

RAJA RAMMOHAN ROY

KEY THEMES

- Religious reforms
- Modern education
- Freedom of press



INTRODUCTION

- He is considered as the ‘father of modern India’.
- Through his memoranda, books, public activities for religious, social, educational, economic and political reforms he inaugurated liberal reformist modernization in India.
- A cosmopolitan thinker as well as a nationalist reformer who believed in rationalist thinking.

INFLUENCE ON HIS THOUGHT

- He drew his thoughts from Perso-Arabic, Classical Greek, Vedantic as well as modern western thought.
- He was influenced by many contemporary events such as the French revolution and the freedom movements in Spain, Ireland and Latin America.
- He had learnt as many as ten languages – Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, English, Urdu, Hindi, Hebrew, Greek, Latin and French.

IMPORTANT WORKS :

- *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhiddin (A Gift to Deists)*
- *The Precepts of Jesus: A Guide to Peace and Happiness*

A BRIEF LIFE SKETCH

PERIOD: 22 May 1772 - 27 September 1833

- He was born into a high ranking orthodox Brahmin family in West Bengal that had the distinction of serving the imperial Mughals for three generations.
- The family's long standing services under the Mughals explains his familiarity with indo-persian culture.
- He first entered the service of Europeans in the year 1803 as Munshi (private secretary) to the collector of Murshidabad.

- It was during this time he was seriously drawn into a study of the English language and the developments in contemporary Europe.
- By 1814, he chose to settle down in Calcutta and for the next fifteen years he was embroiled in furious debates with Hindu pundits and publicists over the true basis of Hinduism and debated over various important issues like sati abolition, introduction of modern education, freedom of press etc.
- During 1814-33, he authored more than 60 tracts and pamphlets in English, Bengali and Sanskrit languages.

- This intensely polemical phase in his life was also intellectually most productive. From Calcutta he ran three journals/newspapers:
 - Bengali '*Samvad Kaumudi*'
 - Bilingual '*Brahmanical Magazine*'
 - Persian '*Mirat-ul-Akhbar*'
- He was officially sent to England in 1830 to plead for an enhanced pension for Mughal Emperor. But he personally carried multiple agendas (For example to counter the propaganda carried out by Hindu orthodoxy against the Sati regulations)

- In 1832, he appeared before the select committees of the House of Commons to be interrogated at length on the material and moral conditions in India under the company's administration.
- The testimony he has left now served as valuable source material for the study of early Indian responses to colonialism.
- Rammohan Roy died after a brief illness in England on 27 December 1833.

RELIGIOUS REFORMS

“There is always an innate faculty existing in the nature of mankind that in case any person of sound mind , before or after assuming the doctrines of any religion, makes an enquiry into the nature of the principles of religious doctrines..” –R.R.ROY

- The social and religious degeneration of his time was the ‘immediate problematique’ for Rammohan Roy.
- Ignorance, superstitions, idolatry, polygamy and infanticide were some of the major problems in the society that led to the self degeneration of the people.
- For him religious reforms can bring both social reform and political transformations in the society.

- From his comparative study of religions he concluded that there are three basic tenets in all religions.:
 - i. Belief in one universal supreme being
 - ii. Belief in the existence of the soul
 - iii. Belief in life after death.
- Other than these three basic tenets he finds many false and objectionable dogmas and doctrines in Hinduism as well as in other religions including christianity.
- His attack was directed against polytheism and idolatry.

- His idea on MONOTHEISM is one of the important aspect of his religious thought.
- Monotheism, he believed is the fundamental message of the Vedanta.
- His idea of a single, Unitarian God was his corrective to the polytheism of orthodox Hinduism and to Christian Trinitarianism.
- He believed that monotheism supported one universal moral order for humanity, while polytheism justifies sectarian moralities.

- He believed that Hinduism is not inferior to Christianity although he admitted that Christ's central teaching can lead mankind to universal love and harmony.
- He also believed that original Vedantic message of the unity of God was superior to the anthropomorphic conception of God contained in the Bible. It is because Christianity justifies the death of Christ for atonement of man's sin against God. However, Vedanta teaches that sincere repentance and solemn meditation can establish victory over sin.

- **His views on sati** was another important aspect of his socio-religious thought.
- He rejected the theory that wife can or has to atone for the sins of her husband. He cited many religious texts to show that they permitted the wife to continue her life even after husband's death. Largely as a result of his campaigns sati was banned by Bentinck in 1829.
- He also noted that God makes no distinction of caste .
Although his attitude towards caste system was somewhat ambivalent. He stated, “our division into castes has been the source of want of unity among us.”

- He tried to protect the true spirit of Hindu religion from both internal and external threats.
- **Internal threat** came from the Brahmins while the **external** was from the Christian missionaries and their practices of conversion.
- He condemned the priestly class for propagating religious dogmas for their personal benefits.

- The Christian missionaries attacked the Hindu religion in several ways:
 - By abusing and ridiculing the gods and saints of the former.
 - Preaching the excellency of the Christianity and attempting to prove debasedness of the other religion.
 - Alluring the locals through various means for converting to Christianity.

THREE APPROACHES TO RELIGIOUS REFORMS:

- Exposing the irrational religious practices and dogmas.
- Promoting western liberal education.
- Seeking state action in support of these programmes.

- He believed in religious associations as the instruments for social and political transformation.
- In 1815 he founded a new religious society known as the *Atmiya Sabha*, *The Calcutta Unitarian Association* in 1821 and the *Brahmo Sabha* in 1828 which later became the *Brahmo Samaj*.
- The theological basis of the organization that Rammohan Roy founded in 1828, the **Brahmo Sabha** was his theistic reading of the Upanishads, which he interpreted as promulgating a non-ritualistic, interior worship of the One True Being.

- He tried to end the monopoly of orthodox Brahmins over the sacred texts. He stressed on the importance of making available the sacred Sanskrit texts to the larger public in vernacular languages.
- He argued that ancient Hindu texts and the Vedas and the Upanishads upheld the doctrine of monotheism. To prove his point he translated numerous Hindu sacred texts into Bengali.

Resources:

1. 'Political thought in modern India' by Thomas Pantham and K. L. Deutsch.
2. 'Indian political thought: themes and thinkers' by M.P singh and Himanshu Roy.
3. 'Makers of Modern India' by Ramchandra Guha.
4. 'Sources of Indian tradition' edited by Rachel Fell Mcdermott, Leonard A . Gordon, Ainslie T. Embree, Frances W. Pritchett & Dennis Dalton.