

# RAJA RAMMOHAN ROY

(22 May 1772 - 27 Sept 1833)

## KEY THEMES

- Religious reforms
- Modern education
- Freedom of press



NPTEL  
Dr. M. K. Jha  
IIT Guwahati

## Historical Context

- ❖ Rammohan Roy was an ardent supporter of freedom of press.
- ❖ When Lord Hastings relaxed the press censorship in 1819, he started several journals and magazines such as *The Brahmanical Magazine*(1821), *Samvad Kaumudi*(1821) and *Mirat-ul-Akbar*(1822).
- ❖ Displeased by Buckingham, the publisher of “Calcutta Journal”, on 14<sup>th</sup> March, 1823 the then Governor-General in Council John Adam suddenly issued a press regulation restricting the freedom of press.
- ❖ The ordinance imposed restraints on all publications without the prior sanction of the government.

❖ In the “Government Gazette”, on 5<sup>th</sup> April, 1823, the government issued an official order mentioning the grounds on which a publication can be restrained. These can be summarized as: -

- Anything defamatory and harmful to the royal family, government officials and their allied powers;
- Publications threatening the peace, harmony and social order;
- Publication creating suspicion and hatred among the natives against the government.

❖ Rammohan Roy and others treated these grounds of the restriction of freedom of press archaic and stated that it will in reality grant the government and its functionaries complete immunity from any public scrutiny.

- ❖ Rammohan Roy, Dwarkanath Tagore and several others presented a memorial to the Supreme Court.
- ❖ When it was rejected by the Court, they appealed to the King-in-Council. It was one of the first communications addressed to a British monarch by any Indian.
- ❖ While the Memorial to the Supreme Court was of pleading in tune, the Appeal to the King-in-Council offers an elaborate account of the difficulties that may follow as a result of the continuance of the ordinance i.e. restrictions on the freedom of the press.

## **Memorial to the Supreme Court (1823)**

- ❖ In the beginning of the memorial, Rammohan Roy presented an account of the loyalty and attachment of the natives to the British government and that there was no ground for them being accused of misusing/abusing the freedom of press.
- ❖ He argued that it was the wisdom and liberties displayed by the government which was the basis of legitimacy of British rule in India.
- ❖ He viewed printing and publishing as the means of free discussion among the natives that could contribute to the improvement of their material and mental conditions.

- ❖ He argued that due to the restrictions on freedom of press, translations from both the Eastern languages as well as from the foreign publications will be severely affected.
- ❖ It will subsequently lead to far-reaching consequences on the diffusion of knowledge and mental improvement of the natives.
- ❖ It will also preclude the natives from making the government aware of their conditions and any injustices prevailing in the system. Thus, it will disrupt the channels of communication between the governed and the government.
- ❖ As a result, the natives will lose the confidence in the British rule to protect their rights and interests.

## Appeal to the King-in-Council (1823)

- ❖ He states the disregard of the subordinate authorities as the reason for their appeal to King in Council who was the guardian of their “lives, property and religion” .
- ❖ He viewed the ordinance on the restriction of freedom of press as an invasion of their civil rights.
- ❖ He stated that the enjoyment of civil rights was what distinguished the British from the previous Muhammadan rule. Civil rights were one of the sources of legitimacy of British rule and by invading that the ordinance had posed a threat to their rule itself.

## **His defense of freedom of press:**

*“Your Majesty is well aware that a Free Press has never yet caused a revolution in any part of the world, because, while men can easily represent their grievances arising from the conduct of the local authorities to the supreme Government, and thus get them redressed, the grounds of discontent that excite revolution are removed; whereas, where no freedom of the press existed, and grievances consequently remained unrepresented and unredressed, innumerable revolutions have taken place in all parts of the globe, or if prevented by the armed force of the Government, the people continued ready for insurrection”*

Rammohan Roy, “Appeal to the King-in-Council”



Roy presented several other arguments in support of a free press:

- ❖ In order to counter the missionaries' continuous attempts to disrepute the native religion and promote religious conversion, the natives should be guaranteed the weapon of press to protect their own faith.
- ❖ Guaranteeing the British citizens liberal rights and freedom while depriving such rights to the natives of India will provoke them to question and resist the British rule in India.
- ❖ It is unjust to punish the natives for a crime they did not commit. If at all, any fault was committed, it was by the "Calcutta Journal". And therefore, to punish the natives of India for such a fault is totally unwarranted.

- ❖ By allowing public scrutiny, the government do not invite a threat to itself but get the opportunity to rectify its wrongdoings and avail greater love and respect from the citizen.
- ❖ Thus he portrayed the ordinance as harmful to both the natives and the British government.
- ❖ Calling the British as deliverers and not conquerors- a father and protector and not a ruler, Roy asked to repeal the ordinance for the sake of both the government and the governed.
- ❖ However, this plea was rejected by the King-in-Council on the charge that India was a colony and hence there was no public opinion in India. Roy, however, wanted the freedom of press to create such public opinion in India.

## **Rammohan Roy on Civil and Political Rights**

- ❖ He was one of the first Indians who imbibed the spirit of constitutional government.
- ❖ The sole reason of his justifying the British Rule in India was the practice of civil liberties.
- ❖ He insisted on the enjoyment of civil liberties for the moral and intellectual development of the people.
- ❖ Despite his continuous effort in protecting the civil liberties, he never thought of demanding political freedom from the British rule.

- ❖ He thought the natives of that period lacking the capacity of self-governance and therefore supported the British Rule.
- ❖ Another reason for his choosing of civil and religious liberty over the political liberty was based on history. Comparing the Muhammadan and British Rule, he stated that although the political rights present in the Muhammadan Rule are absent in the latter, people were happier in British rule.
- ❖ According to Roy, it was the availability of civil and religious rights that made British Rule more favourable.

## Criticism

- We have already studied criticism of Roy and his works by many of his contemporary conservative as well as radical friends such as Radhakanta Deb, Henry Derozio.
- Roy's ideals of modernity had some basic flaws as it was embedded in the ideals of empire. Roy supported freedom struggles in different parts of the world and was gladdened by the French Revolution yet he welcomed British rule in India as an act of divine providence.
- He failed to fully grasp or anticipate the evils of British rule in India.

## Concluding Remarks

- The first great liberal and constitutional reformer in modern India. He played a critical role in promotion of modern liberal education, religious reforms and in protection of freedom of press in India under the colonial rule.
- His support for the British rule can be explained through his historical context in which British appeared to be more just and harbinger of change in a decaying society and economy like India in comparison to the tyrannical rules of Rajputs and Mughals.
- And therefore many questions which was historically available latter such as the question of autonomy or freedom from the British rule was historically absent when Raja Rammohan Roy was developing his thoughts and fighting for religious reforms or promoting modern liberal education in India. He believed that material and moral progress of India was achievable under the just rule of British.
- Therefore, he was someone willing to accommodate and learn from different traditions be it Islam, Christianity or Vedantic philosophy of Hinduism and promoted modern scientific outlook towards society, religion and politics among his natives. And he was equally supporting of universal brotherhood and interdependence among Individual as well nation rather than independence and isolation.

## Resources

1. *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, compiled and edited by S.D.Collet
2. *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, edited by Jogendra Chunder Ghose
3. *Political Thought in Modern India*, edited by Thomas Pantham and Kenneth L Deutsch
4. *Makers of Modern India*, by Ramchandra Guha
5. “Rammohan Roy and the Advent of Constitutional Liberalism in India” by C.A. Bayly, *Modern Intellectual History*, 4:1, 2007, pp 35-40