



Raja Rammohan Roy and the Dawn of Modernity and Nationalism in India

Sanchita Nag

Assistant Professor in Political Science, Kazi Nazrul Islam Mahavidyalaya,
Churulia, West Burdwan

The author teaches Political Science in the Department of Political Science of Kazi Nazrul Islam Mahavidyalaya, Churulia, West Burdwan. Previously she was a Junior Research Fellow in the department of Political Science, Burdwan University, from where she also received her Master's degree in Political Science. Her areas of interest include ethnicity, nationalism, and Indian political thought.

Abstract

The confluence of two different cultures marks the trajectory of India's struggle for Independence – the European and the Indian. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was, in this respect, the culmination of a new age. With the introduction of the Western mode of education, a wave of new thoughts ushered in thereby accommodating itself with the prevailing notions of native forces at work at that time. A new era of change was perhaps unleashed with the advent of the British rule which led to the advent of constant struggle between despotism and liberty, superstition and enlightenment, priestcraft and the triumph of reason; in other words, the period witnessed the beginning of 'destruction as well as 'regeneration', destruction of tradition and the emergence of modern, secular and liberal-reformist forces.

Raja Rammohan Roy (1774-1833), the first great 'modernizer' and father of the nineteenth century 'Renaissance' in Indian thought, appeared on the stage as the pathfinder of a new age – the age of enlightenment and liberal-reformist modernization in India. Besides, witnessing the extremely degraded situation of the then Bengal, in particular and India, in general, under the corrosive effects of the irrational orthodox Hindu society and its evils, namely, caste, polygamy, Kulinism, infanticide, burning of Hindu widows – sati, immorality and so forth, Rammohan intensely desired to strengthen the rotten society from within via reforms of various kinds, that of social, educational, religious, economic, and others; perhaps Rammohan visualized that it is with the rejuvenating of the society, that the process of state-building and nationhood construction is likely to occur in the years to come.

With this objective set forth, Rammohan passionately worked for bringing about social change all throughout his life in order to give shape to his abstract imagination of a "possible India" in future.

The present paper, in this context, seeks to find out how and under what circumstances Raja Rammohan Roy turned out to be a true advocate of an evolving national consciousness, via choosing the path of modernizing Indian society which, he knew would gradually lead toward the establishment of the right to self-determination.

Keywords

modernity, national consciousness, liberty, reforms, renaissance

The trajectory of India's struggle for independence is marked essentially with the confluence of very many distinct cultures among which the most conspicuous have been that of the European and the Indian. Unlike the West, where revolution, armed struggle, violent mass upsurge and tremendous bloodshed have been some of the common phenomenon, "accommodation" and "toleration" marked the very essence of the Indian situation. Besides, a spur of modernity holding the hands of Industrial Revolution and related scientific and technological developments with utmost emphasis upon state-building characterized the western world, it was society along with diversity on religious, cultural, caste and cultural lines, where throbbed the very essence of India. This state-society interface has always remained a matter of serious concern for the pioneers of Indian nationalism that which is full of sentiments and aspirations.

However, as is well known, the impact of British rule, bourgeoisie economy and modern western culture was first felt in Bengal, and produced an awakening known usually as the *Bengal Renaissance*. For about a century, Bengal's conscious awareness of the changing modern world was more developed than and ahead of the rest of India. The role played by Bengal in the modern awakening of India is thus comparable to the position occupied by Italy in the story of the European Renaissance (Sarkar 1970: Introduction). It would not be an exaggeration here to note that Raja Rammohan Roy stood at the verge of opening up a new era, that of modernizing a tradition-ridden society. By this numerous tracts, pamphlets memoranda, and books and public activities for religious, social, educational, economic and political reforms, Raja Rammohan Roy inaugurated the age of enlightenment and liberal-reformist modernization in India.

The life-span of Rammohan Roy (1774-1833) roughly corresponds to that period of history which witnessed heyday of Industrial Revolution in Europe and the consolidation of British colonial rule in India (Chakrabarti 2008: 27). It was the period when Indian thought felt the unavoidable impact of English thought. Through the introduction of the English system of education, the British not only transmitted the culture and temper of the European traditions but, more immediately, the ideas of Bentham, Mill, Carlyle, and Coleridge, the amalgam of a defence of private enterprise and collective endeavour, of democracy and rule of law (Mehta 2010: 157).

There was a continuous tension between the evolution of this new consciousness and the growing familiarity with European culture. Prior to this, with the breakdown of the

Mughal system of administration a period of anarchy and disorder followed. The East India Company resolved to stand forth as the Diwan in 1772 indeed, but it took them more than half a century to establish a well-ordered system of government, securing peace and order for their subjects.

