

Research Article

Raja Ram Mohan Roy: Social Reform and Empowerment of Women

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to discuss the development and growth of the socio-religious reform movement started by Raja Ram Mohan Roy during the 18th century with special reference to women rights and their empowerment. Sambad Kaumudi and Mirat-ul Akhbar, a Bengali and Persian weekly, respectively, started by Raja Ram Mohan Roy to launch his progressive movement in India. This paper also highlights the contribution of Raja Ram Mohan Roy in the field of journalism which he later used as a plausible medium to reach the masses and to propagate his modern ideas for the cultural regeneration of India and modernization of the country. He thought that without education social and economic progress of his countrymen was not possible. Therefore, he strongly advocated for modern education through which he prepared the ground of socio-religious reforms in the country. This paper also tries to analyze the difficulties faced by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in convincing the people for women education and banning the inhuman practice like sati. Roy was the moving spirit behind empowering women and getting for them a respectable position in the society. To broaden the base of his socio-religious reform movement, he founded the Brahmo Samaj in 1829.

KEYWORDS: Renaissance, Cultural Regeneration, Sambad Kaumudi, Mirat-ul Akhbar, Sati

INTRODUCTION

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was deeply influenced by the new and enlightened ideas and ideals, which revolutionized the society in the West and brought intellectual revolution, which transformed the overall thinking process of the people. He wanted those ideals of modernization to be introduced in his country, for a better future and cultural regeneration. Renaissance had heralded the dawn of a new era and civilization in Europe, which made unprecedented progress in every walk of life. Inspired by momentous events of the world history, Raja Ram Mohan Roy expressed his keen desire for a social change leading to political unity of the country and equality in the society and social justice, which earned for him the epithet of 'Father of Modern India' and for his great contributions in the field of cultural awakening, he is known as 'Father of Indian Renaissance'.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a man of high sense of patriotism, moral character, courageous nature and fearless attitude. Well acquainted with world affairs and

developments, a sound knowledge about all the major religions of the world, competency in different languages of the world, broadmindedness, thirst for knowledge, all combined together enabled him to play the role of a true reformer, reform movements started by him were really progressive in nature and bound to succeed in its soul and spirit. Jawaharlal Nehru rightly remarked that 'he was a new type combining in him the old learning and the new. He was also attracted by science and technical aspects of Western civilization, and yet, at the same time, he was anxious to modernize education and take it out of the grip of old scholasticism.' Passionately, he adopted a career in journalism with an objective to propagate modern rational thoughts and liberal ideas, preparing the ground for social reform. Through print-media he launched his progressive movement to replace traditionalism, and mediaevalism with modernity, superstitious practices with rational scientific inquiry, conservatism with liberalism and human equality to substitute social inequalities based on the caste system.

PRINT MEDIA AND SOCIAL REFORM

A visionary, far ahead of his time, Raja Ram Mohan Roy recognized the very potential of print-media and its effectiveness in propagating the ideas of social justice, which was the most persuasive medium to reach the masses at that time. His understanding of the problems of the contemporary world and his articles to various newspapers on issues of current interest was acclaimed by people throughout Bengal. For the diffusion of knowledge, social change and political regeneration, he harnessed the power of the press. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the moving spirit behind the publication; India's first English newspaper to have been launched by an Indian. It was named *The Bengal Gazette*. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's concern for the public cause found an expression in this paper. For his voice to reach a larger section of the Bengali speaking people, Raja Ram Mohan Roy decided to launch his next venture in Bengali. On December 4, 1821 he launched the famous Bengali newspaper the "*Sambaud Kaumudi*"/"*The Moon of Intelligence*".

On 12 April 1822, he launched another newspaper namely '*Mir'at-ul-Akhbar*' a Persian weekly. The Persian knowing readership was still considerably large, as Persian was still the language of the elite, intellectual intercourse, diplomatic usage and legal procedure. Through a Persian journal, Raja Ram Mohan Roy sought to reach the Persian-speaking traditional elites of Indian society. Behind journalistic endeavours, he was motivated by the desire for social improvement, the only guarantee or modernization. *Mirat-ul-Akhbar* was known for its distinct nationalist, democratic and progressive orientation. This newspaper was an important organ of social reform. Raja Ram Mohan Roy confessed that the notion behind its publication was social improvement and upliftment of the people.

