

## Social Contributions of Raja Rammohan Roy : Present Perspective

Aisharya De<sup>[1]</sup>

### Abstract:

*In the national life of present day India, the life and work of Raja Rammohan Roy are still of great importance. His life and thoughts are still significant today for moving and influencing the succeeding generations in India. Even today, corruption, evils and superstitions still exist in every sphere of Indian life. Sectarian bias, conflicts among different sects, polytheism, and image worship are still prevalent in the society. Those are creating disrespect between man to man and are degrading the base of the society day by day. Direction and values are lost. There is a need of regeneration and spiritual upliftment. For this there is a need to follow the ideals and ideas of Raja Rammohan Roy. Raja Rammohan Roy neutralized and synthesized the conservative circles of Hindu society and preached monotheism and he spread that message through his Brahmo Samaj movement. That message needs to be propagated in the present society. Following his philosophy, the deep routed cause of social degradation will have to be understood and accordingly measures will have to be taken. Today, with the emergence of the concepts like individual liberty, women emancipation, free expression of opinions, modernism, one should not forget that all those ideas have already championed many years ago through Raja Rammohan Roy's writings.*

**Keywords:** Present day, Raja Rammohan Roy, Brahmo Samaj, society, philosophy.

### I. INTRODUCTION

After the battle of Plessey (1757) and Buxar (1762), when the rule of British was established in India, the overall picture of India was in a degraded and decaying condition. Social, political, economic, cultural and educational conditions were in a state of decline, degeneration and stagnation. In the words of Rabindranath Tagore, "Her life was dried up and it showed all those dead and forgotten customs, superstitions and prejudices all the ignorance and fear, all feuds, all bitterness and separateness, all unreasonable remoteness from the wide world." (Bose, 1976).

### II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study the socio-religious conditions of Bengal at the time of Raja Rammohan Roy.
2. To study the different aspects of Raja Rammohan Roy's socio religious philosophies.
3. To study the present day relevance of Raja Rammohan Roy's activities and contributions.

### III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Raja Rammohan Roy was out of proportions to his surroundings. He brought as a gift to his people a mind for comprehending the bests of east and west. He wrote innumerable tracts in Bengali, Hindustani and English and distributed them free of costs for eradicating horrible social practice of Sati. Raja Rammohan Roy's writings championed the cause of women emancipation. His movement against burning of widows with the help of Lord William Bentinck not only gave a proof of his proficiency and rational outlook, but also showed his humanitarian approach. In the context of today's concepts of women empowerment, value education and religious tolerance, one should not forget that that

emancipation of one's manhood had been made possible by the indomitable personality and by the untiring efforts of the great unifier, Raja Rammohan Roy. His vision was that the entire human society was a big family. Raja Rammohan Roy had the notion that every one of us is the member of world human society. From that notion of Raja Rammohan Roy, today's concepts of national integration and international understanding are arising. In the context of equalisation, universalization and eradication of caste system, Raja Rammohan Roy's *Brahmo Samaj* movement is still significant today.

Even after so many years of Indian independence, our present society is still buried under the heaps of superstitions, ignorance, prejudices and oppressions. In the context of moral degradation and social oppression, there has again arisen the need of propagating Raja Rammohan Roy's ideas for reconstructing the Indian society. So, it is very significant to find out the relevance of his ideologies in the context of the present day.

### IV. SOCIO RELIGIOUS CONDITION

At the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century and in the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century, India in general and Bengal in particular was undergoing through stagnation and denegation. The debasement of society was mostly due to religious fanaticism. Like the mechanical observances of rituals, torture of the priests and their misinterpretation of *Hindu Shastras*. As the people were not aware of the true meaning of their scripture and texts, they used to follow blindly the false sayings of the priests class. Priests on the other hand, because of their comfort, source of income and happiness encouraged the ignorant people to follow their scriptures blindly by concealing from them the true meaning of their texts. Consequently mechanical

<sup>[1]</sup> Assistant Professor, Chandraketugarh Shahidullah Smriti Mahavidyalaya, Email : aisharyade@gmail.com

observance of rite sand rituals ignoring the true *Hindu* scripture was prevalent in our society and one horrible dominant ritual suicide under the cloak of religion was the practice of *Sati*. That practice was predominantly prevalent among upper caste *Hindus*, though Hindustan did not invent that practice, only acquired it.

