

Raja Ram Mohan Roy – Father of Modern India

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Abstract- The social reform movements in India have aimed at uprooting social evils and inculcating in men and women the spirit of sacrifice for the general good of the society. Some Socio-Religious Reform Movements and the Government took steps to improve the position of women. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the greatest champion of reform movement, Father of Indian Renaissance and he was considered as a forerunner in the women's liberation movement in India. He was a pioneer of progressive reform in all walks of life and 'the Herald of a New Age' in India. His extensive studies freed his mind from the bigotry that characterized an average Bengali. Although Ram Mohan Roy was a man of versatile genius, the governing passion of his life was religious reform. Ram Mohan Roy proved to be the champion of Hinduism. While he defended Hinduism against the hostile criticism of the missionaries, he sought to purge Hinduism of the abuses that had crept into it. At the early age of fifteen, he had criticized idolatry and supported his viewpoint by quotations from the Vedas. He started a campaign for the abolition of Sati, condemned polygamy and concubinage, denounced casteism, advocated the right of Hindu widows to remarry. Thus, Ram Mohan Roy sought to effect a cultural synthesis between the East and the West. He was the first person who tried to abolish sati and all other evil practices. He, the founder of Brahma Samaj, (The Society of God) was the earliest reform movement of the modern type which was greatly influenced by modern Western ideas. This multi-faceted personality was indeed a great son of India.

INTRODUCTION

Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the pioneer of religious reform was the first advocate of social reconstruction and introduction of western education in modern India. The advent of Raja Ram Mohan Roy in the arena of Indian social life is a very significant event in the Indian history. Historians have called him as the "Father of Modern India", "A Champion of Women's Rights", and a feminist. Although he himself was one of the foremost orientalist of the age, his conviction was that India could progress only through liberal education covering all the branches of Western learning. He was the father of constitutional agitation in India. In all his activities, Raja Ram Mohan Roy was actuated by a deep love of his motherland and an intense sympathy for the ignorant and the poor. As it was not possible to have an armed rebellion against the Englishmen, he continued to educate the public opinion and thereby encouraged political consciousness among his countrymen. He adopted all possible means to raise the morale of the people. He denounced social evils and abuses. He believed that education should be practical and useful in order to uplift the people and believed that the spread of rationalism could get rid of social evils. He pleaded that the study of science would inspire Indians to throw off their superstitions and ignorance and take to the path of enlightenment.

EARLY LIFE

Ram Mohan Roy was born on 22nd May, 1772, in an orthodox Brahmin family, in Hoogly district of West Bengal. His father, Ramakant Roy, was an orthodox Hindu, strictly

following the sastras, and his mother, Phulthakurani, was a woman of great intelligence and remarkable firmness of character. Both father and mother played a very significant role in shaping and moulding the character of Ram Mohan Roy. Ram Mohan Roy had also acquired mastery over Persian, Arabic, Hebrew and Greek. He had also become a prolific writer.

In 1809, he was appointed to the post of shristadar in the East India Company in Bengal and continued to work there up to 1814. After his retirement, he settled in Calcutta and devoted himself entirely to the service of the people. In 1815, he came to Calcutta and started the Atmiya Sabha. In 1817, he set up the Hindu College at Calcutta. In 1820, he published the ethical teachings of Christ, entitled "Precepts of Jesus, the Guide to Peace and Happiness." In 1822, he founded the Anglo-Hindu School, and four years later, the Vedanta College, where he insisted that his teachings of monotheistic doctrines be incorporated with "modern, western curriculum." In 1818, he began his renowned crusade for the abolition of Sati, and on 4th December, 1829 Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor-General of India made Sati illegal by Regulation XVII. This left a permanent imprint on the social history of India.

In 1827, Ram Mohan Roy formed the British India Unitarian Association and on 20th August, 1828, he founded the Brahma Samaj or the Congregation of the Absolute. He went to England in 1831 on a special mission to plead the cause of the Mughal Emperor of Delhi to ensure that the Lord William

Bentinck's regulation banning the practice of 'Sati' was not overturned. He was given the title of 'Raja', which means 'King' by the Mughal Emperor. In 1833, he went to Bristol, to stay at Beech House in Stapleton Grove. Ten days after arriving in Bristol, he fell ill with meningitis and died on 27th September, 1833. He was initially buried in the grounds of Beech House, but ten years later his friend, Dwarkanath Tagore, had him reinterred at Arnos Vale Cemetery in southern Bristol. In 1997, a statue of Raja Ram Mohan Roy was unveiled at Bristol.

