



RAJA RAM MOHAN ROY: THE PIONEER OF WOMEN EMANCIPATION

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ABSTRACT

Rammohan Roy was a strong advocate of women's right in British ruled India. He laid the foundations of the women's liberation movement in our country. He revolted against the subjugation of women and pleaded for the restoration of their rights. The condition of the Hindu women in those days was very pitiable. They were subjected to different kinds of injustice and deprivations. According to him, the root cause of the all-round deterioration of Hindu woman was the complete denial of their property rights. The Hindu women were not given the traditional right to share with her brothers property of her deceased father. The married Hindu women was refused the right to share with her son's the property left by her deceased husband. He insisted on modern education for women and their role in social reconstruction. He advocated women's right in family property. He condemned those evil practices do which responsible for the plight of women. He strongly opposed infanticide, child marriage, mismatched marriage, polygamy and the inhuman practice of Sati which is required by the window to be burnt alive on the funeral pyre of her dead husband. We may consider him as the humanist and democratic thinker - as he could not tolerate the autocracies happening against women.

Key words: women, emancipation, rights, liberal, social reformer.

Introduction

Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-2833), may be considered as the pioneer of Indian Renaissance. He is generally hailed as 'the father of Modern India'. Though he was modernist in his approach; he always tried to link modernity with tradition. He attempt to creative combination of secularism and spirituality, of Western and Eastern philosophy. Which attitude towards religion was electric? He wanted to present the concept of universal religion by combining the best features of all living religion of the world. He was the founder of

Brahmo Samaj, one of the first Indian socio religious reform movements in India. He played a major role in abolishing the practice of Sati. In 1815 he formed Atmiyo Sabha. He tried to initiate social and religious reforms in the society. He campaigned for rights for women, including the right for widows to remarry, and right for women to hold property. He actively opposed Sati system and practice of polygamy then prevalent in India. He was influenced by the poor condition of women in society. He strongly protests against the inhumane behaviour with the women in Hindu society and religion.

Views on women

He insisted on modern education for women and their role in social reconstruction. He advocated women's right in family property. He condemned those evil practices do which responsible for the plight of women. He strongly opposed infanticide, child marriage, mismatched marriage, polygamy and the inhuman practice of Sati which is required by the widow to be burnt alive on the funeral pyre of her dead husband. Citing evidence from scriptures, he tried to convince the people that Hinduism does not allow a woman to be burnt alive as a proof of her chastity; human reason, too, does not approve this practice. A woman cannot be held responsible for the natural death of her husband; burning of an innocent woman amounts violence of human dignity. Roy argues that like is the gift of God society has no right to destroy it. A widow, like a widower, should have the freedom to remarry. If there is not feasible, cannot be prevented from leading a pious life.¹ He also severely criticized the Hindu caste system it had given rise to gross inequality in society and eroded the sentiment of patriotism. He was born in a Brahmin family, yet he challenged the notion of superiority of Brahmins, and advocated increased dining as well as inter caste marriage in order to promote social equality.² He strongly express his views in the favour of women emancipation and he wanted to protect women from inhumane rituals of Hindu religion.

Advocate of woman rights

He was a strong advocate of women's right in British ruled India. He laid the foundations of the women's liberation movement in our country. He revolted against the subjugation of women and pleaded for the restoration of their rights. The condition of the Hindu women in those days was very pitiable. They were subjected to different kinds of injustice and deprivations. According to him, the root cause of the all-round deterioration of Hindu woman was the complete denial of their property rights. The Hindu women were not given the traditional right to share with her brothers property of her deceased father. The married Hindu women was refused the right to share with her son's the property left by her deceased husband. In 1822 he wrote a book entitled 'Brief Remarks Regarding Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females'. He pointed out that the ancient Hindu Lawgivers give the mother the right to have an equal share with her sons in the property left by her husband; and daughter to have one fourth part of the portion which is son could inherit in the property left by the father. He indicated how these rights were gradually taken away by the

modern lawgivers. Hit tried to prove that all these depressions were blatant violation of the provisions in the ancient texts written by the authorities such as Yagnyawalakya, Narad, Katyayana, Brihaspati and others. The utter helplessness and humiliation of the Hindu widow was one of the major reasons that prompted the inhuman practice Sati.³ Women completely robbed of their property rights quiet naturally lost their independence and become the slaves of the male members of the family. They were thought to have list intellectual capability is then the males. They were supposed to have an existence only at a physical level. Men wear free to marry as many women as the thought fit for the satisfaction of their lust. Women however they were not allowed to marry a second time. As equality of sexes was an article of faith for him, he could not accept the women were inferior two men in any respect. What you were in priority seemed to be on their path was the result, he argued, keeping them away from generations from the sources of knowledge and the opportunities to shoulder different responsibilities in life. He vehemently opposed polygamy and with utmost vigour brought to light, it's shameful evil consequences. He pleaded for an enactment allowing Hindu male to marry a second wife only after getting a clearance from the magistrate. He was in favour of remarriage of women under certain circumstances. He was strong supporter of women education.

