

RAJA RAM MOHAN ROY AND THE ABOLITION OF SATI SYSTEM IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was hailed as the father of Indian Renaissance. Nineteenth Century India witnessed a remarkable transformation in the Social ideas in the History of India. Age old 'Sati system', ie, burning of Widow in her dead husband's funeral pyre which existed in India was abolished due to the effort of Raja Ram Mohan Roy He was the founder of Brahma samaj and he also played a vital role in the abolition of Polygamy and Child marriage in India.

KEYWORDS

Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Sati System, Brahma Samaj, Lord William Bentick, Samavadkaumud.

1. INTRODUCTION

India made tremendous progress both religious and social field in the 19th century. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was hailed as the father of Indian renaissance. Raja Ram Mohan Roy decided to reform Hindu society from its all irrational observance and evil customs. He opposed all discrimination and evil practice against women. He was the founder of Brahma Samaj. The Brahma Samaj teaches about monotheism. Raja Ram Mohan Roy welcomed western education. Raja Ram Mohan Roy gain more popularity through his activities for the abolition of Sati. The relevance of present study is that access the awareness of people regarding Raja Ram Mohan Roy. It is also useful to have clear evidence about the influence of Raja Ram Mohan Roy in the Indian social scenario. These movements played an important role in creating culture consciousness and confidence among the people. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the great personality of modern India. The abolition of Sati is one of the most significant turning point is the social history of modern India. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's contribution to modern India also needs special reference. They abolish child marriage and polygamy.

He started a campaign for the abolition of 'Sati System' in which wife of the dead burned herself in the funeral pyre of her husband. He also condemned polygamy, denounced casteism, advocated the right of Hindu widows to remarry etc. With his active persuasion Lord William Bentick, the then Governor General of British India passed the famous Regulation XVII in 1829 that situated Sati as illegal and punishable by courts. Raja Ram Mohan Roy warmly advocated the introduction of western education in India. And thus he become a pioneer of English Education in India and of Enlightened journalism in his country. He himself founded and edited a Bengali journal called the "Samvad Kaumudi". For the spread of his ideologies he Started Brahma Samaj

in 1828 A.D. Raja Rammohan Roy did not want the Indians to imitate the West. He based his teachings on the philosophy of the Vedas and Upanishads and tried to bring about a synthesis of the Vedic religion and the Christian humanism. This very synthesis formed the basis of the Ramakrishna Math which was later formed by Swami Vivekananda. Raja Rammohan Roy focused the attention of the British Government to such demands as appointing Indians to higher posts. He protested against restrictions on the freedom of the press. His social reforms made him the "first modern man" in India.

Objective of study is to know more about Raja Ram Mohan Roy's personality, then to know about sati system and its abolition. And to study how Raja Ram Mohan Roy attack polygamy and child marriage, and finally to study about the Brahma Samaj and its activities and feature.

2. RAJA RAM MOHAN ROY AND ABOLITION OF SATI SYSTEM IN INDIA

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was born in to a Bengali Brahmin family in year 1772. His family background displayed religious diversity – his father Ramkanta was a vaishnavite. His mother Tarinidevi was from a shivaite family. This was unusual vaishnavite did not commonly marry shivaite at that time.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy started his formal education in the village Pathshala, where he learned Bengali and some Sanskrit and Persian. Later he said to have studied Persian and Arabic from a madrasah in Patna. When he was hardly 15, he wrote a pamphlet in Bengali in which he denounced idol-worship which he asserted was not recognized in the Vedas. He travelled far and wide and thus able to gather a lot of experience and learning. The Raja fought for the freedom of the press. He himself founded and edited a Bengali journal called the Samvad kaumudi which was one among the earliest Indian newspaper.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy made his contribution to literature also. He was a prolific writer in many language. He was a great linguist and master of style. He is known as one of the creator of modern Bengali prose¹ (Mahajan, 1987). Raja Rammohan Roy supported Western education, including learning of English and the knowledge of science and philosophy. He, along with David Hare, a missionary, founded schools to impart English education to Indian children. He developed the Hindu College which finally developed into the Presidency College in Calcutta.

