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Rammohun Roy's Views on Freedom: A Liberal Interpretation

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Article Record: Received Sept 29, 2023, Revised Paper Received Jan 01, 2024, Final Acceptance Jan 05, 2024
Available Online

Abstract

Historically, it is true that the eighteenth-century world was the age of dominating the human mind by Reason and Judgment. Reaching out of the mysterious Middle Ages, in this century, people learn to judge everything by reason and intellect. The development of Western education had reached its highest peak, and European liberal thoughts were spread all over the world. The desire for freedom manifested itself in the motivation of liberalism in all possible areas of individual and public life. A radical change took place in all aspects of society. A wave of 'Enlightenment' had developed and a new hope for humanity was instigated. Like other European countries, a similar gesture had been found in Indian society also, which became more widespread at the hands of Raja Rammohun Roy. The principal goal of this article is to shed light on Roy's notion of freedom in the context of liberal interpretation. It also presents a concise and fascinating interpretation of the influence of Western liberal thought on Roy and his idea of freedom in the Indian context.

Keywords: *Rammohun Roy, Enlightenment, Freedom, Judgement, Reason*

1. Introduction

Raja Rammohun Roy (1772 – 1833) is a prominent name in Indian socio-economic, cultural, and political history. He is considered by many to be the pioneer of modern India, especially Bengal. Rammohan considered all humankind as one family. He believed that all ethnic groups of the world are offshoots of the same race, and this conception of humankind made him known to the world. The scope of his political thought was as far-reaching as his deliberate thoughts about society or religion, which transcended national boundaries and gained prominence at the international level. Rammohun's statehood developed with almost all the elements of a modern nation-state, including internationalism, freedom, economy, rule of law, and a modern administrative system. He was, at the same time, deeply affected by various ups and downs in the domestic and contemporary world. For example, he was saddened by the defeat of Naples and rejoiced in the success of the July Revolution or the establishment of democracy in Spain. This is my small attempt at the great Indian social reformer Rammohun Roy's thoughts on freedom. In this article, I have tried to summarize how he views the concept of freedom from a liberal perspective.

As an 'inaugurator of the Modern Age in India', this *Bharatpathik* was born to a Brahmin family on 22 May 1772 in Radhanagar, present Hooghly district of West Bengal, India. However, there is a controversy over the year of his birth. In an inscription on his tomb in Arno's Vale, Bristol, the year of

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birth is given as 1774, but in some later accounts of his life the year of his birth was mentioned two years earlier, in 1772 (Kripalini in Ray, 1974). As a great Vedanta philosopher, Rammohun is known worldwide as “the founder of the school of comparative religion” (Majumdar, 1996). He is considered one of the key figures in the Bengal Renaissance and played a crucial role in advocating for social, educational, and religious reforms. His views on the political revival of India were against the inhumanity and superstition of orthodox Hinduism, against the narrow view of the Indian mind. As the original prophet of modern Indian thought, Rammohun was always stood for the social progress of the motherland and his idea about freedom was no different from that.

2. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To shed light on Raja Rammohun Roy’s notion of freedom in the context of liberal interpretation.
2. To present a concise and fascinating interpretation of the influence of Western liberal thought on Roy and his idea of freedom in the Indian context.

3. Research Methods and Resources

This study is entirely based on secondary sources of data and is interpretative. It has consulted the relevant writings of Raja Rammohun Roy and commentaries on his thought. The relevant positions of Roy’s collected works have been consulted in this research. It provides a concise and fascinating interpretation of the selected topic.