Rammohan appeared thus on the stage, when the sense of moral responsibility of the government to the people of India was being slowly but gradually awakened. The people of Bengal enjoyed a limited measure of civil liberty under the aegis of the British Government for nearly half a century (1772-1821), when Rammohan started the Vernacular Journal, *Sambad Kaumudi* in 1821 to rouse the political consciousness of the people of Bengal. He was greatly influenced by the French Revolution no less than by the ideas of Bentham. He was also responsible for founding the Brahma Samaj. In his letters, notes and petitions he enunciated, though not in a systematic form, his own ideas about liberty. He desired independence of all colonies. Even as a boy he was not happy with the presence of the British in India. But the British seemed to him to possess qualities of head and heart which Indians lacked. He, therefore, hoped that the British rule would lead to the amelioration of the lot of Indians and would eventually pave the way for the establishment of a democratic institutions in India and admiration for the British raj which he thought was a blessing in so far as it would bring India at par with the nations of Europe (Mehta 2010: 158).

Therefore, unlike other enlightened thinkers of his age, Rammohan never preached his native people intolerance towards the British rulers. Rather, he held the Europeans to be the greatest benefactor of India vis-à-vis other foreign intruders. He upheld the achievements the English rulers had brought to India, the land stricken with superstition, idolatry, caste system, priesthood, and so on and so forth.

What makes Rammohan's stand distinct of all the contemporaries is that he was not much bothered with the British invasion but more with that of religious and social degeneration, his native Bengal had fallen prey to. It would be pertinent to quote the words of a celebrated biographer of Roy, Sophia Dobson Collet, to have a view of the then Bengal:

“Thick clouds of ignorance and superstition hung over all the land; the native Bengalee public had few books and no newspapers. Idolatry was universal and was often of a most revolting character; polygamy and infanticide were widely prevalent and the lot of Bengalee women was too often a tissue of ceaseless oppressions and miseries while, as the crowning horror, the flames of the

suttee were lighted with almost incredible frequency even in the immediate vicinity of Calcutta” (cited in Pantham 1986: 35).

To this ugly state of things, rightly said Radharaman Chakrabarti, no sensitive intellectual, least of all Rammohan, could remain a placid spectator. But Roy’s reaction was even more intense. He was determined to stop the rot and rejuvenate society. This was clearly an uphill task and called for mobilization of an overwhelming force that must be generated, if not entirely from within the society, at least in conjunction with favourable external factors (Chakrabarti 2008: 29).

Rammohan’s settlement in Calcutta in 1814, after leaving his job in the Rungpur Collectorate, his disseminating of the Upanishadic and Vedantic doctrines, thereby preaching Monotheism, by proclaiming the worship of Brahma as the One Ultimate Being, regular quoting from the Sashtras thereby interpreting it and protecting it from further degeneration, his carrying of crusade against the evil practice of Sati, the introduction of Brahma Sabha and subsequently Brahma Samaj, his visit to England – all these are indicative of the emergence of a significant phase of the Bengal Renaissance period.

Amidst several crises, Rammohan sought to ameliorate the social decadence Bengal was going through. In this connection, he viewed the British as a blessing and perhaps the closest ally in such hour of need. Being a keen observer, he understood properly that in order to bring about national development and a sense of commonality or to evolve national consciousness among the idolatry stricken and superstitious bound fellowmen, neither contemporary politics nor rising against the foreign rulers will do. Since as regards politics, he knew quite well, that in an illiterate society like Bengal, majority of people are least concerned about their civil and political rights; on the contrary, they are content with what they possess and ignorant what plight foreigners and even some self-mongering native people are bringing to them. Reason, rationality and minimum sense of right or wrong had no place during those days. Secondly, as regards revolting against the British, Rammohan was more than confident that it was only through the western mode of education introduced by the British Government that a liberal and enlightened atmosphere would be created. Besides, he witnessed the gradual deterioration of the society which rendered him to believe that the immediate priority should be given to the strengthening of the society via reforms from within; perhaps Rammohan visualized that it is with the rejuvenating of the society, that the process of state-building and nationhood construction is likely to occur in the years to come.

It was a matter of time that, Rammohan passionately pleaded and worked for social change; yet he was not a revolutionary. He had, in fact, the shrewdness to understand that Indian society of his time simply did not admit of revolutionary transformation but it did have the flexibility for slow adjustment. And thus his effort at making reforms – social, religious and economic – from within. It was in this context that Rammohan challenged the prevailing priestly class which invented and perpetuated certain corrupt dogmas and doctrines and derived benefits from them. Thus, he argued scornfully,

“Many learned Brahmans are perfectly aware of the absurdity of idolatry, and are well informed of the nature of the purer mode of divine worship. But as in the rites, ceremonies, and festivals of idolatry, they find the source of their comforts and fortune, they... advance and encourage it to the utmost of their power, by keeping the knowledge of their scriptures concealed from the rest of the people” (Rammohan 1947: 44).

