

Rammohun Roy: His Contribution to the Making of India

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Rammohun Roy was the first Indian to use the English language to communicate his views on religious, social, and political issues. He also was possibly the first to make Bengali prose his vehicle to communicate his message. The essential message he wished to convey was that of rationalism and of an anxiety to convey Western advances in knowledge, especially science, to his fellow countrymen. He thus preferred English to Sanskrit education. His fight against sati was based not only on a call for humanity but also on a reform of traditional Hinduism and improvement of the position of women. His knowledge of Arabic and Persian made him appreciate the monotheistic message of Islam, which he also saw in ancient Hinduism, notably the Upanishads. Despite his own position as a large landholder, he wished to protect peasants from oppression and argued that rents payable by peasants should also be fixed at a low figure, just as the tax imposed on the landlord had been fixed under the Permanent Settlement.

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The First Modern Indian

Rammohun Roy was the first Indian to make the best use of whatever Western education, philosophy and scholasticism was available to Indians in the opening decades of the nineteenth century with the purpose of applying these imbibed skills and knowledge to articulate the concerns of Indians before the dominant colonial power. A handful of enterprising Indians had, indeed, learnt to gain from European knowledge systems that were made available by missionaries and educators, but they did not demonstrate either the skills or the courage required to articulate and agitate over the issues concerning Indian society so effectively before the British establishment. Roy was the first Indian 'public intellectual' who not only excelled in placing critical issues before the English authorities in their own language, with conviction and confidence, but also sought to arouse the concern of his fellow Indians, which sometimes put him at much risk. As we shall see, he held his readers' attention because he presented well-researched content on several issues with his proven command over the English language. Equally striking was the fact that the English took cognisance of him—even when they disagreed—which implicitly conferred on him a certain degree of 'relative equality' of status that colonialists were usually loath to accord to their darker subjects.

To understand the regard with which he was viewed by the British even in London, quite early in his life, let us turn to a notice in the *Missionary Register* (London) that appeared as early as 1816, when Rammohun had just about begun

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his lifelong mission to reform the Hindu religion and to secure an honourable place for Indians in the colonial scheme of things. It describes him to a poorly informed British public as ‘a Brahmin...of great consideration and influence, shrewd, vigilant, active, ambitious, pre-possessing in his manners, versed in various languages’. It then goes on to relish his battles against ‘Hindu Idolatry and Superstition...the folly of the vulgar belief of his country, and a subtle but unsuccessful attempt to put a good meaning on the absurd statements of its more ancient and refined creed’.¹ We are yet to come across any record of an Indian thinker and public activist who received such high regard in Britain, so soon after the British had secured their paramount position in India.

This is among his several firsts, for we come across many other mentions in the international press and journals of this extraordinary social reformer of India. For example, in the summer of 1818, the *American Review* speaks of ‘the learned and philosophic Rammohun Roy’ of distant Kolkata, whose mission against idolatry had earned him great respect. He is described as ‘a virtuous and unsophisticated individual who had advocated the cause of truth, amidst obstacles from which any ordinary mind would have shrunk’ (*Calcutta Journal*, October 1818). He was certainly the first modern social reformer to be awarded such esteem in the West—that habitually looked down upon India and Indians. The next such Indian to earn such handsome praise came full 75 years later—we refer to Swami Vivekananda and his iconic *Chicago Address* of 1893.

A Rationalist Fights Obscurantism

But it is not just for this extraordinary gift of communication that we remember Roy—we are indebted to him for his unwavering faith in rationalism that he expressed through his writings and campaigns. Rammohun had complete mastery over Sanskrit and Bengali and had skill enough to converse and write well in Persian, Arabic, and English. More important for us is the fact that his dexterity as a polyglot and as a polymath conferred on him a rare adroitness to navigate between different cultures and ideas. He is, indeed, a true maker of a composite India for he drew the finest from each of the civilisations that these languages represented. India benefitted immensely from the masterly cross-cultural exchanges that Rammohun engaged in. As a rationalist, he was uncompromising in his war against superstition. Roy was deeply secular and he constantly reinforced India’s age-old tradition of plurality. He spoke out against idolatry and superstition that had gripped Hinduism and he lashed out against the subjugation of women. As we shall see later, Rammohun was, in fact, the first Indian in modern India to make such a passionate plea for women’s education and rights. He is surely the father figure of the Indian Renaissance. He suffered for his beliefs, not only at the hands of his Hindu brethren but also from his best friends and one-time supporters among

