

The Social Implications of the Political Thought of Raja Rammohun Roy

Rammohun Roy is, by any standard, an outstanding figure in modern history. His eighteen years in Calcutta and London are crowded with activities which have left a deep imprint upon Indian society. He was a great scholar in theology and mastered a number of languages. He pioneered the modern critical study of the classical Indian texts; inaugurated a number of social and religious reform movements and furthered the cause of modern education in Bengal. A successful pamphleteer and an impressive journalist, he wrote with ease and competence on various topics from *sati* and the moral teachings of Jesus to the revenue administration in Bengal. What is more, he wrote in five languages — Bengali, Hindustani, English, Sanskrit and Persian. Above all, he has left behind him a rich legacy of ideas, the central theme of which is the freedom of the individual, which has inspired generations of Indians into political action. Perhaps we can measure the great impact he made upon his young contemporaries from the following remark in the *Calcutta Review*, 1845:

Viewed, in reference to native amelioration, the present is perhaps the most interesting and eventful period in the history of the country. It might be properly called the age of enquiry and investigation. The metropolis of British India is now undergoing a remarkable transition; customs conserved by immemorial observance and interwoven with the fibres of the Hindu society are unhesitatingly renounced as incompatible with the laws of God and man... But in reflecting on the change now being wrought by educational and other instrumentalities on the native mind, we are irresistibly reminded of the impetus originally communicated to it by Rammohun Roy. His name is inseparably connected with a great moral revolution. It is, therefore, peculiarly interesting to trace the history of this extraordinary man, for it is in a great measure the history of the Revolution.¹

¹ *Calcutta Review*, IV, July-December 1845, p. 385.

Thus the most interesting part of Rammohun's life and works was not the movement to abolish *sati*, nor the struggle to establish modern education, nor the foundation of the Brahma Samaj, nor the passionate plea for the freedom of the press, but the sum total of all these and more. He inaugurated the modern age in India by ushering in an era of enquiry and investigation. No doubt his scepticism and humanism touched only a small segment of society, but the philosophy of the Enlightenment had also touched a small number of philosophers in Europe, and yet its importance cannot be denied in the history of ideas or in eighteenth century politics. The 'moral revolution' affected the course of Indian history in the nineteenth century, for it was tied up with social reform and economic enterprise. No attempt has so far been made to study the 'moral revolution' in relation to social and economic changes. We are all indebted to the old scholars such as N. N. Chatterjee,² Miss Sophia Dobson Collet,³ B. N. Banerjee,⁴ J. K. Majumdar,⁵ and to modern scholars such as D. K. Biswas and P. C. Ganguli⁶ for their painstaking researches into the life and letters of Raja Rammohun Roy. They have added much to our knowledge about the long career of the Indian reformer, but have not helped much in our understanding of his ideas in depth.

B. B. Majumdar,⁷ in his pioneering work on the history of modern Indian political thought, has given us a fair, if uncritical, summary of Rammohun's ideas. In recent years many scholars in India and America have followed Majumdar's lead in this field. These scholars agree about an intellectual crisis in India, more particularly in Bengal, during the early nineteenth century and assume that rationalism and the spirit of enquiry in the writings of such men as Rammohun Roy were a direct

² *Mahatma Raja Rammohan Rayer Jibanacarit* [in Bengali], Calcutta, 1881.

³ *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohu Roy*, London, 1900.

⁴ (a) *Raja Rammohan Roy's Mission to England* (Calcutta, 1926); (b) *Rammohan Ray* [in Bengali] in *Sahitya Sadhak Caritamala*, 5th ed., i, 16, Calcutta, 1367, Bengali era. Banerjee also wrote numerous articles on Rammohun Roy in English and Bengali in various learned journals of Calcutta.

⁵ (ed.) *Raja Rammohun Roy and Progressive Movements in India; A Selection from Records 1775-1845 with an Historical Introduction*, Calcutta, 1941.

⁶ Biswas and Ganguli edited the third edition of S. D. Collet's works, *op. cit.*, Calcutta, 1962.

⁷ *History of Political Thought from Rammohun to Dayananda (1821-84)*, Calcutta, 1934, pp. 1-77.

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result of English education.⁸ Following K. M. Panikkar,⁹ we can describe the process as the return voyage of Vasco da Gama — the discovery of Europe by Asia. This was not a physical journey in search of spices and Christians, but an intellectual journey which brought back humanism and scepticism. However, English education and Western impact, important as they might have been, do not fully explain the intellectual movements in Bengal during the first half of the nineteenth century. Already the moral and intellectual crisis had affected those who had not gone through any English school. No doubt they had acquired some workable knowledge of English and had had contact with the British officers, but they read Bentham, Blackstone and other notable English authors long after they had reached their manhood. In other words, the Western impact on Rammohun and his friends was conditioned by their traditional attitudes and ideas which were, to quote Gandhi, part of their 'training and home influence'. Many Indians and some Western scholars hold that the Indians were not just borrowing from the West but were trying to assimilate Western and Indian ideas.¹⁰ What is often forgotten is that Rammohun had also inherited a social situation which made it necessary and possible to assimilate ideas and institutions of the two cultures. English ideas would be unimportant unless there was already a group of people who found them useful and were able to reinterpret them in the light of their traditional heritage and social experience. Thus the Western impact upon Rammohun was conditioned in two ways — by the thought patterns which he had inherited and by the social circumstances in which he lived.

It is not possible to single out any particular Western work which influenced Rammohun most. But his works and correspondence clearly show that he was well acquainted with the works of Bacon, Locke, Blackstone and Bentham.¹¹ It is also possible to deduce from the tenor of his arguments that he had read Montesquieu, Adam Smith and the history of modern Britain, especially the version presented by the Whigs and the Radicals.¹² But it is important to remember that the

⁸ See S. Sen, *The Political Thought of Tagore*, Calcutta, 1947, and D. Mackenzie Brown, *The White Umbrella*, Berkeley, 1959.

⁹ *Asia and Western Dominance*, London, 1953, pp. 315-18; cf. E. J. Hobsbawm, 'The End of European World Domination', *Afro-Asian and World Affairs*, no. 2, 1964, pp. 93-9.

¹⁰ Panikkar, *op. cit.*, pp. 320-3; cf. T. G. P. Spear, *India, Pakistan and the West*, 4th ed., London, 1967, pp. 119-22.

¹¹ K. Nag and D. Burman (eds), *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, pts. i, iii and iv, Calcutta, 1945.

¹² *Ibid.*, pts. i and iv.

Western liberal philosophy was expressed through an idiom with which Rammohun's Indian readers, more particularly readers in Calcutta, were familiar.

The traditional education system, the Indo-Islamic philosophy, and the brahmanic metaphysics provided a frame of reference common to Rammohun and his readers. There are reasons to believe that Rammohun learnt Arabic, Persian and Islamic philosophy, probably from the Muslim scholars attached to Fort William College and the *Sadar Dewani Adalat* in Calcutta,¹³ before he had time to examine the *Vedantic* philosophy and European ideas. He, no doubt, knew Sanskrit before he came in contact with the Calcutta Muslim scholars and had some understanding of brahmanism. But his first work does not show any trace of *Vedantic* influence. It seems that he was not able to pay close attention to the Hindu philosophy before he came to live in Rangpur in 1809, when Hariharananda Tirthasvami joined him. Rammohun was profoundly influenced by Hariharananda, who was a *tantrik*.¹⁴ It is interesting to trace the interaction of all these ideas in Rammohun's writings.

Some writers such as Iqbal Singh and R. P. Dutt¹⁵ have brought to our notice the social contents of Rammohun's ideas. But they have not followed their own methods rigorously to make a complete survey of his views and hence have left many questions unanswered. It is not sufficient to say that Rammohun was a humanist and a Renaissance figure who focused the causes of the new middle classes in India. We have to find out what social groups comprised the new middle classes, what their aspirations were, what new problems were created by the rise of such new social groups, how far Rammohun Roy was aware of such problems, and in what way he tried to solve them.

