

Remembering Social Reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy's Perspective on Women

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Abstract

This paper attempts to develop an explanation for women's unequal position in society keeping in mind Raja Ram Mohan Roy's views on women's right to property. It appears that he saw gender inequalities to be a consequence of the denial of rights to women. Accordingly, it also focuses on how increase in polygamy made the plight of women more dreadful leading them to either commit Sati or otherwise opt for deplorable widowhood. It also deals with other areas of women's concern - such as widow remarriage, female education, female infanticide, respect for women, etc.

Keywords: Social Reform, Women, Gender inequalities, Nationalism

... To give a daughter in marriage to an unworthy man on account of his rank or future or other such consideration is a deed of mean and immoral example. Is the union to be therefore considered invalid and their children illegitimate...? *Raja Ram Mohan Roy*

Life sketch

A man of charisma and determination, Raja Ram Mohan Roy is considered as the 'father of modern Indian political thought'. He was the real hero of 19th century India who laid the foundation of modern India. He was born in a small village, named Radha Nagar in Hugli district of West Bengal on 22 May 1772 in a high ranking and orthodox Brahmin family. His father Ramkanto Roy was a modest Brahmin *Zamindar* and had the distinction of serving the imperial Mughals for three generations. His great-grand father, Krishna Chandra Banerjee was a servant under the then Bengal Nawab. He was given the title of 'Roy' for his good services. Since then, 'Roy' replaced 'Banerjee' as the title of his

family (Nanda, 1994, p. 24). Ram Mohan was given the title of 'Raja' by the titular Mughal Emperor of Delhi, Akbar II, whose grievances the former was to present before the British king (Pantham, 1986, p. 34). He learned more than ten languages including Urdu, Hindi, Bangla, Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, English, French, Greek, Latin and Hebrew. His mastery over so many languages reflects his massive intellect. He was a great scholar of comparative religion and the freedom of Bengali prose literature & Bengali Journalism. Ray first entered the service of Europeans in the year 1803 as *Munshi* (private secretary) to the collector of Murshidabad, Thomas Woodforde. In 1809, he took up a job in the Revenue Department of East India Company. During this period (1809-1814), he learnt English. Roy had a critical mind and vast intellect and was a religious encyclopaedist (Das, 2005, p. 87). He provided a rational outlook to the science of theology. Roy was a prolific writer and it is important to note that between 1814-1833, he authored more than 60 tracts & pamphlets in English, Bengali & Sanskrit languages. He was a scholar of the *Vedas*. He published his first translation of *Vedanta Sutra* in Bengali in 1815 and also published its translation into English and Hindi. He translated *Kena, Isha, Katha, Mudka Upanishads* into English. In this respect, he was also called a modern Indian Luther. From Calcutta, he successfully ran three journals/newspapers - the Bengali weekly, *Sambad Kaumudi* (1821) (Moon of Intelligence), the bilingual *Brahmanical Magazine* (1821) & the Persian weekly, *Mirat-ul-Akbar* (1822) (The Mirror of Intelligence). In 1804 he published a pamphlet in Persian named *Tuft-ul-Muahidin* or A Gift to the Monotheists expressing very strong views against idolatry and polytheism. Roy was influenced by the French Revolution and the freedom movements in Naples, Spain, Ireland and Latin America. Thus, his concerns as a reformer and thinker were not confined to India. Roy left the physical world after a brief illness on 27 December 1833 at Bristol in England with the sacred Hindu syllable 'Om' on his lips.