Ram Mohan Roy used to write on diverse topics covering social, religious, political, philosophical, cultural and economic issues of contemporary India. '*Sambaud Kaumudi*' and the *Mir'at-ul-Akhbar* were used as an instrument of propagating ideas of political reform and social development. A considerable space in these papers was occupied by appeals and representations to the government on matters of public concern. The subject matter discussed in these papers ranged from a demand

of seminary for Hindus, the introduction of trial by jury; honourable treatment of the learned; better medical facilities to Indians; modernization of education, and petitions against the export of rice, etc. Canvas of the *Sambaud Kaumudi* was very broad covering national as well as international happenings; news pertaining to social, economic and political aspects occupies space in these newspapers. The newspaper encouraged people to write letters highlighting the social and economic grievances so that a wider consensus could be created for its ratification.

The newspaper in its columns often used to publish articles on public behavior and social conducts, highlighting the importance and its utility in everyday life for instance politeness, sympathy, generosity, etc. At the same time the paper condemned the evil practices like backbiting as injurious for maintaining healthy relations in the society. *Sambaud Kaumudi* always published letters, wherein the rich people were requested to take care of the poor people by showing good gesture and showering their generosity, it condemned the rich people for their enormous expenditure on social gatherings and festive occasions, instead requested them to come forward for the societal development and spend on the promotion of education. Through these newspapers, Ram Mohan Roy wanted to bring social reforms.

Essays on social relevance were published in which the evils like idleness was criticized as being antithesis of development and its consequences like being unproductive illustrated by sighting examples. During the 19th century, the printing press became an important source of diffusion of knowledge and the British authorities were justifiably scared of it. This was the reason why the government always frowned upon the activities of the printing press and time and again tried to curtail its freedom and at one point of time came up with the idea of banning the press. The native press never lost any opportunity to raise their voice of protest against the press regulation.

SUPPORT TO THE BRITISH COLONIALISM

He put forth the agenda of administrative reforms for which he wrote extensively and laid great emphasis on Trial by Jury, which Indians were deprived of. An act was passed to regulate the appointment of juries and courts of

judicature at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras presidencies who were authorized to make rules with respect to qualification, appointment, forms of summoning, challenging and service of such jurors. Finally, the view point of the Indians was also taken into account.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy supported the colonization of India by the British, contrary to the people's general beliefs of 'alleged disadvantages and injuries.' He confessed the good effect of the colonization in socio-economic and cultural field. He firmly believed that India's progress would be better guaranteed under the British; he wrote that, "From personal experience I am impressed with the conviction that the greater our intercourse with European gentlemen, the greater will be our improvement in literary, social and political affairs."

ADVOCACY FOR MODERN AND ENGLISH EDUCATION

The most important task before Raja Ram Mohan Roy was to create social awareness and enlightenment among the people. The British East India Company's agenda for education was restricted to oriental learning in traditional languages. He supported the Christian Missionaries for their effort of educating Indians and he himself wanted to take up the cause by establishing a seminary for the teaching of western sciences and literature. Introduction of modern and English education, therefore comes first on his agenda of social reform. Keeping in mind to promote English education he opened many schools and colleges for the diffusion of knowledge. He opposed the government for the establishment of Calcutta Sanskrit College; he remarked that, "Since no improvement can be expected from inducing young men to consume a dozen of years of the most valuable period of their life in acquiring the niceties of the Sanskrit grammar. As the improvement of the native population is the object of the government, it will consequently promote a more liberal and enlightened system of instruction, embracing mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry and anatomy, with other useful sciences. His contribution to the cause of liberal and progressive education was remarkable.

The government's entire effort was on to encourage oriental learning, whereas his entire emphasis was on English learning and modern scientific education. His endeavours bear fruit when Macaulay prepared his famous

minute on education favouring European literature and science. The Calcutta Gazette, in its editorial remarks, appreciated the progress made by Ram Mohan Roy's Anglo-Hindu school and his effort to ameliorate the intellectual condition of his countrymen was lauded. His pragmatic approach led to the success of his mission, for instance, he offered a piece of land to the Baptist missionaries of Serampore for opening up a school for the native people. He extended support to the Englishmen for opening the Parental Academic Institution, which later developed into the famous Doveton College and catered the educational need of both the Eurasians and natives. His support for English education does not mean that he was against traditional learning, he simultaneously supported both. His scheme of education was not only for boys but he laid great emphasis on the education of girls. He fully realized the significance of vernacular languages in the diffusion of knowledge and promoted the Bengali language.

