

## **RAJA RAM MOHAN ROY (1772-1833)**

Raja Ram Mohan Roy stands in history as the living bridge over which India marches from her unmeasured past to her incalculable future. He was the arch which spanned the gulf that yawned between ancient caste and modern humanity, between superstition and science and between despotism and democracy. He was the first cosmopolitan religious thinker and father of modern India. Roy was deeply imbued with the culture of the west and East, and was a scholar and reformer. He was a nationalist but had profound contempt for narrow-minded nationalism. In religion, Ram Mohan pointed to a universal inner spiritual synthesis, far from the external forms represented through meaningless practice. In pursuit of these religious objectives, Ram Mohan thought of a concerted action by a band of true reformers. His crusade against Hindu modes of worship roused in the orthodox and fanatical reaction against the reformer. Reformist propaganda was initiated through books, tracts, articles and translations from the Upanishads. Jeremy Bentham saluted him as “an admired and beloved fellow worker in the cause of humanity.”

Ram Mohan Roy was born in 1774 in the district of Hoogly in Bengal. Born in a notable Brahmin family in an era of orthodoxy, he grew up amid social evils and religious prejudices. At the age of nine, he had to marry two times, and subsequently one more, because it was impossible for him to escape the privilege of Kulinism. As a grown-up man he saw the burning of his brother's wife a sati, a sight that shocked his conscience. A prisoner of society and religion, he nevertheless enjoyed certain advantages which even the Dark Age provided. Ram Mohan's predecessors had held high offices under the Nawabs of Bengal. Because of the family status, he was sent to Patna to study Persian and Arabic. From his knowledge of Persian and Arabic he understood the essence of the Koran Sufi Philosophy; from Sanskrit, the deeper philosophies of the Hindu Upanishads. The inner meaning of Hinduism and Islam drew him to monotheism and created an aversion in him towards idolatry. With profound knowledge of Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian and English and with a deeper understanding of the philosophies of Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism

and Christianity he became a rare intellectual of his time. He was in search of rationalism and felt resentful towards the prevailing socio-religious customs around him. Ram Mohan's vision was broad enough to encompass various aspects of human life. His movement covered religious, social, economic, educational, political and national issues. A Brahmin himself, he peeped into the inner substance of Brahminical Hinduism to discover the existence of one omnipotent being. The ideal of monotheism was itself a supreme force in Hinduism, as it was in Islam and Christianity. Roy was highly critical of the outer forms of Hinduism, notably, polytheism, worship of images, ritualistic ceremonies, and suspirations rites. Belief in one Almighty god is the fundamental principles of every religion, he said. He established his theories from the Vedanta, the Bible and Koran.

### **AS A LIBERAL POLITICAL THINKER**

Like Rousseau, Voltaire and Montesquieu, Ram Mohan Roy had a passionate attachment to the concept of liberty. He urged the necessity of personal freedom. Liberty is a priceless possession of the human being and, hence, Ram Mohan was a champion of personal freedom. But liberty is also needed for the nation. Roy had a passion for liberty and equality, yet he showed his respect for property and believed in the freedom of contract. Indeed, he pleaded for state intervention in suppressing evil practices in society and held that it was the duty of the state to protect tenants against the oppression of the landlords;

Like John Locke, Thomas Paine and Hugo Grotius, Roy accepted the immutable sanctity of natural rights. He believed not only in the natural rights of life, liberty, and pursuit of property, but also championed the moral rights of the individual. His theory of natural rights, however, was constructed in the prevailing Indian conditions. Thus although an exponent of the theory of Natural Rights and freedom, he also advocated state legislation for social reform and educational reconstruction. As a champion of freedom and democratic rights and a believer in parliamentary democracy, Roy whole-heartedly supported the reform Bill agitation in England. In his opinion, the struggle between the reformers and anti-reformers was nothing but a struggle between liberty and

tyranny throughout the world, between justice and injustice and between right and wrong. It should be remembered that Ram Mohan Roy championed the struggle for freedom and democratic rights, not for Indians alone but for the entire human beings in the world.

Ram Mohan Roy had a keen appreciation of the uncompromising freedom of the creative spirit. He wanted the people of India to develop a sense of self confidence, and was a crusader against unreason and superstition. He admired the English people who not only enjoyed civil and political liberty but was interested in promoting freedom, social happiness and rationalism in the areas where their influence extended. Bipin Chandra Pal while assessing the contribution of Raja Ram Mohan Roy to Indian freedom wrote: Raja was the first to deliver the message of political freedom to India. He so keenly felt the loss of this freedom by his people that even as a boy, yet within his teens, he left his country and travelled to Tibet, because he found it difficult to tolerate the domination of his country by another nation, though, subsequently, with close acquaintance with culture and character of the British people, who seemed to him to have been more intelligent more steady and moderate in their conduct ...' Similarly, Raja Ram Mohan Roy felt quite happy to hear the news of the introduction of constitutional government in Portugal. He supported the struggle for freedom of the Greeks against the Turks. Again, Roy was opposed to the British occupation of Ireland. He collected funds for the relief of the famine stricken people of Ireland.