The central figure in this social awakening was Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who is rightly regarded as the first leader of Modern India² (Chandra, 2009). Raja Ram Mohan Roy was moved by deep love for his life for their social, religious, intellectual and political regeneration. The upper classes were selfish and often sacrificed social interest to their own narrow interest. He was a great personality in the modern India. Raja Ram Mohan Roy had love and respect for all kind of traditional philosophical system. He was basically a profane philosopher. In particular he wanted his countrymen to accept the rational and scientific approach all the principles of human dignity and social equity of all men and women. He also wanted the introduction of modern capitalism and industry in the country. He was also well-acquainted with Jainism and other religious movement and sects of India. In 1809 he wrote in Persian his famous work "Gift of monotheism"³ (Chandra, 2009); in which he put forward weighty argument against belief in many God and for the worship of single God

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was essentially a democrat and a humanist. He was a very well-read man. He studied oriental languages like Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit and attained proficiency in European languages like English, French, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. In his religio-philosophical social outlook, he was deeply influenced by the monotheism and anti-idolatry of Islam, deism of Sufism, the ethical teaching of Christianity, liberal and rationalist doctrines of the West. In 1803, he published a Persian treatise called *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahidin* or 'A Gift to Monotheists' wherein he explains his concept of monotheism. He was deeply concerned with the eradication of social evils like sati, child marriage, polygamy etc. He wholeheartedly supported the Governor-General Lord William Bentick when the latter enacted legislation abolishing sati in 1829.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy established the *Atmiya sabha* in 1814 in order to propagate monotheism and to fight against the evil customs and practices in Hinduism. At a time when the Bengali youth under the influence of western learning was drifting towards Christianity, 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. He warmly advocated the introduction of western science and technology into the educational curriculum of India and became a pioneer of English education and enlightened journalism in this country. He himself founded and edited a Bengali journal called the *samvad Kaumudi*, which was among the earliest Indian edited newspaper. He passed away at Bristol in England in 1833.

He settled in Calcutta in 1814 and soon attracted a band of young men with whose co-operation he started Atmiya sabha. Then he struggled against the religious and social evils which were widely prevalent among the Hindus in Bengal. In particular he spread their worship of idols, the rigidity of caste, and the prevalence of meaningless religious rituals. He held that all the principles in the ancient texts of the Hindus preached monotheism or worship of one god. He believed that the philosophy of Vedanta was based on this principle of reason. Ram Mohan Roy initiated the application of rationalism to Christianity too particularly to the element of blind faith.

In 1820 he published his "*Precept of Jesus*" in which he tried to separate the moral and philosophic message of the New Testament which he praised from its miracle stories. He wanted the high moral message of Christ to be incorporated in Hinduism. He vigorously defended Hindu religion and philosophy from the ignorant attack of the missionaries. At the same time he had a friendly attitude towards other religions. In 1828 he founded a new religious society, the Brahma Sabha, later known as the Brahma Samaj whose purpose was to purify Hinduism and to preach monotheism or belief in one God⁴. The new society was to be based on two pillars or reasons, and the Vedas and Upanishads. It was also to cooperate with the teaching of other religions. The Brahma Samaj laid emphasis on human dignity, opposed idolatry, and criticized such social evils as the practice of Sati. Ram Mohan Roy was a great thinker. He was also a man of action. He then laid the foundation for the reform of Indian society. The best example of his life-long crusade against social evil was the historic agitation he organized against the human custom of women becoming Sati. Beginning in 1818 he set out to rouse public opinion on the question. When the Orthodox Hindus petitioned parliament to withhold its approval of Bentinck's action barring the rite of Sati.

He was a stout champion of women's rights. He condemned the subjugation of women and opposed the prevailing idea that women were inferior to men in intellect or in a moral sense. He attacked polygamy, caste rigidity, and child marriage. To raise the status of women he demanded that they may be given the right of inheritance and property.

