

Ram Mohan Roy and Contemporary Hindu Religion: A Philosophical Study

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Abstract

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a rational and progressive social reformer of modern India. The contemporary societal condition of Ram Mohan was that the common people were misled in several ways by the priest in the name of religion. The conventionally accepted rituals and customs were used as instrumentally to make the Brahmans benefited. They used their fabricated words in society in the name of scriptures and it is consequently resulting to the common people used to follow those instructions blindly. That time, Upanishads was not available in Bengali Language. Since Ram, Mohan Roy translated the Upanishads and core Sanskrit texts into Bengali language and made the common people conscious about their scriptural essence. In addition, the common person able to capture the essence of religion. He was clamor against the hitherto existing ritualism has been practicing in Hinduism. He exposed that the Upanishads do not preach any kind of idol worship. Actually, Ram Mohan wished to develop a rationalistic attitude among the common people of the society and presents a new direction of Hinduism that is called Neo-Hinduism. The present paper intends to depict the image of Hindu religion contemporary to Ram Mohan and how he brought a renaissance through firmly criticizing the dogmatically accepted rituals of Hinduism.

Keywords: Ram Mohan Roy, Renaissance, Social reforms, Scriptural Essence, Hinduism, Upanishads.

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INTRODUCTION

The Bengali society has been facing to experience the religious encounters from various blended tendencies and reform movements from time to time. Within the Hindu tradition, Ram Mohan Roy aroused as the father of socio-religious reform and the Bengali Renaissance in the nineteenth century. Ram Mohan's ideology and exertion was multi-faced and his view regarding society, religion, education and politics has been intimately related to each other.¹ Whenever we go to expound the socio-religious culture and their practices in Hinduism contemporary to Ram Mohan, we must have a crystal imagery of Bengal renaissance. We all evident about the fact that Nineteenth century were a golden period in the history of Bengal. It is said that posterior to the Chaitanya era there had never come such a glorious era in Bengal. During the early decades of the nineteenth century a significant development

were taking place in Indian society, particularly in Bengal. There were great alterations taken place in all spheres of life. In a word, this great revolution is called Bengal Renaissance. The idea of Bengal Renaissance denotes a kind of rebirth, awakening or revitalization or Regeneration or New Age of society and culture after the decline 'or stagnation 'in pre-colonial period of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.² Definitely, this awakening' was the product of Western education and culture. Modernism was boosted up in Bengal as well as in India by the touch of western civilization. Self consciousness, political consciousness, new social class structure due to a new emerging economic order, and most of all, different lifestyle had a great impact on the old social systems in Bengal. Raja Rammohun Roy, in this transitional phrase, gave a new form to the existing Hindu religion with a rationalistic flavor.

¹ Chakrabarty, s: Bharatbarsha: Rastrabhavana, second edition, Calcutta block and print, Calcutta, 2003, p-77.

² Majumdar, R, C. on Rammohan Roy, The Asiatic Society Calcutta ,1984, p-19.

Ram Mohan Roy and Neo-Vedanta

Ram Mohan's one of the main area of interest was the Vedanta and the Upanishads. His religious reformation was very much rooted to the Advaita Vedanta of Shankaracharya (788-820). He amalgamated it with Muslim Sufism and modern western influences such as deism, utilitarianism, and the broader scientific outlook. Through an in-depth study of the Vedanta, he realized that the cardinal aphorism of Vedanta or Upanishads was Monotheism or Unity of God: Ekamevadviyam (One without a second) which in Arabic translated as La ilaha illAllah. His ablution into Christian missionaries also played a significant role in the formation of his reform agenda. He made a foundation of his socio-religious reforms on Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta, regarding especially such as the concept of formless one God. He was gone astray from the classical Vedanta in opposing the tenets of traditional Hindu dharma like idol worship, the belief in the infallibility of Vedas, caste system, and widow burning. The Upanishads or the Vedas do not promote idol worship. However, he observed very close that the Hindu community had become idolatrous and instead of professing monotheism, they professed polytheism. They had also invented many rites and customs, which not mentioned in the Vedas or Upanishads. Therefore, he set out to purify Hindu religion from the 'absurdities' that had crept into it. For this purpose, he launched a movement both on theoretical and pragmatic level. During this period, Upanishads were not available in Bengali language.