In our opinion Rammohun Roy had a model of society in mind. Undoubtedly his pamphlets were written in response to certain specific problems such as *sati*, freedom of the Press, and the administration of justice in Bengal, but when we consider them all together they fall into a definite pattern. He was not a political philosopher, nor a modern sociologist; he has nowhere explicitly mentioned his model. But since he

¹³ B. N. Banerjee, *Rammohan Ray*, pp. 26-9, 201.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-31; cf. Biswas and Ganguli, *Op. cit.*, pp. 101-2; B. N. Banerjee, *Ramcandra Vidyavagish, Hariharananda Tirthasvami* [in Bengali] in *Sahitya Sadhak Caritamala*, 1, 9, 5th ed., Calcutta, 1362, Bengali era, pp. 27-32.

¹⁵ Iqbal Singh, *Rammohun Roy: A Biographical Inquiry into the Making of Modern India*, Bombay, 1958, pp. 5-7; cf. R. Palme Dutt, *India Today and Tomorrow*, London, 1955, p. 108.

was primarily a social engineer, he deliberately set out to reconstruct the society; a schematised and an idealised social system was implied in his arguments. He wanted to establish in India a social order, which would enable the individuals to maximise their abilities and bring prosperity to the whole community. Rammohun was deeply concerned with the freedom of the individual. He assumed that a man is human only so long as he is independent of the will of another. An individual is independent if he is 'rational' and the owner of his person and capacities.¹⁶ Rammohun's faith in individualism was inspired by Western political philosophy, more particularly by the works of Locke and Bentham, but individualism was also part and parcel of the social, religious and economic aspirations of the Bengali middle class. Moreover the social model of Rammohun — a competitive market society — corresponds to the social reality of Bengal in the early nineteenth century.

Rammohun and his contemporaries witnessed a disruption of the old social and economic order on account of the growth of a market, the penetration of British trade into the rural areas, famines, wars and the political 'revolutions'. In 1717 the English had received their 'magna carta' of Eastern trade, when the Mughal emperor Farrukhsiyar conferred upon them the right to trade duty-free in exchange for a small tribute and the right to issue *dastaks* exempting goods from customs check.¹⁷ The English had successfully exploited their 'rights', and by the middle of the eighteenth century they had almost acquired a monopoly control over both inland and foreign trade. They put many Indian traders out of business and reduced the bargaining power of the producers, but they invested a large sum of capital in Bengal, brought foreign markets nearer to the village producers and created their own middlemen.¹⁸ This was one of the most important factors which created a social erosion in Bengal in the nineteenth century.

The British also helped the growth of a market in land and in land rent. The system of farming out (meaning letting out a fluctuating source of revenue income for a more or less stable annual sum to the highest bidder), which was first introduced in Calcutta, was later used extensively throughout the province especially during the period

¹⁶ Cf. Rammohun's *Brief Remarks* regarding modern encroachments on the ancient rights of women according to the Hindu law of inheritance in *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, ed. K. Nag and D. Burman, pt. i, 5-6. Also *ibid.* pt. ii, 23.

¹⁷ S. Bhattacharya, *The East India Company and the Economy of Bengal from 1704-1740*, Calcutta, 1954, pp. 25-7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 218-25.

between 1772-77.¹⁹ This created an unprecedented instability but allowed a large-scale circulation of money and enabled new groups such as *banians*, *gomasthas* and moneylenders to control land and land rent and to oust the 'ancient landholding families'. Significantly, the 'new landed aristocracy' came into existence in areas where the British first used their method of 'farming out' as early as 1758, that is, in Calcutta, 24-Parganas and Burdwan.²⁰ The Permanent Settlement of Cornwallis did not check the 'ruin' of the 'ancient families', nor did it confer new rights by recognising private property in land. The regulations only clearly defined the right of ownership and, what is more, enabled an individual to own unlimited wealth; they made land an alienable commodity for a large market and so allowed capital to purchase an unlimited amount. Elsewhere we have described the process as the growth of a market society,²¹ for certain features of a capitalist system such as the frequency of payments and transactions in money, the production and distribution of resources determined by the demand of a market and the recognition of individuals as owners of land and other resources could be found in Bengal during the late eighteenth century. The legal system under Cornwallis undermined the traditional allocation of work and 'feudal' rights and duties including the police power of the *zamindars*.²²

In the nineteenth century capitalism had failed to make much headway in Indian agriculture; the large farm did not necessarily grow larger; no improvement was made in the techniques of agriculture production; instead there was a fragmentation of landholdings, and the primitive techniques continued right down to our days. It is suggested that Bengal after the Permanent Settlement looked more like 'France of the *ancien régime*' and less like 'the England of Townsend and Tull'.²³

It is sufficient for us to recognise that the British officers had originally designed to bring capitalist enterprise in agriculture to Bengal, and they were partially successful, to the extent of creating a market in land and land-rent and an unprecedented social mobility in that province.

¹⁹ N. K. Sinha, *The Economic History of Bengal from Plassey to the Permanent Settlement*, Vol. II, Calcutta, 1962, pp. 68-95.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²¹ S. N. Mukherjee, (ed.), *South Asian Affairs*, no. 2, St Antony's Papers No. 18, Oxford, 1966, pp. 16-17.

²² A. Aspinall, *Cornwallis in Bengal*, Manchester, 1931, pp. 104-13.

²³ R. Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal*, Paris, 1963, p. 152.

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The money economy and the market in land brought about a social erosion which changed the very basis of interrelationship between individuals and social groups, and created a new social class, the *bhadralok*. Darpanarayan Tagore, Nabakrishna De, Ramdeolal De and similar people, who lived in Calcutta and other trade and administrative centres and made money as moneylenders, land-farmers and agents of Company officials, were the forerunners of the nineteenth-century Calcutta *bhadralok*. That this class owed its origin to the money economy and market in land was recognised by their contemporaries. It was stated in 1829 in the *Bengal Herald*²⁴ that a new class had come into existence by means of 'territorial value' (increase in price of land). The Bengali version of the *Bengal Herald* — *Bangadoot* — claimed that the market in land (which had augmented the price of land), free trade and the contact with the Europeans had helped the rise of a new class (*sreni*) whom he had earlier referred to as *madhyabit* (middle income group) but which had brought about economic prosperity to Bengal. The editor compared the history of the rise of the middle classes in Bengal with that of the middle classes in England. It was suggested that the independence and stability of the English system were the result of the rise of a powerful middle class in the eighteenth century, and the editor hoped that the middle class in Bengal would soon receive independence (*svadhinata*) like its English counterpart.²⁵

Earlier in 1823 Bhavanicharan Banerjee, a journalist of the orthodox party, lampooned the *bhadralok* class in his *Kalikata Kamalalaya*. In it he described Calcutta as the abode of Kamala, the goddess of wealth.²⁶ Rammohun himself recognised, as we shall see, that the Cornwallis system was a milestone in the social and economic history of Bengal.²⁷

The *bhadralok* were a new social class, a *de facto* social group, having no legal or religious sanction. The members of the class had similar social and political interests, and largely shared a style of life. They were not a purely economic class, for there were poor *bhadralok* as well. This class lacked the cohesion of its Western counterpart. It was heterogeneous in origin, consisting of many castes such as brahmins, kayasthas, vaidyas, subarnavaniks and gandhavaniks. These castes were

²⁴ *Bengal Herald*, 13 June 1829, in J. K. Majumdar, *Indian Speeches and Documents on British Rule 1821-1915*, Calcutta, 1937, p. 36.

²⁵ *Bangadoot*, 13 June 1829, in B. N. Banerjee (ed.), *Sangbadpatre, Sekaler Katha*, Vol. 1, 1818-30, pp. 398-9.