4. Rammohun Roy and Indian Renaissance: An Intellectual Debate

There is considerable disagreement among scholars as to the extent to which Rammohan’s liberalism was significant in the development of the Renaissance in India. Amiya P. Sen (2012), R. C. Majumder (1984), and other scholars are reluctant to call Rammohun the founder of the Indian Renaissance. To them, it is nothing but a myth. On the other hand, learned scholars like Bipan Chandra, Biman Bihari Majumder, and even Rabindranath consider Rammohun as the pioneer of India’s Renaissance and modern era. Bipan Chandra considered Rammohan “the first great leader of modern India” and presented him as a “synthesis of Eastern and Western thought”. Referring to him as one of the pioneers of the modern era in India, Tagore wrote that Rammohan appeared in the dark ages of a decadent when the country was ceasing to practice humanity, passing through a region of decadent traditions and uncreative practices. During his time, India lost touch with the underlying truth of its existence and became a complete slave to circumstances. Hence, Tagore considered Rammohun “a luminous star in the firmament of India’s history” (see Chakravarti, 1933). David Kopf, however, attempts to consider Rammohan and the Bengal Renaissance historically, as he argues that Rammohan’s time cannot be separated from his changing image in the nineteenth and twentieth century’s. The historical problem of assessing Rammohan’s place is complicated by the constant shifting of his historical perspective in the minds of later generations. A proper assessment of his role in the Renaissance, thus, requires serious historical attention beyond the usual bibliographical essays listed in monographic studies (Kopf, in Joshi, 1975). But keeping in mind the limitations of the content of this article, I think it is better not to go deep into this debate.

5. Development of Rammohun’s Idea of Freedom

The concept of freedom in modern Indian political thought arose with ‘the development of the English and native printing press in India’. The assimilation with the liberal ideas of the West was one of the significant features of early nineteenth-century India. Prof. K. S. Bhattacharjee rightly observes that, “under the inspiration of liberalism modern political thinkers advanced the claim of each individual citizen to enjoy certain common rights with everyone else in society irrespective of their birth or descent” (Bhattacharjee, 1986). In the narration of freedom in modern India, Rammohun was a leading name who

desired to regenerate India from its old-age traditions of Hindu society. Though he was not a systematic political philosopher like Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau, a systematic theoretical analysis is not found in his conception of freedom. He was, overall, a social reformer and a foremost figure in the social development of modern India. He firmly believed that the progressive development of an individual's personality would depend on his opportunities to enjoy and practice various socio-economic and political rights and freedoms.

In the early seventies of the eighteenth century, Rammohun Roy emerged as a trailblazer in liberating Indians from the shackles of ignorance and superstition of traditional Indian society. As the founding father of freedom from our slavery to ignorance and superstition, Roy's life and struggle, his achievements and failures are part of our heritage. Although Rammohun did not develop a distinct theory of liberty, he was influenced by its European liberal ideals. His concept of freedom was developed through his in-depth study of Western thought and movement, which was not confined to any narrow boundaries or narrow perspectives. By freedom, he meant global freedom, which he obtained from British liberalism. Not only religious freedom, he was an unfettered supporter of economic freedom also. It was at his hands that a logical framework for freedom first emerged in contemporary India. In this regard, he was guided by the pioneering scientific pursuits of European and Western liberal political thought.

In his tribute to Rammohun, William Adam rightly mentioned that "love of freedom was perhaps his (*Rammohun's*) strongest passion" (quoted from Nag, 1973). Rammohun was a free-spirited man and opposed to any superstition. From childhood he "rebelled against the superstition of free thinking, and the religious dogmatism of the priests. ... He was eager to express his independent views by reasoning out his argument" (Nag, 1973). According to him, freedom is a fundamental human right. Without which human life is impossible. Like contractarian philosopher John Locke, Rammohun emphasized the superiority of natural rights, such as the right to life, liberty, and property. Not only that, he was also aware of the political rights of the individuals. But by freedom Rammohun did not mean any extreme and unlimited freedom. Freedom is, to him, a natural right of the individual which is restricted by the state law.

Rammohan's concept of freedom was influenced by prominent European thinkers like Thomas Paine, Grotius, etc., and was based on social utility and public welfare. Indeed, he was a real affectionate for the British liberal ideas of freedom, particularly their civil and political liberties. He believed British rule developed freedom, tolerance, rationalism, liberalism, etc. in India. To him, the British 'rule of law' in India, worked well to protect Indians from 'violent infringement' of their civil and political rights (Bhattacharjee, 1986). He believed so profoundly in British civil and political freedom that he was the first Indian to speak for the full implementation of the civil liberties for the citizens of this country. Because, he understood that the favourable environment for creating political freedom was not in India at that time and lack of awareness of civil and political rights was a common feature of the period. He was, therefore, interested in establishing civil liberties which, he believed, would pave the way for political freedom.