Due to this, the masses of Bengal were not aware of the monotheistic tradition of Hinduism. To make them aware and sent the actual messages of the Upanishads, he had translated the Upanishads into Bengali and later on, translated into English. Since during that period Persian used to refer as the official language as well as the language of the masses, Ram Mohan wrote a book in Persian titled 'Tohfat-ul Mowahhideen' (A Gift to Monotheists). The preface of the book was written in Arabic and later on translated into English. In this book, Raja Ram Mohan Roy tried to establish that the Vedas as the foundation of the Hindu religion never expose any idolatry worship. Many then said that Ram Mohan opposed idolatry based on Islamic teachings but the fact was that he wanted to remove idolatry system from Hinduism based on the Vedas. He was not a Muslim but a Vedic Hindu. Ram Mohan wrote yet another book titled 'A Defense of Hindu Theism' in 1817. In this book, he laid stress on the Vedantic advocacy of Theism and not polytheism.

He wanted to prove that essence of Hinduism was the Theism of Vedanta. In the same year he wrote the book "A defense of the monotheistic system of Vedas. Here he laid stress on the Monotheism of Vedanta. Ram Mohan Roy also tried to find out the actual reason behind the genesis and growth of idolatry and absurdities in Hinduism. He wrote in the

introduction of Ishapanishad: "Many learned Brahmins are perfectly aware of the absurdity of idolatry and are well informed of the nature of purer mode of divine worship. But as in the rites, ceremonies and festivals of idolatry they find the source of their comfort and fortune, they not only never fail to protect idol worship from all attacks but even advance and encourage it to the utmost of their power, keeping the knowledge of their scriptures concealed from the rest of the people. "The However it is also a fact that apart from the community of Brahmins, a section of learned saints and scholars also defended image- worship. For example, the great Hindu saint of the 18th century, Shri Ramakrishna once said: "What is wrong in image-worship? The Vedanta preaches that Brahma manifests itself where there is Existence, Light and Love. Therefore nothing exists but Brahman." Ramakrishna had found justification for image-worship right in Vedanta theology. Other profounder of Hinduism also believed that an idol assists new aspirants to contemplate on God and later on this contemplation leads him to the Nirgun Brahman.

Many scholars of Vedanta choose the different way based on the relation between the Supreme Existence and individual soul. They are Dualists and non- dualists. Shankar believes that Existence is one and all the rest is unreal. He finds out the basal of his theory in the Vedanta. Again, those who believe in Dualism, that is, those who believe that the Supreme Being is one and the universe is his creation, also find justification for their belief in Vedanta. The non-dualists does believe that through devotion and meditation, the individual self can achieve the ultimate level of the Supreme self while the Dualists argues that the individual self can obtain salvation through worship(bhakti) and devotion while retaining his existence as a devotee. The third category of Vedantists is those who believe that through the worship of a deity, as a mere symbol of the Supreme Being, they can attain salvation or union with the Supreme Being. This belief is called Qualified Monism. All of them however bring justifications for their beliefs from the Vedanta. Shri Ramakrishna, Ramanuja or Vaishnavites believe in Qualified Monism.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy dismissed these beliefs and said that the Supreme Lord was formless and attributing form to Him was against the spirit of the Vedanta. He believed that the creator, sustainer and supporter of the universe was a wise uncreated Being. He also dismissed the belief of Shankara and the other Advaitavadis that the Universe was unreal. He believed that the universe was not unreal. Here Ram Mohan Roy comes closer to the view of Quran, which promulgates that the universe has a real and solid existence and is not an illusion. Finally, Ram Mohan Roy founded Brahma Samaj, a religious cult in 1828 based on the principles and philosophy of Vedanta and it believes in one God and envisages that salvation is only possible

through love and worship of God. Therefore, Raja Ram Mohan Roy tried to bring religious reform in Hindu Society and spread the central message of the Upanishads among Hindus of his time. If one carefully observes the entire journey of reforms movement then it will be seen that his long march of Hindu reformation have been seriously engaged with Vedas. Actually, in dubbing the classical Vedanta into a new version of Vedanta, he presented the original message of Vedanta to the subservient class of the society. For the reason we can profess that, he was responsible for a Hindu Renaissance in Bengal.