¹ Quoted in J.K. Majumdar, *Raja Rammohun Roy and the Progressive Movements in India*, Calcutta, 1941/1983, p. 4.

the Christian missionaries. Both these groups castigated him publicly. Even as they contested his interpretation of their own texts and arguments, they could hardly ever deny his grasp over both the essential texts and the scriptures of the religions involved in the debate.

And this is a lesson that we tend to ignore in today's India where the dangers posed by religious obscurantism are as great as they were 200 years ago—in terms of the viciousness of attacks and the trail of death and destruction that follows. We will lose ground to communalism if we fail to grasp either the essentials of religion or the unshakeable hold that it has on our people. It is time to take inspiration from India's greatest crusader against the perversion of religion and to contest what is done in the name of religion, with facts gleaned from the same religions. The major difference that marks the early decades of this century from those of the nineteenth is that present-day fundamentalism is built more on stoked passions than on scriptures. Two centuries ago, the orthodox lobby was led by scholars and not by the unlettered, as, so unfortunately, is the case at present.

Campaign for Modern Education

What marks out Rammohun Roy as *the* pioneering leader of modern India is his historic success in getting the inhuman practice of *sati* or burning widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands banned, and that too quite effectively. But equally important were his other missions on which we will focus in this article—which strives to highlight the very impressive range of socially relevant subjects that he campaigned for. To begin with, he was among the earliest intellectuals to campaign ceaselessly for conveying advances in Western knowledge to Indian students. In this task, he contested most severely the East India Company's policy of cultivating and strengthening outdated knowledge systems contained in the classical languages of India. Rammohun wanted to bring in 'light' through education in the English language, for the sake of its brilliance—not like Macaulay, who wanted it for the mass production of clerks and loyalists for the colonial-imperial machinery.

When influential Indians, primarily from the rich upper castes of Bengali society, got together with David Hare to set up the Hindoo College (later renamed as Presidency College) to impart English education to Indian students, Rammohun was naturally a part of this initiative. But by then, his unwavering rationalism had antagonised the class of rich orthodox Hindus so much that they had open misgivings about him joining the effort. He had, therefore, no option but to quit this first major enterprise to introduce English education. This episode is reported in detail by Hyde East, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. East presided over the meeting on 4th May 1816 when the proposal to set up the College was finalised with more than fifty Hindu gentlemen of substance, confirming this decision by their donations.² Rammohun continued, however, to be on the sidelines of this initiative, though

² Saumayendranath Tagore, *Raja Rammohun Roy*, New Delhi, 1966, p. 29.

he is often mentioned in connection with this College. In fact, within a few years, we come across an ironic situation when the most radical group of Hindu students of this College, who were inspired by a maverick teacher, Henry Vivian Derozio, accused Rammohun of not being radical enough to purge their ancient religion of its undesirable elements.

Rammohun continued in his mission to spread Western education, and in 1822, he gave a big grant to start an English high school of the Unitarian Association, that was led by the noted educationist David Hare and Reverend Adam. To prove that he was not intrinsically against traditional education, he also set up a Vedanta College in 1826. In 1830, he encouraged Reverend Alexander Duff to set up his General Assembly institution that was later to metamorphose into the Scottish Church College of Kolkata. Roy utilised his weekly newspaper, *Sambad Kaumudi*, to air his views on education, and he made repeated pleas to the government to expand English education, free of cost. It is interesting to note that he began a series of articles on popular science in this paper that covered topics like the echo, magnets and their properties, balloons, and the behaviour of fishes. We see yet another ‘first’ from Rammohun, because he was definitely the first Indian to popularise science education in India.

