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**SUTTEE-DAHA: RAJA RAM MOHAN ROY VS. HINDU SOCIETY**

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A few highborn people arise in human society whom one can name as intellectuals, social reformer, a pure soul; **Raja Ram Mohan Roy** is one of those names of the renaissance in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal. He is known as father of modern India. The fore figure of renaissance, fought tirelessly for the people of India considering common dwellers as Godly. India was colonized by the British rulers at that time. 18<sup>th</sup> century Bengal was submerged into darkness, intellectual, societal demolitions crying for a rescuer. Raja Rammohan Roy has dedicated his life to bring reforms in Hindu society of his time. The society was emerged into mud of superstitions, irrational observance and evil customs that resulted human life especially of the women into hell. He found '**Brāhmo Sabhā**' in 1828 A.D, that later renowned as '**Brāhmo Samāji**'. This Society advocated monotheism, worship of the supreme reality Brahman and condemned strongly of the Hindu polytheism, idol worship, ritualistic practices. Earlier Hindu society had the ritual of **Suttee-dāha Prathā** or emergence of the widowed wife or wives into the funeral pyre of her/their husband. By this they received respect of Suttee in society. This heinous tradition was strongly rejected by Roy. He tirelessly revolted against it and later in 1829 Lord William Bentick, the Governor General of British India Banned this through Regulation 17, labelled this tradition as illegal and punishable offence. Rabindranath Thakur describes him as the man who prepares the lamps to be lightened in the daylight (*sakāl belay salte pākano<sup>ii</sup>*). Roy was an advocate of Western education. He became a pioneer for English education in India despite of being a Sanskrit Teacher, a learned of Vedanta himself. He realised far sooner that western methods of study are way more approachable and practical for the people of India than only being dependent on strict verses of Sanskrit education. He was advocate of collaboration of education methods from East and West into Indian knowledge system. He was the founder of the Bengali journal '**Samvad Kaumudi**' and became chief editor of the same. During industrial revolution he realised that to prepare a well-established market in India they need a large number of English learned people. Roy took this as an advantage to preach western education into traditional Spiritual methods to make education available for every lay Indian. He was the pioneer as well as a determined promoter of western education as he considered British invasion as blessing in a way.

Ram Mohan Roy was born in 1772 to a family with diverse religious sects; his father was follower of Vaishnava religion where his mother was a Shaiva. This union was an unlikely case at that

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time. Roy initially started his education with a village pathshala. He learned Bengali, and began with his Sanskrit and Persian language lessons. He completed his formal education from a madrasa in Patna where he learned Persian and Arabic. He was influenced by European writers like Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, John Stuart Mill. He has established *Anglo Hindu School* in Calcutta in 1822 to preach western knowledge in English. By 1827 the number of students rose to 60-80. Prince Dwarkanath Thakur, the great grandfather of Rabindranath Thakur was a student here. Roy accompanied Alecander Duff to establish an English medium school, *General Assembly Institution*. The most renowned institution for western studies in Bengal was the *Hindu College*, established in 1817, 20<sup>th</sup> January. Raja Rammohan Roy was associated with its foundation too. During this time, he came into acquaintance of David Hare, who advised him to establish English School, as a result of that *Hare School* came into existence. Roy stood against when British govt were about to establish the Sanskrit College in Calcutta, as he didn't want to invest the annual recommended fund for education to be dedicated rather in Sanskrit education. He even wrote a letter against this initiative and argued for Western education, Mathematics and other Sciences, to Lord Amherst in 1823, 11<sup>th</sup> December. Though, the College was established despite of his discouragement. It is assumed that British govt. didn't want to become a bad influence to the Hindu majority with whom Roy hadn't a very good terms or maybe they simply disobeyed him as they realised how apt his reasons are. However, the zeal of English learning and western education was increasing efficiently with his conscious efforts. During 1830s, Baptist Missionaries also preached western education which resulted the number of male students around 528 and female approx. 484<sup>iii</sup>. Roy sharpened his Arabic, Persian from Patna and Sanskrit from Kashi. He had a scholarly hold on Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, which connected him to the roots of Hindu dharma.

