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Rammohun Roy's tireless efforts shaped the entire course of national development : A Study

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Abstract: *Raja Rammohun Roy (1772–1833) was a pioneering figure in the spheres of Indian society and politics during the early nineteenth century. This article analyzes his contributions, identifying him as a 'forefather' or precursor to the various political and national movements in India. At a time when no organized nationalist consciousness had yet emerged in colonial India, Rammohun became the first Indian to demand political rights through constitutional means. His efforts—ranging from advocating for press freedom, the Indianization of the jury system, and the appointment of Indians to government posts, to expressing solidarity with global freedom movements, opposing landlord oppression of peasants, and protesting the drain of Indian wealth abroad—represented some of the earliest forms of political protest in modern India. Beyond his religious and social reforms, his role in fostering a progressive, rational, and independent-minded society laid the foundation for subsequent nationalist and political movements. The seeds of India's future struggle for national liberation lay embedded within Rammohun's visionary thinking and reformist initiatives.*

Keywords: *Abstract Universalism, First Estate, Areopagitica, Drain of Wealth, Petty and Grand Jury, Brahmo, Bamachari, Kulin.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Raja Rammohun Roy's primary objective was the reconstruction of Indian life and society. This was a formidable task, as the social and daily lives of the Indian people at the beginning of the nineteenth century were shackled by medievalism. Moreover, the concept of a unified nation was entirely absent during this period, and for centuries, there had been no signs of national consciousness among Hindus and Muslims. One of the reasons for this was an excessive emphasis on spiritual ideals, which led to the neglect of the natural aspirations and innate instincts of human life. Due to this disregard for social life and human aspects, the common people were drifting away from economic and civic ideals. At that time, the teachings of the popular Vedantic trend—'Abstract Universalism'—emphasized the alienation of the senses from their objects, the mind from thought, emotion from feeling, willpower from action, and the individual from society. Because of this isolation of the individual from social life, the unification of the nation—or the 'State' as a collective entity—could not properly develop in India. None of the systems—such as the clan-based democracy of Scotland and the sept-based democracy of Ireland (prevalent until the mid-18th century),or the joint-family-governed democracy of Bengal (existing until the early 19th century)—were founded on the modern concept of nationhood. Just as the British nation emerged through the dismantling of clan rule in Scotland and Wales and the abolition of feudalism, a new sense of nationalism arose in India—not before the 19th century—following the dissolution of the hereditary empires and feudal systems of the Rajputs, Marathas, and Mughals. During the 18th and 19th centuries, medieval monarchy faced challenges from democracies rooted in this newly awakened nationalism—seen partially in England during the time of Thomas Cromwell and fully realized during the French Revolution. In India, Raja Rammohun Roy sowed the seeds of this transformation, and the movement through which this awakening attained its full fruition in Bengal and across the country was the Brahmo movement. Furthermore, the idolatrous and distorted forms of Hinduism appeared to Raja Rammohun Roy as a major obstacle to the growth of national consciousness. He wrote, "...this strange practice of Hindu idolatry, which destroys the social fabric more than any other form of idolatrous worship, also erodes sympathy for my fellow countrymen." In Rammohun's view, this obstinate attachment of Hindus to imaginary deities violated every human and social sentiment.

2. Methodology:

This paper is qualitative study. This study used historical methodology to collect the information on Regarding Rammohun Roy's thoughts on nation and state, and his protest against injustice. Historical methodology is the process by which the researcher gathers evidence and formulates ideas about the past research documents and studies related to Rammohun Roy's struggle for Nation. The method of forming a fundamental concept by reading various books and analyzing information is known as historical methodology. More specifically, it can be termed 'qualitative content analysis' or 'historical synthesis,' as this approach involves consolidating data from multiple sources to construct a new framework by evaluating context, causes, and effects. Historical documents, books, journals, articles and publications related to this subject area were studied to develop this research paper. In this way, historical data has demonstrated how Rammohun engaged in Nation-building, political thought, and protest against injustice.

