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ROLE OF RAJA RAMMOHAN ROY IN SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS REFORM MOVEMENTS

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Abstract

By the end of the eighteenth century, the foundation of the British rule was firmly laid in India. Together with the establishment of the British political supremacy the storm of the western culture and civilization began to rage violently in the country. It affected the evolution of Indian culture. The British came to the conclusion that their religion and culture were no less than any other foreign religion or culture in splendor and excellence. They sought to remedy evils of the day by social and religious reforms. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the pioneer among them and his Brahmo Samaj was the first leading religious movement. The cardinal principles of the Brahmo Samaj were the worship of one God, the Author and Preserver of the Universe and the brotherhood of man. Raja Ram Mohan Roy rejected the barriers of caste divisions, worship of idols and sacrificial ritual and he boldly stood forth as the high priest of universalism and love.

Key words: Reform, Movement, Superstitions, Pioneer, Traditions, Barriers.

Introduction

Reckoning the millennia of Indian history, one can hardly think of a greater contrast than the one that existed between eighteenth-century and twentieth-century Indiaⁱ. In the 18th century, the Indian society and religion presented a gloomy picture – bundle of superstitions, society grew rotten and stagnated cultureⁱⁱ. The nineteenth century was the pivotal century that saw the initiation of this process that brought about an enormous transformation in the religious, social, economic, political, and cultural spheresⁱⁱⁱ. Social movements are organised efforts to change or resist the change in the social structure^{iv}. They do not emerge automatically but emerged due to the shared dissatisfaction; and the conviction that the collective action would lead to the goal. Ideology, timing and leadership have important role to play in a social movement^v.

Reform movements in India

Sovereignty is the soul of society. The country fell to political subordination and that was the decline of dharma. The leadership failed to come up to the social requirements. The social order fell into disruption. Social vigour got dissipated. Superstition became supreme and religion received the lip service. This gave rise to chain of reform movements aims at the reconstruction of social institutions. It took the shape of socio-religious movements^{vi}. In the nineteenth century Brahmo Samaj, Param Hansa Mandali, Prathana Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, Arya Samaj, Theosophical Society, Muhammadan Literary Society, the Religious Reform Association of the Parsis and Akali Dal of Sikhs – all these organizations made notable steps to bring about religious reforms in India. Though these religious movements were true to their basic principles and concepts^{vii} yet by adopting reason and humanism they tried to make the Indian people adoptive to new needs and to the freedom movement^{viii}.

H.C.E. Zacharias writes: "Ram Mohan Roy and his Brahmo Samaj form the starting point for all the various Reform Movements – whether in Hindu religion, society or politics – which have agitated Modern India^{ix}".

The credit of starting the religions and social reformation in modern India undoubtedly goes to Raja Rammohan Roy. Various evils like blind-faiths, sacrificial rituals, caste divisions, idol worship etc., had greatly over-shadowed the Hindu religion. Raja Rammohan Roy was a man of liberal religions views and was friendly to all religions. He was influenced by monotheism of Islam and the Moral principles of Christianity. He believed in the fundamental truth and unity of all religions. He never criticised any religion or any form of religious worship^x.

Early Career of Raja Rammohan Roy

Rammohan was born in the village of Radhanagar, near Krishnagar, in the district of Hoogly, on the 22nd May, 1772. He came of a respectable Brahman family. His great-grandfather, Krishnachandra Benerji, saw service under the Nawab of Bengal and was honoured with the title of "Roy Roy", afterwards contracted into "Roy", which has since been retained as the designation of the family in place of the caste name "Benerji". Braja Benode, the third son of Krishna Chandra and the grandfather of Ram Mohan, served the Nawab Siraj-ud-Doula in a distinguished capacity; but, on account of some ill-treatment accorded to him, he quitted the employment and spent the rest of his life at home. He had five sons, of whom Ramkanta, the fifth, was the father of Ram Mohan. Ram Mohan's paternal ancestors were Vaishnavas noted for their piety and devotion. His maternal ancestors were staunch Shaktas. Very early in life Ram Mohan showed signs of conspicuous talent, and Ramkanta spared no pains to give him an excellent education. He received his early instruction in the village school, where he made some progress in Bengali. But Bengali was not of much consequence in those days. Persian as still the Court language, and knowledge of it was indispensable. He received private tuition in Persian at home under a Maulvi.