Though he was a Sanskrit scholar of repute, he was genuinely alarmed and he protested most stridently when the government allocated precious funds for setting up the Sanskrit College of Kolkata. He was convinced that it was a retrograde step and, on 11 December 1823, he addressed a letter to Governor General Amherst in which he stated, in unambiguous terms, his deep disappointment that the colonial government had decided to give priority to Sanskrit over English. He was clear that any further extension of education in Sanskrit could only be expected to load the minds of the youth with grammatical niceties and metaphysical distinctions of little or no practical use to society and that Sanskrit education would be best calculated to keep this country in darkness. But as the improvement of the native population was avowedly the object of the government, it should promote a more liberal and enlightened system of instruction, embracing mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry and anatomy with other useful sciences.³ This letter was ignored by Amherst and the Committee on Public Education, but it remains an excellent document on the then state of education and the requirements of that age.

Indian Writing in English

Rammohun is noted for being the first Indian to write directly in English to the Governor General of India, Lord Minto, in 1809, and in doing so, he also introduced a new literary genre—‘Indian Writing in English’. For our record, however, we must note that he was not the first Indian writer in the English language, as one

³ Ibid., p. 27.

Sake (Shaikh) Dean Mohamed had published his travel accounts in 1793, making him the first Indian to publish an English book. But Rammohun's writing in the English language was much more serious in content than Dean Mohammad's, and he continued to write several tracts and treatises till his death, a quarter of a century later. Roy's letter of 1809 was a rather bold complaint against an English official, and he wanted Minto to uphold British justice and the rule of law. As B.S. Cohn has interpreted it, 'in writing to the Governor General in the language, style, and manner he did, Rammohun was announcing to the British ruling class in India that he possessed command of the very language that was *their* language of command'.⁴ This 'native' had not set foot on English soil till then—yet he had mastered the language of command and now had the key to the treasure of knowledge acquired by the West, in both humanities and sciences.

Rammohun wrote more significant pieces in English from 1816, when he published a short translation of the Hindu sacred text, the *Vedanta*, and followed it up with two Sanskrit Upanishads in English. He kept writing in English quite regularly, producing two to three tracts every year, and continued to translate his Bengali pieces into English on many occasions. The year 1823 was a particularly busy one for him as it saw as many as nine English works from his pen. His writings in English cover several critical issues, from the spread of English education and its dire necessity to the rights of women under Hindu law. He published his scathing criticism of the practice of *sati* in English as well; and he protested most strongly against the Press Regulations. His English shuttled between the logical and the ornate and complex—as was common during the Enlightenment and for decades thereafter. It is strange that Indian writing in the English language became synonymous with fiction literature, which may be a reason that we often fail to include Rammohun among the great Indian writers. He is more remarkable, nevertheless, for his passionate espousal of progressive causes written in eminently readable English and for his clear articulation of his arguments. That is exactly what he needed as a social reformer and that is what made rulers in India and in England take note of what he said.

After all, he was the first Indian who was able to communicate with such supreme confidence and, what is less noted is that he did so from an assumed and uncontested level of equality. Rammohun had to take considerable pains to reach this level and not only learn the English language and customs but also be adept in the use of phrases and idioms. He took to learning English seriously rather late, but once he was determined, he became quite proficient in the language. His usually reliable biographer, Sophia Dobson Collet, believes that he started learning it in 1795, when he was just twenty-one years old, but his employer in the East India Company, John Digby, felt that was not good enough. Digby says that when he 'became acquainted with him (in 1801), he could speak it well enough to be understood upon most

⁴ Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and the Forms of Knowledge*, Princeton, NJ, 1996, pp. 16–56.

topics, but could not write it with any degree of correctness'.⁵ According to him, it was only when Roy entered his employment (1805) and started taking charge of his official correspondence and conversing regularly with European men that he began to master the language. His classic letter of complaint to Governor General Minto in 1809 is a landmark, as this is the first proper non-commercial correspondence that we come across in the English language from an Indian's pen in India—that was perfect in syntax, grammar, logic and style.

Popularising Bengali Prose

Rammohun Roy's preference for English often overshadows another aspect, namely, his contribution to the development of the vernacular in modern India. He is among the earliest pioneers of Bengali prose and he chose this new style over verse that had a tradition of several centuries behind it. Rammohun used Bengali as an effective instrument to seek popular support for the socio-religious reforms that he had embarked upon. He had settled in Kolkata in 1814 and had made it his base, as he needed to be at that administrative and social centre to be able to canvass the colonial rulers and, simultaneously, to reach out to his countrymen. This is when Roy began utilising the Bengali language in its prose form, very adroitly. His command over English, Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic had already been established—but he especially needed the use of the language of his own people to get them on his side. The vicious campaign that had been launched against his progressive ideas was primarily in Bengali, and he needed to counter it in that language.