His important works are:

1. Tuhfat-ul-Mawahhidin (1803)
2. Vedanta Grantha (1815). This is a commentary on Brahma Sutra in Bengali
3. Vedantasara (1815) in Bengali
4. The Precepts of Jesus – the Guide to Peace and Happiness

The following works of Ram Mohan Roy constitute the source for the study of his political ideas.

1. A Letter to Lord Ahmerst on English Education (1823)
2. A tract on Religious Toleration (1823)
3. Rights of Hindus over ancestral property according to the law of Bengal (1830)
4. Remarks on Settlement in India by Europeans (1831).
5. He also translated the New Testament into Bengali with the help of Baptist missionaries.

Social Development Sati

The term 'Sati' literally means, "a pure and virtuous woman". The practice of 'Sati' was a very ancient one and although it did not become equally common throughout India. Bengal, Rajputana and the South Indian kingdom of Vijayanagar were its main medieval strongholds. It was believed that by burning herself on the funeral pyre, a widow sanctified her ancestors, removed the sins of her husband and she was believed to live in heaven after death. The life of a Hindu widow was full of misery. She was expected to eat only one meal a day. She was not to sleep on a bed. She was never to put on good clothes. She was to live a life of renunciation. In some cases, her head was clean-shaved.

Crusade Against Sati

Men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy were in favour of educating the public opinion against the practice of 'Sati'. He carried on ceaseless propaganda against this inhuman custom both in the press and on the platform. It was his consistent support which enabled Lord William Bentinck to ban 'Sati' in 1829. When the orthodox people put in a petition before the Privy Council in England he put in a counter – petition before the British Parliament on behalf of his progressive friends and co-workers. He was happy when the Privy Council rejected the petition which was given by orthodox people. Orthodox

Hindus sent a petition of remonstrance but Raja Ram Mohan Roy sent a counter-petition congratulating the Government; and his efforts were crowned with success. Regulation XVII of 4th December, 1829, declared the practice of Sati or burning or burying alive of widows illegal and punishable by criminal courts. The Regulation of 1829 was applicable in the first instance to Bengal Presidency alone, but was extended in slightly modified forms to Madras and Bombay Presidencies in 1830. The abolition of 'Sati' put the Raja Ram Mohan Roy in the front rank of the world's humanitarian reformers.

Freedom of Press

Raja Ram Mohan Roy fought for the freedom of the press. He himself founded and edited a Bengali journal called the 'Samvad Kaumudi' which was among the earliest Indian edited newspapers. He carried on a vigorous agitation against the Press Regulations of 1823. He submitted a memorial to the Supreme Court in which he dwelt on the benefits of a free press. His agitation for the freedom of the Press must have paved the way for the final emancipation of the Press in 1835.

Administrative Reforms

During his stay in England from 1831-1833, Raja Ram Mohan Roy agitated for reforms in the administrative system of British India. He was the first Indian to be consulted on Indian affairs by the British Parliament. While giving his evidence before a Select Committee of House of Commons, he suggested reforms in practically all branches of Indian administration. The political ideas of Raja Ram Mohan Roy were influenced by European philosophers and jurists like Bacon, Hume, Bentham and Montesquieu. He advocated the peaceful settlement of international disputes through the mediation of a congress composed of an equal number of members from the Parliaments of the countries concerned.

Champion of Liberty

Raja Ram Mohan Roy always championed the causes of liberty, constitutionalism, democratic rights and parliamentary democracy for every country of the world. He was also a champion of the right of Hindu females to inheritance. Ram Mohan Roy stood firmly against all sort of social bigotry, conservatism and superstitions. He wrote a learned essay in 1822 entitled: "Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females according to the Hindu Law of Inheritance."

Abolition of Female Infanticide

The custom of infanticide was particularly prominent among the Rajputs who considered an unmarried daughter as a disgrace to their family and who also found it difficult to find suitable husbands for their daughters. The birth of a daughter was a liability and thus the custom of female infanticide sprang up. In 1795, infanticide was declared to be murder by Bengal Regulation XXI. In spite of this, the custom continued. Daughters were killed or by suffocation immediately after birth, sometimes, the mother was forced to starve the child. The evil of female infanticide was ended by propaganda and the forceful action on the part of the British Government. The offenders were warned that very strong action would be taken against them if they committed the offence. Raja Ram Mohan

Roy was the first to raise his voice against the evils of polygamy, Kulinism and all the inhuman practices which accentuated the sufferings of women in the name of religious sanctity, some other evils in the prevailing social system of Bengal and also denounced the rigours of caste rules.