3. Engrossed in power struggles:

Rammohun Roy identified the following reasons behind the decline of the Hindus and their loss of independence. First, he observed that in the early stages of civilization, India possessed a constitutional system of governance characterized by peace and harmony; Brahmins served as guardians of the law, while Kshatriyas held administrative authority. Brahmins harbored no claims to political power nor any ulterior motives regarding it. However, over the course of two millennia, they began accepting official positions under kings. Consequently, both legislative and executive powers became concentrated in their hands, paving the way for the establishment of autocracy. Internal strife among hundreds of such petty kings became a significant factor in the defeat of the Hindus. Second, the presence of numerous mutually hostile kings, the fragmentation of independent kingdoms into countless subdivisions, and the existence of a vast array of castes and tribes shattered the framework of social and political unity. Engrossed in power struggles and personal ambitions, these kings failed to repel foreign invasions on various occasions. Third, princes often prioritized their personal comforts and luxuries, neglecting the welfare of the state. Many of them relied on the goodwill of nobles who had effectively secured independence from sovereign authority. Finally, according to Rammohun Roy, the East's lack of knowledge regarding modern advancements in warfare was a primary reason for the defeat at the hands of the British, who possessed superior military and naval forces.

4. Liberalism:

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the spread of Western education brought a wave of European liberal ideas and ideologies to India, precipitating radical societal change. Moreover, the French Revolution of 1789 served as a beacon of hope for the people of India and the world at large. This revolution empowered people to use reason and rationality to raise their voices against superstition and tyrannical rule. The impact of the French Revolution influenced the thought process of Raja Rammohun Roy; it fostered a new spirit of liberty within him, and his ideas and actions were largely guided by the revolution's principles. Like Voltaire, he launched satirical attacks against orthodox Brahmins and Christians; like Montesquieu, he advocated for the separation of the executive and the judiciary; and like Rousseau, he believed that human beings are 'forever free' by their very nature and constitution. Much like the encyclopedists Diderot and D'Alembert, he launched scathing critiques against the Brahmins—the 'First Estate' or privileged class of Indian society. Rivaling Physiocrats (economists) like Quesnay and Adam Smith, he also championed the cause of free trade between India and Europe. Thus, his multifaceted genius, illuminated by the French Revolution and enriched by the ideas of liberal philosophers, forged a cohesive worldview. In doing so, he proved himself to be a true embodiment of the spirit of that era.

He enthusiastically supported movements for liberation from oppressive Spanish rule—not only in Bengal or India but also in the Spanish colonies of South America—within the arena of global politics. It is said that he even hosted a dinner at his Kolkata residence to celebrate this cause. Furthermore, he extended his full support to the constitutional struggle in Spain. He was deeply distressed upon hearing the news of the fall of the constitutional government in Naples in 1821. He wrote, "I am compelled to conclude that I shall not live to see the universal restoration of liberty among the nations of Europe and Asia... I regard the cause of the Neapolitans as my own, and their enemies as ours." Rammohun also expressed deep satisfaction at the victory of the liberal faction in the Portuguese Civil War. Additionally, he was a staunch advocate for Catholic emancipation. Raja Rammohun Roy welcomed the success of the revolution in July 1830. He took a keen interest in England's reform movement and championed the cause of the reformers, remarking, "This struggle is not merely between reformers and anti-reformers, but—on a global scale—between liberty and tyranny, justice and injustice, and truth and falsehood." When the Reform Bill was passed in England, Raja Rammohun Roy sent a congratulatory message to William Rathbone. Thus, his internationalist outlook in the political sphere transformed him into an eloquent figure possessed of universal empathy.

It might seem somewhat paradoxical that a man who harbored such 'universal sympathy' for freedom placed complete faith in the efficacy of the British administration and unhesitatingly acknowledged the benefits left behind by the British.