### **FREEDOM OF THE PRESS**

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was one of the earliest champions of the freedom of the press. Like Milton and other scholars who fought for freedom of press, Roy championed the concept of freedom of written expression. Along with Dwarkanath Tagore, Harchandra Gosh, Gouri Charan Banerjee, Ram Mohan had written a petition in 1823, addressed to the Supreme Court, for the freedom of the press. When the Petition was rejected, and appeal was made to the king in council. The appeal contained Ram Mohan's reflections on the governmental mechanism of the day. It stated men in power hostile to the liberty of the press, which is a disagreeable. Check upon their conduct, when unable to discover any

real evil arising from its existence; have attempted to make the world imagine that it might, in some possible contingency afford the means of combination against the government, but not to mention that extraordinary emergencies would warrant measures which in ordinary times are totally unjustifiable. Your majesty is well aware that a free press has never yet caused a revolution in any part of world, because, while men can early by represent their grievances arising from the conduct of the local authorities to the supreme Government,.....’ He strongly believed that not only would the freedom of press provide a device for ventilation of grievances it would also enable the government to adopt steps for their redressal before they caused damage to the administration.

Roy recognized and appreciated British rule in India. Although he despised colonialism, he appeared to have endorsed the British rule presumably, because of its historical role in combating the prevalent feudal forces. Not only was the British rule superior to the erst-while feudal rulers, it would also contribute to different India by injecting the values it represented. The continued British rule, he further added, would eventually lead to the establishment of democratic institutions as in Great Britain. Like any other liberals, Roy also felt that the uncritical acceptance of British liberal values was probably the best possible means of creating democratic institutions in India. He appreciated the British rule as a boon in disguise’ because it would eventually transplant democratise governance in India.

## **HUMANISM AND UNIVERSAL RELIGION**

Being a champion of freedom and rights, Ram Mohan was a great humanist and believed in co-operation, tolerance and fellowship. Roy established the ethical concept of universal love on the basis of the doctrine of ethical personality of God. He was also the exponent of cosmopolitanism and stood for brotherhood and independence. He had begun with the study of comparative religion but later come to visualise the necessity of a universal religion. Finally, he formulated the scheme of a fundamental spiritual synthesis stressing the unity of religious experience based on the worship of a monotheistic God. Thus he carried

forward the traditions of social and spiritual synthesis stressed by Guru Nanak, Kabir and other saints. Roy believed in universalism and regarded humanity as one family with the different nations and tribes as its branches. In his famous letter written to the French Foreign Minister in 1832, he suggested the establishment of a 'Congress' for the settlement of commercial and political disputes. He was a humanitarian and universalist, and like David Hume he also subscribed to the doctrine of universal sympathy. Jeremy Bentham admired Ram Mohan's Universalism and humanitarianism, and in a letter to him, he said: '.....Your works are made known to me by a book in which I read a style which but for the name of the Hindoo I should certainly have as cribbed to the pen of a superiority educated and instructed English man.,

Ram Mohan Roy advocated liberal humanitarian nationalism. Emancipation of man from the bondage for ignorance, and social tyranny, his freedom of thought and conscience and his equality with other fellow men were considered as the fundamentals of liberalism. Such free and emancipated individuals, with feeling towards their mother land, could create national unity. It was through a spiritual and mental revival that Ram Mohan wanted to regenerate the Indian people and unite them into a national fraternity.

## **SOCIAL REFORMS**

Raja Ram Mohan Roy is regarded as the father of Modern India and Indian renaissance. He was a social reformer par excellence Most of the reform movements that have revolutionised Hindu society can be traced to his great son of India. He was himself the victim of social evils, and throughout his life he worked for the social and religious uplift of his community. His role in doing away with the evil practice of sati among the orthodox Brahmins was historical. By founding Brahma Samaj, Roy sought to articulate his belief in the Islamic notion of one God' in his conceptualization, social reform should precede political reform, for the former laid the foundation for liberty in the political sense. Given his priority, Roy did not appear to have paid adequate attention to his political ideas.