Various causes may be there behind such wilful deliberate murder. Among which, the self-interests of the *Brahmins* and their misinterpretation of *Hindu* sacred texts were prominent. Along with that, the ignorance of the people, cost of the widows, and decline in culture were also there. The various causes may be listed as follows:

- In 18<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, with the new land settlement system, a new group deriving socio cultural status from the British came into being. They lost their historical position and from service castes, they entered into a profession of commerce. They, by the service of investing money in lands, became rich and luxurious and to avoid the cost of maintaining widows they started that practice to gain their social status and virtue.
- Property distribution law was another cause. To avoid the proposition of the share of property as laid down in the *Dayabhaga*, mainly that rite was performed. Because in the *Dayabhaga*, it was held that after the death of the husband, the widow was entitled to the share of his property.
- Many widows, because of the fearful, upcoming future, committed suicide, as they knew very well that after the death of the husband, there would be a complete bar to their social, cultural and economic freedom. They would not be able to attend festive and religious occasions. They would be under strict diet in food and dressing. So, they knew that after the death of the husband, their life would be miserable from every corner, and therefore in most of the cases they had chosen the path of *Sati*.
- The *Brahmins* were mostly responsible for the rite. As they knew that in that rite, they had their comfort and happiness, they used to make misinterpretation of the *Hindu* texts, and knowing fully that *Sati* was not mentioned in the *Hindu Shastras*, they continued its propaganda for their self-interests and happiness.

From the very causes of that horrible rite of *Sati*, discussed above, one could easily predict, how distress and miserable the condition of the women was in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal. They were not entitled to the acquisition of knowledge; they were deprived of exercising all sorts of talents and capabilities and were not given any economic freedom and independency. Not only the practice of *Sati*, but also another shameful character of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal was Kulinism or Polygamy. Though devoid of true knowledge, *Kulin Brahmins* were considered as the highest caste in the society and in the name of marriage, actually there was sell of girls in the society. After marriage in most of the cases, the husbands remained absent and the wives became dependent on their father and brother for economic reasons. Due that marriage, their life and position became miserable in the society. At the marriage the wives were considered as the better half of their husband, but after marriage their status became no better than slaves.

## V. GOVERNMENTAL ROLE

British Government was however very indifferent in the matter of degradation of the society and used to take a neutral position in the socio religious affairs. Though the matter of *Sati* came into the notice of the British Government early in 1772, only in 1813, company's instructions were drawn up in this regard which sanctioned the practice of *Sati* if it was approved by the *Hindu* religion and law, but where the same religion and law forbidden the practice, the practice would be banned. That instruction increased the death toll from 378 to 839 in the six divisions of Calcutta, Dacca, Murshidabad, Patna, Benaras and Bareilly.

## VI. RAJA RAMMOHAN ROY'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Actually at that time instead of laws and regulations, formation of public opinion was necessary and that urgency was felt by none other than Raja Rammohan Roy. He wrote counter petition, small tracts and pamphlets to make people aware of the growing inhumanities of the society and actually started his battle in this regard. In 1818 he wrote "A Conference between an Advocate for and an Opponent of Burning Widows Alive." That was an imaginary conference, where in the voice of opponent, Raja Rammohan Roy showed that in *Hindu Shastra*, nowhere *Sati* has been mentioned. In 1820, he wrote "A Second Conference between an Advocate for and an Opponent of Burning Widows Alive." He distributed his tracts and pamphlets free of costs to mobilise public opinions regarding this cruel custom of *Sati*.

Not only literary works, but also Raja Rammohan Roy endeavoured to stop the practice of *Sati* personally without caring for his risk. He was a great humanist, so without caring for the comments of orthodox *Hindus* and the ignorant priests and relatives, whenever he came to know that a *Sati* ceremony was going to happen in the neighbourhood, he rushed there to put a stop to that practice to save a life. In all his tracts and writings, he made three important points clear which were:-

According to the sacred books of *Hindu*, con cremation was:

1. Not obligatory but at most optional.
2. Not the most commendable but the least virtuous act a widow could perform and
3. Must be a voluntary ascending of the pyre and entering into the flames- a mode never practised in the conventional *Sati*.

## VII. RAJA RAMMOHAN ROY'S INHERENT SOCIO RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY

All his reformatory activities were guided by a consistent philosophy guided by "*lokasreya*" or public good. He translated that philosophy of common good of the public into reality. He had a deep regard and feelings for women. He realised their miserable conditions in the society and he was fully aware of the causes behind their distress. He realised that the major causes were lack of truth, reason, rationality,

justice and humanity. Raja Rammohan Roy's rational view was that: - men in general were suffering from the influence of habit, custom and blindness. They failed to identify the cause effect relationship of each and every occurrence.