From this diagnosis, Rammohan concluded that religious reform is both social reform and political modernization. And thus, accordingly, he conceived of setting up of reformist religious association like the Atmiya Sabha in 1815, the Calcutta Unitarian Association in 1821 and the Brahma Sabha in 1828, which later became the Brahma Samaj, as instruments of social and political transformation.

The Brahma Samaj movement was the most potent and living force, which exercised a profound, though possibly an indirect influence even over orthodox Hindu society. Besides, for the sake of conformity, he wanted to take the Hindu mind back to the pristine glory and simplicity of the Vedas and Upanishads which, like ancient scriptures of other religions, upheld certain basic humanistic values and prescribed little that stood in the way of legitimate human efforts at betterment of material existence (Chakrabarti 2008: 32).

In this context, aptly says Girijashankar Raychaudhuri, that Rammohan for the first time in this age brought forth the immense wealth of the Vedas and the Upanishads once again, which have been forgotten for long since (Raychaudhuri 2012: 37). Taking a cue from the Hrochian model, one could easily discern how Rammohan took up the task of “Phase A”, which is according to Miroslav Hroch, is generally a movement for reviving the ancient culture of that “nation” through historical and archaeological researches. Rammohan, consciously revived the Vedic and Upanishadic tradition of India and sought to disseminate the values underlying the Sacred Texts among the masses.

Unlike his early age, Rammohan used to place his claims against the irrational orthodox Hindu society only on the basis of reason; later in his thirties he combined reason along with Sashtic injunctions while writing down the famous *Gift to Monotheists* in Persian. Here, he argued, that the natural tendency in all religions was towards monotheism, but unfortunately people have always emphasised their special, peculiar creeds, forms of worship and practices which tend to separate one religion from another. He even undertook the task of interpreting the Vedantic literature and translating them into vernacular. His argument was that for the emancipation of the people, the monopoly of the orthodox Brahmans over the sacred texts had to be undermined. Accordingly, during the period 1815 to 1823, Rammohan published *Translation of an Abridgement of the Vedant* and translations of several of the Upanishads into Bengali, Hindi and English (Pantham 1986: 37).

Thus, when the Hindu society was rotten to its core with caste, polygamy, Kulinism, sati, infanticide and other evils, when morality was at a very low ebb, when men spent most of their time in vice and idleness, and in social broils and party quarrels, Rammohan adhered to undertake religious measures via reforms to emancipate the toiling masses over whom hovered the clouds of ignorance and naivety.

But Rammohan, says Susobhan Sarkar, was no mere philosopher, critic or religious reformer. He was a stern fighter against social evils and a champion of those suffering from social oppression. This is illustrated by his historic campaign against the inhuman custom of sati – the burning of Hindu widows. The British rulers were partly apathetic and partly nervous about the outcry which would follow the forcible suppression of the rite. Their regulations against the “misuse” of the practice were ineffective and even a tacit approval of the monstrous custom (Sarkar 1970: 9).

The condition of the Hindu female in those days was truly pitiable. Education among females was unknown. Kulinism, polygamy and everyday oppression made the life of the Hindu female unbearable. David Kopf writes in this context that, Rammohan found Bengali Hindu women uneducated and illiterate, deprived of property rights, married before puberty, imprisoned in *purdah*, and murdered at widowhood by a barbaric custom of immolation known as *Sati* (cited in Pantham 1986: 41). Unless women were freed from such inhuman forms of oppression, Rammohan felt, Hindu society could not progress. Just as he opposed the orthodox Christian doctrine of Atonement, so he rejected the theory that the wife can, or has to, atone for the sins of her husband. He also cited the Sacred Texts to show that they

permitted the wife to continue her life after her husband's death. Largely, thus, as a result of Rammohan's campaign, *sati* was banned by Lord Bentinck in 1829. Rammohan also advocated widow remarriage, female education and right of women to property (Pantham 1986: 41-2).

Further, Rammohan's attitude towards the caste system was somewhat ambivalent. While he practiced some of the overt caste rules (e.g. the wearing of the sacred thread), he noted that God makes no distinction of caste and that "our division into castes...has been the source of want of unity among us" (cited in Pantham 1986: 42). Therefore, the urge to withhold division and thereby claiming for unification also indicates the developing of nationalist consciousness.