Ram Mohan Roy was one of the earliest propagators of modern education which he looked upon major instrument to spread modern idea in the country. In 1817 David Hare, who had come out to India in 1800 a watch maker but who spent his entire life in promotion of modern education in the country, founded the famous Hindu college. In 1825 established a Vedanta College in which course both in India learning and in western social and physical science were offered. Ram Mohan Roy was equally making Bengali grammar, he Translation, Pamphlets and journals he helped evolve modern and elegant prose style for that language. He believed that by trying to weed out corrupt element from India religion and society and by preaching the vedantic message of worship of one God he divided into divergent group.

Ram Mohan Roy's demand that the abolition to company's trading right and removals of heavy export duties on Indian goods. He was the great personality in the world. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was in the nature of the prepared of this country for political advancement in the future. By removing the social and religious evil he prepared the India for political consciousness. He was undoubtedly the pioneer in this field and no wonder has been rightly called the father of Indian nationalism.

As an Educationist Raja Ram Mohan Roy had his own way of action and ideas. The main contribution and performance of Raja Ram Mohan Roy can be listed below:-

- Raja Ram Mohan Roy believed education to be an implement for social reform.
- In 1817, in collaboration with David Hare, he set up the Hindu College at Calcutta.
- In 1822, Raja Ram Mohan Roy founded the *Anglo-Hindu school*, followed four years later in 1826 by the *Vedanta College*; where he insisted that his teachings of monotheistic doctrines be incorporated with "modern, western curriculum."^[24]
- In 1830, he helped Rev. Alexander Duff in establishing the General Assembly's Institution (now known as *Scottish Church College*), by providing him the venue vacated by *Brahma Sabha* and getting the first batch of students.
- He supported induction of western learning into Indian education.
- He also set up the *Vedanta College*, offering courses as a synthesis of Western and Indian learning.

The Brahma Samaj

The Brahma Samaj played a notable role in the Indian renaissance. The Trust deed executed in 1830 explained the object of the Brahma Samaj as "The worship and adoration of the Eternal, unsearchable Immutable being who is author and preserver of the Universe". The Samaj declared its opposition to idol worship, Priest hood and Sacrifices of any kind. The worship was performed through prayers and meditation and readings from the Vedas and the Upanishads.

The Brahma Samaj was the earliest movement of the modern type in India which was greatly influenced by modern western ideas. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the founder of Brahma Samaj at Calcutta in the year 1828. It was one of the most influential religious movements⁴ (Farquar, 1915) which is responsible for the making of modern India and it was started at Calcutta. On 20 August 1828 by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Debendranath Tagore as reformation of the prevailing Brahmonism of the time and began the Bengal Renaissance of the 19th Century pioneering all religious, social and educational advance of the Hindu Community in the 19th Century. Its Trust

Deed was made in 1830 Formalizing its inception and it was duly and publicly inaugurated in January 1830 by the consecration of the First house of prayer now known as the Adi Brahma Samaj from the Brahma Samaj springs Brahmoism the most recent of legally recognized religions in India and Bangladesh reflecting its foundation on reformed spiritual Hinduism with vital elements of Judeo Islamic faith and practice

Meaning of name the Brahma Samaj literally denotes community of men who worship Brahman the highest reality⁵ (Sastri, 1911). In reality Brahma Samaj does not discriminate between caste, creed or religion and is an assembly of all sorts and description of people without distinction, meeting publicly for the sober, orderly, religious and devout adoration of “the unsearchable Eternal, Immutable Being who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe.”

The ideals of Brahma Samaj Can be discussed below:-

- The ideals of Brahma Samaj have their origin in the synthesis of the Vedic religion and the Christian humanism.
- It advocated that there is one God, who is present everywhere, and is without shape and form. His worship lies in intense devotion.
- It believed in the brotherhood of man and treated all men as equal. It started a magazine entitled Samvad Kaumudi, to teach people love of mankind.
- It supported the introduction of English in schools with the belief that the study of English would open the door to modern sciences.
- It condemned social evils such as casteism, untouchability, child marriage and the Sati system. It was due to the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy that Lord William Bentinck abolished Sati system in 1829 by declaring it an offence.
- It advocated freedom of the press and condemned any restriction imposed on it by the Government.
- It supported widow-remarriage and the education of girls. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the first to agitate for getting women their rightful place.

