



Raja Rammohan Roy: A Study of His Religious Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this research paper is to explore the fundamental religious philosophy behind the religious reform movement that Raja Rammohan Roy initiated in the context of the Indian Renaissance in the 19th century. During the British colonial rule when they were trying to create division among Indians by using religion, Rammohan spoke about a monotheistic religious ideology based on the harmony of all religions. Opposing paganism and misinterpretation of scriptures he spoke about the worship of the formless Supreme God and one God. By reading Hindu spiritual scriptures along with Christian, Islamic and Buddhist philosophies he gained such self-reflection that if knowledge is not developed a wrong idea about God arises. Learning different languages and learning about philosophies and doctrines related to religion were the main driving forces of his religious philosophy. He accepted scientific facts as the basis of universal religion along with argument, logic and mental imagination. In this article I have tried to show how Rammohan read various religious scriptures and books on religious philosophy written in different languages, reformed Hinduism based on spiritualism and considered the worship of the formless Brahma to be the best path to God.

In the 19th Century Hindu Society was plagued with many flaws. During this time Indian Renaissance was picking up speed. The person who contributed the maximum to this flow was Raja Rammohan Roy. During the British Colonial period while British Rulers tried to utilise differences between the Indians by the ruling of religion, Raja Rammohan Roy appeared as a new Verdict lighthouse



to the common people with one New Monotheist Religious Consciousness. His main objective was to eliminate religious narrow-mindedness, casteism, superstition, paganism and to develop modern thinking among the people. In this regard he proposed a set of new religious beliefs based on a very deep philosophical foundation. Human and Humanity were the main key to the pursuit of his entire life. Actually he was a religious thinker. He was an ardent nationalist and his life was imbued with the latest ideas of his time. Raja Rammohan Roy had deep faith and conviction in this message of the Upanishads-“Humans are the children of nectar”.ⁱ The main substance of his religious philosophy was man.

He was greatly influenced by western thought. Like the French philosopher Rousseau, he also believed that man is eternally free by nature and instinct. Rammohan Roy’s religious undoubtedly created a good deal of controversy during his life-time and after. His philosophical thoughts and reforms which awakened the existence of human freedom in the field of philosophy of life had a special impact on religion and society. In field of religious pursuits he was above the boundaries of race, caste, tribe, and time. He associated himself with them by uniting the superiority of Hinduism, the sincerity of Islam and the depth of Christ.ⁱⁱ Rammohan Roy came to Calcutta and started living permanently from November 1815. In that year he established the 'Atmiya-Sabha' for discussions related to Brahma. The main purpose of this 'Atmiya-Sabha' was to promote universal monotheism in opposition to paganism among Hindus. By reading various subject and books of different religions he understood that any religion will become a world religion when it becomes a human religion. Reading the Bible gave him the realization that there was something great in the life of Jesus Christ that made him the beloved of the whole world as a companion in human love and suffering. The humanism of Jesus which complements the Brahmanism of Vedanta will be fulfilled in the connection of these two. Just as Rammohan opened the best ideas of Hinduism to the world in his Bengali translation of Vedanta he also showed generosity by collecting the words of Jesus and publishing them in English.ⁱⁱⁱ He was attracted to Christianity and took the help of a disciple named Reverend William Adam to learn more about this religion. As a believer Rammohan would occasionally go to church with friends for religious discussions.

He had respect for the religious scriptures of not only Christianity but also Buddhism, Jainism, Islam etc. To express his perception of the essence of various religious texts, he wrote 'Tuhfat-ul-Muwahiddin' (Gift to the Monotheists)^{iv}. In this book he makes protest against idolatry and superstitions and therefore, perhaps with considerable secular outlook. His linguistic knowledge was endless. He was well-versed in Bengali, Hindi, English, Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Greek, Hebrew etc. He also acquired a lot of knowledge about modern science, philosophy, political science, economics etc. After reading the Quran his belief in the traditional idol worship of Hindus and Buddhists was weakened. After reading the Gita



and the Upanishads he came to know about Brahmailidya. He had close contact with Buddhist scriptures and Buddhist literature. During his student life when he was travelling Tibet and Bhutan he came into contact with Mahayana Buddhism and studied the Tripitaka. In 1827 he translated in Bengali and published an edition of the Vajrasuchi.^v From 1820 to 1823 Rammohan was engaged in a controversy with Christians on the fundamentals of Christianity. He inspired Indians to take good things from western civilization and other religions. Raja Rammohan Roy was not in favor of blindly following any one religion. He was a symbol of equality of all religions.