²⁶ Bhavanicharan Banerjee, *Kalikata Kamalalaya* [in Bengali], reprint, Calcutta, 1343, Bengali era, p. 4.

²⁷ R. Roy, *Petitions against the Press Regulations, The English Works*, pt. iv, p. 4.

important in the traditional society, either because they were rich, as in the case of the subarnavaniks, or because they had a very high ritual status, as in the case of the brahmins. But their position was more or less fixed within a social pyramid which was comparatively stable, and the interrelationship between the castes was determined by custom and *shastric* law. Thus rules regarding food, inter-dining, marriage and inheritance were determined by customs which were theoretically unchangeable. In the early nineteenth century the inter-caste relationship was undergoing a profound change, especially in Calcutta. In this city the taboos regarding food and pollution could not be enforced rigidly, as the brahmins had to share the civic amenities with other castes often living in the same street. Although the brahmins retained a high ritual position, they had to share their social and economic power with other castes who were *bhadralok*. It was more important to be a *bhadralok* than to be a brahmin.

In the 'twenties of the nineteenth century Calcutta was notorious in the eyes of rural Bengal; it was thought that the inhabitants of the city did not observe the caste rules and the brahmins were not necessarily recognised as social leaders. According to Banerjee²⁸ the Calcutta *bhadralok* were divided into factions (*dals*) which were involved in unending feuds (*daladali*). The *dals* were ephemeral groups formed by men from various castes under the protection of a rich man who could come from any caste, and the brahmins of Calcutta accepted the leadership of even the low caste shudras.

The ritual position of the brahmins was also challenged. In 1832 Dharma Sabha, an association established by the orthodox party, called a special meeting where the Bengali pandits debated a crucial question concerning the shudra-brahmin relationship. They were asked to find out whether the *sastras* permitted a shudra, if he was a *Vaisnava*, to claim reverence from the brahmins and whether the brahmins were permitted to eat such a shudra's *prasada* (leavings of food taken by a superior). The debate followed a correspondence between Motilal Seal, a rich subarnavanik, and Banerjee, then secretary of the Dharma Sabha. Later, Seal published the correspondence together with the *vyavastha* of the pandits in a pamphlet called *Biprabhakti Candrika* and distributed 500 copies gratis among his friends in Calcutta. According to the pandits' *vyavastha* a brahmin should always command respect from a shudra, and under no circumstances should a brahmin eat a shudra's

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 28-34.

prasada.²⁹ This view, however, did not go unchallenged. Later that year another pamphlet, *Sri Sri Vaisnava Bhakti Kaumadi*,³⁰ was published in Bengali by Bhaira[va] Chandra Dutta, a rich subarnavanik. In it Dutta argued that a shudra, who is aware of his shudrahood, but chants the name of Visnu and performs all religious duties, could command respect from the brahmins (*brahmaner pranamyā*).³¹ Thus by the beginning of the nineteenth century there arose, owing primarily to the economic changes but partly also to the change in administration, a class of people who adopted a system of law and government consciously designed to anglicise India.³² However, despite the optimism of *Bangadoot*, the *bhadraḷok* class was an ineffective political and economic force as it was a numerically small, amorphous group consisting of many castes.

Caste as a hierarchical system was becoming irrelevant in Calcutta. The ritual superiority and social leadership of the brahmins were under a cloud. But caste as an endogamous group with strict laws concerning marriage and inheritance remained in full force. As we probe deeper we begin to realise the complexity of the situation. On the one hand a new class had emerged searching for new ideas, a new code of behaviour and striving for social and political advancement. It fought for a new system of education, security of landed property, free press, trial by jury, irrespective of caste, race and creed, and for Indian participation in the Government of India. It used modern techniques such as press, public meetings and signature campaigns to propagate its views. On the other hand traditional ideas and institutions continued to exist and in some cases reinforced their position by using modern techniques of communication and agitation. Many bitter battles between the so-called conservatives and the so-called reformers were in reality quarrels of the old society fought in a new form. Thus it is possible to look upon Rammohun as a champion of *tantric* views³³ who waged an ideological battle against the '*vaisnavas*. Significantly, many conservatives such as Radhakanta Deb and Motilal Seal were *vaisnavas*.³⁴ We could also look upon Rammohun as the last prophet of

²⁹ *Biprabhakti Candrika* as reprinted in Bengali.

³⁰ Reprinted in N. N. Law, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-64.

³¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 54-5.

³² E. Stokes, *English Utilitarians in India*, Oxford, 1961, pp. 1-47.

³³ For a study of the tantric influence on Rammohun see B. Mukherji, 'Raja Rammohun Ray o Tantra Sastra' in *Vividha Prabandha*, pt. I, Chinsura, 1327, Bengali era, pp. 143-9.

³⁴ N. N. Law, *op. cit.* p. 26.

the Indo-Islamic syncretic movement carrying on the tradition of Kabir, Dara Shikoh and many others.

Rammohun came from a radi kulin brahmin family, who had traditionally held, since the days of Vallala Sen, a very high, if not the highest, social status in the caste hierarchy of Bengal.³⁵ Despite the social upheaval many of the family members managed to retain their position and during the nineteenth century played a leading role in Bengali society. Many outstanding writers, social and religious reformers and politicians came from this caste. In fact four great Bengalis — Rammohun Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Surendranath Banerjee and Rangalal Banerjee — descended from three branches of the same Bando-Ghati family.³⁶

Since two great social reformers, Raja Rammohun Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, came from the radi kulin caste, Binoy Ghosh³⁷ argues that the social reforms were inaugurated not only to enhance the social and economic position of the new middle classes but also to safeguard the interests of the radi kulin brahmin caste. There is some force in Ghosh's arguments. The strict laws of endogamy, prohibition of widow remarriage and polygamy left many radi kulin women childless, and consequently the caste was losing in number. A seventeenth century Bengali poet prophesied that if the strict laws of endogamy and pollution continued, the kulins would soon disappear.³⁸ It seems that the social reforms concerning *sati*, widow remarriage and polygamy aimed at increasing the birth rate.

It is significant that the majority of the members of Rammohun's Atmiya Sabha belonged to radi kulin or Bhagna kulin caste,³⁹ whereas the leading figures of the orthodox Dharma Sabha came from the kayastha or subarnavanik castes. Only two out of twelve members of the

³⁵ N. N. Vasu, *Banger Jatiya Itihas, Brahman Kanda*, Calcutta, 1321, Bengali era, pp. 114, 134.

³⁶ Pandit Lalmohan Vidyavidhi, *Sambandha Nirnaya*, I, Calcutta, 1874, Appendix. Cf. N. N. Vasu, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

³⁷ *Vidyasagar o Bangali Samaj* [in Bengali], 2nd ed., Calcutta, 1371 Bengali era, pp. 74-6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 68-9.

³⁹ It is not possible to determine the exact number of people associated with Rammohun's Atmiya Sabha, but it appears from the contemporary newspapers such as *Samachar Darpan*, *Calcutta Gazette*, *Christian Reform* and *Tattvabodhini Patrika* that while Rammohun was successful in bringing together men from various castes and creeds, the majority of his followers were Banerjees or Mukherjees and other Radi Kulin brahmin.

Dharma Sabha committee were brahmins.⁴⁰ Thus caste conflict was fused with ideological and class conflict. If contemporary Indian politics is expressed largely through two idioms, modern and traditional,⁴¹ a beginning had already been made in the 'twenties of the nineteenth century in Calcutta. The traditional ideas and institutions, instead of dying out, were adapted to the changing situation and strengthened in the process. Although the caste system was shaken, caste remained an institution through which political, social and economic battles could be waged. This was particularly true of the kayasthas and subarnavaniks in the latter half of the nineteenth century and of the other low castes during the twentieth century. But we must pay equal attention to the growth of a new class which cut across caste barriers. This development could be comparatively easily understood with a Western model, since it was similar to the changes brought about by the rise of capitalism in Europe. Caste conflicts meant change from a customary and status society to a market and competitive society.⁴²

The strength of Rammohun's model lies in its being based on social reality, his awareness of the growth of a market, the rise of a new class and a competitive society. The weakness of his model lies in his failure to realise the importance of some of the traditional institutions in India and their adaptability to the changing situation.

