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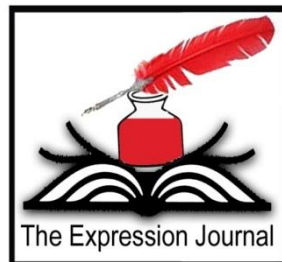
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**ROLE OF RAJA RAMMOHAN ROY IN SHAPING A NEW INDIA:
A CRITIQUE ON HIS SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS REFORM MOVEMENTS**

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Abstract

It cannot be denied that the pictures of the Indian society were very frightening and heart-rending just two centuries back. Even in the beginning of the nineteenth century, Indian society was caste-ridden superstitious, rigid, decadent and Indian people did not like to go to schools and colleges for education and agriculture was their main profession. Many social and religious evils were prevalent at that time. The situations were bad for the weaker sections, women and children because only the powerful people dominated over the weaker ones. The caste discrimination and untouchability were the common practices of rural India. Women were not sent outside home for working. People were suffering from the sati tradition, child marriage, blind beliefs, idolatry, dowry, gender discrimination, untouchability, casteism, unemployment, poverty and many more social evils. A change was immediately needed at that time and it was not possible only through the internal forces. A strict ruler was needed to implement laws and all this could be possible with the British Raj. Many social and religious reformers came forward and some of them have to sacrifice their lives also. In this paper I have tried to highlight the contribution of Raja Rammohan Roy's social, religious and political reformations done a in shaping a new India.

Keywords

Social Reforms, Ancient India, Religious Beliefs, Evils, Social Activists.

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With the advent of the British Empire, the dark age of social and religious evils started declining because India lived in the villages and most of the people living in the villages did not know the value of education. Some social and religious reformers also came forward and they decided to change the ugly pictures of India through their reformative actions. Among such people the names of Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda, Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawahar Lal Nehru and many more names are well-known. The wave of reformation came in India with the early decades of the 19th century.

The decay of Indian society was not hidden to the educated Indians and they started working systematically to eradicate the social and religious evils from India. The western impact on people's mind also started working as a tonic for their brain. After that, many changes were seen in Indian society and that change is generally known as the Indian Renaissance.

Among the social reformers, the name of Raja Rammohan Roy comes at the top. He was the great man who took all pains to change the shape of India. He is generally called the "father of the Indian Renaissance". His family was very orthodox and firmly believed in Hindu religion. He was also brought up under the strict observance and strenuous orthodoxy. His parents also devoted their life for the religious services. Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar write in the "Introduction" of their book that "In the late 1980s, finally, a feminist survey of reforms was initiated..." (6).

Raja Rammohan Roy was a great scholar, social reformer, patriot and humanist. He worked for the upliftment of the poor India. He was born in a village Radhanagar in Murishdabad district of West Bengal. His father was a revenue officer who Rammohan Roy became Zamindar later. He was a learned man who

leant Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy in Varanasi and Persian, Arabic and Koran in Patna. He got his education from home also and the local *Maulavis* or Muslim priests taught him some background of the Muslim languages, literature and culture. Apart from it, he had the mastery over some international languages also such as English, Latin, Hebrew and Greek. It is said that he had the knowledge of seventeen languages. He was a scholar who studied Hindu scriptures and Islamic studies.

Raja Rammohan Roy met John Digby in 1805 and he remained in his touch for around ten years. He was Digby's munshi and later Digby found that Raja Rammohan Roy has a good understanding power and he was pleased with Rammohan's ability, intellect and wisdom. He taught Rammohan Roy English with his power of accuracy and under Dugby's guidance, he pursued public correspondence and conversations with the European gentlemen in English. He was a multi-talented personality who took different actions as a career likewise a Zamindar, money-lender, investor in trading houses, advocate, educationist, writer, journalist and a socio-religious reformer. He was greatly influenced by John Locke, David Hume, Advaita Vedanta Philosophers and Sufi saints. Akbar II gave him the title of "Raja". He published books, edited journals of different languages and formed societies.

So far as his religious thoughts are concerned, he was influenced by Utilitarianism, Liberalism and Enlightenment. He had views like John Locke who says that God has given us the senses of reasons and we can decide ourselves what is right and what is wrong, and no mediators like priests, *maulavis* or pundits are required for that.

He believed in the existence of one God, and he also believed in universal Supreme Being, existence of souls and rebirth. He held the views that many evils have entered all religions and he focused especially on Hindu religion which was suffering from polytheism, idolatory, superstitions, etc. He believed that without monotheism and utilitarianism, the dark age of evils will not come to an end.