Rammohan was born in an orthodox Hindu family and received proper education with secular motives. He was a 'Kulin Brahman' who was a progressive and liberal thinker, always studied new subjects and thought deeply about them. As a result the areas in which his thoughts were expressed had a clear imprint of novelty and originality. The social and political upheavals of contemporary India greatly influenced him which made him interested in acquiring knowledge about new subjects. His indomitable mentality and interest in learning are seen in every field. In his book Kishori Chand Mitra writes about the discussion of Rammohan's knowledge of language and religion "The wide field over which his acquirements spread, comprising sciences and Languages which individual knowledge rarely associates together."^{vi} He respected both scripture and reason but he believed that there should be a limit between the two. Many people believe that Rammohan's view of religion was beset with various contradictions. Acharya Brajendranath Shil while explaining Rammohan's religious philosophy, said that he was simultaneously a Hindu, a Muslim and a Christian. He was a Hindu from the time of writing *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahiddin* (Gift to the Monotheists) in 1803 until the dissolution of the Atmaya Sabha in 1820. He further declared that the realization of the existence of one 'Supreme Power' could be attained by individuals without instruction or guidance from any one.^{vii} During this period he only wanted to free Hinduism from paganism and ritualistic practices. In this time he wrote a translation of the Vedanta Darson, *Vedantasara*, Bengali translations of the five major Upanishads and books on monotheism.^{viii} But within a short time under the influence of his friend Adams he founded the Unitarian Sabha in 1821. Rammohan's English biographer Mary Carpenter says that during his last days in England, he became a believer in Unitarian Christianity. Debendranath Tagore mentions in his autobiography that Rammohan was once attracted to Tantra practice. These played a special role in the expression of innovations in the religious field centered around the Brahmo movement.

In the 18th century the Indian society was decadent gradually sinking under the yoke of British rule. In that time a few Indians were aware of modern western education as well as the advanced civilization of the world. Raja Rammohan Roy knew very well that for any movement or revolution the first task is to



prepare the public. He considered the newspaper as the best means to awaken the masses for the social and religious reform movement. He considered the effort as the best means for national renaissance and emphasized on its development.^{ix} When unconnected superstitions and blind religious beliefs were gradually increasing in religion, it was at that time that Rammohan went against the tide and focused on the work of religious harmony. He was the most prominent among the handful who left their mark of scholarship on this subject. When Rammohan was sixteen years old, when the entire country was immersed in the dense darkness of paganism, when not a single ray of light from Western knowledge and civilization had penetrated that darkness, when not a single English educational institution had been established in the entire country, he attacked the paganism of the Hindus and published a small booklet against the conventional religion. It was called, 'The Pagan Religion of the Hindus'.^x Through this booklet he expressed clear and impartial view in terms of religious thought and philosophy which was unimaginable at that time. In fact his aim was to protect the Vedic religion from the clutches of material worship and superstitions born of ignorance. Raja Rammohan Roy was a monotheist but despite this he believed in universal religion. The essence of monotheism is that there is no place for duality except for one. According to this view God is one and unique. He is infinite, eternal, absolute, unchangeable, omnipotent, omnipresent and unbound by anything in the world. If judged impartially monotheism is to be called a satisfactory doctrine. This doctrine is completely consistent with our conventional conception of God.^{xi} He thought that the main goal of all religious scriptures is monotheism. According to this interpretation he talks about the interpretation of the Vedas or Gita for Hindus, the Koran and Hadith for Muslims, the Bible for Christians, the Tripitaka for Buddhists etc. According to him when a universal religion is revealed it takes the form of pure monotheism. He perceived that the universal truth was stressed in different ways and different accents in its different historic utterances. After reading various religious texts he came to realize that the goal of religion is not merely to provide information but to develop and control the feelings, powers of the mind, that is the entire conscience and personality. For this true consciousness education is necessary.