ABOLITION OF SATI AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

After advocating administrative reforms, through his writings, he tried his level best to bring about social awakening in India. The Indian society was deeply entrenched in its customs, traditions, habits etc. and was not ready to discard its age-old traditions. He worked tirelessly to convince the Indian people to abandon all those outdated traditions and customs, which were not sanctioned by the Vedas and were antithetical to the demands of the modern age. Before Raj Ram Mohan Roy, from time to time individual initiative was taken by the native rulers to abolish the practice of sati. However, they did not succeed in their mission to ban it completely because of the opposition within the community. The Christian missionaries were critical of sati and launched the movement for its abolition, but they were afraid of the orthodox section of the society who opposed them. Raja Ram Mohan Roy too was opposed by the orthodox Hindus, even he faced opposition from the family members and was excommunicated from the community but his mission succeeded because it was within the society and he received support from others including the Europeans. It was learnt that with the spread of modern education superstition was vanishing with far greater speed than was anticipated. He was a staunch champion

of women's rights. His crusade for the abolition of the inhuman practice of sati is a clear testimony of his concern for women. An eyewitness to sati Raja Ram Mohan Roy took a vow not to rest unless and until such a horrible and barbarous practice was abolished (Collet SD, (ed) Sarkar SC, 1913). Raja Ram Mohan Roy consolidated public opinion for its abolition; therefore people were extremely tenacious of its continuance. Raja Ram Mohan Roy wrote three tracts condemning the practice of sati: *Sahamaraṇ Visayak Pravartak-Nivartak Samvad*, 1818; *Sahamaraṇ Visaye Paravartak-o NivartakarDviyiya Samvad*, 1819; and *Sahamaraṇ Visaya*, 1819. Pursuing a rationalist stand, Ram Mohan Roy quoted extensively passages from ancient and mediaeval scriptures to emphasize his view point that there was never unanimity on the burning of the widows and advocated that these scriptures have not declared Satidana mandatory. He used to visit the Ghats where sati was performed convincing people to refrain from forcing the women to commit sati. The instances of sati either forcefully induced or voluntary kept increasing, which alarmed the government to formulate some law to prevent it. From 1815 to 1818 an increase of more than sixty percent was recorded. The government was also serious to curb the barbarous custom. The print media also came forward to support the campaign started by Raj Ram Mohan Roy. The *Calcutta Journal*, 9 September 1819 supported the view point of Raja Ram Mohan Roy in these words "the general character of his argument tends to itself develop the state of feeling among the natives on this subject. There is no appeal made to their national honour, no attempt to kindle their indignation against accustom, which reflects such disgrace on the character of the country, no endeavour to arouse all their feelings against a practice so repugnant to every principle of humanity." The *Calcutta Gazette* expressed its support in favour of him and praised his efforts 'to remove the idle and cruel pageantry, the wild and barbarous rites'.

This was very disgusting and disturbing for Ram Mohan Roy because Shastaras exclusively declare that those who were pregnant or who have not yet reached the age of maturity are exempted, but in practice all the illegal excess were committed, evidences show that sometimes widows were forcefully intoxicated to burn them against their inclination. (Sambaud Kaumudi, quoted by the *Calcutta Journal*, 18 March 1822, Sambaud Kaumudi, quoted by John Bull, 5 April 1828) The *Calcutta Monthly*

Journal announced that if Lord William Bentinck prudently and firmly takes steps to ban the inhuman practice 'he will achieve to himself an imperishable glory' (*Calcutta Monthly journal*, July 27, 1829). 'In his crusade against sati' It is believed, 'Ram Mohan Roy made extensive use of the print media wherein he made strong philosophical and legal argument against sati.' Publication of the *Sambaud Kaumudi* invigorated the struggle against sati; he published articles highlighting its brutality and injustice to women. Public opinion in India and England was gradually gaining momentum for abolishing the practice, which had degraded the position of women and an infringement upon the right of women and their dignity. Finally, the abhorrent practice of sati in perfect conformity with the most celebrated of the *Shastras* and the dictates of the reason, Governor General William Bentinck passed a regulation abolishing it and made punishable crime. Admirers praised his concerted efforts and openly stated that 'without extraordinary and unceasing exertions of Ram Mohan Roy the act for the abolition of sati might have never been passed' (Majumdar JK 1941, 150).