Stress on Fundamental Unity

Before everything else, Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a religious reformer and seeker after truth. His study of Christianity, Islam and Hinduism brought him to the conclusion that there was the prevalence of the monotheistic principle in all religions. By 1803, he was bold enough to express his views on monotheism in Persian, and advocated his views of a common bond of Unity in mankind as regards the existence of 'One Being'. He thus condemned sectarian tendencies which arise because of different attributes given by those having difference among themselves. He thus stressed the need of 'fundamental unity, among all religions'. It is ignorance, blind belief and the absence of rational approach that divided the people into different religions. He also challenged the principle of supernatural power coming out of ignorance about cause and effect which are found in the entire universe. In his attempt to emphasise the concept of a 'universal religion based on monotheism' he also came into contact with Jain scholars and studied Jain philosophy. By 1814, he had completed a comparative study of world religions.

Father of Indian Renaissance

Raja Ram Mohan Roy made his contribution to literature also. He was a prolific writer in many languages. He was one of the greatest savants of his age. He was a great linguist and master of style and known as one of the creators of modern Bengali prose. He has been rightly called as "the Herald of a New Age." According to Rabindranath Tagore, Raja Ram Mohan Roy "inaugurated the modern age in India." He has also been described as the "Father of Indian Renaissance" and the "Prophet of Indian Nationalism."

Atmiya Sabha

In 1815, he founded Atmiya Sabha – 'an association or the dissemination of religious truth and the promotion of free discussion of theological subjects' which later on developed into Brahma Samaj by 1828. He desired that monotheists of different religions should come together and discuss the 'formless, eternal and unsearchable', concept of God. Thus he did not want himself to be branded as belonging to one group or another, but should be regarded by all as "the follower of universal religion."

Brahmo Samaj

The Brahma Samaj was founded in 1828 by Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Strongly influenced by Islam and Christianity, he opposed polytheism, mythology and idolatry, and preached that Brahman (God) should be worshipped in His pure form. He wanted the Brahma Samaj to be a movement and an instrument for ideological revolution and religious reforms. The message of the Brahma Samaj was: "There is only one God; none equals Him. He has no end. He is present in all living beings." It emphasized the idea of universal

brotherhood. Under Ram Mohan Roy's leadership, the Samaj launched an attack on the evils of Hindu society, propagated in the name of religion and social custom. The programme of the Samaj was acclaimed by a large number of educated people in Bengal and outside.

Brahmo Samaj advocated the remarriage of widows, the worship of one God and the brotherhood of man. It also stood for respect for all religions and their scriptures. The Brahma Samaj has rendered brilliant service for the progress of education and cultural renaissance in our country. The Brahma Samaj did not believe in polytheism, image worship. There was no place for priesthood. After the death of Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1833, the work of Brahma Samaj was carried on by his followers like Devendranath Tagore and Keshavchandra Sen.

Evaluation of Brahma Samaj

The ideas of Brahma Samaj had a great impact on India as well as worldwide religious thought. It reflected the modern, liberal approach in a national method. Scholars like Max-muller believed that it was worthy of "emerging as a new religion." As a new sect it could not supersede the Hindu religion. But the work of Brahma Samaj entitled Raja Ram Mohan Roy to be "the pioneer of religious reform", by emphasising the concept of 'universal religion', by trying to bring about "a synthesis between all the religions." The Brahma Samaj has played a notable role in the Indian Renaissance. The intellectual mind which had been cut off its moorings by the Christian propaganda found a way out in the Brahma Samaj. Socially, the Samaj has purged Hinduism of many dogmas and superstitions. The Samaj has attained notable results in improving the status of women – abolition of the purdah system, discouragement of child marriage and polygamy, introduction of widow remarriage, provision of higher education, etc. Casteism, untouchability and other social taboos were also attacked and some success achieved.

CONCLUSION

At a time when the West knew very little about India, Raja Ram Mohan Roy worked as a bridge between the East and West. He was a man of conviction and strong determination. Raja Ram Mohan Roy believed that the British rule in India was a divine dispensation. It was all for the good of the people of this country. He believed that Indians should be given more and more share in the administration of the country by gradual stages. He stood for civil liberty for all with all its implications. He may be considered as the first leader of modern India who initiated a new enlightenment and urge towards a future free from the shackles of evil customs and traditions. By removing the social and religious evils, he prepared the Indians for political consciousness. He was a lover of humanity and that is why he pleaded for religious and social reforms.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was an exponent of cosmopolitanism and stood for brotherhood and independence. He was not only the pioneer of religious reform and the first advocate of social reconstruction in India, but he also tried to solve the

educational, economic and political problems of his time. He was a modern man and a symbol of the renascent spirit of new India.

END NOTES

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