If Rammohun was the inaugurator of a 'moral revolution', of an era of investigation and inquiry, he also helped to establish the concept of freedom and equality. To do this he had to re-interpret the classical religious texts and re-establish what he considered the 'true religion'. Rammohun claimed that wherever he had travelled he found people believing in the existence of 'One Being' who is 'the source of creation

⁴⁰ *Samachar Darpan*, 23 January 1830, as published in B. N. Banerjee, *op. cit.*, 1, pp. 300-2.

⁴¹ W. H. Morris-Jones, 'Indian Political Idioms' in C. H. Philips (ed.), *Politics and Society in India*, London, 1963, pp. 133-54.

⁴² E. R. Leach (ed.), *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and Northwest Pakistan*, *Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology*, no. 2, Cambridge, 1960, pp. 4-9. In his introduction Leach argues that "If a whole caste group plays the role of a political faction by competing with other such factions for some common economic or political goal it hereby acts in defiance of caste tradition" (p. 6). Agreeing with this view one would suggest that it was the market economy which introduced the element of competition into what was, according to C. B. Macpherson, a 'customary society'; *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism, Hobbes to Locke*, Oxford, 1962, pp. 49-52. For a divergent view of the caste society see M. N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India*, Bombay, 1962, p. 7.

and the Governor of it'.⁴³ The 'One Being' is Supreme and beyond 'our powers of comprehension and description'.⁴⁴ It is only 'men of uncultivated minds' who choose to adore something which they can 'always see' and 'pretend to feel'.⁴⁵ God cannot be worshipped in this manner, for He is beyond human perception (*atindriya*) and boundless (*aparimita*). No image made by man can describe Him.⁴⁶ He is omnipresent yet beyond human reason and imagination. It is in the 'nature' of men to agree to the existence of the 'One Supreme Being'. But men disagree in 'giving peculiar attributes to that Being'.⁴⁷ This is so because of habit⁴⁸ acquired through tradition. But nothing should be accepted without critical examination just because it is handed down by *tawatar* (tradition) and preached by *mujtahids*, brahmins or missionaries. He argued that it is this faculty of reason which differentiates men from other animals.⁴⁹ In all organised religions, he complained:

... hundreds of useless hardships and privations regarding eating and drinking, purity and impurity, auspiciousness and inauspiciousness etc. have been added and thus they have been causes of injury and detrimental to social life and sources of trouble and bewilderment to the people, instead of tending to the amelioration of the condition of society.⁵⁰

The shackles of 'habit and training' have made the individuals 'blind and deaf notwithstanding their having eyes and ears'. But there is always an innate faculty existing in the nature of mankind; so 'in case any person of sound mind...makes an enquiry ...there is strong hope, that, he will be able to distinguish the truth from untruth and... [of his] becoming free from the useless restraints of religions'.⁵¹

⁴³ R. Roy, *Tuhfat-ul Muwahhidin or a Gift to Desists*, ed. and trans. by Moulavi Obaidullah Obaide, reprint, Calcutta, 1949, Introduction.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁵ Cf. Rammohun's translation of an abridgement of the Vedanta as published in *The English Works*, pt. ii, p. 60.

⁴⁶ R. Roy, 'The Bengali Translation of the Vedanta', in *Rammohun Granthavali*, pt. i, ed. by B. N. Banerjee and S. K. Das, Calcutta, n.d., pp. 4-7.

⁴⁷ R. Roy, *Tuhfat-ul*, p. 1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2, 4.

⁴⁹ R. Roy, 'The Bengali Translation of the Vedanta', *Rammohun Granthavali*, pt. i, p. 5.

⁵⁰ R. Roy, *Tuhfat-ul*, p. 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

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By separating God from 'habit and training' and from organised religions and by putting Him beyond reason, Rammohun allowed reason to rule supreme over worldly matters and opened the possibilities of 'boundless improvement' of the individual in intellectual, moral and social fields. He insisted that there is no necessity for 'intermediate agencies' such as 'prophets or revelation' for guidance in attaining spiritual salvation.⁵² He preferred *atmasakshatara* (direct meeting) to *upasanaparampara* (mode of worship handed down from the ancestors).⁵³ He argued with Mrityunjay Vidyalankar that it was possible to reach Brahma without observing the rules of the *varnasramadharmas*. By this he did not mean asceticism. He showed that such great men as Vasistha, Parasara, Vyasa and Janaka, although great believers in the omnipresent God according to the doctrine of the *Vedanta (brahmanistha)*, were also householders (*grhastha*) and zealous in 'worldly affairs' and 'politics'.⁵⁴ So it is possible to pursue 'worldly affairs' without any hindrance to spiritual salvation. To Rammohun faith in one God (who is beyond reason) was inseparably connected with his faith in individual freedom. Man must be free to pursue his 'worldly affairs' without any 'useless religious restraints' and with faith in the omnipresent God. Most of his Bengali pamphlets ridiculed religious taboos concerning caste, food, marriage and worship. In these he pleaded that shudras must be permitted to read the *Vedanta* in translation,⁵⁵ brahmins and kayasthas should be allowed to drink and eat meat,⁵⁶ and taboos concerning food had no relevance to 'true religion'. He further argued that a brahmin should not be considered a brahmin simply because of his *jati* or *varna*;⁵⁷ he must also be a *brahmanistha*. He pleaded that the Saiva wedding rites which permitted inter-caste and inter-communal marriage, should have the same sanction as the Vedic rites.⁵⁸ All taboos concerning food and inter-caste relationship were against the social and economic progress of the Bengali *bhadralok*.⁵⁹

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁵³ R. Roy, 'Bhattacharyer Sahit Bicar', in *Rammohan Granthavali*, pt. i, p. 177.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 161; cf Isopanisad in *Rammohan Granthavali*, pt. i, pp. 199-201.

⁵⁵ R. Roy, 'Goswami Sahit Bicar' in *Rammohan Granthavali*, pt. ii, pp. 47-8.

⁵⁶ R. Roy, 'Kayasther Sahit Madyapaner Bicar' in *Rammohan Granthavali*, pt. ii, pp. 183-4.

⁵⁷ R. Roy, 'Cariprasner Uttar', *Rammohan Granthavali*, pt. v, pp. 44-8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pt. vi, pp. 19-20. Cf. 'Pathya Pradan', *Rammohan Granthavali*, pt. vi, pp. 179-80.

⁵⁹ R. Roy, 'Translation of the *Kena Upanishad*, One of the Chapters of the *Sama Veda*', *The English Works*, pt. ii, p. 14.

Faith in God also helped to establish equality among all human beings. All men 'equally enjoy' or 'suffer' 'the pleasures of inconveniences of nature'.⁶⁰

This simple code of religion and morality is so admirably calculated to elevate men's ideas to high and liberal notions of God, who has equally subjected all living creatures, without distinction of caste, rank or wealth...and has equally admitted all to be partakers of the bountiful mercies which He has lavished over nature.⁶¹

Women are also equally subject to God and blessed with an innate quality to make 'boundless improvement' in moral and intellectual fields. In his passionate pleas against burning widows alive he made out a case for the freedom of women:

Women are in general inferior to men in bodily strength and energy; consequently the male part of the community, taking advantage of their corporal weakness, had denied to them those excellent merits that they are entitled to by nature.⁶²

Women are not inferior to men in any other way. If they did not have to live as 'a slave in the house' and were allowed to have proper instruction in knowledge and wisdom they would be able 'to exhibit their natural capacity'.⁶³ The civil society of Rammohun consisted of free individuals united in the worship of one true God. Unity was important to Rammohun, who felt that polytheism and image worship only perpetuated the differences between creeds and castes, while faith in 'One Being, who is 'the fountain of the harmonious organisation of the universe',⁶⁴ creates a bond which held them together. Its relevance to the amorphous and weak *bhadralok* class was also beyond dispute.