Rammohan had a keen eye on the expansion of education with the aim of removing religious errors in the social sphere and promoting rational worship of God. He thought that the main reason for the political downfall of Hindus is their religious and social downfall. He was of the opinion that without social and religious reforms political reforms have no importance. That's why he gave priority to social and religious reforms before political reforms. We are all aware of his role in the establishment of Hindu College in 1817. He also opposed the establishment of Sanskrit College in 1823 because although there was an opportunity to acquire grammar and spiritual knowledge there was no opportunity to teach



mathematics, philosophy and science. As a result he established Vedanta College in Calcutta in 1826 to free people from superstition and inspire them to think of true God. We cannot deny the active role and inspiration of Rammohan in the reconstruction of the Indian educational structure by Governor General Lord William Banting. In fact while studying history we have learned that education brings consciousness, consciousness brings revolution and revolution brings change. This is probably applicable to Rammohan's religious reforms in all respects. His educational life was spent in such a critical situation when the burning flame of British rule was trying to devour the governance, society, religion, and culture of this country in any way. The main objective behind the keen interest of the British rulers and Christian missionaries in the expansion of education in this country was to propagate and spread the Christian religion. In this situation the non-religious Englishmen were trying to create discord in the name of the religion practiced by the Hindus, focusing on paganism, superstitions etc. In this context his own statement was 'I regret to say that the current religious customs practiced by the Hindus are not conducive to their political interests. Caste differences have created numerous divisions among them have completely deprived them of a sense of patriotism and the meticulous details of religious rituals and the rules of penance have made them incapable of undertaking any difficult venture'.^{xiii} He did not create any new religious sect nor did he ever express a desire to abandon Hinduism. In August 1828 he founded the Brahma Sabha (Sanskrit: 'Brahma Samaj') for the search for religious truth and the worship of the formless Brahma. Later it became best known as the 'Brahma Samaj'. The Brahma Samaj rejected the authority of the Vedas and incarnations, abandoned the ritualistic practices of the Hindus and promoted a progressive religious movement known as the Brahma andolon. Through movement, Rammohan's revolutionary work was able to set an example for India and the world. A review of the background to the founding of the Brahma Samaj and various aspects of Brahmoism reveals that just as Islam had an influence on his life, he was also attracted to the life and teachings of Christ. As an alternative to the 'Dikdarshan' or 'Samachar Darpane' of the Srirampur missionaries, he expressed his own opinion by publishing 'Brahmin Sevadhi'.

Raja Rammohan Roy was of the opinion that the upliftment of Hinduism in the Indian society is possible only when these evil practices are abandoned. After reading the three religious scriptures the Quran, the Vedas and the Bible Rammohan came to the conclusion that all three scriptures contain teachings on the two great truths of the oneness of God and kindness towards humanity. The above three scriptures discuss in detail the issues related to monotheism and altruism. But gradually by distorting the opinions of the followers of the scriptures of the three religions Hinduism, Islam and Christianity and misinterpreting the scriptures several sub-religions emerged. In all these sub-religions by distorting the



original message of the true religion numerous superstitions and blind beliefs were introduced which created religious conflicts and errors in the social field. He believed that the aim of any religion is not merely to provide information or advice but rather to develop and control the feelings, powers of the mind, the entire conscience and personality. Therefore by stopping the practice of all kinds of tantra mantras or supernatural feelings he wanted to inaugurate and develop a rational intellectually based and morally enlightening religion. Many theologians of the time opposed him and were against this argument. Many engaged in debates with him. Their argument was that without knowledge of the Vedas one cannot attain Brahman knowledge. In response to this Rammohan said that the names of many Brahman sages are found in the Vedas who attained Brahman knowledge without studying the Vedas.^{xiii} He further said that the idea that there is only one God at the root of the creation and management of the world is prevalent among many. But this complication is due to the fact that a few religious practitioners taking advantage of people's ignorance and simple faith, add their own fabricated and unreasonable restrictions to religion. If we think deeply about the various aspects of his reform work and religious philosophy it will be seen that Rammohan's rejection of Hindu paganism and opposition to the rituals and practices of traditional Hinduism is not exactly synonymous with accepting Islam or Christianity but it can be called the purification of his religious beliefs. That is the transition from the level of Brahminical Hindu pagan religious beliefs and rituals to the land of pure, simple, rational spiritual and moral religion. Therefore through his reform work he tried to bind the followers of all religions of the world in a bond of unity, harmony, brotherhood and friendship. He was firmly determined to reform Hinduism and worship the monotheistic Brahman by combining modernity, humanity and spiritualism . However while doing this work he did not belittle any religion or attack any religion. Rather he tried to highlight only that which is good, auspicious and beneficial in religion.