In the opinion of Subhash Chandra Bose, Roy as a person, was a 'prophet of the new age', who 'stands out against the dawn of the new awakening in India' (Mukherjee, 2017, p. 44). He was the "first to draw the consciousness of the Indian people from ages past, from the ancient ways, into the free light and the air of the modern day" (Saraswati, 1989, p. 1). He laid the foundation of religious tolerance and established the concept of universal religion for the promotion of "piety, virtue and benevolence, the strengthening of bonds of union between men of all religious persuasions and creeds". He was also the "first Indian to comprehend the very significant changes that had taken place in Europe

between the Renaissance and the French Revolution” (Mukherjee, 2017, p. 43). He was an ardent champion of universalism and was the founder of colonial liberalism in India. He was also the first to initiate a comparative study of religion. He is regarded as the 'father of Indian Renaissance'. Roy was a great pioneer of religious & social reforms. He introduced Western education in Modern India. In the words of R. C. Majumdar, Roy may be justly regarded as “the pioneer of organised political movement in India and the methods followed by him marks the beginning of what came to be known in latter days as constitutional agitation”. He was the first Indian to condemn religious & social malpractices like idol-worship, enforced widowhood, Sati, and girl infanticide. In 1828 he founded the famous *Brahmo Samaj* (society for the followers of the Absolute). Rabindranath Tagore commended him as 'inaugurator of the Modern Age in India' and 'a luminous star in the firmament of Indian history'. In 1815, he started the '*Atmiya Sabha*' or 'the Society of Friends', a spiritual society (a discussion club for scholars of religion and philosophy). In 1821 he founded the Calcutta Unitarian Association. He was the first Indian subject who for the first time had addressed 'His Britannic Majesty' directly. Roy was the “first Indian to have a significant view of the outside world, not just meaning the Mughal world or the Hindu world, but meaning the European world” (Khilnani, 2016, p. 234). He founded the first English school in Calcutta financed completely by Indians. Pioneer of Indian journalism, a liberal, humanist, great visionary and an internationalist, he was the first to believe in the 'publication of knowledge' and use it for reformist political activity. Bipin Chandra Pal says,

Roy was the first to deliver the message of political freedom to India”. Roy was one of the first educated Hindus to react to Christianity and set the general tone of the Hindu reaction to it in the modern period. Raja's proposal for a Congress of Nations was reflected in the formation of the League of Nations and United Nations in 20th century. (Mohanty, 2007, p. 86)

Introduction

To represent the grievances of the Emperor of Delhi, Ram Mohan Roy was sent as his ambassador to England and subsequently also conferred the title 'Raja'. Roy always advocated equality between men and women in matters of education. He thought of education for women as necessary not only for the improvement in their conditions but also for the development of the nation. Roy

refuted the argument that women were in general inferior to men in bodily strength and energy. According to him, the male part of the community taking advantage of their corporeal weakness have denied to them those excellent merits that they are entitled to by nature, and afterwards they are apt to say that women are naturally incapable of acquiring those merits. Roy attacked that view of womanhood which provided the psychological justification for their subordination. He raised the voice for abolition of discrimination between man and woman and the system of polygamy. He crusaded against evil social practices like *Sati* or widow immolation which he condemned by relying on classical Indian texts. In most parts of the country, though exceptionally rare but there was it seems an upsurge in Bengal during Roy's lifetime; in 1823, there were approaching 600 recorded cases. Roy's campaign against this practice converged with the birth of an international concern with human rights. To Amartya Sen, "Roy's focus on *Sati* accorded with Roy's generally patrician attitude to reform" (Khilnani, 2016, p. 240). But a much more significant reform measure which Ram Mohan was interested in and pleaded for was the right to property for Hindu women which did not receive the attention it deserved at the hands of scholars and intellectuals. He was the first to draw the attention of his countrymen in this regard and made persistent efforts to establish the fact that the ancient *Shastric* laws granted women the right to inheritance of property, but this right has been further curtailed by modern jurisprudence such as *Mitakshara* and *Dayabhaga* (both are the two schools of law that govern the law of succession of the Hindu undivided family under Indian law). The voice of Ram Mohan did have a sound hearing and independent India chose to extend to them the right that he had pleaded for more than a century and a half before (Sarasvati, 1989, p. 7). Ram Mohan also condemned several other disgraceful practices associated with the treatment of women. He wrote extensively against the custom of fathers selling their daughters to prospective husbands due to some financial interests. He quoted from Manu and Kashyapa to show that the custom was contrary to the dictates of sacred laws (Doctor, 1997, p. 23).