His own explanation for this apparent contradiction was that, while he had traveled extensively within Hindustan—and even to places beyond its borders—during his youth (specifically around the age of sixteen), the sight of India under British dominion had initially filled him with deep resentment; he felt humiliated seeing his country subject to a foreign power. However, later, at the age of twenty, he came into contact with Europeans and familiarized himself with their legal and administrative systems. He perceived them, in general, as more intelligent, composed, and temperate. Consequently, he shed his earlier prejudices and felt drawn to them. He arrived at the conviction that "even though their rule was that of foreigners, it would undoubtedly accelerate the progress of the native population." Professors Dilip Kumar Biswas and Prabhat Chandra Ganguly rightly observed, "...Rammohun Roy was farsighted enough to realize that Indian civilization was undergoing a period of profound decline during his time... He welcomed British rule despite its many drawbacks and evils, because it enabled India to come into contact with Western civilization... Thus, Rammohun Roy did not hesitate to wholeheartedly welcome British rule in India, even though he was never for a moment blind to its darker aspects."

5. Movement against injustice:

From the very beginning, Rammohan strove to overcome the obstacles hindering the eradication of the superstitions prevalent in the society of his time; his objective was twofold: to educate, raise awareness among, and mobilize the common people, while simultaneously drawing the government's attention to these issues. He relied heavily on the press for this purpose, recognizing that no social or political movement could be built without the freedom to express independent opinions. However, a major hurdle arose whenever any statement deviated from established norms or was deemed anti-state, leading to the curtailment of the freedom of the press. Restoring this freedom of speech marked Rammohan's first political campaign. According to Dr. Bimanbehari Majumdar, the early signs of the constitutional struggle for India's freedom emerged in 1822, when Rammohan stated in the inaugural issue of his ‘Mirat-ul-Akhbar’ that his aim was to disseminate news that would "inform rulers of the true condition of their subjects and acquaint subjects with the laws and customs established by their rulers; thereby enabling rulers to more easily provide relief or assistance to the people, while allowing the people to access the means of obtaining protection and redress from their rulers."

The history of the Indian press from 1766 to 1823 is marked by various restrictions imposed by the British government on newspapers, periodicals, and journals. Firstly, the government had to contend with wartime situations involving various Indian states, and opposition from the French was also a significant factor. Secondly, missionaries—particularly the Serampore Baptist missionaries—often ridiculed the Hindu and Muslim religions. Another major factor was the growing discontent within the native army. James Silk Buckingham, the editor of the ‘Calcutta Journal’, was a liberal who advocated for free trade and condemned the Company's monopolistic dominance. The situation escalated into a severe conflict after Lord Hastings left and William Adam was appointed acting Governor-General, coinciding with the promulgation of the Press Regulation Act on March 14, 1823. When the matter went to the Supreme Court for legal ratification, Rammohun Roy and others submitted a memorandum in opposition; however, it failed to elicit a favorable response. Subsequently, he appealed to the King-in-Council—specifically King George IV of England. Many consider this appeal comparable to Milton’s ‘Areopagitica’. He also demanded an inquiry commission to assess the true condition of the people, but this request was ignored. In protest, he ceased the publication of his newspaper, ‘Mirat-ul-Akhbar’.

The system of trial by jury was introduced in India with the establishment of the Mayor’s Court in 1726. However, following the establishment of the Supreme Court in 1774, discrimination existed between British subjects and native inhabitants; under the prevailing laws, the latter were not permitted to serve on petty juries or grand juries. In early 1816, native residents petitioned the British Parliament for permission to serve on juries, followed by further appeals to the Supreme Court of Calcutta in 1817 and 1822. Meanwhile, in 1821, Rammohun Roy published articles in the ‘Sambad Kaumudi’ advocating for freedom of the press and the right to trial by jury. The Indian Jury Bill of 1826 granted Indians permission to serve on petty juries but stipulated that Christians could only be tried by Christian jurors. Strong representations were made to the Court of Directors to amend this discriminatory provision, and the bill was subsequently enacted into law in 1833.