Rammohun Roy was, as Brajendranath Seal describes, "a precursor, an archetype, a prophet of coming Humanity" (see Singh, 1983). His thoughts are comparable to those of Sir Bacon, Voltaire, and Volney. As a humanist, Rammohun explained the concept of freedom from a humanistic perspective. He advocated liberating the human soul from the shackles of ritualism, orthodoxy, superstition, and falsehood. According to him, communal prejudice is the main obstacle to India's advancement. So, he was opposed to communal bigotry. He believed that nation-building is possible only by getting rid of communal prejudices.

Rammohun was a strong advocate for the freedom of thought and expression. He believed that individuals should have the right to question traditional beliefs and practices, engage in rational inquiry, and express their ideas without fear of persecution. This aligns with liberal values that emphasize the importance of free speech and the exchange of ideas. Indeed, Rammohan ushered in political freedom in India, and his

struggle for freedom of the press can undoubtedly be exemplified. He prioritized freedom of speech and expression and fought for it. Thus, his rhetoric on freedom of the press has created another area for his contribution to freedom. Rammohun believed that “a free press is one of the best safeguards of liberty, and is in the best interest of not only the people but the government as well” (Selected Works, 1958). According to him, a democratic government can only be effective if it protects the freedom of the press. Rammohun was so passionate about the freedom of the press that in 1823, he rose against the British government when the publication of newspapers or periodicals was prohibited. Almost as soon as the Ordinance was promulgated by the then Acting Governor-General, Mr. I. Adam, on 15 March 1823, along with four others, he appealed against it to the Supreme Court. After the Supreme Court dismissed his appeal, he appealed to the King-in-Council (Selected Work, 1958). To him, “not only would the freedom of press provide a device for ventilation of grievances, it would also enable the government to adopt steps for their redressal before they caused damage to the administration” (Chakrabarty and Pandey, 2009). Any restriction on the freedom of the press may jeopardize the freedom of speech and expression. It is, actually, contrary to the development of human civilisation. Thus, freedom of the press needs to be ensured in the interest of Indians to speak and express their views. Roy opposed any restrictions on the press in the interests of Indians to speak and express their opinions. But interestingly, during Rammohun’s time, the British government continued to impose restrictions on freedom of speech and expression.

Rammohun believed that man is, by nature, ‘eternally free’ and ‘to deny this freedom was an outrage upon his nature and a sin against his Maker’ (Tagore, 1973). The key to Rammohun’s idea of freedom was universality. He advocated a ‘cosmopolitan idea of liberty’, which, according to him, the British administration could provide to the Indians. He unhesitatingly acknowledged the benefits of British rule in India. Though he never wanted to see India under a foreign yoke, he was fascinated by the British liberal forms of Government and laws. The moderate behaviour and the steadfastness of the British government attracted him most. As a cosmopolitan man, he advocated for bringing ‘all mankind into one family, uniting all men and women under the banner of one universal religion’. Indeed, Rammohun was a pioneer in eliminating of all social inequalities, granting equal political status to all nations of the world, and, conceding universal peace and harmony (Chakravarti, 1935). Equal rights for all and the ‘love of freedom was, perhaps, the strongest passion of his soul’. He regarded freedom ‘not of the body merely, but of the mind – freedom not of the action merely, but of the thought’. He, in the words of William Adam, “did not seek to limit the enjoyment of it to any class or colour, or race or nation or religion. His sympathies embraced all mankind” (quoted from Chakravarti, 1935).

The sources of Rammohun’s political opinions were around his love of freedom. Biman Bihari Majumdar has rightly observed that, “He (*Rammohun*) was a passionate lover of liberty in all its forms and especially of freedom of thought. His love of liberty had no parochial outlook about it – it embraced the whole world” (Majumdar, 1996). Like an active political activist, he was well aware of the political practices of the time, and his sympathy for all political liberation movements of the contemporary world would prove that. The arrangement of a public dinner party at the Town Hall for the victory of Spain, his support of the Greek’s struggle for independence against the Turks, and his enthusiastic excitement for the triumphed of the French Revolution were some instances of his love for liberty. Rammohun always stood for liberty, equality, and justice for the people in the world population. That is why he considered the struggle between the reformers and anti-reformers as a “struggle between liberty and tyranny throughout the world; between justice and injustice, and between right and wrong” (Chakravarti, 1935). In the words of his biographer Miss Sophia Dobson Collet “he offers to the new democracy of the West a scarcely less valuable index of what our greatest Eastern dependency may yet become under the imperial sway of the British commonality” (Sophia, 1914).