The main essence of Raja Rammohan Roy's religious beliefs was the doctrine of universal religion. Those high and lofty ideals of one true God would relieve men from sectarian bias and would guide them to the cardinal principle of service to man. Social service and betterment of people, he believed would help men to work for the betterment of the humanity at large. His idea of one universal religion and one eternal God were reflected through his *Brahmo Samaj*. The lofty philosophy of uniting different classes and communities of the Indian people under one roof of common worship of one God was the motive when he founded his *Brahmo Samaj*. Raja Rammohan Roy's concept of universal religion was based on the concept of secularity and therefore rejected communal differences, hatred, casteism, sectarian bias and inequalities. He wrote a tract opposing the caste system of Indian society, because he strongly believed that casteism had no meaning and significance from the view point of the progress of the society, rather it blocked our common thinking power and pulled men back. He strongly criticised the existence of divisions and subdivisions in the society. He believed strongly that the divisions of so many castes in the society would create only sectarian bias and would be responsible for the subjection to foreign conquerors. The total process would be a bar to attaining national unity. So, Raja Rammohan Roy propagated for national integration also along with emotional integration and unity. He stressed over community feeling, sort of we feeling, which he believed could improve the condition of the society. His philosophy was "a fundamental unity in the midst of diversity." (Sen, 1967, pp 338). He thought that idea of national integration and transformed that idea into reality at a time when most of the people of the country were in frog-in well existence. His guiding philosophy was reconciling individualism with socialism.

Raja Rammohan Roy, a great reformer, dedicated his life in freeing the society from the loads of unreason and absurdities, and wanted spontaneous efforts and a thorough change in the mentality of the people by means of which, he knew, people would be active to eradicate such evils. Raja Rammohan Roy believed that the relationship between man and society was based on reciprocity. If man was given freedom of expression, man would try to secure the same freedom for the society as a whole. By securing rights for a greater number of people in the society, *Lokasreya* or common good could be achieved.

In evaluating the socio religious philosophy of Raja Rammohan Roy, Brajendranath Seal pointed out that : ".....The Raja held that individual progress is the touchstone as well as the measuring rod of social progress; but the individual's progress could be secured only by organizing and establishing the conditions of social progress." (Tagore, 1974, pp68).

Raja Rammohan Roy, a man of multidimensional personality, and a reformer took a reformatory style to eradicate one of the deep rooted diseases of the then *Hindu* society, *Sati*. For that, he made long and hard struggle, as he knew very well that overnight the abolition of that cruel

practice was not possible. All he wanted was to give a widest awareness and publicity to that matter, so that his countrymen should be aware of the ill effects of that fearful customs. He arranged for open discussions and controversies for that purpose also. Consequently public opinion was mobilised towards a practical measure. Another point which was also very significant in that respect was his farsighted view. The main crux of his view was the intellectual development of his countrymen. He always hoped that such intellectual advancement with the help of western knowledge and culture and literature could only put a stop to that cruel rite forever and could bring public good.

In the Editorial remarks of the "*Bengal Hurkaru*". (November 28, 1829), the editor of the said paper appreciating the ardent philanthropic activities of the learned native Raja Rammohan Roy paid tribute to him. The editorial remarks also included the fact that it became possible for Lord William Bentinck to pass *Sati* regulation act because of the way, which Rammohan Roy had prepared by "the energy of argument, and the grace of eloquence."- (Majumdar, 1983, pp 152). His protest against the low estimates of women, his participation in the freedom of press, his attempts in awakening his countrymen from the dream of error, his tireless efforts for making his countrymen aware of the evil effects of social practices in the name of religion and his endeavour for the introduction of western education—all were directed towards the attainment of public good or *Lokasreya*.