### **Hindu Society and Suttee:**

In Indian knowledge system Dharma is not only referent of religion rather it is defined in terms of one's obligation towards their (his/her) duty. It is what one adheres. Since earlier time Hindu society was divided into four varnas, Brahman, Kṣatriya, Vaisya and Shudra. Divisionary nature among caste and creed tore the glory of Bengal apart. Hatred, greed among classes, child marriage, polygamy, infant-killing was daily soap of that period. Conservative brahmins treated other classes, poor and women as outsiders to the social structure. Untouchability was at its peak. Ramesh Chandra Barman highlights an incident regarding this; during the time when Ramtanu Lahiri was an unpaid student in David Hare's school, he was offered food by Mr. Hare, fearing lose of class he refused it suppressing his hunger. To our surprise he was only a child at that time<sup>iv</sup>. Cunning Brahmins turned every weak

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hearted people as slaves to religion. Births, marriages, sickness, deaths or other form of ceremonies were seized under these Brahmins. They seized education and kept it out of reach of the lower class. It was their source of revenue. The only resource-person to reach to education, to religious rituals were these upper-class Brahmins, who portrayed themselves as messengers of the Gods. Thus, all the other classes were dependent as well as relied on them. Raja Rammohan realised the limitations, darker sides of Brahmin supremacy. He strongly opposed of the Idol worship, polytheism, ritualistic practiced of Hindus. He explicitly vocalised of verses from the Vedas, Karma-Kanda, Upanishadic teachings to bring back spirituality to its real senses. But in contrary the contemporary Hindu society was merged into sacrificial rituals during Durga festivals, Pilgrimage visits, cleansing sins in Ganga, Idol worshiping, non-spiritualistic over stimulatory rituals. To fight these externalities of religious practices he formed a society consisting strong-willed, well-read people. The members of this group were:

*Prince Dwarakanath Thakur, Prasanna Kumar Thakur, Gopimohan Thakur, Dwarpayana Thakur, Annada Prasad Bandyopadhyay, Bhukailash from Khidirpore, zamindar Kashinath Mallick, Raja Kali Shankar Ghosal, Rajachandra Ray, Nandakishore Basu and so on.*

This society was known as *Atmiya Sabha*. He created this Sabha to stand against Hindu complexities, superstitions. They discussed on Vedanta; everyone had the liberty to express their thoughts without hesitation. This society soon became eye sore for the conservative cunning Hindus. They invited Roy for debates on various regards. The society was conservative and highly androcentric, patriarchal. Women lived on the edge of the system and under control of male supremacy. Polygamy for men was normalised, while widow-marriage was unacceptable thing. The Suttee-daha pratha was another heinous ritual practiced in that period. The term Suttee has originated from Sat, stands for truth. A pious woman who follows truth and moral paths are referred as Suttee. The concept of Suttee-daha or emergence of the widowed wife into the funeral pyre of the late husband has originated from the mythology of Devi Suttee. Witnessing the unwelcome of her husband lord Shiva and over hearing humiliations about him Devi Suttee sacrificed herself in front of her father and his acquaintances who were involved into the Shiva Shaming. Following this story, the widowed wife, killing herself in his husband's funeral pyre was considered auspicious. She was worshiped as pious lady, dedicating her life solely to her husband. The concept Suttee had two parts, first is dying in the same funeral fire, known as *Sahagamana* or dying or going along; and later is *Anugamana* or following after the late husband, by sacrificing her life after the husband's death. Historians like P.V. Kane and H. H. Wilson mentions there's no mention of Suttee tradition in Vedic era thus, this can be a later affair. *P. V. Kane* in his monumental work *History of Dharmasastra* expressed, this concept of