Rammohun sharply criticised all evil customs of the traditional Hindu society and declared a kind of warfare against them. The main goal of his thought was to rebuild Indian society. Hence, individual rights

and freedom were the fundamental concepts of his socio-political thoughts. The Renaissance and Western liberalism influenced him to propagate the rights and freedom of the individual. More particularly, ideologies like 'liberty', 'equality', and 'fraternity' of the French Revolution (1789) influenced him even more. A liberal environment is needed to enjoy proper rights and freedoms. He was convinced that Indians, like the British, should have the opportunity to practice and enjoy social, economic and political rights and freedom. According to him, freedom is crucial for the expansion of one's personality. Thus, the British Government should not exploit the Indian people. He believed that creating interaction between the British citizens and the indigenous Indians would be more fruitful for Indian citizens to enjoy freedom. Therefore, he believed that the greater our intercourse with European gentlemen, the greater our freedom and progress in social and political affairs.

6. Rammohun's Views on Freedom: A Liberal Interpretation

In the nineteenth century, liberal philosophy had tremendous success in England, developed by political philosophers and thinkers like John Locke, J. S. Mill, Jeremy Bentham, A. V. Dicey, and many others. All of them are the well-known prophets of Renaissance in thought and action in Europe. These thinkers 'changed the attitude towards fate and the importance of the world. They did not deny the importance of the development of the souls but shifted the emphasis in such a way as to highlight the importance of enterprise in the service of the community' (Mehta, 1992). Moreover, the British liberal philosophy was not only remaining limited within her geographical territory. It spread beyond the borders of England to the entire Europe cum other parts of the world. Rammohun was the first Indian to associate himself with this wave of British liberal political philosophy and introduced it in Bengal cum India. Therefore, he was rightly called the father of liberalism in modern India.

Especially from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, the Renaissance began to influence Indian social and political life. As a result, the worldly behaviour and ideology of traditional Indian society were radically changed. During this period, the religious orthodoxy of traditional India began to move away from society, and people began to show interest more in 'reality' than spiritual false notions. In India, like Europe, a new kind of changes had been found in individuals thinking and reasoning. A sort of liberal thinking had emerged among the Indian-educated middle-class people, which helped to develop liberalism in India. V. R. Mehta shows that the introduction of English education by the British not only transmitted the culture and traditions of the European Renaissance but also brought together the ideas of Bentham, Mill, Carlyle, and Coleridge and the combined efforts of democracy and the rule of law, which dominated the thinking of Indian intellectuals (Mehta, 1992).

From a liberal perspective, Rammohun's views on freedom can be understood through his emphasis on individual rights, rationality, and the need for social progress. It is needless to say, modern Indian political thought has become more unique than the ancient and the medieval eras. With the emergence of the European Renaissance to the Indian subcontinent people become more and more rational. This rational ideology, however, taught a man that by acquiring rights and freedoms, he could develop his personality. As a result, people became more aware of their rights and freedom, and began to make relentless efforts to restore them. It was Rammohun, who first introduced the European concept of Renaissance in Indian socio-political as well as religious thoughts and became the founding father of the modern Indian Renaissance. He was, in fact, the first Indian who paved the way for rationalism by liberating Indian society from its religious orthodoxy and superstition. On the other hand, he was an unsighted fan of British liberalism. So Rammohun's idea of freedom was much more linked to Western liberalism and the Renaissance.

