was an embodiment of liberated energies with the idea of a symbiosis of that cosmopolitan sense of human reality which characterised Bengal's intellectual life throughout the century. In the nineteenth century Rammohan initiated the modern trends of cross-culturalism universalism individualism as well as internationalism and this trend reached its climax with the advent of the thoughts of Rabindranath Tagore in the twentieth century. That is why Amiya Prasad Sen remarked that Rammohan being a champion of liberty and civil rights in colonial India was also a true cosmopolitan who envisioned a world without borders. He has rightly remarked that in spite of his lofty public presence, Rammohun was a hugely controversial figure.²⁶ By the time of his death in Bristol, he was as much resented as respected, both at home and abroad.

I have initiated the discussion with the comment that an underlying social consciousness was prominent behind the religious liberalism of Rammohan Roy. Another interesting argument revolving round the question of reform is whether Rammohan's religion was

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secular or not. Scholars have argued that Rammohan's religion was void of secularism as the theory itself emerged in the west much later in the mid-nineteenth century.

The word secularism as used in the West for over three hundred years, locates an area in public life where religion is not admitted. When one enters public life one is expected to leave one's faith behind. It is understood that managing the public vellum is a science that is essentially universal, that religion, is a potential threat to any modern polity or the Baconian world-view of science. This world-view has never freed the western world from the pangs of exploitation and orthodoxy of all kinds. Religion has been recorded as the chief threat to all kinds of politics, while economic and cultural threats are even deeper today. In contrast, another known western meaning of secularism centres on equal respect for all religions. It implies that while the public life must have space for a continuous dialogue among religious traditions and between the religious and secular--that, in the ultimate analysis, each major faith in the religion should respect diversity of the theory of transcendence. Recently, Ali Akhtar Khan has drawn attention to the fact that George Jacob Holyoake, who coined the word secularism in 1850, advocated secularism accommodative of religion, a secularism that would moreover emphasise diversities and coexistence in the matters of faith. His contemporary, Joseph Bradlaugh, on the other hand, believed in a secularism that rejected religion and made science its deity.²⁷ Most non-modern Indians believing in political cultural forces unleashed by colonialism still operating in Indian society, have unwittingly opted for the accommodative and pluralist meaning while India's westernized intellectuals have consciously opted for the abolition of religion from the public sphere. In other words, the accommodative meaning is most compatible with the meaning the majority of Indians, independently of Bradlaugh.²⁸

Rammohan's thoughts on religion coincided with this non-modern idea of secularism. As a champion of comparative theology he favoured the unorthodox ideals of all religions and negated orthodoxy of all kinds. Moreover the term 'religion' in English should be equated not only with the institutional religions but also with the philosophical epistemological and metaphysical traditions of India, though loosely. Rammohan Roy was a believer of the Hindu faith and at the same time he was one of the early science enthusiasts of Bengal. His ideas of western science were permeated through the vernacular medium in his Anglo-Hindu School. Rammohan himself wrote a number of scientific essays on 'Echo', 'Property of Magnetism', 'Behaviour of Fish', 'Description of a Balloon' etc. He was supposed to have no contradiction between his pure faith and western science. Many scholars of the later period are thinking in terms of an Asian civilizational dialogue with a belief in the unity of non-reductionist science with the

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cosmos. Rammohan Roy visualized such a dialogue which has become significant globally.²⁹

Mary Carpenter who wrote her book on the last days of Rammohan Roy came up with a near-the-truth appreciation , “The Rajah Rammohun Roy was, in the land of his birth, a man greatly before his age.... The seed which he sowed was long and germinating, but it never lost its vitality.”³⁰ This comment is valid even today.

This is a working paper based on initial research. All comments are welcome.

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