

“ROLE OF PRESS AS CAMPAIGN OF SOCIAL REFORM BY RAJA RAM MOHAN ROY”.

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Abstract

Raja Ram Mohan Roy is considered as the pioneer of modern Indian Renaissance for the remarkable reforms he brought in the 18th and 19th century India. Among his efforts, the abolition of the brutal and inhuman sati practice was the most prominent. His efforts were also instrumental in eradicating the purdah system and child marriage. In 1828, Ram Mohan Roy formed the Brahmo Samaj, uniting the Bhramos in Calcutta, a group of people, who had no faith in idol-worship and were against the caste restrictions. The title 'Raja' was bestowed upon him by the Mughal emperor Akbar II, in 1831. Roy visited England as an ambassador of the Mughal King to ensure that Bentinck's regulation banning the practice of sati was not overturned. Ram Mohan Roy was a staunch supporter of free speech and expression. He fought for the rights of vernacular press, he also brought out a newspaper in Persian called 'Miratul- Akhbar' (the Mirror of News) and a Bengali weekly called 'Sambad Kaumudi' (the Moon of Intelligence). In those days, items of news and articles had to be approved by the Government before being published. Ram Mohan protested against this control by arguing that newspapers should be free and that the truth should not be suppressed simply because the government did not like it. Present study focus on the role of press in the reformation movement fostered by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the study is based on the secondary sources.

Key words: Rajaram Mohan Roy, press, Bramo samaj, Samad Kaumudi, Social Reform

Introduction

Father of the Indian Renaissance, Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) was born in a conservative Brahmin family in the village Radhanagar, West Bengal. He received the traditional education that was common in 18th century India. During his boyhood and early youth, he had acquired remarkable proficiency in several oriental languages such as Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, besides Hindi and his mother tongue Bengali. Comparative study of Islamic and Hindu theological scriptures and acquaintance with the works of the *Sufi* mystic poets of Persia, together with a knowledge of Aristotelian logic, had enabled him at an early age to develop a somewhat revolutionary approach towards the traditional religions. He also crusaded against the social evils like sati, polygamy and child marriage etc. He demanded property inheritance rights for women. Roy's political background fit influenced his social and religious to reforms of Hinduism. He writes, "The present system of Hindus is not well calculated to promote their political interests. It is necessary that some change should take place in their religion, at least for the sake of their political advantage and Rabindranath Tagore said Raja Ram Mohan Roy inaugurated the modern age in India. He is the father of Indian Renaissance and the prophet of Indian nationalism.

Data and Methodology

The collection of necessary data is obtained from secondary sources. Secondary data are sources based upon the reviews and references, books, journals, periodicals and website.

Social reform and Press

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a social reformer who used his journals to criticize traditional customs and practices which were holding back Indian society. He felt the need for modernization by following rational and egalitarian customs and practices, he was himself a victim of traditional customs and practices. His journals endeavored to counter the criticism of the missionaries on the one hand and to educate Indian public opinion on the need for social reform. There were items of local news including births, marriages and deaths as well as reports of events in India and the world. Articles on themes of religious and social reform, especially the need to end the inhuman custom of Sati as well as travelogues, shipping and commercial news.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy as Champion of press

Rammohan was a great champion of the freedom of the Press. His efforts to liberate the Press were made with the aim of educating Indians about the affairs of the nation in their true perspective. He himself published newspapers in English, Bengali and Persian for the purpose of creating mass consciousness as a veritable check against the British authoritarianism. Besides being a great social reformer Ram Mohan also made a valuable contribution to Bengali literature and he is regarded as the father of Bengali prose. He was the first to realize the value of the newspapers as an instrument for diffusing intellectual light. His earliest books on Bengali prose were Vedanta – Grantha and Vedanta - Saar which were published in 1815 and 1816 respectively. His greatest contribution to Indian language journalism was perhaps his petition to the British government against the Vernacular Press Act of 1823. The study of the history of freedom of press reveals that Raja Ram Mohan Roy was an ardent (devoted) supporter and patronizer of freedom of press, he brought out journals in some major languages including Bengali, Persian and Hindi in order to create socio-cultural and political awareness among the people of India. He was deeply devoted to the work of religious and social reform, so he founded the 'Brahmo Samaj' in 1825. He condemned polytheism and idol worship and propagated the concept of one God. His religious ideas had assimilated elements of Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and modern European liberal philosophy. He translated ancient Indian works on religion and philosophy into Bengali.