Rammohan was a pioneer of modern Western education, which, he believed, would enlighten the Indians against the superstitions and injustices of religious orthodoxies. The mere study of ancient, Sanskrit texts, he said, would only "keep the country in darkness". Thus his appeal to the Government to provide for a more liberal and all encompassing education facility thus embracing Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Anatomy, with other useful sciences along with Sanskritic system of learning.

All the above mentioned attempts of Rammohan are suggestive enough of the fact that he was much advanced than his time actually demanded of him. He appears before the modern reader as "the man of all square" and that too with commendable success on every matter that called for his concern. His approach throughout has been that of a developmental and modernizing one. In this respect, his greatest achievement lies in introducing a free press – press as the foremost medium of establishing liberty of thought and expression, one of the prime characteristic of a modern nation state.

As is well known, while abroad, he came into contact with eminent personalities of the day including William Roscoe, Jeremy Bentham, Robert Owen and easily aroused in them great respect for his bold but logical bent of mind. He also visited France, the country of his dream, where the people had fought for the triumph of liberty, equality and fraternity. That he was also influenced by Mill is already mentioned.

Bentham and the two Mills subsequently, were the foremost advocates of liberal democracy. "Only through the vote, secret ballot, competition between potential political leaders (representatives), elections, separation of powers and the liberty of the press, speech

and public association could ‘the interest of the community in general’ be sustained” (cited in Held 1998: 24). Further, for John Stuart Mill, “the appropriate region of human liberty became: first, liberty of thought, feeling, discussion and publication; second, liberty of tastes and pursuits; and third, liberty of association or combination assuming, of course, it causes no harm to others” (Mill cited in Held 1998: 27).

Quite naturally, Rammohan being an ardent admirer of J.S. Mill took up the task of advocating the idea of expressing grievances and demands as well before the Government via the setting up of a liberal mass media. Here, it would be pertinent to note that Rammohan’s attitude to subjugation, a fact which he, of course, did not decry and thus failed to be a patriot in the usual sense of the term, we cannot and must not overlook one thing, viz., Rammohan had the will as well the aptitude to prevent the new founded alien rule from being totally indifferent to the social and cultural needs of the native community. Instead of confining itself to the easy routine, as elsewhere, of economic exploitation and political oppression, British imperialism in this country had to experiment with a carefully devised state craft in order at least to appear to be responsive to the myriad pressures generated from various strata of the society (Chakrabarti 2008: 30).

Rammohan, here stands out to be triumphant for bringing out the first constitutional agitations in our country. He drew up a memorial to the Supreme Court and a petition to the King-in-Council against the Press Ordinance of 1823, in which he defended liberty of free expression of opinion. His attempt at shaping up public opinion via the introduction of a Bengali and a Persian weekly, the *Sambad Kaumudi* from the end of 1821, and the *Mirat-ul-Akbar* from the beginning of 1822 are well known.

To be very precise, Rammohan, notwithstanding his bias toward the British as a nation, wanted to ensure that whoever ruled the country must prove to be equal to it and have necessary legitimacy. In other words, his entire attempt to reform from within is evident enough of the fact that, he viewed political authority, even if alien, to be responsive to the needs of society.

So far what has been recapitulated is not merely to remind us of what Rammohan has achieved throughout his lifetime. Rather, it is to point out that Rammohan was the one among many others to realise completely the significance of the modern age. His focus being to reform the decadent society also paved the way for political mobilization and most importantly, national emancipation. In fact, Rammohan’s idea of liberating the irrational

Hindu society from its age long crises did not mean his rejection of ancient values and tradition and – what he desired was a tying up tradition and modernity; that of borrowing from the past what is best and linking them up with the needs of modernity. All throughout there flitted across his vision the prospect of a free India; he felt and perhaps was very sure, that English rule was creating a middle class in India which would lead a popular movement of emancipation.

To conclude, Rammohan – the Father of Modern India – was truly an advocate of an evolving national consciousness; he chose the path of modernizing Indian society which, he knew would gradually lead toward the establishment of rule to self-determination – the task which later had been undertaken more boldly and arduously by Bhudev, Bankim and Vivekananda. His understanding was too clear, his love of liberty too deep for any kind of vagary. Rammohan simply sought to develop the moral conscience of the native people. Yet, as a whole, the conservative critics missed, even today, that Rammohan possessed in admirable measure the qualities of both objectivity and honesty.

That the nation is the end product of a long period of work, sacrifice and devotion (Renan 1882: 17) is evident enough of the epoch-making significance of the lifework of Rammohan. The idea of a “possible India” latently occupied the imagination of the “modern man” – Rammohan.

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