

রামমোহনের বহুমাত্রিকতা

রামমোহনকে নিয়ে আয়োজিত আন্তর্জাতিক আলোচনাচক্রে পঠিত প্রবন্ধের সংকলন



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Rammohaner Bahumatrikata

Compilation of articles written on various aspects of Rammohan

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Rammohan Roy and Brahma Samaj

Rakesh Mondal

One of the most influential social and religious reformers of the 19th century, Ram Mohan Roy, born on May 22, 1772 in what was then Bengal Presidency's Radhanagar in Hooghly district. As India grapples increasingly with changing social and religious circumstances, Roy's work in the sphere of women's emancipation, modernising education and seeking changes to religious orthodoxy finds new relevance in this time.

Roy was undoubtedly the first person on the subcontinent to seriously engage with the challenges posed by modernity to conventional social structures and ways of being, according to historian Ramachandra Guha, who served as the book's editor for *Makers of Modern India* (Penguin Books, 2010), a biography of the "work and words of the men and women who argued the Republic of India into existence. He was also among the first Indians whose beliefs and actions were not constrained by those of caste, kinship, or religion.

Roy, who was raised in accordance with traditional caste customs at the time and was born into a wealthy upper-caste Brahmin family, experienced child marriage, polygamy, and multiple marriages throughout his life. The family's affluence had also made the best in education accessible to him.

Roy was a multilingual individual who was fluent in Bengali, Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, and eventually, English. He developed a scepticism toward societal conventions and religious dogmas as a result of his exposure to the literature and cultures of each of these languages. He particularly resented customs like Sati that required widows to commit suicide by being burned alive on their husband's funeral pyre. After the passing of his older brother, Roy's sister-in-law had become one of these victims, and the wound had remained with him.

At the end of the 18th century, as the Mughals began to lose power and the East India Company began to gain ground in

Bengal, Roy was also beginning to make his mark. His education had whetted his appetite for philosophy and theology, and he spent considerable time studying the Vedas and the Upanishads, but also religious texts of Islam and Christianity. He was particularly intrigued by the Unitarian faction of Christianity and was drawn by the precepts of monotheism that, he believed, lay at the core of all religious texts.

The first phase of its history is intimately linked up with the career of its founder Rammohun Roy. The Brahma Samaj, which began its illustrious career on August 20, 1828, gave Rammohun's idea of universal worship a physical form. One of the "Young Bengal" group's leaders, Tarachand Chakravarti, was chosen to serve as the organization's secretary. In the beginning, weekly services were held on Saturday evenings; later, they were moved to Wednesdays, a tradition that is now followed at the Brahmamandir in Tagore's Shantiniketan. It was divided into three parts: the Vedas were recited by Telegu Brahmins in a private chamber in front of the Brahmin members of the congregation, the Upanishads were read and explained to the general public, and religious songs were sung. On this point, Rammohun's previous Unitarian contacts had undoubtedly been of considerable assistance by giving him a model of congregational worship that was at odds with the spirit of Hinduism. This would correspond exactly to the reading of the Bible, the sermon, and the hymns of Christian worship. However, the parallelism was limited to the outer appearance alone. Rammohun's universal worship had a distinctly Hindu flavour to it. According to the Trust Deed of the new church, the reading of the Vedas only in front of the Brahmin participant does not seem to be in line with the church's non-sectarian and global principles. The traditional Telegu Brahmin group, however, was the only custodian of Vedic ceremonies in Calcutta at the time, and its members could not be persuaded to recite the Vedas in front of both Brahmins and non-Brahmins. The fact that Rammohun and his fellow congregation organisers arranged to have the Upanishads read and explained in front of the entire congregation, which occasionally also included

Christians and Muslims in addition to non-Brahmins, shows that they had no issue with the general audience hearing the sruti texts. In contrast to their conventional Telegu counterparts, scholarly Bengali Brahmin pandits like Ramchandra Vidyavagis, Utsabananda Vidyavagis, Iswarchandra Nyayarata, and others were given this responsibility. These men were free of prejudice. The Brahma Samaj as an organisation eventually fell into oblivion after Rammohun Roy left for England in November 1830 and passed away there in September 1833, while its name, theology, and social aspirations persisted and flourished among several communities in the vicinity of Calcutta. However, it was able to survive the crisis because to the generosity of Rammohun's friend Dwarkanath Tagore and the unwavering commitment of Pandit Ram Chandra Vidyavagis. Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), who is regarded as the second greatest leader of the Samaj, gave the Brahma movement fresh vitality. The Tattwabodhini Sabha, which Debendranath founded in 1839, was the first public manifestation of his interest in Brahmoism. He joined the Samaj in 1842, and on December 21, 1843—7 Poush, or 1765 Saka in Bengali calendar—Ram Chandra Vidyavagis officially initiated him into Brahmoism alongside twenty other young men. This event is remembered in Bengali cultural history, and it is still commemorated at Shantiniketan.