and later on he was sent to Patna, then a great centre of Islamic learning, for a proper study of Arabic and Persian. There he read Euclid and Aristotle in Arabic, and also made a study of the Koran and Koranic literature. He was then sent for study of Sanskrit to Benares, where he did not take long to become well-versed in the literature, law and philosophy of his people, especially the Upanishads. While this education made him an ardent admirer and advocate of the monotheistic religion inculcated in the Upanishads, it shook his faith in the popular Hindu religion of the day. On his return home he fearlessly attacked the meaningless ceremonialism and the priest-ridden idolatry which prevailed all round in the name of Hinduism. This led to an estrangement between him and his father, and made him leave his paternal roof. In search of truth he went out on travel, which was not confined to India alone^{vi} but extended to far-off Tibet. After about three years of travel Ram Mohan returned to his father - when he was about twenty years old - and on his return was taken back with great kindness and affection.

Raja Rammohan Roy In Bengal

The death of his father in 1803 led him to remove from Benares to Murshidabad, the old Mogul capital of Bengal. There he published his first work, entitled *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahuddin*, or "*A gift to Monotheists*" - a treatise in Persian with an Arabic preface. This work shows in a considerable measure the influence on Ram Mohan's mind and style of writing of his studies in Islamic scriptures at Patna. In matter, it is a deistic dissertation on the futility of all existing religious and the fatuities of religious leaders. In form, it is cast in a logical mould and abounds with logical and philosophical terms. It is an essay seeking to establish that the real root of all religious is faith in one Supreme Being, and that all the rest is mere excrescence.

Rammohan now entered service under the East India Company as a clerk in the Collectorate under Mr. John Digby, the Collector at Rangpur. He was subsequently promoted to the post of Dewan, "the principal native officer in the collection of revenue"^{vii}. In 1822, the British Baptist shoemaker William Carey published his missionary tract *An Enquiry of the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of Heathens*. In the following year, William Carey landed in India to settle. His objective was to translate, publish and distribute the Bible in Indian languages and propagate Christianity to the Indian peoples. He believed that "mobile" (i.e. service classes) Brahmins and Pundits were most able to help him in this endeavour, and he began gathering them. He learned the Buddhist and Jain religious works as a means to improve his argument in promotion for Christianity in the cultural context. In 1795, Carey made contact with a Sanskrit Scholar, the Tactic Hariharananda Vidyabagish, who later introduced him to Ram Mohan Roy; Roy wished to learn English^{viii}.

During his stay at Rangpur, Ram Mohan carried on religious controversies with the Pundits, wrote tracts in Persian, translated portions of the Vedanta, studied the Tantras and made of a study of the Kalpa Sutras and other Jaina scriptures. Thus it was a time of strenuous preparation for his future work. After about ten years Ram Mohan retired from service with a view to finding more time for the work which lay nearest his heart. Leaving government service he went home to stay with his mother awhile.

Inspiration of Raja Rammohan Roy

There was one fateful event that happened during this period which left an indelible impression on Ram Mohan's mind and acted on him as a powerful impetus later in life, to the everlasting benefit of his country. Ram Mohan had an elder brother, named Jagan Mohan, who died in 1811. His wife, who was devotedly attached to him, burnt herself on his funeral fire. Ram Mohan had tried to dissuade her from it, but had failed. When, however, she actually felt the flames on her person she made an attempt to get up and escape as almost an act of heresy and^{xiv} sacrilege, managed to keep her pinned down to the pyre by means of bamboo poles while, with the noise of tom-toms and other instruments, they drowned her frantic shrieks. Ram Mohan, though a witness of this awful scene, failing to help her out of such a tragic end, was stricken with pity and remorse. He there and then took the vow that he would never rest till the inhuman practice of Suttee was abolished^{xv}.

Formation of Brahma Samaj

Rammohan Roy wanted to legitimize Hindu traditions to his European acquaintances by proving that "superstitious practices which deform the Hindu religion have nothing to do with the pure spirit of its dictates!" The "superstitious practices" Ram Mohan Roy objected included sati, caste rigidity, polygamy and child marriages. Brahmos believe that worship of Him needs no fixed place or time. Roy demanded property inheritance rights for women and which was a movement of reformist Bengali's formed to fight against social evils^{xvi}. In 1815 he founded a reforming institution called the Atmiya Samaj; in 1819, he established the Calcutta Unitarian Committee and on the 20th of August 1828, the Brahma Samaj. By founding the Brahma Samaj he never sought to set up a new independent religious sect, but prepared an environment, saturated with the best teachings of all religions, in which persons of all sorts and conditions could assemble, without any distinction whatsoever, for the adoration of one God.