Ram Mohan's Perspective on Women: Opposed Practice of *Kulinism* and Polygamy

The other evils which existed in Roy's days were *Kulinism* and polygamy. *Kulin* Brahmins were placed on the highest pedestal of the caste structure as they were treated with utmost respect. A girl married to a *Kulin* Brahmin was considered

to be very lucky. Caste was the only factor that was taken into consideration for solemnizing any marriage. Physical ability, height, age, education, wealth, etc., were secondary and caste was the primary factor. Since the *Kulins*, were the highest in the hierarchy of castes, they were much sought after. Consequently, they exploited their position to their own advantage. They married as many wives as possible invariably for monetary consideration. In some cases, the age gap between the husband and wife ranged from 30 to 70 years. Roy strongly opposed the practice of this *Kulinism* and its concomitant, polygamy as unnatural and preferred monogamy as it was in consonance with monoandry. While condemning polygamy, Roy cited *Yagnavalkya* who had allowed the husband to have a second wife on eight specific grounds of wife having the habit of drinking, suffering from incurable diseases, unproductiveness etc. Through Press as well as in various platforms, Roy articulated his views on this problem. He argued that anyone who wanted to go for a second marriage or more than that during the life time of his first wife should be allowed to do so only on proving before competent legal authority that the conditions under which polygamy was permitted by the Hindu *Shastras* were fulfilled (Padhy, 2014, pp. 71-72).

Encouraged Widow Remarriage

Roy also encouraged widow-remarriage to save them from inhuman murder or suicide in the form of *Suttee*. He remarkably succeeded in persuading scores of his followers and friends to marry widows. He rather pleaded strongly for the restoration of the property rights of the widows as well facilities of their multifaceted education. He cites authorities like Manu and Yagnavalkia who say that a widow must live voluntarily on pure flowers, roots and fruits, not pronouncing the name of another man, to argue that these authorities expected the widow to live and not commit *sati*. Thus, Roy says that “*sati* is nowhere enjoined by the religion of the Hindus as an imperative duty. On the contrary, a life of purity and retirement on the part of the widow is more specially and preferably inculcated” (Doctor, 1997, p. 22).

Advocator of Women's Education

The condition of the Hindu female in those days was truly deplorable. Education among the females was unknown. Roy considered that unless the educational system of India was totally overhauled, “there was no possibility of the people coming out of the slumber of so many centuries” (Banerjee I., 2014, p. 29). Roy was the first prominent advocate of women's education. To him, the

cause of the pathetic condition of women is that they were deprived of obtaining education from many centuries. He argues that from an intellectual point of view, in no way women are inferior from men. Giving an example of ancient India, he pointed out that there was given an equal opportunity to study scriptures to the women with men and women like Lilavati, Bhanumati (the wife of the Prince of Kurnat) and Maitree proved themselves as intelligent beings (Anupama Saxena & Archana Kumari, 2010, p. 125). He preferred for them “education of the household”. Roy was nevertheless modern enough to plead with Indian women to shed-off the *Purdah*, their traditional veil which had kept them apart from both the society and the state. Instead he called upon them to adopt “English manners and English behaviour” (Tyagi, 1998, p. 152). Roy thought education as very important for women in order to reform or correct their condition and in arousing the consciousness of their rights. Though Roy was a great exponent of women's education, but he could not succeed in establishing any separate educational institution for women.

Raised Voice Against Prostitution

The arrival of the British bourgeoisie in Bengal meant the introduction of commercial and administrative systems along with the prevalent values of 19th century capitalism. The collapse of traditional social norms under the impact of the colonial economic changes also led to the loosening of the tight hold of *Kulinism*. The development of prostitution as an industry in 19th century Bengal offered avenues of escape for daughters and wives of *Kulin* Brahmin families, who for almost 700 years suffered deprivation and humiliation locked up within the cell of *Kulin* obligations. Therefore it is not surprising that a mid-19th century official report estimates that of the 12,000 odd prostitutes in Calcutta, more than 10,000 were Hindu widows and daughters of *Kulin* Brahmins (Banerjee S., 1993, p. 2466). Prostitution is said to be the most heinous of all social evils. It was operating in various forms and manners. It was often operating under the guise or cover of dancing girls, cabaret artists, masseurs, call girls, escorts or mistresses. Roy raised his voice against this social nuisance and wanted the state to abolish or at least to curb and regulate it by law in order to minimise its evil effects. Recently, its regulation has become much more important as these so-called sex-workers are considered potential carriers of sexually transmitted diseases or of acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