He was positively the first Bengali in modern India to democratise knowledge through the vernacular language. The esoteric Hindu scriptures were beyond the grasp of most of his countrymen in Bengal, as all of them were written in Sanskrit. Besides, they were the exclusive property of a very narrow class of Brahmanical scholars. His transliteration of the *Vedanta* texts in 1815 served the twin purposes of conveying these teachings and their purport to the common Bengalis. Their support was, it is reiterated, absolutely essential to his cause, and he interpreted the *Veda* and *Vedanta* to suit his mission. As Ashis Nandy has observed, he utilised the internal inconsistencies that lay within the texts to his full advantage. It was also a fact that the *Rig Veda* or the *Vedanta* were hardly well known to the common people who were more familiar with Vaishnava and Tantrik texts. Rammohun invoked the authority of *Veda-Vedanta* as none had done before him—primarily to convince people that *sati* and infanticide had no legitimate basis in ancient Hinduism.

To give an idea of how popular Bengali publishing was in the early decades we need to look at figures. Between 1810 and 1820 alone, some 15,000 volumes were printed in Bengali,⁶ which shows the growing appetite of the audience for

⁵ Digby's Preface to *Ram Mohun's English Works*, quoted in D.K. Biswas, ed., *The Correspondence of Raj Rammohun Roy*, Vol. I, 1809–1831, Calcutta, 1992, pp. 21–23.

⁶ Amiya P. Sen, *Rammohun Roy: A Critical Biography*, New Delhi, 2012, p. 15.

Bengali books. ‘Rammohun himself comes across as a man who was determined’, writes Amiya P. Sen, ‘to use to his advantage the several new institutions that the city of Calcutta now hosted—printing presses, voluntary associations and debating clubs, modern schools, as well as the centres for scholastic learning, libraries and state-sponsored centres of higher learning’.⁷ Within a period of fifteen years, that is, between 1815 and 1829, Sen estimates that Rammohun and his co-workers had produced twenty-three tracts and pamphlets in Bengali that were devoted exclusively to religious subjects, while they churned out fifteen literary pieces in the English language. Besides the two commentaries on the *VedantaSutra*, Roy’s Bengali translations also consisted of the essence of five *Upanishads*, namely, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Isha*, *Manduka* and *Mandukya*. These gave him a head start in what began as an almost single-handed battle against an entire phalanx of Hindu obscurantists. In fact, he had to come up with seven polemical tracts to combat this ultra-conservative brigade and their logic and propaganda.

Just a few years before him, William Carey and his team at Serampore had begun translating English texts into prose in Indian languages—publishing the first Bengali version of the Bible. These early translations in Bengali prose broke several barriers, but were not very easy to read. This was not only because the readers were new to Bengali prose *per se* but also because of many difficulties in translation. There were hardly sufficient numbers of the ‘right’ words or expressions to convey the desired meanings—as the rather insular language and civilisation of Bengal were encountering a well-fortified foreign language for the first time. This handicap was addressed most promptly by innovators of Bengali prose like Ramram Basu and Mrityunjoy Vidyalankar of the Fort William College, Kolkata, and, of course, by Rammohun Roy.

Rammohun’s cross-cultural skills enabled him to traverse the different worlds of several distinct languages, with ease, and at will. He resorted to the use of Sanskrit terms wherever Bengali proved inadequate to express his thoughts; in any case, the Persian language had loaned several thousand words and expressions to Bengali. Summing up Roy’s contribution in his oft-quoted essay of 1845, Kishorychand Mitra stressed how Roy undertook to create a literature in Bengali, and his exertions were crowned with a success that exceeded the most sanguine expectation. Bengali has so vastly improved by his careful cultivation, by his taste and his genius, that it can be now successfully devoted to the communication of Western knowledge to the children of this vast country.⁸

The last phrase, ‘Western knowledge’, explains why, thanks to stalwarts like Rammohun, the Indian Renaissance flowered so well and so successfully in Bengal in the nineteenth century. As Tagore notes, ‘a revolutionary change was noticeable in Bengali prose with the advent of Rammohun in the field of Bengali literature’.⁹

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁸ *Calcutta Review*, 1845, IV (1845), p. 357.

