

RAJA RAMOHAN ROY AS A REFORMER: AN EXPLORATION

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ABSTRACT

The nineteenth century Bengal was very backward. Stagnancy, degradation, corruption, superstitions and other inhuman beliefs and practices had engulfed the Bengal or rather the entire India. Casteism, untouchability, sati, child marriage, infanticide and other ill practices had played a great role in increasing the backwardness of Bengal as well as of India.

In order to eradicate such evil beliefs and practices and to uplift the status of man some educated men of the elite class came forward and their reformation include the areas of literature, philosophy, art, music, politics, science, religion and other aspects of intellectual inquiry. It is said that Raja Rammohan Roy was pioneer of this movement. Other stalwarts were: Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, Debendranath Tagore, Akshay Kumar Dutta, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda. This paper intends of explore the reformation brought by Raja Rammohan Roy during Indian renaissance.

Keywords: Reformation, Religion, Social, Political, Modern

Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), was born on 22 May 1772 in an orthodox Brahman family at Radhanagar in Bengal. He studied Persian and Arabic and read the Quran, the works of Sufi mystic poets and the Arabic translation of the works of Plato and Aristotle. He, also studied English, Sanskrit and read Vedas and Upnishads. He was greatly moved by western modern thought and gave importance on rationalism and modern scientific attitude. He worked for East India Company from 1803 to 1814 as the personal diwan and resigned from the company in 1814 in order to dedicate his life to religious, social, political and educational reforms of India.

It is believed that Raja Rammohan Roy was the pioneer who tried to pull the Indian society out of the dark ages like medieval age. His ideas and views through which he wanted to uplift the Indian

society gave birth to the Indian Renaissance because He brought reformations in the fields like education, religion, social and political.

Educational reforms:

Raja Rammohan Roy believed education is an important tool for implementing reforms and tried to spread the benefits of modern education to his countrymen. He supported David Hare's efforts to found the Hindu College in 1817, while Roy's English school taught mechanics and Voltaire's philosophy. He established Vedanta college In 1825, where courses in both Indian learning and Western social and physical sciences were taught. In 1822, he established the *Anglo-Hindu school* and in 1826 the *Vedanta College*; where he stressed that his teachings of monotheistic doctrines be incorporated with "modern, western curriculum"ⁱ. He also helped Rev. Alexander Duff to establish Scottish Church College.

Religious Reforms:

He was very much annoyed with orthodoxy of Hinduism and considered it as the impediment of progress and advancement of man. He criticized vehemently the evil believes and practices of Hindus, such as casteism, untouchability, sati, polygamy, child marriage, priest craft, polytheism, idol worship etc. and thought that orthodox Hinduism of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the perverted and corrupt form of the ancient Hindu religion. He was against priest craft and held them responsible for corrupting the ancient Hinduism by indulging idol-worship and other various religious superstitions. He found nothing rationality in idol-worshiping and argued that such irrational activity corrupted and degraded the character of common people and prevented moral reformation.

He believed in monotheism and to prove that Hindu scriptures teach monotheism, he published the Bengali translation of the Vedanta and also translated five of the major Upanishads between 1815 and 1817. In this way he tried to purify the Hindu religion from the crude ignorant superstitions. We

find he advocated a rational, moral, non-authoritarian, this-worldly, and social-reform Hinduism. British and American Unitarians also liked his writingsⁱⁱ. He published his first major English work *Abridgement of the Vedant* in 1816 and also translated several upanisad into English to remove englishman's misapprehension of Hinduism and to prove though superstitious practices damaged Hindu religion but it has nothing to do with its spirit of purity.

Social Reformation:

Roy tried to free women from various forms of oppression like illiteracy, child marriage, sati, purdah, without which a society cannot progress. He did not think that women were inferior to man. And always wanted to uplift the status of women and give them education and inheritance to property. He also advocated for remarriage of Hindu widows and abolition of polygamy and child marriage.

The most inhuman and murderous practice in nineteenth century Bengal was Sati. At the time, not only in Bengal, but all over India, Hindu widows were forcibly burnt alive on the same pyre of their husbands. The wives were said that in this way they could attain the haven. It was Raja Rammohan Roy who came forward as a major source to prevent such horrible practice. He tried to get public opinion on the prevention of the practice of Sati, cited oldest sacred texts of Hinduism to show that such evil practice was opposed by them and even appealed to reason, humanity and compassion of the people of Bengal. He even visited the burning ghats of Calcutta to make understand the relatives of Hindu widows to give up such heinous practice, but sometimes he was attacked by them. In 1829, William Bentinck with the active help of Raja Rammohan Roy suppressed the practice of sati and declared that such practice is a crime and violation of which is punishable with death sentence.

He opposed Indian casteism and believed in social equality of all human beings.

He established Atmiya Sabha (society of friends) in Calcutta In 1815, to campaign against idolatry, caste system, untouchability, rituals and other social evils.ⁱⁱⁱ

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To implement his ideas, he established the Brahma Sabha in 1828, which was later renamed as Brahma Samaj which was an important organization of religious reform. The members of this organization came from different caste, creed and faith and believed in a Universal Religion based on the principal of one Supreme God. They preached that Hinduism was an impersonal monotheistic religion and thereby was opposed to polytheism and idolatry. The principal objectives of this organization were to condemn and prohibit all types of socio-religious superstitions in order to reform and in 1872, an act was passed under the leadership of Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-84), one of the leaders of Brahma Samaj, which abolished polygamy and child marriage.

Political Reforms:

Though Roy admired British rule in India, but he organised protest against such rule and criticised the British restriction to the free movement of the press and the excluding Indians from the higher posts in British government in India.

Taxation reforms: Rammohan Roy was against of the oppressive system of Bengali zamindars and wanted fixation of minimum rents and demanded the elimination of taxes on tax-free lands. He called for decrease of export duties on Indian goods abroad and the closure of the East India Company's trading rights.

Administrative reforms: Roy wanted the Indianisation of higher services and separation of the executive from judiciary. He demanded parity between Indians and Europeans.

Conclusion:

Raja Rammohan Roy is believed to be the father of Indian renaissance who brought a revolutionary change in almost all aspects of human life like social, religious, educational, economical

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etc. He was able to eradicate some of the evil beliefs and practices that were not only inhuman in nature, but also stood as barriers in the way of development and progress of a society like Bengal. Specifically, women got emancipation from some horrible and inhuman practices, from the murderous custom, called Sati. Some legal measures were also taken to uplift their status. His ideas are needed for the regeneration of mankind as a whole. He initiated the era of enlightenment and liberal *reformist*. Rabindranath Tagore in his address, entitled 'Inaugurator of the Modern Age in India,' mentioned to Ram Mohan as 'a luminous star in the firmament of Indian history'.

It can be said that he was the first who led the intellectual reform movement in modern India which in turn led to the beginning of rationalism and enlightenment in India which indirectly contributed to the nationalist movement of India. In a word, his reformation contributed havoc in eradicating man's suffering in all respects of life and that's why he can be considered as a true reformer.

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