Against Dowry System

In the past, social ties, like marriages in the traditional feudal Bengali society

were also dictated and controlled by utilitarian interests of the dominating upper caste and upper-class men. The system of dowry (money and assets demanded by the bridegroom in exchange for marrying the woman) and the custom among the *srotriya* Brahmins to virtually sell off their daughters to the highest bidders among the bridegrooms (since the parents among this community were required to pay bride price for the marriage of their sons) reflected the norms of a feudal society where women were treated as a property to be exchanged between one male and another. Such an exchange, however, had to be justified by the guardians of medieval Hindu Bengali society by invoking the precepts of Manu who ordained that a woman should always be under the surveillance of a man – as a daughter under her father, as a wife under her husband and as a mother under her son (Banerjee S., 1993, p. 2466). Roy was against these kinds of dowry system which virtually resulted in the sale and purchase of girls in marriage in the name of so called *kuleen* tradition. Those who could afford to part with substantial parts of their movable and immovable property got suitable husbands for their daughters and they treated them with some amount of degree of respect and those who could not afford to give dowry, their daughters were compelled to marry the aged, the infirm, the diseased, the widowers, the poor and lower class persons. Though the demanded dowry was given in marriage, the demand for dowry was not a 'one-time' demand but series of demands and the non-fulfilment of which brought them humiliation, harassment, physical and mental cruelties and even death. This social evil instead of being curbed has assumed alarming proportions and resulting in ever-increasing dowry deaths even recent times.

Against Female Infanticide

Female infanticide was another social evil plaguing society. It is a fact that in his days, the *Rajputs* were accustomed to kill their infant daughters at the feet of Goddess Kali to invoke her blessings which was only a shrouded excuse of getting rid of the economic liability. Roy strongly opposed this inhuman social evil that the persons indulging this malpractice must be proclaimed guilty of child-murder and punished according to the law (Banerjee I., 2014, p. 32).

Against the Devadasi System

The birth of a girl child in many Hindu families was looked down upon as a 'surplus-production of God to be eventually returned to Him. If the girl child somehow escaped from being subjected to female infanticide, she was handed over to the temple authorities to make her serve as a *Devadasi* there. Then the

girl was brought up by the temple priests who trained her in the art of singing and dancing. When she attained maturity, she was subjected to gradual prostitution. She was made to dance to please the presiding deity, the priests and patrons of the temples.

Abolished the *Suttee/Sati* System

In Roy's days the social system of the Hindus contained a number of iniquitous and inhuman practices, the most barbarous of which was *Sati* (or '*suttee*', as it was then known) - the burning of widows on the funeral pyre of their deceased husbands. It was believed by the people that if a woman died along with her husband, she not only would go to heaven but also saved her husband from perdition. *Sati* was widely prevalent in some parts of India especially Bengal. Roy mentioned that the proportion of *Sati* in Bengal was 10.1 percentage compared to other territories (Bombay and Madras presidency) (Lalita, 1990, p. 511). In Bengal, it resulted in the sorry plight of the child widow. It was performed either in the form of con-cremation or post-cremation. In con-cremation the practice was to bind the widow along with the corpse of her husband and then heap over her such a quantity of wood that she could not rise and save herself. Post-cremation was performed in case the widow was away from her husband at the time of his death. In that case, she used to be burnt alive along with some relic of her deceased husband. So inhuman was the practice that the body of the widow in both the cases was tied to large bamboos to avoid the possibility of her rushing away from the flames. There was also a loud drum beating as a part of the ceremony so that her pleas and cries of help went unheard. Their submission was forced and involuntary. The patriarchal notions had impacted the psyche of the people so deeply that women were prepared from their early life for performing *Sati* on the death of their husbands.