Ram Mohan Roy and Hindu Religion

Ram Mohan's concept of religious reforms does not merely refer to the alteration of the religious faith and religious practices but it has a dynamic approach that introduces the socio-political importance of the society. He professed that every human being can make a distinction between the fundamental principles of a religion and its rituals with the help of their rationale and critical thinking. In addition, he wrote vedantabhasya for freeing the entire body of pretending interpretation of religion from the priesthood. That is why Ram Mohan raised his voice against the contemporary evil practices of Hindu religion. We can make a division of Ram Mohan's writings possessing highly judgmental and critical exploration into three broad categories:

1. In favor of Brahmajnana or against of the formalism (sakarvada).
2. In favor of the Hindu philosophy or it is against of the pastors of Christian congregation.
3. In favor of the removal of sati practice or it is against of the practice of sati.

Writings on the against of formalism

There are some valuable writings of ram Mohan's which was dealt with the contemporary formalism of Hindu religion. These are as follows –

- a) Utsabananda vidyabagisher sahit bichar. (1816)
- b) Sankar shastrir sahit bichar (1817)
- c) Bhattacharyer sahit bichar (1817)
- d) Goswamir sahit bichar (1818)
- e) Kabitakarer sahit bichar (1820)
- f) Subrahmanya shastrir sahit bichar (1820)

Utsabananda vidyabagisher sahit bichar.(1816)was ram Mohan's first writing regarding the critical view of scriptural analysis. The history behind this writing was that in1816 vidyabagish once sent some questions to Atmiyasabha and soon after, in responding those questions the book containing 20-21 pages successfully written in Sanskrit language. Ram Mohun, in this book, through presenting the scriptural evidences depicts that one group of people of society is imposing the Brahmatva on their cherished divinity (istadevata) and by practicing their unjust action on the group of people who were treated as inferior to the

former. The book Shankar shastrir sahit Bichar (1817) was written in English. Shankar shastrir criticized ram Mohun through a writing named Madras currier where he showed that idol worship is quintessential for the upliftment of humankind. In addition, in responding to this the book was appeared. .Bhattacharyya sahit bichar (1817) was the first judgmental book of ram Mohun written in Bengali. Mrityunjay vidyalamkar opposing to ram Mohan's proposal writes a book namely Vedantachandrika for supporting the Pratima-puja.ram Mohun refuted his each argument firmly.³ He wrote against the priesthood and discloses how the priests used to hide the real meaning of the scriptures, and spreads the words in their own deceptive way. The words were as: 'you people make a mindset in such a way that it is me who is the determiner of the scriptures. In addition, just keep your intellect and conscience away and abide me as god. You might bestow a satisfaction then you people will get rid of all miseries and will achieve the heaven'.

Writings on against the Christian pastors

- a) Brahmansebadhi (1821)
- b) An appeal to the Christian public (1820)
- c) Second appeal to the Christian public
- d) final appeal

Ram Mohan's contentious debate was not merely with the conservative Hindus, but it was with the some aggressive Christians missionaries also. The time from 1820 to 1827 was so vibrant and productive. The famous controversy between Roy and Marshman of the srerampore mission over the bible's status and other scriptures were one example among many.roy believed that the bible had no superiority over other scriptures, but Marshman contested Roy's view. The Marshman challenged Roy's selection in 'precept of Jesus' and devised seven positions to prove his point of view. Roy nullified his proves from the text of the Bible. Here one interesting thing is that Ram Mohan published a magazine namely 'Brahmanical magazine, the missionary and the Brahmin 'in responding one of the Christian pastors while he presented satirical view about classical schools of Indian philosophy.