The cardinal principles of Brahma Samaj were the worship of one God, the Author and Preserver of the Universe, and the brotherhood of man. It inculcated respect for the religious and scriptures; but it had no faith in any scriptures as an authority^{xvii}. It denounced polytheism and idol worship as sinful and opposed caste distinctions. In fact, the new theism of the Brahma Samaj differed from the older theism of India not in what it asserted, but in what it denied. In fact, the Brahma Samaj movement was a socio-religious reform movement. Thus, Raja Rammohan Roy rejected the barriers of caste divisions, worship of idols and sacrificial ritual and he boldly stood forth as high priest of universalism and love^{xviii}.

Services of Raja Rammohan Roy

In 1817, in collaboration with David Hare, he set up the Hindu College at Calcutta. In 1822, Roy founded the Anglo-Hindu school, followed four years later by the Vedanta College, where he insisted that his teachings of monotheistic doctrines be incorporated with "modern, western curriculum"; Vedanta College offered courses as a synthesis of Western and Indian learning. In 1830, he helped Alexander Duff in establishing the General Assembly's Institution, by providing him the venue vacated by Brahma Samaj and getting the first batch of students. Roy supported induction of western learning into Indian education. He advocated the study of English, Science, Western Medicine and technology. He spent his money on a college to promote these studies. Roy published magazines in English, Hindi, Persian and Bengali. He published Brahma Magazine in English in 1821. One notable magazine of his was the Sambad Kaumudi, published in 1821. In 1822, Ram Mohan published Mirat-ul-Akbar in Persian language. Brahma Magazine ceased to exist after publication of few issues. But Sambad Kaumudi, a news weekly, covered topics such as freedom of press, induction of Indians into high ranks of service and separation of the executive and judiciary. Sambad Kaumudi became bi-weekly in January 1830 and continued for 33 years. He published newspaper to register his protest against the introduction of Press Ordinance of 1823. The ordinance stated that^{xix} a license from the Governor General in council would be mandatory to publish any newspaper. When the English Company censored the press; Ram Mohan composed two memorials against this in 1829 and 1830 respectively. Being an activist, he steadily opposed social atrocities like Sati and Child Marriage^{xx}.

Contribution of Brahma Samaj towards Indian Society and Religion

The Brahma Samaj was the result of the first creative activity of the Indians inspired by Indian Renaissance. The Brahma Samaj was also benefited by western concepts of liberty of thought, reason and innovation in society and religion. It therefore, criticized the prevalent social and religious practices of the Hindus but justified its arguments on the basis of Hindu religious texts. Its approach was also not that of reproach but of reformist zeal. It, thus, simplified and modernized Hindu religion. It led the first movement which fought the evil practices of Hindu society and religious reform movements among the Hindus. The Brahma Samaj attempted to reform Hindu Society as well. There remained not a single evil which it spared from its attack. All those social evils which have been decried by educated Indians and national leaders in modern times were first attacked by Raja Rammohan Roy and his Brahma Samaj. The Brahma Samaj led a crusade against the practice of Sati, polygamy, child marriage of minor girls, caste system, purdah system, untouchability and use of intoxicants. It adopted inter-caste marriages, education of women, widow remarriages etc., as practical measures for removing the social evils. It succeeded in creating a general awakening against these social evils in Bengal^{xxi}. The leaders of the Brahma Samaj also worked for the welfare of the peasants, liberty of the Press, social legislation etc. Raja Rammohan Roy wanted the revenue to be fixed with the cultivators in Bengal as was the case with the Zamindars and supported the cause of abolishing sati legally. Thus, the Brahma Samaj worked as a pioneer in revitalising the Hindu society, in discarding all its social evils and working in practice against them. It glorified the ancient culture of India, helped in developing confidence among Indians in their own religion and, thus, participated indirectly in the resurgence of Indian nationalism^{xxii}.

Conclusion

Brahma Samaj helped in social and religious reforms in India. It also helped in modernizing India. It placed before the Indian people the problems concerning their society and religion and also put forth the solutions thereof. Rammohan was an Indian religions, social and educational reformer and humanitarian, who challenged traditional Hindu culture and indicated the lines of progress for Indian Society under British rule. Although he introduced the western concepts, he was appreciated not only in India but all over the World for his sincere efforts to build a nation with respectable values and living place for everybody. He is called the "Maker of Modern India" and also as "Father of Modern India". He is also regarded as the "Father of the Bengal Renaissance"^{xxiii}.



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