⁹ S. Tagore, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

Persian, Arabic and Islam

We move on to another remarkable cross-cultural skill of Rammohun—his command over Arabic and Persian. In the hagiography that surrounds much of what Rammohun did, we have a legend that is so well imbedded that it is repeated, almost mindlessly, in all his biographies and in writings on him—without cross-checking facts. And this relates to his education during his childhood, about which details are quite fuzzy. He is said to have been sent to Patna at the age of nine to learn Persian and Arabic and to pursue Islamic studies, but this is not substantiated by any evidence. The next story that appears in all ‘histories’ relating to him is that he went to Benaras at age fourteen or so to pick up Sanskrit and learn Hindu texts. This story was so much in circulation that his contemporary and friend, William Adam, also mentioned it, thereby reinforcing the legend. Sen makes a convincing case against both these stories by referring to the painstaking research done by historian and Bengali literary critic Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay, who published thirty-five essays and articles on Rammohun’s life between 1926 and 1946, based on the several court papers that affirmed facts recorded under oath. Roy faced much litigation, and even his own nephew and mother filed cases against him in 1817, and these give us several reams of evidence about his life and properties.

Bandyopadhyay mentions that there is no record of either the Patna story or the Benaras phase. Rammohun picked up Sanskrit at age fourteen from a local Brahman scholar, Nanda Kumar Vidyalankar, and he mastered it later on his own, with the guidance of other local scholars. In 1938, R.P. Chanda and J.K. Majumdar brought out a publication entitled *Selections from Official Letters and Documents Relating to the Life of Raja Rammohun Roy* that relied on similar hard evidence, but this publication too could find no substance behind the Patna and Benaras stories. The fact is that he familiarised himself with Persian in the same manner that his father and grandfather had done before him, and we may recall that both were quite adept in it. Both of them had served in the revenue departments of the nawabs of Bengal where this skill was essential. None travelled any great distance to learn Persian, but it goes to Rammohun’s credit that he went one step ahead and gained considerable command over the language. He had a flair for languages, which helped him pick up Arabic without formal tuition at the Patna madrasa. It was available in plenty in Islamic establishments that flourished in Bengal, thanks to six centuries of unbroken Muslim rule.

Roy brushed up his knowledge of both these languages during his first serious stint in Kolkata from 1801 to 1803. He became close to Persian and Arabic scholars in the *Dewani Adalats* while dealing with court and revenue records. Roy learnt as much as he could from the teachers and theologians employed by the newly opened Fort William College in Kolkata, and he received commendations from them. We bring in this point about Patna and Benaras mainly to highlight the erroneous mentions in almost all references connected with his life. Though Roy himself

wrote a short “autobiographical sketch” that was published in 1833,¹⁰ he did not mention precise details about his early life. The myths thus rolled on, gathering strength, about how he mastered the Quran and read Euclid and Aristotle in Arabic in Patna, before he reached his teens. What is, however, beyond dispute is that he was among those educated Hindus (and Brahmans) who made special efforts to understand Islam and its philosophy, through both Arabic and Persian. He was not yet thirty years old, when he published his first book on religion entitled *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhidin* (A Gift for Monotheists) sometime between 1803 and 1804. It was in Persian, with an introduction in Arabic. Many have speculated on why he chose these languages over Sanskrit or Bengali. One reason could be that he was not yet ready for a battle with Sanskrit/Brahman scholars, though the monotheism he advocated ran counter to the basic polytheistic structure of Hinduism and was bound to trigger controversy. Bengali had, incidentally, not yet become the language of intellectual discourse, and besides, he wanted no trouble from his family. His father had just died a few months earlier and he had expressed his displeasure at his son’s religious views. Later on, his mother was so bitter about his proclaimed beliefs that she fought against him in court and severed all relations with him.

Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhidin is his first known theological statement, and Max Mueller considered it his primary and overriding statement on religion. In Islam, he was attracted not only to its strict monotheism but also to its rational approach, rather than to Sufi mysticism that had attracted countless Hindus before him. Collet notes that his tract ‘was abounding with Arabic logical and philosophical terms’.¹¹ Brajendranath Seal analyses Roy’s marked preference for the rational streak in Islam and traces it to the Mutazilites (rationalists) of the eighth century and also to the Muwahhidin (monotheists) of the twelfth century.¹² As the first modern Indian, he set down the agenda, so to say, for others to follow—a deep abiding respect for the best that Islam had to offer. His rationality led not to atheism, as it often does, but to a strong ‘secular’ approach and an unshakable belief in India’s basic plurality. Incidentally, in 1829, Rammohun published his book *Universal Religion*—treading somewhat the same path as Akbar—but it was a bit of a disappointment as his materials were primarily drawn from Brahmanical Hinduism.¹³

On Rights of Women

To return to what we had briefly mentioned about Rammohun Roy’s campaign for women’s rights, we need to take a look at the second tract that he wrote against

¹⁰ Quoted in Mary Carpenter, *The Last Days in England of the Rajah Rammohun Roy*, London, 1866, Indian reprint: Kolkata, 1955, pp. 22–26.

¹¹ S.D. Collet, *Raja Rammohun Roy*, eds., Dilip Kumar Biswas and Prabhat Kumar Ganguli, Calcutta, 1900/1988, p. 29.

¹² Quoted, Sumit Sarkar, *Rammohun Roy and the Break with the Past*, Delhi, 2008, p. 323. Also see Milninda Banerjee, *Rammohun Roy: A Pilgrim’s Progress*, Kolkata, 2009, p. 56.

¹³ Amiya P. Sen, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

sati in 1819. While he contested the views of orthodox Brahman Sanskrit scholar Kashinath Tarakavagish who glorified *sati*, this writing is also the first known essay on gender issues in modern India. He negates the argument that women were essentially ignorant and unintelligent by throwing up a counter question: Why was no attempt made to educate them to attain their real worth? He refused to accept that women were lax in morals, and vociferously accused men of duping them and leading them astray. Rammohun was the first advocate of women's rights in India—far ahead of others—and his campaign against *sati* was only a part of his overall mission for the uplift of women in India. In his later works, he argued that, 'the burning of widows often brought material gains to the male members of the widow's family',¹⁴ and this could well be true. It is noteworthy that the incidents of *sati*, that were hardly ever reported in Bengal during the rule of the sultans and nawabs, went up remarkably in the post-Plassey period—once the upper castes of this region were empowered and enriched by the British.

Historians may need to examine in greater depth the links that Rammohun mentioned between the growing wealth of individual Bengalis under British rule and their cruelty towards widows for the sake of appropriating their property. This was more pronounced in the families of the Sanskritised castes and was quite visible in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century. We need to study this connection between the historic rise of the Bengali *bhadralok* class that coincided with the establishment of British rule and the consequential contraction of the property rights of their women. Male members of this class were bent on appropriating property that was rightfully due to widows under Bengal's *Dayabhaga* laws, which was more liberal than the more male-centric *Mitakshara* system prevalent in the rest of India. They compelled young widows to either commit *sati* or to migrate and settle in Kashi-Vrindavan—where they were exploited shamelessly and had to spend the largest part of their lives in penury. Other dependent women members of the family were also deprived of their property rights through various devices, now that wealth proved quite addictive. Amiya P. Sen quotes from official records to establish that while the upper castes accounted for only 11 per cent of the population, 55 per cent of the reported cases of *sati* in the second decade of the nineteenth century were from these castes. In 1823, 41 per cent of all the cases of *sati* reported in Bengal were from Brahman families.¹⁵ Rammohun's charge deserves to be taken seriously, and the economic gains that accrued from social injustice and crimes against women need to be investigated in the context of *sati* in Bengal.

In 1822, Roy wrote strongly against Hindu laws that had steadily gone on depriving women of their rights throughout history. In his monograph entitled *Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females According to the Hindoo Law of Inheritance*, Roy took cudgels against Bengal's *Dayabhaga* law and insisted

¹⁴ Partha Pratim Basu, *Revisiting Rammohun Roy's Political Agenda*, Kolkata, 2009, p. 32.