Thus Rammohun's faith in one God was part and parcel of his social and political philosophy. To him religion was 'the basis of society'. As he stated:

⁶⁰ R. Roy, *Tuhfat-ul*, p. 7.

⁶¹ R. Roy, 'The Precepts of Jesus, The Guide of Peace and Happiness', *The English Works*, pt. v, p. 4.

⁶² R. Roy, *A Second Conference between an Advocate for and an Opponent of the Practice of Burning Widows Alive*, *The English Works*, pt. iii, p. 125.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 125-6.

⁶⁴ R. Roy, *Tuhfat-ul*, p. 6.

Social Implications

Although it is a fact and cannot be denied that as mankind are naturally social beings, they are required to live together socially; but as society depends upon individuals' understanding the ideas of each other reciprocally and on existence of some rules by which the property of one is to be defined and distinguished from that of another and one is to be prevented from exercising oppression over another, so all races inhabiting different countries, even the inhabitants of isolated islands and summits of lofty mountains, have invented special words indicating certain ideas, which form the basis of the invention of religion, and upon which organisation of society depends.⁶⁵

He favoured change in 'their [Indians'] religions at least for the sake of their political advantage and social comfort'.⁶⁶ When *sati* was abolished he wrote to one of his friends in England saying that since the Act had 'removed the odium from our character as a people...we now deserve every improvement temporal and spiritual'.⁶⁷ The religious reforms of Rammohun aimed at freeing individuals from 'restraints' imposed upon them by religion. These 'restraints', he believed, denied the Indians 'social comfort' and disqualified them from entering into difficult economic enterprises.⁶⁸ Thus the freedom of the individual was not an end in itself; rather it was a means to encourage economic prosperity. To Rammohun as to the English liberal philosophers, freedom (or as he often called it 'independence of character') was inseparably related to reason and wealth. Man is free so long as he is rational and owner of his person and capacities. Rammohun claimed that women in Bengal had lost their freedom largely because they had been deprived of their ancient right of inheritance by the 'modern expounders of law'. In his view ancient lawgivers unanimously allowed a mother an equal share with her son in the property left by her deceased husband, in order that she may spend her remaining days independent of her children.⁶⁹ But the 'modern expounders' had

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶⁶ Letter to a friend, 18 January 1828, as published in *The English Works*, pt. iv, pp. 95-6.

⁶⁷ Letter to a friend, 14 July 1832, as published in "Notes on the *suttee* and its Abolition", in Binoy Ghosh, *Report of Regional Records Survey Committee of West Bengal 1958-59*, Calcutta, 1959.

⁶⁸ Extract from a letter, 18 January 1828, as published in *The English Works*, pt. iv, p. 95.

⁶⁹ *The English Works*, pt. i, p. 1.

deprived women of right to property; consequently they had no freedom and were entirely dependent on the goodwill of sons and other relations.⁷⁰ Such women, after the death of their husbands, were left to choose from 'three modes of conduct': (a) 'To live a miserable life as entire slaves to others, without indulging in any hope of support from another husband'; (b) 'To walk in the paths of unrighteousness for their maintenance and independence'; or (c) 'To die on the funeral pile of their husbands, loaded with the applause and honour of their neighbours'.⁷¹ Independent means to support oneself being an essential qualification for freedom, an unrighteous woman maintaining herself, he believed, had more freedom than a virtuous widow.

From a 'careful survey and observation of the people and inhabitants of various parts of the country', Rammohun claimed to have found two classes of 'inhabitants of the cities, towns or stations'. He distinguished these classes from the rural classes who live in 'primitive simplicity'.⁷² The 'inhabitants of the cities', whose 'religious opinions are shaken', who have 'no sufficient means to enter into commerce or business', nor any prospect of bettering their condition 'by the savings of honest industry',⁷³ are on the whole dishonest and have no 'independence of character'. However, even among such inhabitants he found many 'men of real merit, worth and character';⁷⁴ but they were those who were 'engaged in a respectable line of trade'. Thus 'independence of character' was related to the 'respectable line of trade'. It is the native officers 'of trifling salaries' who might not be independent and therefore tempted to use 'their official influence to promote their own interests'.⁷⁵ He also insisted that 'natives of respectability' should be appointed as collectors 'in lieu of Europeans'. But such a native's worth, character and responsibility depended upon his ability to provide 'sureties' of such amount as the 'government may deem adequate'.⁷⁶

Rammohun's concept of individual freedom thus implied a class society consisting of the enlightened free owners and the superstitious dependent multitude. All men are equal in the eyes of God and endowed with the innate quality to free themselves from 'the useless restraints of religion' and make 'boundless improvement' in intellectual, moral and

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷² *The English Works*, pt. iii, p. 64.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-5.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

social fields. In practice, however, only a few are not 'fettered with prejudices', and being aware of 'true doctrines', have acquired 'the dignity of human beings'.⁷⁷ The masses, on the other, hand blindly follow the superstitious rituals. In Calcutta only the members of his Atmiya Sabha, Rammohun thought, were able to acquire such 'dignity of human beings', and had risen above the ignorant masses. He found a similar situation everywhere; in England 'there is no resemblance between the higher and educated classes and the lower classes'.⁷⁸ Such a class society, he maintained, was implicit in the *Vedas*, the *tantras* and the *Puranas*, which introduced a plurality of gods and goddesses for the sake of those whose 'limited understandings' rendered them incapable of comprehending and adoring the invisible Supreme Being, so that such persons might not remain 'in a brutified state, destitute of all religious principles'.⁷⁹ Just as the *Vedantic* religion is for the enlightened few, a market conduces to the greater prosperity of those who are more rational and skilful than others. Rammohun pleaded for the Europeans being encouraged to settle in India, but these should include only 'persons of character and capital'. He was willing to shut the doors against 'persons of lower classes'⁸⁰ and include rich merchants and *zamindars* — 'respectable and intelligible classes' — in the political system under the British government in India. He apparently accepted two contradictory concepts, equality and class society, without being conscious of it. He fervently hoped that through divine providence and human exertions 'the masses of India' would sooner or later avail themselves of that true system of religion and gain independence of mind.⁸¹ A competitive market, he thought, would open opportunities for everyone to 'gain independence by honest means'.⁸²

Rammohun viewed education as a channel through which individuals could free themselves from the 'fetters of prejudices'. He opposed the establishment of the Sanskrit College in 1823, for such a 'seminary [similar in character to those existing in Europe before the time of Lord Bacon] can only be expected to load the minds of youth with grammatical niceties and metaphysical distinctions of little or no

⁷⁷ *The English Works*, pt. ii, p. 23.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-5.

⁷⁹ *The English Works*, pt. ii, p. 14.

⁸⁰ *The English Works*, pt. iii, p. 51.

⁸¹ *The English Works*, pt. ii, pp. 23-4.

⁸² *The English Works*, pt. iii, pp. 49-50, 63-8.

practicable use to the possessors or to society'.⁸³ He was not against teaching Sanskrit language as such because Sanskrit works contained much valuable information. But he was in favour of encouraging the teaching of Sanskrit by granting allowances to 'those eminent professors, who have already undertaken on their own account to teach them, and would by such rewards be stimulated to still greater exertions'.⁸⁴

He wished the government to spend more money allocated for education to 'instruct' the natives of India in mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry, anatomy and other useful sciences, which nations of Europe had carried to a degree of perfection that had 'raised them above the inhabitants of other parts of the world'.⁸⁵ The Sanskrit system of education, controlled by 'speculative men', he believed, would keep the 'entire country in darkness'. Britain escaped such a fate since 'the Baconian philosophy' was allowed 'to displace the system of the schoolmen'.⁸⁶ It was not the Sanskrit learning itself which worried him but the 'speculative system' which, he thought, would not allow individuals to free themselves 'from the fetters of prejudice' and learn 'useful sciences'.