As a Social Reformer

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was basically a social reformer who contributed significantly for the elimination of the Sati System and for the spread of Women Education in the country. Ram Mohan Roy tried to spread literary, political and scientific knowledge among the Indians. He had the intention of presenting popular demands and grievances before the Government by creating public opinion on current issues and topics. The purpose Raja Ram Mohan Roy had in mind could not be served properly if there was no freedom of press. Roy published magazines in English, Hindi,

Persian and Bengali the first liberal paper to be published was the. Bengali weekly started in Calcutta in 1816 by the enthusiastic members of the Ram Mohan's Atmiya Sabha. The newspaper continued to be published till 1820. The British East India Company was against Freedom of press in India. But Raja Ram Mohan Roy strongly argued against this view. The company had the fear of public criticism under a free press. Ram Mohan Roy was successful in convincing the authority with his strong logic arguing that in India freedom of press would not be harmful for the government as people had been loyal to it. A free press acts like a channel of communication between the two and solves many problems. People come to know about the plans, programs, policies and intentions of the government through it. People also express their reactions and grievances through it thus making the governance more effective. A free press helps disseminate knowledge and boosts intellectual improvement. It allows creativity: gives literary, cultural and artistic knowledge and pleasure. The government comes to know about the defects of its policies and administration and gets a scope to remedy those before any crisis arises. Raja Ram Mohan Roy argued that a free press fails revolution and does not nourish it. He felt that there has not been a reduction of violence under a free press. On the contrary, a number of revolutions have taken place in those parts of the world where press freedom was denied. The purpose Raja Ram Mohan Roy had in mind could not be served properly if there was no freedom of press, he championed the cause of press freedom.

Campaign against Sati

Samvad Kaumudi regularly editorialized against sati denouncing it as barbaric and un-Hindu it was the main vehicle of Raja Ram Mohan Roy's campaign against sati. Reportedly Raja Ram Ro Mohan opposed sati practice (burning of widow with the dead husband's corpse). With his active persuasion Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor General of British India passed the famous Regulation XVII in 1829 that situated Sati as illegal and punishable by courts.

Protest against Vernacular press

In 1823, Press Ordinance was promulgated, it prohibited the publication of newspaper or periodicals without previous license from the Governor-General-in-Council. Raja Ram Mohan Roy protested against it and submitted a memorandum to the Supreme Court arguing in favour of freedom of press in India. The British East India Company was against Freedom of press in India. But Raja Ram Mohan Roy strongly argued against this view. The company had the fear of public criticism under a free press. Ram Mohan Roy was successful in convincing the authority with his strong logic arguing that in India Freedom of press would not be harmful for the government as people had been loyal to it. Roy pointed out that a free press acted as a safety valve and did not give any scope for sudden outburst. Freedom of press was helpful to both the government and the people. A free press acts like a channel of communication between the two and solves many problems. People come to know about the plans, programs, policies and intentions of the government through it. People also express their reactions and grievances through it thus making the governance more effective. Raja Ram Mohan Roy argued that a free press fails

revolution and does not nourish it. He felt that there has not been a reduction of violence under a free press on the contrary, a number of revolutions have taken place in those parts of the world where press freedom was denied. Due to lack of opportunity of expression grievances and discontentment of the people pile up and ultimately burst out in the form of a revolution.

With his inspiration following newspapers came into being:

- Bengali Gazette
- Sambad Kaumudi, (Bengali);
- Miratul Akhbar (Persian),
- Brahmanical Magazine (English)
- Bengal Herald
- The Reformer
- The Enquirer
- Gyan Anveshan

Samvada Kaumudi

One notable magazine of his was the Samvad Kaumudi began under the editorship of Bhabani Charan Banerjee. But Banerjee left the newspaper after 13 issues because of the dispute with Roy on the points of sati system and other social reforms. Ram Mohan took charge of it, the Samvad Kaumudi was intended for the common people.. Samvad Kaumudi became bi-weekly in January and continued for 33yrs. An article contained the description of the miserable condition of the Hindus suffering from caste prejudices. Another issue contained an advice to the Hindus to become tradesman rather than mere clerks. The paper also appealed to the government to establish trial by jury in the Zila and Provincial Courts.

Mirat-ul-akhbar (Mirror of News).

In 1822, Ram Mohan published Mirat-ul-akhbar in Persian language. The Mirat-ul-Akbar happened to be the first paper in Persian language to be published in India. As a language still recognized in courts, was seen as a means to reach the intelligentsia the top policymakers of the country. Rammohan also realized that he could express himself best in a language he was most comfortable with Persian as a result he wrote many of the articles and edited the newspaper. Mirat-ul-Akhbar, the weekly in Persian, devoted much space to international affairs. The first issue carried an article on China and an analysis of the causes of tension between Russia and the Turkish ruler at Constantinople.