## **Abolition of sati and the formation of Brahma Samaj**

As a crusader against social evils and unscientific and unhealthy practices prevalent in the traditional caste ridden Hindu society, Mohan Roy formed a number of social organisations in North India. In 1816, he started a spiritual society known as 'Atmiya Sabha' for religious and social purposes which were later extended to other fields of activity. Atmiya Sabha was sort of discussion club for scholars of religion and philosophy at other fields of activity. In 1818, he began his celebrated crusade for the abolition of sati, and on December 4, 1829, Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor General of India made Sati illegal by Regulation XVII. Thus the year 1829 may be taken as an important landmark in the social history of India Ram Mohan Roy certainly won great renown by his crusade to free Hindu women from the dark practice of sati. It must however be noted that along with the European Sanskriti, H.H Wilson, Ram Mohan was opposed to any legal enactment for the immediate suppression of sati. He favoured that the practice 'might be suppressed quietly and unobserved by increasing the difficulties and by the indirect agency of the police.

The most important event which brought fame to Ram Mohan Roy was the establishment of the Brahma Sabha on 20th August 1828 which became famous as the Brahma Samaj in 1830. After the failure of the British India Unitarian Association (1827), the followers of Ram Mohan felt the urgent necessity of establishing an institution solely devoted to Unitarian and monotheistic worship. Ram Mohan did not contemplate the Brahma Samaj as an institution of a new religious sect. He wanted the monotheists of all religions to use the premises of the Sabha as their own. He also wished this institution to be a meeting ground the people of all religious denominations who believed in one God, who is formless, eternal unsearchable and immutable. He told one of his friends that after his death the Hindus would claim as their own, the Muslims would do the same, and as also the Christians, but he belonged to no sect as he was the devotee of universal religion. The Samaj stood for the 'worship and adoration of the eternal unsearchable and Immutable Being-who is the author and preserver of the universe but not under or by any other

designation or title peculiarly used for and applied to any particular Being or Beings by any man or set of men whatsoever'. It admitted 'no graven image, statue or sculpture, carving, painting, picture, portrait or the likeness of everything'. It further stood for the promotion of charity, morality, piety, benevolence, virtue and the strengthening of the bonds of union between men of all religious persuasions and creeds.

Thus Ram Mohan began the first great religious movement of the 19th century since religion was the dominating force in Indian society, reform of religion meant reform of society. The Brahma Samaj was thus a socio religious reform movement. Ram Mohan raised his voice against the social abuses which rendered in calculable harm to Indian society. The caste system appeared to him as the greatest obstacle to national unity. Ram Mohan proceeded even beyond the frontiers of caste. He adopted a Muslim boy and gave the most daring example of human equality. Besides caste, the traditional Hindu society suffered from other social evils, such as, polygamy, degradation of women, untouchability, and, above all, the horrible sati system. Ram Mohan's endeavour to rouse opinion against these customs marked the beginning of an era of social change. If ultimately the evil practice of sati system was abolished, it was as much due to Ram Mohan as to the Governor General William Bentinck in whose time it was affected.

The principles and ideas of Brahma Samaj gradually spread for beyond Bengal and created an atmosphere of liberalism, rationalism and modernity which greatly influenced Indian thought. As Max Muller has rightly pointed out, 'If there is ever to be a new religion in India, it will, I believe, owe its very life-blood to the large heart of Ram Mohan Roy and his worthy disciples Debendranath Tagore and Keshab Chandra Sen.' But Max Muller's prophecy could not be fulfilled, because the condition attached to it- the emergence of a new religion in India was impossible of realization. Hinduism proved strong enough to counteract the growing influence of Brahmanism as it had done in the case of Buddhism.

The philosophy of Brahma Samaj left its decisive influence on the Indian thought. The death of Ram Mohan (1833) was no doubt a great tragedy for the Brahma Samaj since he was the centre of the entire

movement. But the mission of the master was taken up by other daring souls. From the beginning, the movement was confined to the intellectually advanced and educationally enlightened minds who believed in reforms. It was not their aim to make it a mass movement, though the purpose was to educate the masses. It is beyond dispute that the legacies of Ram Mohan could not die after him as they were in consonance with the requirements of the time.

### **An assessment**

Ram Mohan Roy was a multifaceted personality with foresight and vision. He was bold, sincere and honest and had the courage to preach his convictions. He was interested in the emancipation and empowerment of women and was earliest feminist in modern India who revolted against the subjection of women and preached against the modern encroachments on the ancient rights of Hindu females. He was also a model social reformer who was highly a critical of the prevailing social evils in the traditional Hindu society. He was a prophet of universalism, a keen and ardent champion of liberty in all its phases and apolitical agitator for the freedom of the press and the right of the tenants. He has been called the father of modern India, the first earnest minded investigator of the science of comparative religion and the harbinger of the idea of universal humanism. He stands in history as the living bridge over which India marches from her unmeasured past to her incalculable future.