Brahma Sabha

On 20 August 1828 the first assembly of the Brahma Sabha was held at the North Calcutta house of Feringhee Kamal Bose. This day was celebrated by Brahmans as Brahmotsab. These meetings were open to all Brahmans and there was no formal organization or theology as such. On 8 January 1830 influential progressive members of the closely related Kulin Brahmin clan of Tagore and Roy Zamindar family mutually executed the Trust Deed of Brahma Sabha for the first Adi Brahma Samaj on Chitpore Road, Kolkata, India with Ram Chandra Vidyabagish as first resident superintendent. On 23 January 1830 or 11th Magh, the Adi Brahma premises were publicly inaugurated. This day is celebrated by Brahmans as Maghotsab. In November 1830 Ram Mohan Roy left for England⁶ (W. Jones, 2003). With Rammohan's departure for England in 1830, the affairs of Brahma Sabha were effectively managed by Dwarkanath Tagore and Pandit Ram Chandra Vidyabagish, with Dwarkanath instructing his divan to manage affairs. Weekly services were held consonant with the Trust directive, consisting of three successive parts: recitation of the Vedas by Telugu Brahmans in the closed apartment exclusively before the Brahmin members of the congregation, reading and exposition of the Upanishad for the general audience, and singing of hymns. The reading of the Vedas was done exclusively before the Brahmin participants as the

orthodox Telugu Brahmin community and its members could not be persuaded to recite the Vedas before Brahmins and non-Brahmins alike.

By the time of Rammohan's death in 1833 near Bristol, attendance at the sabha dwindled and the Telugu Brahmins revived idolatry. The zamindars, being preoccupied in business, had little time for affairs of sabha, and flame of sabha was almost extinguished⁷ (Sarkar, 1906)

Abolition of sati system.

The highest ideals for a woman within the Indian culture are virtue, purity and allegiance to her husband. From this tradition stems the custom in which a wife immolates herself on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband as proof of her loyalty. This custom in which a woman burns herself either on the funeral pyre or her deceased husband or by herself after his death is now referred to as sati .

In the original meaning "Sati" was defined as a woman who was "true to her ideals". A pious and virtuous woman would receive the title of "Sati". Sati was derived from the ancient Indian language term Sat, which means truth. Sati has come to signify both the act of immolation of widow and the victim, rather than its original meaning of "virtuous woman". The term "sati" is always associated with the Hindu goddess sati. In the Hindu mythology, Sati was the wife of Lord Shiva. She consumed herself in the holy pyre. She did this in response to her father's refusal to invite Shiva to the assembly of the Gods. She was so mortified that she invoked a yogic fire and was reduced to ashes. Self-sacrifice like that of the original sati, became a "Divine example of wifely devotion". The act of sati probated the belief that if a widow gives up her life for her husband, she will be honored. Socially the act of Sati played a major role in determining the true nature of a woman.

Self-sacrifice is considered the best measure of judging the woman's virtue as well as her loyalty to her husband. The following applies to the ideal wife. If her husband is happy she should be happy; if he is sad, she should be sad, and if he is dead, she should also die. Such a wife is called a pativrata.

Sati was an ancient Hindu custom, according to which a wife immolates herself at the funeral pyre of her husband. In 1811 Roy witnessed his brother's widow being burned alive on her husband's funeral pyre. Three years later he retired and concentrated on complaining against the practice of woman dying as Sati. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the first Indian to protest against this custom. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was strictly opposed to this system of Sati. He advocated that this was completely against the woman's right to live in the society as a human being⁸ (Basham, 1975). Thus he challenged the age-old evil practice of Sati. It is said that once Raja Ram Mohan Roy had to witness his beloved sister-in-law's death on the funeral pyre of his brother. This incident crushed his mind. This personal experience thus served as a fuel for his activities against the evil social custom of sati. During those days Raja Ram Mohan Roy tried his level best to stop and ban this custom of sati. He tried a lot to make people enlightened against the Sati system. Thus at last in the year 1829 Lord William Bentinck banned Sati by law. Thus Raja Ram Mohan Roy's effort was fulfilled. Tremendous changes took place in the Indian society and Hindu religion is being considered. It can be considered as a turning point in the social history of India. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's effort behind this rightly made him able to assume the title as the father of Indian Renaissance.