Although Rammohan was not an economist by profession, he possessed a vast reservoir of knowledge, befitting a scholar of the nineteenth century. No one else came forward with similar economic ideals for fifty years after he articulated his views; it was only later that figures like Romesh Chunder Dutt and Mahadev Govind Ranade emerged. In 1833, the British Parliament's Select Committee—tasked with reviewing the East India Company's trade and administrative systems in India—invited Rammohan Roy to testify. There, he presented his economic ideas, covering issues such as India's land tenure and judicial systems, socio-economic conditions, the character and social status of its citizens, the salt monopoly, European settlement in India, and the drain of wealth resulting from the Company's administration. By highlighting these issues, he reflected the progressive thinking regarding Indian society and the economy at the time. Rammohan placed particular emphasis on the adverse effects of the Permanent Settlement; he

proposed that the land revenue system should engage directly with the cultivator, just as it did with the ‘zamindar’ (landlord). He advocated for curbing the ‘zamindars' ’ power to hike taxes and called for a reduction in the land revenue burden on farmers. Rammohan himself owned six estates, which gave him firsthand insight into how the Permanent Settlement had enriched a select few while plunging millions of cultivators into distress. Consequently, much like John Stuart Mill, Rammohan argued that if the state required additional revenue, taxes should be levied on luxury items and non-essential goods rather than increasing the financial burden on agriculture. He also disapproved of the Company's trade monopoly—a stance that bore fruit in the Charter Act of 1833, which completely abolished the Company's trading rights. Alongside these economic concerns, he campaigned against blind superstition, religious orthodoxy, and the undemocratic excesses of British rule, spearheading movements against practices like ‘Sati’ and opposing measures such as the New Jury Act, the Stamp Act, and press censorship laws.

Rammohun Roy was the first Indian—predating Dadabhai Naoroji by fifty years—to highlight the drain of wealth from India to England. Citing data from the East India Company's auditor, he stated that the volume of this wealth drain amounted to three million pounds sterling. This figure encompassed the expenses of the Company's London office, the repayment of its debts in Britain, payments due to military and civil pensioners residing there, and the cost of purchasing British goods for the Company's use in India—amounting to £450,000 annually. Additionally, it included the savings of British officials and merchants stationed in India, which totaled two million pounds. He suggested that the drain of wealth might be mitigated if Europeans purchased land and settled permanently in the country. George Alexander Prinsep, a partner in the agency house Palmer & Co., stated in his 1823 work, (Remarks on the External Commerce and Exchange of Bengal): "It is no extravagant assertion to advance that the annual remittance to London on account of individuals has been at the rate of nearly two million per annum for a series of years past."

6. Lack of democratic and state-oriented thinking in the past:

A study of the evolution of human civilization reveals that, in the early stages, humans formed families, clans, tribes, and communal groups. From these various associations, distinct peoples emerged, and the aggregation of these peoples gave rise to nationalism. Such patterns were observed across the globe, and India was no exception. As these ancient, democratic tribal groups evolved into states, the power of the collective waned, giving way to the rise of individual monarchies. Consequently, the rigid rule of monarchies and empires across the world led to the disappearance of ancient hereditary or tribal democracies. Similarly, democratic electoral practices existed—such as those found among the Native Americans and the Khasi people of Assam. While these primitive democratic systems persist among extant ancient tribal civilizations, they do not equate to modern democratic systems. Observing the ‘Panchayat’ system in Bengal, village governance in the Deccan, and other forms of collective administration and elections elsewhere, many surmise that democracy in India is ancient; indeed, the ‘Sangha’ system of the Buddhist era rivaled modern democracy in many respects, though that practice, too, vanished in the post-Rammohun era. Thus, while a sense of collective governance or democracy has existed in India since ancient times, these early tribal or communal electoral systems cannot be classified as modern democracy.