The Tattwabodhini Sabha quickly developed into a forum for Bengal's intellectual and cultural elite in the middle of the nineteenth century. It eventually grew to have more than eight hundred members, which was impressive in those days. The centre of the organisation was undoubtedly a group of devoted Brahmos led by the youthful Debendranath, and its stated goal was "the dissemination of the Brahma Dharma in various methods." But at the same time there had assembled under the banner of the Sabha reformers and educationists like Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Haldar, Anangamohan Mitra, Kanailal Pyne and Durgacharan Banerjee, poets and litterateurs like Iswar Chandra Gupta, Pyarichand Mitra, Kaliprasanna Sinha and Madanmohan

Tarkalankar, Hindu College radicals like Tarachand Chakravarti, Chandra Sekhar Deb, Sib Chandra Deb, Ramgopal Ghosh, Ramtanu Lahiri and Hara Chandra Ghosh, scholars like Rajendralal Mitra and others all with a common ideal and programme in harmony with the religious and social ideas of Rammohun Roy. The era of the Tattwabodhini Sabha (1839-1859) thus ushered in a significant and creative epoch in the history of the Brahma Samaj which had for once come to receive the sincere co-operation of nearly all the progressive sections of the contemporary Hindu society. The unification of these diverse elements of national life on a common platform was certainly an organisational achievement which reflects credit on the tact, foresight and earnestness of the young Debendranath.

Rammohun Roy's departure for England and his premature death had robbed him of the chance of providing the infant Brahma Samaj with a solid organisational machinery. The task was now taken up with vigour and enthusiasm. Rituals and ceremonials of the new church were formulated, the most prominent among these being the system of initiation. It started with the initiation of Debendranath and his friends in 1843. In the history of the faith, the Brahma who had been initiated was a novel phenomena. The introduction of the unique status of membership or required subscription for the initiated came along with it. One significant doctrinal shift that occurred was the rejection of the Vedic texts' infallibility. Within the Samaj, rationalists like Akshay Kumar Dutta discovered that they were unable to trust in any *apaurusheya* sastra (infallible scripture). Sharp detractors of the theory included the Tattwabodhini Sabha intellectual group affiliated with Hindu College. Debendranath ultimately came to agree with the viewpoint's veracity. The cornerstone of Brahmaism was decided and legally declared to be "the human heart illumined," rather than any infallible book, going forward. Hindu scriptures however continued to be respected without being considered infallible and Debendranath compiled two volumes the *Brahma Dharma*, a selection of suitable passages from the Hindu sastras and wrote the *Brahma Dharma Vijam* (the Essence of Brahmaism) consisting

of four short aphorisms for the use and guidance of worshippers. As the Brahma movement gained momentum in the nation, the church was able to establish 101 branches in all across India and Burma by 1872. However, in one way, the nature of Brahmaism had changed significantly since this era. The Samaj had now unmistakably evolved into a religious sect or society with its own tenets, customs, and rules. As a result, it started to stand out as a distinct religious group from other existing sects. It should also be remembered that Brahma leaders of this era considered the devotion of the formless Brahma they fostered as the greatest and most ideal. The attitude is drastically different from that of the global assembly as envisioned by Rammohan Roy. While acknowledging Brahmaism's universal vision, they were always quick to highlight its unique connection to Hinduism. The vibrant personality of Keshub Chandra Sen (1838-1844), who joined the Samaj in 1857 and briefly served as Debendranath Tagore's right-hand man in the sphere of mission activity, dominates the subsequent phase of the Brahma movement. Debendranath made the young man an acharya of the Samaj because he adored him like his own son. The first non-Brahmin to hold that office was Keshub. He immediately gave the Samaj work fresh life, and he inspired such evangelical passion that its message quickly reached the farthest reaches of Bengal. He made a thorough tour of the Madras and Bombay presidencies in 1864, laying the groundwork for the Brahma Samaj's message to spread throughout Southern and Western India. Through the efforts of the youthful Keshub, the Brahma movement undoubtedly gained pace at this point, and even Rev. Alexander Duff, one of its fiercest adversaries, was forced to acknowledge that "the Brahma Samaj is a power, and a power of no mean order." However, Debendranath and Keshub, two men with very different temperaments, had been at odds for some time regarding creed, rituals, and the attitude of the Brahmans toward the social issues of the day. As a result, the Samaj quickly split into two groups: the old conservatives who supported the cautious Debendranath and the newer liberals. The division came to the surface towards