The debate over the origin of Rammohan's religious philosophy has not diminished in later times. In addition to his recognition as a religious scholar and a religious and social reformer of this country in the Western intellectual community of that time, he also made an identity as a scholar in oriental studies. In fact his religious philosophy was guided by Western education and Western religious philosophy. As a religious reformer and a proponent of the Brahmo movement, Rammohan's expression of his views on religion can be arranged in several stages:

1. Studying Islamic theology early in life led to a strong belief in monotheism.
2. Under the influence of Islamic and European rationalistic philosophy, monotheism took on a completely rational form(Deism) that was opposed to revelation.



3. Under the influence of Christ's religion of love and contemporary secular Western social thought, humanitarianism and service to humanity were accepted as an integral part of Brahmanism or Brahman worship.
4. Studying various religious scriptures, learning languages, studying Western rationalist philosophy and gaining knowledge about medieval Indian bhakti, tantric, and other worship systems.
5. The practice of Indian spirituality especially Vedanta scriptures, fostered respect for scriptures and recognized the usefulness of scriptures and individuality alongside reason in religious thought.
6. To establish monotheistic Brahmanism and to reform religion and society by opposing the paganism and superstitions of Hinduism on the basis of rationalism.

He realized through the historical perspective of Western thought that religion, society or state are not separate from each other but are very closely linked and that is why religious reform, educational reform and state change are also interconnected; one cannot exist without the other. Since he saw religious reform in this way in the context of a holistic change in his thought religious reform was interconnected with social and indirect state change.

There is huge Place of Jesus Christ and Christianity across Rammohan's religious philosophy. Before explaining the monotheistic philosophy he read the Bible and its companion books in depth and also started interpreting them. Before establishing the Brahma Sabha in 1820 AD he compiled and published the teachings of Jesus Christ from the Bible. Which naming to do it is, "Precepts of Jesus, Guide to Peace and Happiness" i.e. the advice of Christ, the pioneer of the path of happiness and peace. In the introduction to this booklet he writes– "To the Supreme God who has made all life equally subject to change, suffering and death, regardless of race, rank and condition, who has irrespective of race, rank and condition, , sorrow and death, who has showered countless mercies on nature and made everyone share in them, I hope to achieve the best result by preaching this in its present form to the public."^{xiv} Several editions of these Bible-related books of Rammohan were published in Europe and America. From this we understand that his writings and style of thinking were especially accepted by the Western intellectuals. The Christian missionary Reverend Duff came to Calcutta in 1830 and met Rammohan and proposed to establish a school for English education. He accepted this proposal warmly and left a house of the Brahma Samaj for the school. In fact the rational and progressive Rammohan wanted to see religion and society in the light of reality. Therefore, he probably accepted the progressive aspects of Christianity without hesitation. He believed that it was necessary to investigate the truth about religion



and clarify what was natural, what was abnormal, what was sincere, what was external and accidental. In his thinking it was revealed that society and social order were one of the foundations of religion. Therefore although the missionaries' explanations of religion often failed to satisfy Rammohan, their ideas regarding social progress and the spread of education influenced him a lot. He searched for reason with an inquiring eye within all religions but he stayed away from all religions that were formal and irrational. He broke the traditional and orthodox Hindu ideas and took the help of laws for this.

When discussing the philosophical aspects of Rammohan's religious thought, it is understood that he like his successor Ramakrishna understood the fundamental unity of all religions. He believed that only by abandoning various symbols and complex rituals can people of different religions unite and worship one God. The issue of religion was very important in his thought and consciousness. In this context an observation by Salauddin Ahmed is very important. He has shown that while opposing the practice of sati, Rammohan did not appeal to the logic and conscience of people but took refuge in the ancient scriptures. He understood that the realization of Brahman which is based on Vedanta theory is the basic message, principle or teaching of Brahmanism and that is why he devoted himself to the practice of Vedanta. His religious consciousness was based on keen rationalism and unconformist mentality. Kishori Chand Mitra called Rammohan is a 'Religious Benthamite'. That is because he gave more importance to the usefulness of a religion than to its truth or falsehood. In fact, he considered the worship of one God and the welfare of living beings to be the true religion. The main objective of Rammohan's religious philosophy was to form a non-sectarian, purified universal human religion.

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