‘He negates the argument that women were essentially ignorant and an intelligent by the throwing our account all question: why was no attempt made to educate them to attend their real worth? He refuses to accept that women were lax in morals, and vociferously excuse man of duping then and leaving them astray. Rammohun was the first advocate of women’s rights in India-far ahead of others- and his campaign against Sati was only a part of his overall mission for the upliftment of women in India’⁴ In his later works, he argued that, ‘the burning of widows often brought material gains to the male members of the widow’s family’,⁵ According to Jawhar Sircar (2020), historians may need to examine in greater depth the links that Rammohun mentioned between the growing wealth of individual Bengalis under British rule and their cruelty towards widows for the sake of appropriating their property. This was more pronounce in the family of the Sanskritised castes and was quite visible in the late 18th and the early 19th century. We need to study this connection between the historic rise of the ‘*Bengali bhadralok*’ class that coincided with the establishment of British rule and the consequential contraction of the property rights of their women. Male members of this class were bent on appropriating property that was rightfully due to widows under *Bengal's Dayabhaga laws*, which was more liberal than the more male centric *Mitaksharasystem* prevalent in the rest of India. They compelled young widows to either commit Sati or to migrate and settle in Kashi vindavan- where are they are exploited shamelessly and had to spend the largest part of their lives in penury. Other dependent women members of the family were also deprived of their property rights through various devices, now that wealth proved quite addictive. According to Amiyo P. Sen, from official records to establish that while the upper castes accounted for only 11 % of the population, 55% of the reported causes of Sati in the second decade of the 19th century were from these castes. In 1823, 41% of all the kisses of Sati reported in Bengal were from Bramhan families.⁶

In 1822, he wrote strongly against Hindu laws that had steadily gone on depriving women of their rights throughout history.

Women emancipation through social reforms

He was well known for his pioneering thought on the emancipation of women and especially on the abolition of Sati and widow marriage.⁷ His revolutionary social reform is evolution of the cruel practice of Sati. He used all the means at his disposal to stop this in human practice, which force the helpless widow to burn herself alive on the funeral pyre of her husband. In 1818, he wrote his first essay on Sati in which we argue that the women had an existence independent of her husband and hence, she had no reason to end her life on the demise of her husband. The society had no right over her life. Right to life of both men and women was equally important. That the practice of Sati was centuries old it could be no argument to make it just. All that comes through centuries need not always be right. All customs need to be adjusting to the changing circumstances, they are to survive. According to him, Sati was nothing short of murder and was therefore a punishable offence under the law. He fought against the practice of Sati on three fronts: the first and the most important was that of public opinion. He through writings, speeches, education and discussion prepare the minds of the people in favour of the abolition of Sati and explained how the practice had no support in any of the religious texts and hence governmental action in the matter could not be and interference in religious affairs. Secondly, he tried to convince the rulers that it was their responsibility as civilized to learn to put an end to the cruel custom. The third front was the inquiry into the causes that led a Hindu widow to commit Sati and to make arrangements to eliminate the causes. He found that ignorance of the women about their legitimate rights, their illiteracy, custom denial to the property rights to the widow and the consequent helplessness, dependence, misery and humiliation were some of the causes behind this practice. He pleaded strongly for the registration of property rights of the women as well as for facilities for women's education.⁸ He argued: ' Those who have no reliance on the 'Shastras' and those who take delight in the self destruction of women may well wonder that we should oppose that suicide which is forbidden by all ' Shastras' and by every race of man'.⁹ He also organised vigilance committee to keep a check up on people who encouraged widows to commit Sati and himself tried to persuade the relatives of widows to give up the plan of self immolation. In his way he created an atmosphere and aroused enlightened public opinion for the evolution of the barbarous practice. Ultimately Lord Willam Bentinck, the Governor General, declared Sati as illegal and punishable by the court on 4th December 1829. The law provided that persons who were even associated in any way with the commission of Sati to be regarded as criminals.¹⁰ He gave before the people a correct interpretation of the Hindu scriptures. He was also the best admirer of community development. He always tried to do the best for the upliftment of this community. Ha emphasized more on women's education and worked for their progress. He also took care on the right of women to the property of her father.

Evaluation

Not only did he plead for women's share in the ancestral property but he wholly supported many of their other causes. He stood for female education and also widow remarriage. In order to gift the women their rightful place in the society he stood against polygamy and also for inter caste marriages. He was a symbol of Indian spirituality and had deep faith in that. He studied Indian religion in proper sense of the term. He believed that the ancient Indian religion in its true sense stood for religious tolerance, universal brotherhood, humanism and liberalism. He very boldly said that untouchability or caste system or Idol worship were only such institutions which were subsequently introduced in religion by the selfish people and the not part of original and period Hindu religion. We may consider him as the humanist and democratic thinker - as he could not tolerate the autocracies happening against women. He was an activist for women education, widow remarriage and he was against all social and religious evils against women. So we can consider him as the pioneer of the women emancipation of British colonial India.

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