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Suttee is been of academic interest in India for about hundred years, since 1829. This Suttee held behind as a tradition is condemnable. It involves not as a mere custom but symbolises an attitude towards women subjugation. It idealises the relationship of husband and wife and labelled the women who follows this ‘tradition’ as ideal wives. Any tradition spurs out of contemporary needs but seeks legitimation into the past. There is however no clear history of burning the widow along with the late husband of her in Vedas. Though a similar hint is available in Rg Vedas as a mimetic ceremony. The widow lays on the funeral pyre of the husband before it is lit, and was raised from it by a male relative of her late husband. It signifies a symbolic death of the wife along with the husband. The concept of Niyoga has a link to this context, where the wife is permitted to marry her husband’s brother if she has not borne a son with her husband. This is known as *Niyoga or levirate*’. The Mahabharata has examples for this, Madri the wife of Pandu, the wives of Krishna. Through the eminent commentator on Smrti shastras like Manu-Smriti, she states that *Manu* strongly condemned and opposed the Suttee. He accused it of being adharma and ashastriya or not accordance with religion or literature as it amounts to suicide. Suicide is forbidden in literatures or Shastras. However, this exposition is controversial as Manu has not mentioned of Suttee in his writings anywhere.

There are some considerations that are argued in favour of this pratha. Firstly, Manu defines the life of widows to be spent in austere duties, forgiving every injury, staying away from any form of sensual pleasure, faithfully practicing widowhood in virtue. A widow should live under her father, brother or other relatives. Now, Con-cremation or Suttee-daha is labelled as incumbent duty for widows; in that case if any widow chooses the other way that is the life of virtue. That would be violation of the duty; Smarttu Raghunandan, the commentator on Hindu Law in Bengal stated the passage from *Ungira* that, *‘there is no other course for a widow beside Con-cremation’*<sup>vi</sup>

**The Debate:**

In beginning British govt. wasn’t interested in Indian social internal affairs, but soon they felt the need of the otherwise. In 1804 the magistrate of Bundelkhand wrote to the Governor regarding prohibition of this tradition. The govt proposed a verdict on this that any woman willing to perform Suttee will need permission from the district magistrate. Lord Amherst amended a few more regulations to this; the permission has to be asked by the widowed woman herself; the relatives helping her into this will not be granted of recruitment to any jobs and all the properties of the widowed woman who will commit this tradition will be seized by the govt. After his constant and hard efforts Lord Bentick Abolished this tradition completely as illegal and punishable. After Roy has witnessed his beloved sister-in-law to sacrifice herself willingly into the pyre of his elder-brother, but shrieking to

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jump out of it when she felt the flames envelop her, but restricted and pushed back into the pyre by bamboos. He also witnessed around 544 Suttee daha in 1818; encouraged by *Job Charnock*, who was an initiator at John Company's Calcutta, has rescued and married a Hindu woman from being victim of Suttee-daha. These incidents triggered his reform activities in another levels. He was well read of the Shastras of Hindu dharma. He knew quite accurately of the predecessors who spoke and even dared to act against this heinous tradition. After hearing of 60 among the 1500 wives and concubines entered into funeral pyre when his own Commander-in-chief died of a natural death in Deccan, 1614, in *Ain-i-Akbari* the *Mughal emperor Akbar* mentioned that it is a strange method of the men to seek renunciation in terms of sacrificing the wives, he mocked these men's being remarked as magnanimous in these lines<sup>vii</sup>. In 1818 Roy published the first pamphlet on this issue, "*an Opponent of the Practice of Burning Widows Alive*" in both English and Bengali. This kindled controversial debates in the Hindu society which led him to publish another issue of such pamphlet "*Second Conference Between an Advocate for an Opponent of the Practice of Suttee*"<sup>viii</sup>, in Calcutta itself in 1820s. different European troops banned this tradition in the specific areas they have occupied, criticism from another religion i.e. Christianity was an easy game. But Roy envisaged at finding the truth that there is no mention of Suttee in Hindu Shastras too. He translated these pamphlets into English to illuminate the British Raj, begins the conversation as an opponent to Suttee tradition, "those who have no reliance in the Shastras, and those who take delight in the self-destruction of women, may well wonder that we should oppose that suicide which is forbidden by all Shastras and by every race of man."<sup>ix</sup> This was at the response of the statement of the advocate of such tradition by justifying it as long observed in the country, that Suttee is referred by many sacred law givers, as follows:

1. In the words of *Ungira* when he described it as a way to attain Heaven alongside the husband as it was for Arundhuti.
2. In *Mahabharata* in a story of a couple pigeon, where after the death of the male one, the female one entered into the flames and she found her husband after reaching the Heaven.
3. Through the words of *Hareet* that posits that the wife must burn herself along with her husband, failing to do so she has to transmigrate into a female form again.
4. They also invoked *Lord Vishnu* as a support, stating after death of the husband a wife must live as an ascetic or must ascent as suttee.
5. In the *Brahmin Pooran* states, "if her Lord dies in another country, let the faithful wife place his sandals on her breasts, and pure, enter the fire."<sup>x</sup>
6. The advocates used Rig Veda phrase towards the fire, personifying it, requests to anoint the widows so that they are never separated from their husbands.

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7. They state there is no other way known for a woman, virtuous, loyal being except to ascend the pile of her husband. There is no other duty left for her after the husband dies.

The advocates of the tradition have taken each reference to purification through fire; they understood as con-cremation or post-cremation. As per they refer to this, if women decide not to perform such, it would be sinful and disgraceful by others. The Male chauvinist contenders of the tradition accused women of being inferiorly capable in understanding, lack will and are without firm resolution, are unworthy to trust, live by passion, thus, are devoid of knowledge of virtue.

In response to these the opponent Raja Rammohan Roy and his colleagues, state that women in general sense are inferior to men but only in physical strength; they are denied corporeal knowledge that men have access to, if given equal opportunities, they can exhibit their natural capacity. Regarding understanding he states from Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishads of Yajur Veda, that when Yajñavalkya imparts divine knowledge of the complexities of nature to his wife Maitreyi, she was completely able to follow and attain it. of the women's resolution, Roy states that where utterance of death shakes a man to his core, woman offers to burn with the dead husband with firm mind. They are neither untrustworthy, that if taken note it would be concluded that there are nearly ten times higher number of be betraying men than women. their only fault would be that they trust others easily, invest confidence too soon, that results them to misery, and ironically this even leads them to burn themselves to death. In respect to their leading life by passion he describes marriage traditions followed by men versus women. That, men marry often two wives, sometimes ten or above while women marry one husband, desires to join him even in his funeral pyre, leaving all worldly pleasures or lives life of ascetic devoted to the memories of her late husband. At marriage the wife is considered as half of her husband, but in reality, after marriage, she is treated worse than inferior animals. She is thrown into household cleaning, cooking, washing dishes, clothes, serve her husband, parents-in-laws, siblings-in-laws and children day and night, even after all this she is left to eat leftovers be it sufficient or not. He states that "All the ancient law gives 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."<sup>xi</sup>

Roy, taking support from *Manu*, that he explicitly said about the duties of the widows as to emaciate her body, consuming flowers, roots and fruits and restraining herself from even pronouncing name another man, forgiving all injuries, avoiding sensual pleasures, and peacefully continue to serve harsh duties as a loyal widow to her husband. Also, these references from *Ungira*, *Hereet* are addressed to those who stay occupied by sensual desires and cannot be only option in practice.