The concept of nationalism—as understood in the post-French Revolution era—did not exist in India prior to Rammohun. Groups such as the Sikhs, Rajputs, and Marathas were mutually antagonistic; they were essentially feudal chieftains seeking to build empires to serve the interests of their own specific communities or factions. Unlike figures such as Shankaracharya in the religious sphere or Shivaji in state-building, Rammohun Roy did not merely attempt to establish Hindu supremacy in the nineteenth century. Rammohun possessed a foresight that Shivaji lacked; consequently, Shivaji never attempted to forge an Indian nation. He did not look towards the Rajputs, nor did he envision the potential for a new power arising from a synthesis of Hindus and Muslims in Punjab. The Sikhs, Rajputs, and Marathas were enemies to one another rather than allies, and thus, no strong bond of unity was ever forged among them. It is for this reason that Rammohun Roy himself wrote, "Patriotism never existed in this country." Yet, some hold the view that nationalism is an ancient concept in India, predating Rammohun—and even the eras of Maratha and Rajput history. A look at the history of Rajasthan reveals strong solidarity among the people towards the King of Chittor—based on clan, region, or ethnicity—but this was nothing new. Similar examples can be found among the feudal lords of medieval Europe; however, such regional loyalties are distinct from the patriotism that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Far from fostering a sense of unity across India's various provinces, the Rajputs—bound by clan pride—never managed to unite the whole of Rajasthan. We observe a similar phenomenon in the blind loyalty to clans seen in feudal Europe. Therefore, this bears no relation to the modern concept of nationalism that emerged later.

Just as the glorious tales of the Solar and Lunar dynasties were once composed and recited by poets in ancient India, the praises of kings—whether personal or ancestral—were subsequently inscribed on stupas, stone pillars, and copper plates. Similarly, while the bardic poets of the Rajputs sang of the exploits and glory of various kings, a sense of collective Rajasthani identity or nationalism never found expression in their works. In other words, the empires that emerged in India prior to the eighteenth century—be it the imperial expansion of Ashoka, the empire-building of

Emperor Akbar, or the regional empires of the Rajputs and Marathas—never embodied the spirit of nationalism. For instance, following the death of Shivaji, the Maratha Empire saw various Maharashtrian feudal chieftains—such as the Scindias, Holkars, and Bhonsles—establishing dominance within their own respective territories. Far from reflecting a sense of Indian nationalism, there was not even a trace of a unified Maharashtrian identity; thus, it can be concluded that the formation of an empire is not synonymous with the formation of a nation.

In 1838, in Boston, USA, William Adam—a Unitarian disciple of Rammohun—spoke of Rammohun Roy's life and achievements, stating: "He would be free or not be at all... Love of freedom was perhaps the strongest passion of his soul... freedom not of action merely, but of thought." When Rammohun Roy was born, the society and religious landscape of the country were so deeply entrenched in superstition that, while some attempts to break free were perhaps already underway, Rammohun Roy emerged as a true savior. The situation becomes clear when one considers a few examples of these superstitions: human beings were bought and sold for twenty rupees; the ownership of enslaved people attached to an estate would change hands along with the property itself; newborn babies in the birthing room were believed to be seized by owls; witches were thought to cast spells on young men in villages; wealthy 'Babus' in the metropolis of Calcutta were often defined by their relationships with mistresses; 'Bamachari' worshippers of the 'Shakti' cult consumed alcohol and meat as part of their rituals; and in that era, 'Kulin' women were poisoned, infant daughters were cast into the waters of the Ganges, and widows were burned alive on funeral pyres in the name of religion. Rammohun Roy—for whom freedom was the very essence of life—did not seek liberty by allying with the British, the Marathas, or the Sikhs; instead, he chose the path of an intellectual revolution born of the synthesis between Eastern and Western civilizations. India had never lacked philosophers, religious leaders, or heroes; what had been missing, however, was a vision that could harmonize religion, philosophy, statecraft, and literature into a unified whole. Rammohun was the visionary who inspired the nation with the ideal of pan-Indian unity.