The early liberal thought of the West had, indeed, a profound effect on Rammohun. As a liberal political reformer, he always wanted to see the victory of Liberalism in the world. Liberty and equality were the principal objectives of his political thought. Rammohun's struggle for women's freedom and rights has broadly expressed his liberal views. He was the first Indian to promote women's rights over their

ancestral property. He declared the battle against the evil practices of *Suttee* (Sati) that “led Indian widows to the blazing fire” (Nag, 1973). Rammohun challenged this evil practice and finally, in his relentless efforts and cooperation, by Legislation in 1829, Lord William Bentinck abolished the *Suttee* practice from Indian society forever. In the words of G. S. Krishnayya, “It was his greatest triumph, this purging of his country of that supreme shame. In the history of India, his name will be linked for all time with this achievement” (Krishnayya, 1969). Indeed, it was the most challenging fight of his life, and finally, he won it. Speaking about this most rigid and relentless effort, Jamuna Nag writes, “Rammohun’s promptness in rectifying the distorted quotations from Hindu scriptures was admirable. He needed superhuman energy and tact. And he was preparing himself for one of the toughest battles which he fought and won” (Nag, 1973). Besides, he also supported the right of daughters to ancestral property. He believed that one of the main reasons for the prevalence of *Suttee* was the destitution of women after the death of their husbands. In his “Brief remarks regarding modern encroachments on the ancient rights of females according to the Hindu Law of Inheritance”, written in 1822, he spoke out against polygamy and the virtual sale of young girls to Brahmins for money. In another legal treatise, “The Rights of Hindus Over Ancestral Property according to the Law of Bengal”, written in 1830, he also explains the laws relating to inheritance and alienation of property. He supports his argument by presenting explanations from ancient legal texts such as *Yajnavalkya*, *Katyayana*, *Narada*, *Vrihaspati*, etc. (Selected Works, 1958). Hence, the right of the daughter to the ancestral property and the abolition of the *Suttee* system - these two incidents undoubtedly bear witness to Rammohun’s liberal thinking. Moreover, his support for women’s education also reflects Rammohun’s liberal thinking.

Rammohun was the first Indian scholar to initiate the political consciousness among the people of Bengal. His *Sambad Kaumudi*, a Bengali weekly, had played a crucial role in spreading the political consciousness among the Bengalis. Biman Behari Majumdar writes: “Rammohun started the Vernacular Journal, *Sambad Kaumudi* in 1821 to rouse the political consciousness of the people of Bengal”(Majumdar, 1996). However, Bhabani Charan Banerjee, editor of the journal, did not support Rammohun for expressing his views against *Suttee*. In 12th April 1822, Rammohun started his Persian weekly *Mirat-ul-Akhbar* (Mirror of News) to share his liberal views. Through this weekly, he “welcomed the Muslim Intelligentsia to share the joys of a free press” (Nag, 1973). Rammohun’s liberal thoughts began to be published through these two newspapers. The combination of *Mirut* and *Kaumudi* makes the reader aware of everyday national events, literary progress and general knowledge. Not only national issues, international events were also published, and as a result, a national consciousness gradually developed among the Indians. In short, Rammohun’s journals promoted the cause of freedom and progress in India, which was, according to Zastoupil, “an instance of Rammohun’s role in the transition to a modern Bengali public”. In Zastoupil words: “The *Kaumudi* focused critical attention on sati, caste restrictions, wasteful expenditure, charity, marriage practices, and other matters”. And “the *Mirat* was more theoretical and international in scope. The military events in the Ottoman Empire and history and recent turmoil in Ireland drew its attention” (Zastoupil, 2010).

Rammohun did not like the policy of aggressiveness of any foreign power and never wanted India to be under any foreign yoke. But he was not opposed to British rule in India. Instead, he welcomed British rule in India for its liberal laws and government. British rule, to him, could liberate the traditional Indians from their religious orthodoxy. The essence of his ideas of freedom was to liberate Indians from the prevailing religious orthodoxy and superstition which could, as he believed, only be possible through British rule. During his time, two different trends were gradually developed in western thoughts: the earlier liberalist ideal and the nationalist ideal. Rammohun was preferably favouring the former for its enjoyment of civil and political liberty. He was an immense adherent of the British liberal ideals for its promoting liberty and social happiness.