In spite to protest from orthodox Hindu, he carried on his propaganda against the custom. Finally he won the cause when Lord William Bentick, the governor general of India passed a law in 1829 abolishing the custom of Sati. According to this law the custom of Sati become illegal and punishable as culpable homicide⁹ (Majumdar, 1984). Raja Ram Mohan Roy also opposed child marriage and supported widow remarriage. The abolition of Sati is one of the most significant turning point in the social History of modern India.

The upbringing of many Indian girls emphasized the concept of pativrata (woman with chastity) as the only way for a woman to merit heaven. This concept of meriting heaven through self-sacrifice became embedded within the mind of many as the only assurance for female to gain salvation. A female's life must be lived in full devotion to her husband; otherwise she will be doomed for eternity and will live a cruel experience as widow. This period women had to lead a very dangerous life. They sacrifice their life. According to Ananda coomaraswamy: "Women were socially dead after the death of their husbands and were thought to be polluting" only a woman who is sexually and legally possessed by a husband is respected within Indian society.

By sacrificing herself a widow saves herself from the cruel existence of widowhood and ends the threat she posed for society. She is considered a member of society who has unrestrained sexual vigor and thus may harm society with immoral acts. A widow was seen as having irrepressible sexual power and could be a danger to her society. Widow Remarriage was not allowed in India during that period.

A widow was not allowed to remarry, nor was she able to turn to religious learning and hence lived a black and barren life. The pain that Sati endures on the pyre was less painful of an experience than the torture she must endure physically and emotionally as a widow. She was separated from social world of the living and considered to be "cold sati". She was only allowed to wear rags and was treated by her family and member of society as an impure, polluted being. The prohibition in which she is unable to adorn herself was considered justifiable done for the widow's "own interest". The efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy finally became a blessing to Indian Women who can live for their own child after the death of their husband.

3. CONCLUSION

Raja Ram Mohan Roy is a great historical figure who put laudable effort to transform India and decreed to defy the age old Hindu tradition. The central figure in this awakening was Raja Ram Mohan Roy who is rightly regarded as the first great leader of modern India. He undertook a lot of social reform to change the society and worked to uplift the status of women in India. Raja Ram Mohan Roy tried to spread the message of Monotheism in Religion. He was also a great scholar who translated many books, religious and philosophical works and scriptures into Bengali and also translated Vedic scripture into English. Raja Ram Mohan Roy is hailed as the 'father of Indian Renaissance'. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was strictly against the social evils like Sati, child marriage, caste rigidity etc. Ram Mohan Roy's impact on modern Indian history was a revival of the pure and ethical principles of the Vedanta school of philosophy as found in the Upanishads. He preached the unity of God, made early translations of Vedic scriptures into English, co-founded the Calcutta Unitarian Society and founded the Brahma Samaj. The Brahma Samaj played a major role in reforming and modernising the Indian society. He successfully campaigned against sati, the practice of burning widows. He sought to integrate Western culture with the best features of his own country's traditions. He established a number of schools to popularize a

modern system (effectively replacing Sanskrit based education with Englishbased education) of education in India. He promoted a rational, ethical, non-authoritarian, this-worldly, and social-reform Hinduism. His writings also sparked interest among British and American Unitarians

Raja Ram Mohan Roy's contributions to modern India also need special reference. He was the pioneer who tried to made tremendous progress in the socio- religious field of 19 th century. The abolition of Sati is one most significant turning point in the social History of modern India.His area of influence was very wide suchn as socio-political and religious arena, In generally we can concluded that Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a great men of Indian History and he is the torch bearer of Indian Renaissance. Rabindranath Tagore said, "*Raja Rammohan Roy inaugurated the modern age in India. He was the father of Indian Renaissance and the prophet of Indian nationalism.*" One of his greatest achievements is the uplift of the position of women in India. First of all, he tried to give women proper education in order to give them better social status in society. His effort in the abolition of Sati made him immortal as a social reformer.

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