Rammohun looked upon the market as another agency through which individuals could improve their economic position and 'gain independence'. In a free competitive market society land, human labour and other resources being owned by individuals are legally alienable. Rammohun opposed any change in the legal system of inheritance and proprietorship in Bengal, for the *Dayabhaga* system had given individuals 'the power to alienate' their property, 'acquired' or 'ancestral', at their free will. They did not need to have the consent or sanction of their family, community or authorities to dispose of their property. This right of individuals had been handed down from the traditional society and the British law courts had accepted it. Under the system anyone possessed of landed property, whether self-acquired or ancestral, had been able to procure easily, on the credit of that property, loans of money to lay out on the improvement of his estate, in trade or

⁸³ R. Roy's letter to Lord Amherst on Western education as reprinted in Biswas and Ganguli (eds), *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohan Roy*, p. 453.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 458-9.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 458.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 460.

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in manufactures, whereby he 'enriches himself and his family and benefits the country'.⁸⁷

Rammohun insisted that law must be independent of morality. Many acts such as selling intoxicating drugs and spirits and giving a daughter in marriage to an unworthy man are immoral, but they are not invalid in the eyes of the law. There are, however, some immoral acts which are also illegal, for example, the execution of a deed on a Sabbath day. A line has to be drawn between those immoral acts which should not be considered invalid and those which should be regarded null and void in law.⁸⁸ The line of distinction should be drawn according to the common law and established usages of every country. Thus a father may be charged with breach of religious duty if he sells or gives away ancestral property at his own discretion. He should not be subjected to the pain of finding his act nullified, nor the purchaser punished with forfeiture of his acquisition. Rammohun cited Jimutavahana to show that if a man should sell the whole of the inherited estate, without the consent of his family, for its maintenance or for self-preservation, he does not commit 'even a moral offence', for 'a man should always preserve himself'.⁸⁹ Thus a man must have complete legal right of ownership over land and other resources without any moral restraints.

If new laws were to be introduced to incapacitate individuals to dispose of their property freely, Rammohun argued, a great majority of the property owners would lose credit, fall back on the savings from their income and be forced to curtail their establishments, which could 'impede the progress of foreign and domestic commerce'. He asked: 'Is there any good policy in reducing the native of Bengal to that degree of poverty which has fallen upon a great part of the upper provinces, owing in some measure to the wretched restrictions laid down in the *Mitaksara* their standard law of inheritance?'⁹⁰ This progress in trade and commerce and the prosperity of the whole community are dependent on the recognition of the individual as the complete owner of all resources, with the legal right to alienate, sell or dispose of his property without moral restraints and free from the will of others.

Rammohun strongly pleaded for a clear definition and strict observance of the contracts between individuals in a market economy, for this provides the security which encourages individuals to maximise

⁸⁷ *The English Works*, pt. i, p. 19.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-2.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

their abilities. The Cornwallis system had given the landed class in Bengal such security. He claimed that since 1793, after the Permanent Settlement, the landholders of Bengal had placed their entire reliance on the promises made by the British government, and by constantly improving their estates had 'been able to increase their produce in general very considerably'.⁹¹

Faith in government by law was, according to Rammohun, the main difference between the system of government established by Cornwallis and that of the Mughals. Although 'lands in India were individual property in ancient times',⁹² and even under the Muslim rule (when the right to property had been violated) lands were held by the 'hereditary zemindary system',⁹³ there was uncertainty regarding the assessment of revenue and no security of property. The relations between the state and the proprietors were not clearly defined nor the terms strictly observed. The ruler could unilaterally and arbitrarily augment or reduce the rates of revenue and deprive the landholders of 'their rights as proprietors'.⁹⁴ The Cornwallis system relieved the landlords from 'distress and difficulties originating in the uncertainty of assessment'. A 'perpetual settlement was concluded' between the government and proprietors⁹⁵ and the terms of contracts were clearly defined and observed. This proved beneficial to all the parties concerned. The *zamindars* improved their estates, raised their prices by augmenting rent and brought about a general prosperity, while the government fetched a large sum in the form of land revenue. Rammohun showed that the government income from land revenue in Bengal during the period 1817-28 rose by thirty percent, whereas in Madras, where the *ryotwari* system prevailed, land revenue actually decreased by more than two percent during the same period.⁹⁶ Economic security was the most important reason why the Indians were so firmly attached to the British government. As he stated:

Although under the British rule, the natives of India have entirely lost their political consequence [power and rank], they considered themselves much happier in the enjoyment of civil and religious liberty than were their ancestors.⁹⁷

⁹¹ *The English Works*, pt. iv, p. 4.

⁹² *The English Works*, pt. iii, pp. 40-1.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-8.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-1.

⁹⁷ *The English Works*, pt. iv, p. 27.

Civic liberties concerning land ownership and free trade were decisive factors in this respect. Rammohun admitted that men of such 'ancient families' as were reduced by the British government were 'decidedly disaffected to it', but referred to others who being 'engaged prosperously in commerce', or secure in the peaceful possession of their estates by the Permanent Settlement, or having sufficient intelligence to foresee the probability of future improvement under British rule, 'are not only reconciled to it, but really view it as a blessing to the country'.⁹⁸

Rammohun, however, was not fully satisfied with the Cornwallis system, which was far from perfect and had room for improvement in it. If the cultivators in Madras were subjected to the 'extortions and intrigues' of 'the surveyors and other government officers', in Bengal they were at the mercy of the *zamindars*.⁹⁹ There was no chance for them to improve their position, since their rights being not clearly defined there were no contractual relations between them and the *zamindars*. The landlords could augment rent at their will and depose the cultivators from their traditional hereditary right to cultivate land. Rammohun wanted a perpetual settlement between the cultivators and landlords, like the one Cornwallis had drawn up for the government and landlords. He was at a loss to conceive why 'this indulgence was not extended to their tenants' by requiring proprietors to follow the example of the government in fixing a definite rent to be received from each cultivator, 'according to the average sum actually collected from him during a given term of years.'¹⁰⁰ This would give the cultivators the necessary security to improve their lands and an opportunity to accumulate capital. He insisted that the sales of landed estates must be fairly conducted. All the parties interested in purchasing them should receive notices of sales, which must be fixed in public places such as markets, ferries, government offices, etc., in Calcutta, Patna, Murshidabad, Benares and Cawnpore. The police officers should be required to take care that the notices remain fixed in all those places from the first announcement till the period of sale. The day and hour of sale must be precisely fixed and biddings allowed to go on for a specific

⁹⁸ *The English Works*, pt. iii, p. 67.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

period so that all the intending purchasers have the opportunity to make an offer.¹⁰¹

To Rammohun the chief function of the state was to protect the life, religion and property of the individuals. For this reason the sovereign of a state must have power to enforce law and order. He argued that since 1712, until the emergence of the Company as a political power, there was no effective political force in India.¹⁰² Akbar II, the last but one 'representative of the imperial throne of Timur', enjoyed only the empty title of 'King of Delhi'¹⁰³ 'without royal prerogative or power'. Ranjit Singh's power was confined to north-western India only.¹⁰⁴ The new middle classes were no doubt a significant social and economic force in Bengal, but they lacked cohesion to become an effective political force and had no influence outside the province. The British were, in the circumstances, the only effective political force in the country and, what was most important, had used that position to maintain orderly relations of exchange and to protect the 'lives, religion and property' of individuals. It was also in British India that 'the literary and political improvements' were 'continuously going on'. But Rammohun emphatically asserted that sovereignty must not be in the office of the Governor-General or his subordinate officers, but in King-in-Parliament, who was 'the supreme legislative power in the country'.¹⁰⁵

Laws, however, according to Rammohun, should not be arbitrarily enacted. They must give due weight to the customs of the country and be 'reasonable', though no custom was sacrosanct just because it was ancient. In his words:

I agree in the first assertion, that certain writings received by Hindus as sacred, are the origin of the Hindu law of inheritance, but with this modification that the writings are supposed sacred only when consistent with sound reasoning.¹⁰⁶

In his view the Hindus of Bengal had accepted the rules laid down by the author of *Dayabhaga* knowing that they committed a sin by withholding

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-5.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 5-7.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁰⁵ *The English Works*, pt. iv, p. 25.