¹⁵ Amiya P. Sen, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

that the rights enjoyed by women in ancient times had been eroded over time. He demanded that they be restored. He had evidently learnt the art of delving into the ancient Sanskrit texts to cull out what he was looking for and then presenting his case with aplomb.

The Peasants

Rammohun Roy was heir to a part of a zamindari estate bequeathed to him by his father, and he managed to add large tracts to it by investing his own savings when opportunities opened up in the decade after the Permanent Settlement of 1793. Yet it was characteristic of him that, at least towards the closing years of his life, he placed himself uncompromisingly on the side of peasants against his own class of zamindars. Roys's fellow landlords may perhaps never have forgiven him for stating before the British Parliament that 'while undoubtedly their (zamindars') conditions have been much improved' thanks to the 'Permanent Settlement of Bengal', the condition of the peasantry has certainly not improved.¹⁶ In his paper on the Revenue System of India, which he submitted to a Parliamentary Committee in London in 1831, and still more in the replies he gave to the Committee's questions, he heavily criticised the Permanent Settlement for, by it 'the landholders have adopted every measure to raise the rents {from the peasants} by means of the power put into their hands,' and held that 'in some parts of these provinces the rent is already so high, that even an interdict against further increase cannot afford the Ryots (cultivators) any relief or comfort,' and so he asked the Government to fix the cultivators' rents at a fair level just as it had fixed the revenue due from the zamindars.¹⁷

Over four decades later, Romesh Chunder Dutt described in some detail the miserable conditions of the Bengal peasantry in his *The Peasantry of Bengal*, London, 1874, and then remarked, 'not that we can hope to recount all the oppressive acts that are committed by zamindars'.¹⁸ His conclusion: 'let the rates of rent now payable {by the peasant} be carefully ascertained after an extensive survey, and such rates be declared fixed for ever'.¹⁹ This, we can see, was exactly what Rammohun Roy had proposed.

R.C. Dutt was, perhaps, not prepared for the outrage his proposal provoked among the zamindars of Bengal, and he seems to have been forced entirely to forget his proposal in later years. Indeed, in his *Economic History of Early British Rule*, London, 1901, he appears practically as a trumpeteer of the Permanent

¹⁶ Kalidas Nag and Debajyoti Burman, ed., *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, Calcutta, 1945/1995, p. 45

¹⁷ Jogendra Chandra Ghosh, ed., *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, Calcutta, 1906, pp. 272–74, 278–79, 291.

¹⁸ R.C. Dutt, *The Peasantry of Bengal*, ed., Narehari Kaviraj, Calcutta, 1980, p. 167.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68

Settlement.²⁰One wonders if Rammohun Roy could ever have bowed to such pressure from the wealthy and the contended.

Summing Up

To recapitulate, Roy was surely the first modern Indian and an uncompromising rationalist who possessed extraordinary skills as a public intellectual and a crusader for justice. His chief achievement was to create the first discursive public space in India, which occurred thanks to his acquired command over the English language. He was the first major Indian communicator in the English language who assumed a level of equality in his debates with the colonial rulers while also strengthening the case for India's inherent plurality. He crossed different cultures and civilisations with the ease of a born internationalist, and one who also simultaneously popularised the pursuit of scientific temper, way ahead of other Indians.

Roy displayed commendable courage to fight Hindu obscurantism that was represented by a much larger and powerful group, and not only to survive against this community—which he did, with rare panache—but to win in the greatest battle of his life. He was the first visionary in modern India who spoke for the rights of women, strove for the spread of the best of Western education, highlighted the suffering of peasants and spoke against the oppression by rapacious officials of the ruling establishment. Roy was also among the earliest crusaders of the vernacular press and its freedom, and fought against discrimination on grounds of race and religion. He was, in fact, the first modern Indian who spoke in the language of plurality and secularism. Rammohun Roy, the father of the Indian renaissance, was truly a maker of India—as an idea, a reality and a civilisation that is wedded to the principles of multi-culturalism.

²⁰ Romesh Dutt, *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule*, 6th ed., London, 1906, pp. 95–96.