## VIII. PRESENT PERSPECTIVE

Now in the context of the present society, the question is to what extent that common public good in our present society is maintained? Raja Rammohan Roy at that time fought against one of the malignant disorders of popular Hinduism, *Sati*, burning of widows on the funeral pyre of their dead husbands. With the help of Lord William Bentinck, that cruel barbarous rite was declared illegal and banned. But, keeping in view the growing corruption of our present society, it can easily be said that in the name of *Sati*, at the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century and in the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century, lives of women were sacrificed. The same sacrifice is continuing till today in the name of female infanticide, female foeticide, bride burning etc. All sorts of physical and mental tortures are still prevalent in our society against women with more violence than before. We claim that we belong to a more enlightened society than what was there two centuries age, but the fact is this certain mental makeup have not been changed yet. Amongst the most educated families of today, the birth of a girl child is considered as a matter of subdued pleasure. The treatment of a boy and girl in a family differs, day to day interaction differs, and plan for education also differs. The existence of general imbalance between the sexes in our society is very much prevalent. Nowadays, this general imbalance begins even before birth as because of unscrupulous medical practitioners, who, with the help of technology help to identify a female foetus and destroy it. The cruel rite of *Sati* has taken new version in our present society. Female infanticide and female foeticide, gender based oppression of women in India. In India, one of the major reasons for female infanticide is dowry. Along with this, the reason of poverty, ignorance and superstitions are merged with. Thus it can be

said that the reasons for *Sati* which were there in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, are still continuing today, only the mode has been changed. "During 2001-2011, the share of children to total population has declined and the decline was sharper for female children than male children in the age group 0-6 years", said the study "Children in India 2012-A Statistical Appraisal" conducted by the Central Statistical Organization. Like female infanticide, another heinous evil propelling in the society is female foeticide. It is based on the sex determination, which leads to an irresistible conclusion that the practice of eliminating female foetus by prenatal diagnostic techniques is widely prevalent.

So time has come when it is utmost important to take concrete measures to combat the growing horror of female infanticide and female foeticide in India. A new culture is required in Indian education system that can change the notion about women, so that the next generation can be escaped of this mindset of its parents. We today are technologically modernised, but still much degraded in terms of human values. We need to be progressive. Women should be made conscious about their rights which can be secured by true education and economic solvency. For economic independency, women should be made entitled to property rights. If we look back to this issue, we will find that after the enactment of law against *Sati*, Raja Rammohan Roy did not stop. He had furnished reference to the rights of women as acknowledged by different scriptures and for that, he wrote a separate essay. Through that essay, with his irrefutable arguments, he wanted to make it clear to his countrymen that in order to remove women misery, they should be made economically independent and for that reason, women should be entitled to property rights.

With the passage of time, legal provisions has been made for securing economic independence of the women in our society. For example, Women's Right to Properties Act, 1937 and the passing of the section 6 of *Hindu Succession Act*, 1956, gave improved position to the widows and daughters.

By securing a fair position of women in education and economy, equalisation can be sought for in the society. Today the present generation is conscious about equalization of educational opportunities, education for all, removal of untouchability etc. All those rest on what Raja Rammohan Roy advocated before a decade. Since the inception of our constitution, in various articles, Raja Rammohan Roy's philosophy on caste system is held. Like, Article 15 of Indian Constitution, as enacted in 1950, Article 17 of Indian Constitution, Untouchability (Offences) Act of 1955, (renamed in 1976, as the Protection of Civil Rights Act)- all these speak to no sectarian bias and no caste system in the society. . But the caste system is yet to be completely eradicated from the mindset of all people.

For integrating people of different religious communities and castes and for propagating universal religion, Raja Rammohan Roy founded his *Brahmo Samaj*. He furnished his outline in the 'Trust Deed' and the same bind the *Brahmo Samaj* even now. *Brahmo Samaj* today denounces polytheism, reject the caste system, reject the dowry system and focus on its abolition. Today's *Brahmo Samaj* also held women emancipation as its one of the principles. On 16<sup>th</sup> May, 1890, at the decision of the Executive Committee of the

*Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, Brahmo Balika Shikshalaya* was founded. From 1910-1936 the wife of Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose, Lady Abala Bose was the secretary of the school. This school can boast as one of the premier educational institutions for girls in Calcutta still now.

## IX. CONCLUSION

Thus we see that in the context of present day, to the society, contributions, thinking and activities of Raja Rammohan Roy are still significant for moving and influencing the succeeding generations in India. His fight against social evils and his support for socially oppressed is exemplary. It is necessary to inculcate Raja Rammohan Roy's ideas for reducing superstitions, casteism, religious dogmatism, honour killing, female infanticide, female foeticide, dowry, child abuse, child labour, crime against women and many more social corruptions, which prevail everywhere in the society in an increasing manner than what was present in the 18th Century. Lastly, we shall conclude with a quotation of Rabindranath Tagore for Raja Rammohan Roy:

"Rammohun belongs to the lineage of India's great seers who age after age have appeared in the arena of our history with the message of the Eternal man."

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#### **XI. WEBSITE LINKS**

- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rammohan\\_College](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rammohan_College)
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bengali\\_renaissance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bengali_renaissance)
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