¹⁰⁶ *The English Works*, pt. i, p. 20.

'blind submission' to the authority of one group of saints and showing preference to another, because they found such laws 'reasonable and calculated to promote their interest'.¹⁰⁷ This was so in every country, and the rules which determined the rights of succession and alienation of property 'first originated either in the conventional choice of the people or in the discretion of the highest authority, secular or spiritual, and these rules have been subsequently established by the common usages of the country and confirmed by judicial proceedings'.¹⁰⁸ He wanted the British government to accept such usage as law. But unjust laws and rules which are against reason and bring 'social discomfort' must be changed. Pleading for a change in law regarding the position of the cultivators, Rammohun claimed that an 'unjust precedent and practice, even of longer standing, cannot be considered as the standard of justice by an enlightened government'.¹⁰⁹ In fact, he argued, men are justified in opposing any system, religious, domestic or political, 'which is inimical to the happiness of society'.¹¹⁰ So good laws should both follow the dictates of reason and conform to customs which are the result of historical experience.

Rammohun projected his model to ancient India. In the ideal society men followed the 'doctrines of true religion',¹¹¹ adored the Supreme Being and lived under a just and efficient government, enjoying freedom. Even women in ancient India had property rights and enjoyed independence. The government followed rather strictly the norms of the separation of powers. The brahmins were the legislators of the community, while the ksatriyas wielded executive power.¹¹² Rammohun thought that the system of absolute rule came to India when the brahmins started accepting employment in 'political departments', became 'nominal legislators' under the Rajputs (ksatriyas) and the real power, whether legislative or executive, came to be exercised by the latter.¹¹³ The Rajputs exercised 'tyranny and oppression for a thousand years, when the Musulmans from Ghuznee and Ghore invaded the country...and introduced their own tyrannical system of government'.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁰⁹ *The English Works*, pt. iii, p. 58.

¹¹⁰ *The English Works*, pt. ii, pp. 137-8.

¹¹¹ Letter to Woodford, 22 August 1883, as published in *The English Works*, pt. iv, p. 93.

¹¹² *The English Works*, pt. i, p.1, fn.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Such uncontrolled power must not be allowed to rise again in India. No doubt he read back some Whig principles into Indian history, but some 'historical experiences'¹¹⁵ were true; under the old regime the uncontrolled power exercised by the Mughal officers neither encouraged trade nor provided security of property.

In 1823 Rammohun attacked John Adam's rather hasty regulation, which restricted the freedom of the press. He was disturbed by the regulation, not only because it tampered with the civil rights, but also because by enacting such a regulation the local executive authority had 'suddenly assumed the power of legislation'.¹¹⁶ The supreme legislative body in India, in his view, being the King-in-Parliament and the officers being only the executive branch, the British government must prohibit any authority 'in this country from assuming the legislative power',¹¹⁷ the end of the principle of the separation of powers and of civil liberty.

Rammohun strongly advocated the separation of powers even at the lower level of administration. He regretted that:

...many collectors are even invested with the additional office and powers of magistrates contrary to the judicious system established by Lord Cornwallis, and to the common principles of justice, as they thus become at once parties and judges in their own case; consequently, such powers very often prove injurious to those who attempt to maintain their own right against the claims of government whose agents the collectors are.¹¹⁸

He was willing to go to the logical end and separate the office of the judge from that of the magistrate.

Rammohun fought for the 'freedom of press' not because this was an 'ancient birthright' but because he considered a free press essential for the social and economic progress of the community, diffusion of knowledge and efficient and just government. The restrictions of the press, he believed, would preclude the natives from communicating 'frankly and honestly' to their gracious sovereign in England and his council the real condition of his Majesty's faithful subjects in 'this distant part of his dominions' and the treatment they experienced from the local government. The free press, on the other hand, would exercise

¹¹⁵ *The English Works*, pt. iv, p. 11.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-1.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹¹⁸ *The English Works*, pt. iii, p. 50.

restraint on the local executive which had absolute power over all the citizens. It would also act as a mirror of public opinion and acquaint the local government with the feelings of its subjects on various government policies. He credited the free press in Bengal with encouraging 'free discussion', which had 'served greatly to improve their (Bengalis') minds and ameliorate their condition'.¹¹⁹ One of the obstacles to the efficient administration of justice in India, he thought, was the lack of publicity of the 'judicial proceedings by means of the press', which could act as a watch-dog over the workings of the courts of law.

To improve the quality of judicial administration Rammohun recommended the codification of the criminal and civil law and the publication of the two codes in Indian languages to familiarise the community with the law of the country.¹²⁰ In the Benthamite fashion he argued that the code of criminal law ought to be 'simple in its principles, clear in its arrangement and precise in its definitions, so that it may be established as a standard of criminal justice in itself'.¹²¹ However, he was aware that such a code could not be based on some 'universal principles'; instead it had to conform to the customs of the country.¹²² He was happy that 'the criminal law now established in India has been judiciously founded on Mohammedan criminal law'.¹²³ He also realised that uniformity in civil law could not be achieved until the whole community was prepared 'by the diffusion of intelligence'.¹²⁴

Rammohun made a number of suggestions for good government and the political improvement of the 'enlightened' and 'respectable' classes of Bengal. He wanted every new project of law, before its final adoption by the government, to be printed and copies of it sent to the 'principal *zamindars*', 'highly respectable merchants', *muftis* of the *Sadar Dewani Adalat* and the head native officers of the Boards of Revenue 'for their opinion on each clause of Regulation', which they should send in writing to the government within a certain period.¹²⁵ The government need not be guided by their suggestions, but a copy of the minutes made by *zamindars* and others should be sent to England for the consideration of the Court of Directors and Parliament, and there should be a standing committee of the House of Commons to take the whole Regulations and

¹¹⁹ *The English Works*, pt. iv, pp. 6-9, 27-31.

¹²⁰ *The English Works*, pt. iii, pp. 32-3.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-6.

Minutes into consideration, and report to the House from time to time on the subject for their confirmation or amendment.¹²⁶ He argued that this would not confer upon the *zamindars* and merchants any political power, but get them interested in the government.

Rammohun aimed at combining 'the knowledge and experience of the native' with 'the dignity and firmness of the European' in all branches of administration.¹²⁷ He asserted that the Indians had 'the same capability of improvement as any civilised people'.¹²⁸ For economy and better relationship between the governors and the governed the Indians of 'character and capital' should be encouraged to take responsible posts with higher salaries. All appointees should have 'independence of character'. All British subjects should be treated as members of one great family without showing 'an invidious preference to any particular tribe or sect', but giving fair and equal encouragement to the 'worthy and intelligent under whatever denomination they may be found'.¹²⁹ But if the government should pursue an opposite course there would be 'religious jealousy', spirit of domination and revenge. Hence the government should encourage a 'community of feeling', not exclude the Hindus and Muslims from acting as jurors in the trials of the Christians, and make the Indians eligible for all offices including those of the justices of peace.¹³⁰

Rammohun's concept of individual freedom was much more complex than is generally recognised. It meant freedom from the 'fetters of prejudice', 'useless religious restraints', 'social discomforts', religious persecution, arbitrary taxation and insecurity of property. It also meant freedom to acquire and use knowledge for material improvement, to engage in economic enterprises without moral or other restraints and freedom of movement.¹³¹ The suggestions he made to the Select Committee in 1832 aimed at improving the local administration in India so that individuals could enjoy such freedom.