Ram Mohan Roy was an ardent supporter of women's upliftment and he raised such issues concerning women, like widow remarriage, child marriage, sale of girls in the marriage, prevention of *koolinism*, abolition of the caste system, changes in inheritance laws to accommodate women and polygamy in the columns of his newspapers. He was fully convinced that unless women would receive education, their position would not improve. He wrote several articles for the defense of the right of women. In his article 'Brief Remarks Regarding Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Female' published in 1822, he boldly emphasized that all the ancient law gives unanimously assigned to a mother an equal share with her son in property left over by her deceased husband. Consequently, he defended the right of a widow to own property. He was of the opinion that debarring women from inheriting property caused polygamy, which further deteriorated the condition of women. The practice of sati assumed an alarming situation in the upper caste, later it was also practiced by the lower caste and poor people, obviously the economic factors cannot be ruled out. Evidences were there that if a woman did not follow the custom, she had to face the civil suits for their property. Poverty compelled the

poor and lower caste people to adopt sati and the widow encouraged to perform sati, just to relieve themselves from extra financial burden and liability. Raj Ram Mohan Roy tried to ensure equality and justice for widows, so that they could live a life of dignity and honour, which was their birth right. He advocated that liberal education could only help to eliminate “the darkness of ignorance” and ensure the progress of society.

Ram Mohan Roy was also opposed to the caste system and wrote several pamphlets to condemn it. In fact he held that individual progress was the touchstone as well as the measuring rod of social progress. However, untouchability and the hereditary caste system was leading the society towards decay. Caste system was based on the principle that all men were not equal by birth. Being a social reformer, he was actually aware of the deleterious effects of caste on the social and political life of the country. He seriously felt that caste was responsible for many evils. To him India has been subjected to the foreign invaders on account of the existence of the caste system, which kept the people of the country divided and in the long run prevented unity. To raise his voice against the caste system and its abolition, Raja Ram Mohan Roy used print media as a weapon.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy convinced that journalism should be used as an instrument to keep the ruling class well-informed about the problems and grievances of the people so that better governance could be achieved. Through print media, people should also be kept informed about various policies and programs of the government. He was a great admirer of parliamentary democracy and the liberal political institutions of the West and he wanted these institutions to be introduced in India. He was an ardent supporter of freedom. In 1821, he even celebrated the establishment of constitutional government in Spain.

CONCLUSION

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a man of remarkably rare genius and extraordinary personal courage. The more scrupulously his writings are studied the more eminent he becomes. The British acknowledged his greatness and glorified his achievements. The Times dated 13 June 1831 praised and expressed high opinion about him on his visit to London in these words: “We hail his arrival

as a harbinger of those fruits, which must result from the dissemination of the European knowledge and literature, and of those sound principles of rule and government, which is the solemn obligation of Great Britain to extend to her vast and interesting empire in the east.”

This ardent champion of the rights of women breathed his last on 27 September 1883 at Bristol. The Times dated 30 September 1883, mourn his death and described that ‘His talents and acquirements were great; about his whole demeanour there was a charm of modesty and reverence that produced the most agreeable effects on all who saw and conversed with him.’ The obituaries and condolence letters written after his death reveals that he was admired all over the world for his accomplishments particularly about his role in the upliftment of women. He talked about the ideas of enlightenment, popularized the concept of liberty and equality and believed in the method of scientific inquiry. He advocated for universal brotherhood and global peace, in a letter to the Foreign minister of France, he wrote “All mankind are one great family of which numerous nations and tribes existing are only various branches. Hence enlightened men in all countries wish to encourage and facilitate human intercourse in every manner by removing all impediments.” The death of Raja Ram Mohan Roy attracted the attention of print media of the country and abroad like his crusade against sati did.

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