As a social reformer, Rammohun’s contribution to freedom is measured by his outstanding role in promoting English education. By education, he wished to free the people from the prison of accumulated

chauvinism, and for this, he advocated modern Western English education. He sought to reorganize India through reforms by expanding Western education. Therefore, as a 'monotheistic revivalist' of modern India, he invariably advocated for introducing Western English education in this country. Indeed, Rammohun was fascinated by the generosity of Western English education and its relentless adventure towards discovering new knowledge. According to him, this new knowledge "alone could free his people from the prison-house of accumulated prejudices which had paralysed their faculties of fresh thinking. This knowledge alone could equip them to take their rightful place in the modern world"(Ray, 1974).

Rammohun's aimed to enlighten the vernacular-educated Indians in the light of European liberalism. In this regard, he was sufficiently aware that only European education could make it possible. So, even though he learned *Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Sanskrit*, etc., he was broadly interested in learning Western English education. Because, according to him, all these indigenous languages will not be enough to helping in learning the West best. He believed that English education is predominantly essential for acquiring skills in the practice of European epistemology. Rammohun recognized the importance of education in fostering rational thinking and societal progress. His efforts to promote education, especially for women, reflect a commitment to empowering individuals through knowledge—a value shared by liberal ideologies that emphasize the role of education in creating informed and autonomous citizens. Therefore, Rammohun was keen "to educate his people" through European English education, "to free them from the house of ignorance, superstition and idolatry, and to save them from the proselytising of foreign Christian missionaries" (Ray, 1974).

As a modern liberal man, Rammohun was not opposed to any religion. Instead, he rejected certain orthodox religious practices within Hinduism and criticized superstitious aspects of other faiths. He did not accept the imposition of anything in the name of religion. In the words of Bipan Chandra: "he vigorously opposed worship of idols, rigidity of caste, and prevalence of meaningless religions rituals" (Bipan Chandra, 1971). On the contrary, he believed in the "oneness of God and the fundamental unity of all religions. He did not reject any truth to be found in any scriptures and in the teachings of any prophet. He was, however, opposed to meaningless ritualism and idolatry"(Selected Works, 1958). His "*Tufat-ul-Muahiddin*" or "A Gift to the Believers in One God", published in 1804, was one of the earliest works in which he discussed various religious issues and declared battle on orthodoxy and bigotry (Selected Works, 1958). In short, Rammohun was, in fact, in favour of the right to freedom of religion. To him, people are free in their religious faiths. They have the right to choose their particular religion and have the right to follow their own religious beliefs. Thus, the religious ideas of Rammohun were also profoundly affected by liberal thought which was always passionate about liberating India from its old-age religious orthodoxy. Also, his stance on religious freedom is consistent with liberal principles that support religious pluralism and the separation of Church and state.

7. Conclusion

Within the guiding principle of 'reason', Rammohun wanted to build a 'New India' based on freedom and humanity. His fighting spirit, outstanding personality, and unwavering image as a social reformer gave him a long-lasting name in the humanitarian movement outside India as well. In Rev. Scott Porter's words, he was "one of the most extra-ordinary men whom the world has witnessed for centuries: whose freedom, vigour, and independence of thought, commanded the admiration even of his adversaries" (Singh, 1983). He was so fond of freedom that he regarded the opponents of freedom as the enemies of society and, according to him, they would never succeed. Focusing on demands such as the Indianisation of services, jury trials, separation of power, freedom of the press, and consultation with Indian zamindars, Rammohun paved the way for several generations of the moderate constitutional movement (Singh, 1983). He felt that, the zamindari system established the exclusive power of zamindars and deprived the tenants of their rights and freedoms. He, therefore, sharply criticized the zamindari system of medieval India, and opposed the further expansion of the system, which still evokes sympathy for Rammohun in the progressive hearts of intelligent people today. Inspiring the life of the lifeless public of medieval

India, Rammohan, through Western liberal ideals and English education, created a wave of Renaissance, which, in short, deeply attracted the hearts of the people of India. His efforts reflected a commitment to individual rights and social progress, which are central tenets of liberal thought. Therefore, from the overall discussion, it can be said that Rammohun's ideas and efforts resonated with many liberal principles, particularly those related to individual freedom, reason, and social progress, which stemmed from his profound belief in Western liberalism.

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