In addition to this, for legitimising this practice people were building a place of worship such as a temple or a shrine to commemorate the performance of *Sati* where prayers were offered and funds were collected. However, from a closer scrutiny one would find that the main reason behind the performance of *Sati* seems to be an economic one. By forcing the widow to be *Sati*, her parents-in-law and even her biological parents and other family members not only saved themselves from the economic liability of maintaining her but were also able to turn their economic liability into an asset – a profit which they received in the form of offerings from the people who were coming for prayers so as to seek her blessings. From this analysis it seems that *Sati* practice is one of the classic

illustrations of an economic crime perpetuated by the Brahmins, Priests and a patriarchal male-dominated Hindu society in the grasp of religion.

The *Smritis* were cited as authority. The *Rishis* such as Angira, Harit and Vishnu have sanctioned the practice of con-cremation in the following passage:

That woman, who, on the death of her husband, ascends the burning pile with him, is exalted to heaven, as equal to Arundhati. She who follows her husband to another world shall dwell in a region of joy for so many years as there are hairs in the human body, or thirty-five million. As a serpent-catcher forcibly draws a snake from his hole, thus raising her husband by her power, she enjoys delight along with him. The woman who follows her husband expiates the sins of three races: her father's line, her mother's line and the family of him to whom she was given a virgin. (Kumar, 2012, p. 84)

In 1818, Roy began his celebrated crusade for the abolition of *Suttee*, and on 4 December 1829, Lord William Bentinck, the then British Governor-General of India made *Suttee* illegal by Regulation XVII. That's why the year 1829 was considered as an important landmark in the political history of India. Due to this, Roy won great recognition for his crusade to free Hindu women from the dark practice of *Suttee*. However, it must be noted that along with the European Sanskrit scholar H.H. Wilson, Roy was also opposed to any legal enactment for the immediate suppression of *Suttee*.

Championed Right of Hindu Females to Inheritance

With respect to the natal rights of women, Roy emphasised that the ancient lawgivers entitled a daughter to one fourth of the share of the son. The married daughter was given less preference than the unmarried daughter by the ancient law givers, Roy in his tract has paid more attention to the rights of unmarried daughter. He quotes Manu here: "To the unmarried daughters let their brothers give portions out of their own allotments respectively. Let each give a fourth part of his own distinct share and they who feel disinclined to give this shall be condemned" (Fatima, 2009-2010, p. 645). Though the ancient law-givers had provided daughters one fourth of share allotted to sons, the modern commentators on *Dayabhaga* set aside this right of daughters. They did not recognise daughter's share to the property of fathers and only recognised the expenses of their marriage. This defraying of expenses was taken more as a donation than as a duty on the part of brothers.

Apart from daughter's right to inheritance, Roy also dealt with question of

women's right to property in a wedded family. All the ancient law givers unanimously awarded a mother an equal share in her son's property left by her deceased husband. This was to ensure that she spent remaining days independently of her children as is evident from the following: Yajnavalkya. "After the death of a father let a mother also inherit an equal share with her sons in the division of the property left by their father" (Fatima, 2009-2010, pp. 645-646). Roy argued that according to the modern commentators, a mother's right to inheritance is valid only when a person dies, leaving two or more sons and all of them survive and be inclined to allow a share to their mother. Despite the provisions of ancient lawgivers, mothers remain destitute and dependent. Criticising the modern *Dayabhaga* doctrine Roy argued that several limitations and restraints were inflicted upon the right to female inheritance. He emphasised that debarring women from inheriting property was the primary cause of degradation of position of women in society and was largely responsible for polygamy, *Sati*, and the pathetic condition of widows in our society.

Believed in Right to Property for Both Women and Men

As a true liberal, Roy also believed in the sanctity of the 'right to property' for both women and men. According to him, every individual should have the right to own property he inherits or earns. To him, women had become the slaves of the male members of the family and this was because of the fact that they were denied any property rights. In other words, he opined that women's full economic dependence on men was the chief cause of their uncomfortable and uncertain life.