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To repeal the abolition of Suttee, two Hindu appeals were sent to the Governor General in the years 1812, 1815 and 1817. During this period Roy and his comrades sent counter *petition in 1818, August*. They stated firmly that, they have been eyewitness of the heinous tradition that is none other but murders of widows in their first instance of grief by death of their husbands, that they are carried, tied or pushed into the pyre, and burnt to death. Thus, they need the Govt to take immediate actions to stop these unlawful murders. Roy exemplifies with Manu, that **in Vedas it is stated that whatever Manu says is wholesome and whatever is contrary to Manu's laws are not comprehensible**. He further highlights *Yajñavalkya's statement on widowhood, that she has to live under care of any of her male relatives after her husband dies*. This in other way stands against the burning of the widow. Rammohan brings *Nishkama-karma theory of Bhagavat-Gita* here that as the con-cremation has stated for future result or *Fala-lava, and this contention is strictly forbidden in the path of Nishkama-karma or fruitless-action*. So, burning widows is condemnable. He invoked of Yajñavalkya, Katyayana, Narad Muni, Vishnu, Vṛhaspati and Vyasa, that they advocate of daughters to be given fourth part of the ancestral property. Roy considered persuasion as a better way to eradicate Sutte/Sati, that it might get suppressed eventually by increasing difficulties in the way and by the indirect agency of police and laws. His statements from Shastras managed to make the Governor General to determine to suppress this tradition as it involves moral concerns and sensitiveness of individual. His regards for Bentham's Utilitarianism, greatest good for the greatest number of people, played a significant role on this case. On December 19<sup>th</sup>, 1829, eight hundred Hindus sent a petition to prevent Suttee, to the Governor General to the annual Regulation no. XVII.<sup>xii</sup>

To conclude, throughout history of this Suttee tradition, it was a controversial practice among Hindus. This has brought multiple legal provisions and principles under discussion, right to life, right to freedom, right to freedom of expression; murder, suicide and abetment to suicide. It was also exemplified as negligence of failure to prevent such heinous crime. The practice of sati has been there in the subcontinent of India before colonization, in the time when the continent was divided into kingdoms and ruled by the kings. The history has gloried the Wife immolation or Jawahar Vrata in terms of protecting their dignity from foreign men during wars and this was mostly practiced in the kingdoms which had been defeated. The women creating a large fire emerges into that one by another. The Suttee is a similar tradition of wife's immolation into the fire either alongside of the husband in the same pyre or post cremation. Though history may glorify this practice of Jawahar or Suttee is has deep-rooted repercussions of patriarchal dominance. Women were dehumanised, conceived as irrational, emotion-driven beings who needed to be protected and kept under control of male supremacy. In warfare women had no place but to hide inside their homes or protect their dignity by

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sacrificing their lives altogether. Maybe we hadn't had to witness these immolations of women if patriarchal dominance hadn't captured women's dignity in the first place. If they were treated as equally capable and sound humans, they would have been trained and partaken in warfare alongside of men, that would in a way helped the kingdom as well as fear of losing dignity wouldn't be a question as women would have been more human than 'women' then.

In the preceding on the tradition, when advocates found their grounds to be rather loose and not suggested by Shastras in Hinduism, they leaned towards force implication of it taking emotional tole on men. They stated this practice might be sinful but they shall not refrain to practice it. this is rather to assure the husband that his wife(s) would follow him on the pile, his mind would be at ease from any kind of misconduct from her side. The wife must live under control of husband, stand in awe to him. Rammohan Roy stood against Polygamy and Kulinism as plural marriage would result in more Suttees, specifically to the Bengal regions. But the reformist Raja Rammohan Roy and his Colleagues stood strong against all the odds and conservative attacks. To them Woman was first a human being and a wife afterwards and should be treated as one in the first place. She is as capable and, in some cases, even stronger willed and determined than men if observed from a neutral non conservative lens. He was a true Emperor (Raja) without the crown on his head for the misfortune, deprived women in Bengal. And it is beyond any doubts that, Ram Mohan Roy has to be named among the best-known reformists of women liberation among Indian subcontinent.

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