Through this paper he tried to communicate his political and social views to the educated elite according to their needs. In the Prospectus of the Mirat-ul-Akhbar, published in the first issue of the weekly, Ram Mohan wrote that the object of the paper was not to shower praises upon its promoters or his well-wishers or to scandalize anybody. On the contrary, it aimed at reaching the truth, in its second issue Ram Mohan published his article on the British Constitution. Ram Mohan wrote an editorial about the trial protesting against the cruel treatment meted out to one

Pratap Narayan Das who had succumbed to the injuries caused by whipping ordered by John Hayes, the Judge of Camilla. As a result of this Hayes was tried by the Supreme Court in April that year. Ram Mohan's editorial was translated into English, and published in the Calcutta Journal of May 14, 1822 by its editor, James Silk Buckingham who was a great friend of Ram Mohan.

In all his publications Ram Mohan emphasized the important of subjects having educational value, besides those on politics and theology. During 1821 – 24 he published in the Mirat-ul-Akhbar several articles on scientific subjects like "Echo in Acoustics" Properties of the Magnet", "Behaviour of fishes" Description of a Baloon, etc. His persistent Advocacy for the introduction of scientific education bore fruit long after his death. The Persian editorial of the Mirat-ul-Akhbar written by Ram Mohan were translated into English and were published in the Calcutta Journal, edited by James Silk Buckingham. In this editorial Ram Mohan revealed his great learning and deep knowledge of the political affairs of his time. Ram Mohan's editorial criticism of popular Christian faith, English foreign policy and of the British insolence on public roads towards the common people appeared too venomous for the British administration in India to swallow.

Press Ordinance,

Soon the acting Governor- General came down with a heavy hand for the suppression of the liberty of the Press, and promulgated a new Press Ordinance, drastically curtailing free expression of opinion through the press. Immediately after the enactment of the Ordinance, Ram Mohan closed down the Mirat-ul-Akhbar as a mark of protest. In the last issue of his paper, he declared his inability to go on publishing under" what he considered were degrading conditions and he lamented that he one of the humblest of men, should be no longer able to contribute towards the intellectual improvement of his countrymen. After suspension of the Mirat-ul-Akhbar in 1823 Ram Mohan became connected with several other periodicals, and continued his relentless crusades against irrationalism and suppression of freedom of the Press.

Bengal Herald

Bengal Herald was started by R.M. Martin in collaboration with Ram Mohan and Dwarkanath Tagore. It was a liberal periodical with a progressive outlook. It had also a corresponding Vernacular Publication called the Bangadoot printed in Bengali Persian and Hindi and was edited by Nilratan Haldar, a close associate of Ram Mohan. The Bengal Ankara the two leadings liberal English journals of the time in which Dwarkanath Tagore had large interests. Later Samuel Smith a leading book-seller and publisher of Calcutta purchased the Bengal Ankara, which happened to be one of the oldest and leading English papers in the early twenties of the nineteenth century. Under his editorship and guidance, the paper soon grew in popularity and usefulness. In the acquisition of this paper he was given substantial financial help by Dwarkanath Tagore. Dwarkanath was also one of the main proprietors of the India Gazette.

Brahmanical Magazine

He also brought out a religious periodical, the Brahmanical Magazine, to counteract the missionaries' propaganda. Ceased to exist after publication of few issues. But Sambad Kaumudi, a newsweekly, covered topics such as freedom of press, induction of Indians into high ranks of service and separation of the executive and judiciary.

Promoting growth of nationalism

The awakening generated by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in Bengal soon spread to other parts of India. Newspapers published in Indian languages strengthened national consciousness. Indian owned newspapers sprang up in various parts of India. Newspapers published in Indian languages strengthened national consciousness. Indian-owned newspapers sprang up in various parts of the country. Many of them advocated political and social reform. This awakening also resulted in the formation of citizens' association comprising lawyers, teachers and other sections of the English educated intelligentsia and emergence of nationalist movement.

Conclusion

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the first Indian to realize the value of the newspaper as an instrument for diffusing intellectual light through social reform, acknowledged by his contemporaries after his death. On the occasion of the free Press Dinner given in honor of Metcalfe, on February 9, 1838 in the Town Hall, Calcutta, Prasanna Coomar Tagore paid an eloquent tribute to the great contributions made by Ram Mohan for the freedom of the Press and social reform. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was certainly one of the most luminous star on the Indian intellectual firmament of the 19th century The history of the Press in India is a history of struggle against autocratic power and popular spineless. That history has yet to be written, but when it comes to be written, the name of Ram Mohan, who shines out clearly in brilliant and honorable

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