Writings on against the supports of sati (widow burning)

- a) Sahamaran bisoye prabartak o nibortoker sambad (1818)
- b) Sahamaran bisoye prabartak o nibortoker sambad (1819)
- c) Sahamaran bisay (1829)

Perhaps the greatest social reform with which Roy's name will be permanently associated is the

³Mukhopadhyaya, S. Italiya renesanser aloke banglar renesans, first edition, progressive publishers, Calcutta, 2000, p-95.

abolition of the merciless practice of sati. Roy used all the instruments at his disposal to stop this heinous practice, this used to force the helpless widow to burn herself alive on the funeral pyre of her husband. In 1818, Roy had written his first essay on satidh pratha in which he argued that the woman had an independent existence of her husband and hence, she had no reason to end up her life on the demise of her husband. The society had no such a right over her life. There are several rights in the society. Ram Mohan though has not enlisted any right as civil rights but mentioned some rights over the citizen. They are right to life, right to liberty, right to freedom of the press, right to religion etc. Of these Right to life of both men and women was equally important.⁴ The practice of sati passed its centuries that could be no reasonable argument to make it just. All that comes through centuries need not always be right. All customs are to be adjusted to the changing circumstances, if they are to survive in a cohesive manner. According to Roy, Sati was nothing but a sort of murder and was therefore treated as a punishable offence under the law. Roy became a vocal against the ugly practice of sati on three fronts: The first and the most important was that of public opinion. Roy through writings, speeches, agitation and discussions prepared the psyche of the people in favor of the abolishment of sati and exposed how the practice had no support in any of the religious texts and hence governmental action in the matter could not be an intervention in religious affairs. Secondly, he tried to convince the existing rulers that it was their responsibility as civilized rulers to find a solution to stop the inhuman practice of this hitherto existing cruel custom. The third front was engaged to the root cause of this custom. It mainly focuses into inquiry to look for the causes that led a Hindu widow to commit Sati and to arrange such a way that can eliminate those causes. Roy knew that women has been remain ignorant about their legitimate rights, their intervention into literary rate, conventionally non-acceptance of the equal share of property rights to the widow and the consequent helplessness, dependence, misery and humiliation were some of the major causes behind this practice. Roy pleaded strongly for the restoration of property rights of the women as well as for facilities for women's education.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen in the above discussion, the society at once broke down by practicing social evils. In addition, we have seen that in the era of renaissance some leading intellectuals were appeared in the chest of Bengal one of them is Ram Mohan Roy. He accused the inhumane activities like sati or widow burning. Roy had great contribution in removing the wrong practice of rituals of Hindu society. He was never opposed to Hinduism nor of Vedic and upaniishadic teaching. Nevertheless, he was opposed with those rituals that

had been continuously practicing on the people of bottom level of the society. He wanted to show how the Brahmin so called purohiths had misled the real meaning of the Vedas to nurture their lives freely. That is why he translated the core Sanskrit text into Bengali, which was isolated for a long period. To provide a review and a constructive rational form to religion was Roy's primary concern for which he founded the Brahma Samaj in 1828. The Samaj provides a forum for religious and philosophical contemplation and discussion. Roy was a brilliant candidate of several languages, cultures and philosophical systems and these influences shaped his path breaking writing and ideas. He extensively conducted a deep study and analysis of dogmatic culture Hinduism in order to re-interpret the basic tenets of religion. In doing this, he wanted to prove that blind faith and superstitious beliefs and practices had no foundation in the primordial and original Hindu religion.

According to Roy, another factor has been accountable for the deteriorating political and social milieu was the social decadence of the Indian society. He wanted to build a new Indian society where principles of tolerance, sympathy, reason, liberty, equality and fraternity are to be followed. In all this, he believed that the support of the British government was essential. Roy was diametrically opposed to the caste system and the practice of Sati. He was considered as one of the great champions of women's rights. Though he advocated the public rights and liberty of the common people but the legitimate status of the state he wanted to see is political liberalism with restrictions. The image of limited constitution he painted could control the state and safeguard the rights and liberties of the individuals. He was one of the first Indians to advocate and popularize the idea of internationalism. 'A multi-faced personality. Roy carried on a relentless crusade against all kinds of injustices, exploitative practices and superstitions. Eventually it is worth speaking that the entire society and culture are still utilizing the consequences of the deeds of such great personality.

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⁴Adam, 1974, p-4.

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