Raja Rammohan Roy believed that we should take good elements from any religion of the world and should not restrict ourselves only to one religion. People will not be able to do their proper development because there may be some weakness in any religion and only one religion cannot be perfect and flawless that's why he advocated the need of monotheism in India. Raja Rammohan Rao wanted a spiritual synthesis in which he wanted that all the people belonging to every religion should get benefitted by it. He thought that the synthesis of private and public life is also equally important in framing a new democratic country. The dream of social reform cannot be realised if the people are not given equal rights, liberty, opportunities and justice individually. The development of the individual is the development of the society.

He formed Atmiya Sabha in 1815 and the purpose of this Sabhawas to give patronage to get rid of social evils. Later this Sabha was renamed as the Brahmo Samaj. He founded Calcutta Utilitarian association in 1821 and the Brahmo Sabha in 1828. The Brahmo Samaj emphasised on the rationalism and the Vedantic philosophy.

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Through this society he wanted to bring social, political and religious reforms. He translated many religious texts and Vedantic texts in Hindi, English and Bengali. He wanted that the government should also intervene in people's life for their welfare.

Raja Rammohan Rao believed in the philosophy that the whole world should be a family and people should come out of their narrow-minded mentality. He rejoiced 1830 French Revolution and spiritual liberal movement Portugal, Spain, Naples and Latin America. He proposed that we should go beyond the boundaries of selfish motives of one religion or country. That's why he thought that a World Congress should be formed so that every person of the world feels that the whole world is a family. The League of Nations and universal brotherhood was around 200 hundred backs in his mind.

Raja Rammohan Rao adopted multiple strategies for the social reformation. He read Sanskrit literature and ancient Hindu scriptures and he felt that people cannot progress without western thoughts. Only old thinking and traditional mindsets cannot change society, people should know about the advancement of science, technology and management without which Indians would lag behind.

He has vision of Cosmopolitan Indian society in which rationality, reason, equality, liberty and fraternity are the main elements. He also focused on the lives of Indian women because the women of that time were suffering from many problems. They had secondary place in their homes as they were living in a man-dominated society. Furthermore, there were many evils in Indian society such as Sati pratha, child marriage, purdah pratha, and gender discrimination. Raja Rammohan Roy wanted that women also should get equal status and it was not possible without their education. The condition of Dalit women was very bad and untouchability was prevalent in Indian society. Like Wollstonecraft, he wrote for the equality for women. He found that without giving property and inheritance rights to women, it is not possible for women to give them equality. Polygamy was in practice at that time and Raja Rao denied this right for men. Widows did not have the right of remarriage and he wanted to see the people educated. That's why he opened many schools, colleges and educational institutions. He worked on the grass root levels of the Indian society. Sati pratha was a very scornful practice at that time.

Raja Rammohan Roy presented first counter petition to Lord Hastings against Sati pratha. He published an imaginary dialogue between advocate and opponent in which the burning of widows on the funeral pyre remained the main focus. Roy took the side of the opponent as he has strictly against the rite of Sati. By the end November 1818, he translated and published this tract under the title "A Conference between an Advocate for, and an Opponent of, the Practice of Burning Widows Alive". The purpose behind this tract was to aware the people against the cruel rite. The Bengali version of this tract was also circulated in different parts of India so that people must be aware of it. He distributed this tract free of cost many times so that people may come in his support and voice may be raised vehemently against this rite. His pamphlets, tracts and papers were not limited to India only; this rite was being criticized outside India also. He write a paper which was

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published by him in England with the title "Some Remarks in Vindication of the Resolution Passed by the Government of Bengal in 1829 Abolishing the Practice of Female Sacrifices in India" and it was published in 1831 after the abolition of *Sati Pratha* by Lord William Bentinck.

It was due to him that Lord William Bentinck had to pass a law banning *Sati Pratha* (1829). His brother was dead and his brother's wife was killed by this tradition. This incident shocked him and made him a hater of this tradition. Raja Rao was in the favour of giving women equal freedom in marriage. They should also get right of inters caste and interfaith marriages.

He favoured western English education in India and told people that it is not only for their career advancement, it was beneficial for the entire world. He was highly influenced by J.S. Mill and was anti-monarchist or against despotic rules. He thought that the constitutional rights can bring equality and justice in society. He believed in the freedom of expression to everyone.

He was also criticized for his radical thoughts. He was excluded from his own family and even Radhakanta Dev, Bengal Hurkaru and Henry Vivin Dorozio also criticized him during his lifetime. Many conservative people attached him for being too much western, radical and liberal for being half-cooked modern.

He had to struggle persistently against so many social evils prevalent in our society. He believed that the ancient Hindu scriptures the Vedas and the Upanishads upheld the doctrine of monotheism. For that purpose, he translated these texts into Bengali. Despite all this, he was the staunch faith in the philosophy of Vedanta (Upanishads) and he came forward to defend Hindu religion from the attack of the missionaries.

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