the close of 1866 with the emergence of two rival bodies, the Calcutta or Adi Brahma Samaj consisting of the old adherents of the faith and the new order (inspired and led by Keshub) known as the Brahma Samaj of India. The new wing proceeded to carry out its spiritual and social reform and achieved striking success within a short period. A second Indian tour of Keshub Chandra Sen in 1868 like the previous one four years ago, did much to foster the sense of spiritual and national unity in India and his visit to England in 1870 carried the message of the Brahma Samaj to the West. By emphasising female emancipation, female education, and the complete removal of caste distinctions, the Samaj now undertook a much more radical and comprehensive social reform plan. Due to its efforts, the Indian Reform Association was established in 1870, and the Indian Marriage Act, which legalised inter-caste marriage, was passed in 1872. Doctrinally, the faith underwent a significant theistic shift with the sense of sin, spirit of repentance, and efficacy of prayer as its defining characteristics. This shift is likely attributable to the faith's extensive Christian influence. Since its unique relationship with Hinduism and other major world religions, like Islam, started to be disputed, it had also, in a sense, become far more universal than previously. Christianity and Buddhism were studied with greater respect. The infusion of effusive bhakti or intense devotional fervour into Brahmaism rendered it more soothing, emotional and attractive to the common people. A descendent of the renowned mediaeval Vaishnava saint Advaitacharya who had joined the Brahma Samaj, Vijaya Krishna Goswami, greatly assisted Keshub in introducing the kirtan or devotional music in the style of the Bengal vaishnavas to the Brahma Samaj for the first time. Finally, Keshub's concept of "God in conscience" helped to eliminate tensions between profession and practise by enhancing the community's moral existence in line with the new spirituality. Keshub's admiration for all faiths during his final years inspired him to create a vibrant and rich synthesis of religions, which he dubbed the "New Dispensation" (Navavidhan) on January 25, 1880.

Despite the rapid advancement of the Brahma movement under Keshub, the Samaj experienced a second schism in May 1878 when a group of Keshub Chandra Sen's adherents split off to found the Sadharan Brahma Samaj. Their main reasons for doing so were that their demand for the introduction of a democratic constitution in the church was denied, that they disagreed with Keshub on the doctrine of adesha or Divine command, and that they objected to the body led by the veteran Derozian Shib Chandra Dev consisted of some of the most brilliant and talented young men of the time including Sivnath Shastri, Ananda Mohan Bose, Dwarkanath Ganguli, Nagendranath Chatterjee, Ram Kumar Vidyaratna, Vijay Krishna Goswami and others. They were all staunch democrats and promptly framed a full-fledged democratic constitution based on universal adult franchise, for the new organisation. This was mainly due to the earnest endeavours of the England-returned Cambridge wrangler and lawyer Ananda Mohan Bose who received the warm support of his colleagues. According to Bipin Chandra Pal, this democratic experiment had been intended by the founders to serve as a model for the independent Indian democracy of the future. Rammohun Roy had turned a republican during his mature years. He had to conceal his republican sympathies carefully in England knowing English public opinion to be allergic to republicanism. The Sadharan Brahma Samaj now revised this tradition of Rammohun's time. It was declared in the pages of the Bengali mouthpiece of the Samaj (*Tattwakaumudi*, 16 Phalgun, 1803 Saka) that the Brahma Samaj was about to establish a 'World wide republic' by placing inequality by equality and the power of the king by the 'power of the people' and that this all comprehensive outlook was the special attraction of the Samaj. The new body displayed considerable vitality and dynamism in making inroads into fresh fields of philanthropy and politics. A significant number of its key players were active in the Indian League (1878), the Indian Association (1878), and the developing Indian National Congress. It has so far shown to be a strong and vibrant branch of the Brahma Samaj throughout the nation. However, this is not meant

to diminish the significance and vitality of Keshub Chandra Sen's Brahmo Samaj, which was established in India and continues to support the objectives of the Brahmo community. The Brahmo Samaj of India and the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, the two branches of the Brahmo Samaj, currently coexist peacefully and both serve the spiritual and other requirements of all Brahmo Samaj members.

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