Rammohun showed less interest in political freedom for the Indians — freedom to control the destiny of their country. He realised that the new propertied classes lacked cohesion and experience to exercise political power. Moreover, the lives and property of the individuals

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹²⁹ *The English Works*, pt. iv, p. 38.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-9.

¹³¹ Letter to Prince Talleyrand (1832), as published in B. N. Banerjee, *Rammohun Ray*, pp. 69-72.

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were well protected under British rule; no other power in India could give such protection. As he put it:

...though it is impossible for a thinking man not to feel the evils of political subjection and dependence on foreign people, yet when we reflect on the advantages which we have derived and may hope to derive from our connection with Great Britain, we may be reconciled to the present state of things which promises permanent benefits to our posterity.¹³²

In 1832 he pleaded with his countrymen to exercise moderation and prudence while making petitions to England for a better political deal for the Indians, as he believed that the reformed Parliament would be favourably disposed to the Indian cause.¹³³

Rammohun thought that the middle classes would strengthen their position if they identified their cause with the struggle for 'liberty' in other parts of the world. The debate on the Reform Bill in 1832 reflected the 'struggle' not merely between the reformers and anti-reformers, but also 'between liberty and tyranny throughout the world, between justice and injustice, and between right and wrong'.¹³⁴ Hence he considered 'the cause of the Neapolitans as my own, and their enemies as ours'.¹³⁵ He took 'lively interest' in the progress of South American emancipation;¹³⁶ he was a strong supporter of the liberals in Spain and Portugal and an ardent admirer of the French Revolution.¹³⁷ He supported the cause of Catholic emancipation and parliamentary reform.

We have endeavoured to discover the social base of Rammohun's political ideas and seen that although his concept of individual freedom was Western in origin, it was shaped by Indian social conditions and expressed in a language comprehensible to the Indian readers. The freedom of the individual was essential for the social and economic prosperity of the new classes in India. He had the extraordinary vision

¹³² 'A Letter on Grant's Jury Bill', *India Gazette*, 22 January 1833, as reprinted in *The English Works*, pt. iv, p. 40.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-41.

¹³⁴ Letter to Mrs Woodford, 27 April 1832, as published in *The English Works*, pt. iv, p. 91.

¹³⁵ Letter to J. S. Buckingham, 11 August 1821, as published in *The English Works*, pt. iv, p. 89.

¹³⁶ *Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany*, September 1821, pp. 350-7.

¹³⁷ Letter to Woodford, 22 August 1831, as published in *The English Works*, pt. iv, p. 93; cf. Biswas and Ganguli (eds). *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, pp. 161-3.

to look upon the market economy and the British Raj as tools of history which would finally 'liberate' India. But his vision was limited. He failed to see that a market economy under the colonial rule might in the long run have a limited impact on the economic growth of the country. Although he was right in thinking that the interests of the new classes were tied up with those of the British, he failed to see that the two interests would eventually clash and the middle classes would win 'freedom' in every sense of the term only when they brought the masses to one political platform under the banner of nationalism.

Rammohun's concept of freedom of the individual was inseparably tied up with rationality and ownership; the masses received somewhat lower status in civil society and were excluded from the political society. His concern for the 'miserics of the agricultural peasantry of India' was also very limited.¹³⁸ He aimed at establishing a contractual relationship between the *zamindars* and the cultivators, so that the *khud-kasht ryots* had the opportunity to improve themselves through a free market. He did not bother about the landless peasantry, wage-earners and slaves;¹³⁹ nor could he foresee that free trade, settlement of the Europeans and commercialisation of agriculture would bring unemployment and misery to many in rural India.¹⁴⁰

Rammohun was unaware of one important aspect of the new development. He failed to see that members of Dharma Sabha, the great stalwarts of the orthodox religion, were also governors of the Hindu College, the most important institution for the new education. They joined the School Book Society, Free School Society and Agricultural Society¹⁴¹ and supported many secular causes such as trial by jury, free Press and Indian participation in administration. It was Motilal Seal, an orthodox Vaisnava, who provided Rs.30,000 for a modern Medical College.¹⁴² Thus it was possible to enter the new economic ventures and support the new education system without abandoning the old religions,

¹³⁸ S. C. Sarker (ed.), *Rammohun Roy on Indian Economy*, Calcutta, 1965, pp. i-v.

¹³⁹ Slavery was widespread in Bengal. See D. R. Banaji, *Slavery in British India*, 2nd edn., Bombay, 1933, p. 9.

¹⁴⁰ H. R. Ghoshal, 'Changes in the Organisation of the Industrial Production in the Bengal Presidency during the Early Nineteenth Century', in B. N. Ganguly (ed.), *Readings in Indian Economic History*, Delhi, 1964, pp. 120-5.

¹⁴¹ A. F. S. Ahmed, *Social Ideas and Social Change in Bengal 1818-1835*, Leiden, 1965, pp. 21-2.

¹⁴² N. N. Law, *op. cit.*, i, pp. 29-30.

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although many caste taboos, which stood in the way of economic enterprise, were dropped unceremoniously.¹⁴³

Rammohun failed to see that it was possible to wage battles for economic and political position through traditional social institutions such as caste. In fact he inadvertently let lose revivalism as a new force in Indian politics. He did this by insisting on religious reform and by idealising ancient India. Revivalism enjoyed the support of the masses, as it spoke through the traditional channels, and in the long run proved to be a dynamic anti-imperialist political force. But it blocked the way to building the social order visualised by Rammohun.

However, Rammohun's importance in the history of modern Indian ideas cannot be denied. If the present-day Indian polity is still concerned with the freedom of the individual and secularism, it owes a great deal to Rammohun. Moreover the 'moral revolution' which he inaugurated eventually shook the whole society; nobody would accept the old ideas unquestioningly. The so-called 'counter-reformation' was largely an indirect result of his efforts.¹⁴⁴ He correctly analysed the position of the middle classes in India and his weapons were to be successfully used by the Indians for their economic and political enhancement in the next half century.

Indian liberalism was a valid political force during the nineteenth century. This was because it had a social base of its own. The basic tenets of Indian liberalism were formulated by Rammohun from his own social experience. The new middle classes in Calcutta needed to establish the privilege of wealth and intelligence in place of birth and rank. It suited them to replace the old status society by an open competitive system without losing control to the masses or to the old political authorities. Since they could not claim political control for themselves, at least during the nineteenth century, they depended on British support. However, society was changing rapidly and the old ideas were becoming irrelevant to the new generation in the last quarter of the century. The early nationalists and moderates tried to adjust these ideas to the changing situation and to some extent they were successful. So long as the masses were left out of the political arena and the civil society was controlled by the enlightened proprietors, Rammohun's

¹⁴³ For an interesting study of the caste and modern occupations see N. K. Bose, "Some Aspects of Caste in Bengal" in Milton Singer (ed.), *Traditional India: Structure and Change*, Philadelphia, 1959, pp. 191-226.

¹⁴⁴ C. F. Andrews and G. Mookerjee, *The Rise and Growth of Congress in India 1832-1920*, 2nd edn., Meerut, 1967, pp. 1-27.

ideas remained valid. But with the emergence of Gandhi and mass-based political society after the First World War, these ideas lost their force. The liberals lost power to Gandhi not because they were inept politicians, but because they remained faithful to a set of ideas which had lost touch with reality.

R. H. Tawney once said that 'Puritanism helped to mould the social order, but it was also itself increasingly moulded by it.'¹⁴⁵ Rammohun's ideas changed the face of Indian society but were themselves shaped by it.

¹⁴⁵ *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, London, 1948, p. xiii.