Respect for Women

Roy had tremendous respect for women. He ridiculed those who believed that women by nature were inferior to men mentally without resolution, unworthy of trust, subject to passion and void of virtuous knowledge. He argued that women were inferior to men in physical strength and energy. It is because of this that they were exploited by men and deprived of their dues. He considered women to be as competent as men (Padhy, 2014, p. 70). He opined that natural wisdom and commonsense of women were in no way less than that of men. Men have taken undue advantage of the submissiveness of women. Women have proved to be more fruitful than men (Bhagwan, 1999, p. 76). He argued that women were kept ignorant by men because the latter wanted to monopolise the

whole of social sphere. As a humanist, he thought that the human race could not advance if either sex remained in a degraded condition (Yadav, 1998, p. 66).

Conclusion

The preceding analysis suggests that the reform with which Roy was closely associated with and will always be remembered with his name is the abolition of the cruel and inhuman practice of *Sati*. According to him, Hindu widows burnt themselves not only on account of religious prejudices, but the insults and slights to which they were daily subjected to. The prevalence of *Sati* was attributed to the plurality of wives, the sacred river Ganges and sanctity of the *Vedas*, the *Vedangas*, the *Smrities* and other religious commentaries which were followed by *Brahmins* and the upper castes in the society.

Roy was also a champion of the right of Hindu females to inheritance. He firmly opposed the grave injustice done to women by the modern law of inheritance. He wrote an essay in 1822 titled "*Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females according to the Hindu Law of Inheritance*". Therein he quoted ancient jurists like Yanavalkya, Narada, Katyayana, Vishnu and Brihaspati and pointed out that on the basis of the opinion of ancient law-givers, in the property left by the husband, the mother was entitled to get a share equivalent to that of her son, and the daughter to one-fourth (Varma, 1992, p. 27). Thus, in order to remove any economic grounds for the practice, he also called for property rights to be given to women, which would help ensure their security after their husband's deaths.

Rammohan's condemnation of polygamy (*kulinism*) was equally forthright. To him, the most important cause of women's miserable condition was polygamy among the rich people. Some of them, especially *Brahmans* of higher birth, marry ten, twenty or thirty women, either for some small consideration, or merely to gratify their brutal inclinations. This leaves a great many of them, both during their life-time and after their death, to the mercy of their own paternal relations. To these women, there are left only three modes of conduct to pursue after the death of their husband. First, to live a miserable life as slaves to others without indulging any hope of support from another husband. Second, to walk the paths of unrighteousness for their maintenance and independence. And thirdly, to die on the funeral pile of their husbands loaded with the applause and honour of their neighbours. It cannot pass unseen by those who are familiar with the state of society in India that the number of female suicides in the single province of Bengal when compared with those of any other British provinces is

almost ten to one. Thus, we may safely attribute this disproportion mainly to the greater frequency of plurality of wives among the natives of Bengal, and to their total neglect in providing for the maintenance of their females. This terrible polygamy among Brahmans is directly contrary to the law given by ancient authors. For instance, Yagnavalkia who permitted a second wife only on specific grounds such as the vice of drinking spirituous liquor, incurable sickness, deception, barrenness, extravagance, the frequent use of offensive language and producing only female off-springs (Sharma, 2002, p. 20). He argued that the ancient law-givers did not approve of polygamy as a normal practice. He opined that the spirit of Hindu Law clearly does not permit a Hindu male to marry more than one wife at will but allows a second wife only with the consent of the first and on specific grounds.

Structuring his convictions on the basis of liberty and justice, Roy fought for the cause of women to transform society into a more egalitarian and progressive one. Roy's concern for the improvement in the status of women reflects his concern for the nation, as women were seen as bearers of national identity. He made valiant and successful efforts to save widows from the horrifying self-destruction demanded by the society. He is, indeed, the great path-maker of this country who has removed ponderous obstacles that impeded our progress at every step.

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