Rammohun's Brahmo Sabha was not merely a religious body; rather, it served as a unifying guide for forging a greater nation. The 'Brahmo' mantra he championed was not the creed of a sectarian religious group; it was a call to awaken a universal national consciousness that transcended the boundaries of Hindu, Muslim and Christian faiths—a spirit embodied by the Brahmo movement of the nineteenth century. Rammohun was unique in his attempt to unite people of all faiths within the Brahmo Sabha, seeking to establish a universal dimension across India by validating the distinct tenets of Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity—such as the Hindu concept of 'Shuddhi' (purification), the Muslim 'Kalma', and the Christian significance of the waters of the Jordan—rather than treating them as separate, conflicting entities. While the British established a unified administrative and legal framework across India, Rammohun Roy sought to awaken a sense of kinship among all Indians—a bond that had not existed previously. Rammohun was not a mystic devotee 'Param-Bhagavat' in the mold of Kabir, Dadu, Chaitanya, Mirabai, or Ramakrishna; nor was he a philosopher who authored formal treatises on philosophy like Sayancharya, Vallabhacharya, or Patanjali. Had he possessed a dedicated commentator or disciple capable of skillfully interpreting and analyzing Hindu, Muslim, and Christian faiths, we would undoubtedly have seen the emergence of a distinct school of philosophy derived from his ideas and writings. In reality, he was a householder whose goal was to foster progress in the afterlife while living a worldly life. As Gurudas Banerjee aptly observed: "One thing, I believe, we all will be agreed upon—all sects, whether orthodox Hindus or progressive Brahmos, whether Mahomedans or Christians—that to Rammohun Roy is due the credit of forcibly pointing out to learned Hindus that religion does not require one to be a 'yogi' or a 'suttee', or to retreat to the forest; rather, home and society provide the best setting for true worship."

To overcome the profound crisis gripping the society, religion, and politics of 19th-century Bengal, Rammohun Roy sought to unite people of all backgrounds through Brahmoism; he utilized ancient Hindu scriptures as a tool to speak out against superstition. Simultaneously, he embraced the customs, laws, and culture of Western civilization, influenced by the liberalism that had spread rapidly across Europe in the wake of the French Revolution. Prior to Rammohun, such liberalism or nationalism was absent; the prevailing sentiment was one of regionalism. He realized that spreading this liberalism or nationalism—and uniting all Indians—required first abandoning religious divisions, then forging a unified nation, and finally cultivating a spirit of nationalism. To realize this vision, he established the Brahmo Sabha, although the organization later fractured and deviated from its original ideals. While his ideas gained traction among some, they did not achieve widespread success across India. Nevertheless, the subsequent rise of various organizations, minor rebellions, and the eventual emergence of the National Congress in 1885 paved the way for nationalism to spread throughout the country. However, Rammohun's initial vision—uniting people of diverse faiths under the umbrella of the Brahmo Sabha to form a unified nation—did not materialize. Regardless, his thoughts and actions embodied concepts such as religious unity, democratic ideals, and national consciousness—precedents that were previously unseen. For this reason, we will always remember Rammohun as a pioneer and a founding figure of modern India.

7. Conclusion:

Rammohun Roy had long before consistently advocated—through letters to the Board of Control—for various elements that would later become central to the national movement against British rule, such as legal reforms, administrative and judicial structures, constitutional matters, land reforms, revenue systems, and the Indianization of the army; these communications served as significant documents for the political movement. Bipin Chandra Pal remarked, "The Indian National Congress could scarcely go beyond the issues advocated or demanded by Rammohun Roy." A significant milestone in this regard was the separation of the executive and judiciary, which was implemented for the first time on Thursday, September 5, 1968, in the districts of Kolkata (the Presidency city) and Hooghly in West Bengal—a policy Rammohun Roy had championed over 130 years earlier. Paying deep tribute to Rammohun Roy's contribution to India's' Swaraj movement, the great national leader Surendranath Banerjee stated, "We... claim Rammohun Roy as our leader, our guide, and our revered teacher in the arduous struggle for political renaissance... It may be said that our national life has flowed from him like a stream. His tireless efforts shaped the entire course of national development." Thus, Raja Rammohun Roy inspired India to break free from the shackles of a foreign power, reconstruct its own destiny, develop indigenous institutions, and once again reclaim a position of greatness among nations.

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