

Philosophical contribution of Ram Mohan Roy to the 19th century Bengal Renaissance

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ABSTRACT

The present work will try to focus on the philosophical contribution of Ram Mohan Roy to the 19th century Bengal Renaissance. The philosophers like F. Bacon, J. S. Mill, J. Bentham, H. Spencer have also contributed their philosophical thinking. The philosophers plead for a reason and rational thinking. They advocated humanity in place of Divinity. Ram Mohan Roy, a great scholar in Indian as well as Western philosophy, was the prime priest of modernity in Bengal. He founded BrahmoSamaj which is a policy of social reform and dedicated to anti- idolatry and monotheism, the worship of the supreme Brahman. The philosophy of monotheism of Ram Mohan Roy came not only from the principles of *Sankar* but also from the Quran through Arabic and Bible through Hebrew. This monistic movement against superstition helped to bring renaissance in the 19th century. He had discovered the theory of monotheism through the philosophy of Hindu, Islam, and Christianity. He had tried to show the unity of different religions. In essence, Ram Mohan was a cosmopolitan rationalist thinker with a universal outlook on human civilization.

1. Introduction

Bengal renaissance refers largely to the social-cultural, psychological and intellectual changes in Bengal during the nineteenth century as a result of contact between certain sympathetic British officials and missionaries on the one hand and Hindu intelligentsia on the other. During the British period, Bengal witnessed an intellectual awakening that is similar to the renaissance in Europe during the 16th century, although Europeans of that age were not confronted with the challenge and influence of alien colonialism. This movement raised questions about the existing orthodoxies, the dowry system, the caste system, and religion. One of the earliest social movements that emerged during that time was the Young Bengal movement that espoused rationalism and atheism as the common nominators of civil conduct among upper caste educated Hindus. The Bengal renaissance was contributed by various scholars like Ram Mohan Roy, IshwarChandraVidyasagar, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Keshab Chandra Sen, and Rabindranath Tagore. However, it was Ram Mohan Roy who substantially developed the monistic theory of God through his universal outlook.

2. Discussions

Ram Mohan Roy was an important figure in Indian renaissance. He was called the 'father of modern India'. He tried to break the traditional superstition to establish modern India. He criticized the traditional culture and tried to establish modern culture taken help the from the Vedanta. The eighteenth-century society, in which Ram Mohan Roy was born, was too fluid and too complex to be viewed in the light of such a simplistic analysis. Nineteenth-century was to justify as absolute traditional modernization polarity. Although with the advent of the British, there were changes in the external realities, and adjustments in the scope of new concepts, structures and innovations became realistic to avoid the crisis.

But Indian society is a traditional society and guided by the prescription of *Smriti*. It was marked by a bewildering polytheism, by hundreds of useless hardship and equal regards to all creatures could only bring salvation for them. He wanted to make his all countrymen well aware of those high and lofty ideals of life and he was sure of the fact that only the teaching of Vedanta could serve the purpose. For that reason, he established the Vedanta College. He held Vedanta as pure and elevated theism, which could help his countrymen to make from polytheism to monotheism. He criticized the material aspect of worship that narrow pillars and rites as created by the follower of Hinduism later on. He knew that the pure and real scripture of Hinduism did not support any narrow negativism.

The 19th century is one of the most eventful and formative periods of the history of India. It was the beginning of a series of thoughts and movements of far-reaching consequence. A survey of the political, socio-economic and religious condition of that age is necessary to thoroughly understand the development of the nineteenth century in a proper historical perspective. Although thinkers differ in determining the nature of this renaissance, some think it is not a renaissance compared to that of Italy in Europe. Others think that it is a renaissance in Indian form. There is another group who think it is a very significant reform movement in Indian society and cult.

All the differences disappear at the source of this renaissance; the source is the new ideas of eighteenth-century England. These ideas came from the philosophers of Europe. The philosophers are mainly Francis Bacon, David Hume, John Locke, J.S. Mill, J. Bentham, Herbert Spencer, Auguste Comte and the like. Mainly I will focus the philosophical contribution of Ram Mohan Roy in this century. The philosophers pleaded for reasons and rational thinking. They advocated for humanity in place of divinity. Ram Mohan Roy is a great scholar in Indian philosophy as well as conversant with western philosophy, who

is the prime priest of modernity in Bengal. Ram Mohan Roy was the founder of "BrahmoSamaj". This 'Samaj' stoutly advocated a policy of social reform.

BrahmoSamaj is the societal component of Brahmoism, a monotheistic reformist and Renaissance movement of Hindu religion. Monotheism believes in the existence of one God or in the oneness of God. It is diametrically opposite to polytheism. Polytheism believes in many God. Monotheism is a concept which has placed in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In this respect, the one God of monotheism is contrasted with the conception in some monotheistic religions and impersonal divinity or divine unity that permits the whole world, including humanity itself. For example, the Upanishads, part of the Vedic literature of Hinduism, can proclaim *tattvamas* literally "you are that" where that refers to the single, supreme reality of principle. Roy was the worshiper of supreme God who is beyond human knowledge and who supports the Universe.

BrahmoSamaj was dedicated to anti-idolatry and dedicated to monotheism, the worship of Brahman, the Supreme Being. The various versions of Brahmoism that arose in the course of the nineteenth century, as well as the mimetic of each version, are elaborations and intentions of this schema. BrahmoSamaj as a scheme is precisely the negation of particular- and rather fundamental features of the scheme representing Hinduism. This is the goal of Ram Mohan Roy. (This does not mean that the Brahmoism scheme replaced the totality of the Hinduism scheme, in either Ram Mohan Roy's mind or in the minds of those who become Brahmos). The percept of Brahmoism was meant to replace some of the beliefs and practices of orthodox Hinduism, not obliterate the Hindu religion altogether. Both Hinduism and Brahmoism take the Vedanta and Upanishads as their scriptural source. We find Roy saying in 1816, over a decade before the formation of the BrahmoSamaj, that 'the whole body of the Hindu theory, law and literature is contained in the Vedas'; and because they are so extremely voluminous written in the most elevated and metaphorical style. It is to the Vedanta that he first turns to refute certain precepts of Hindu Orthodoxy. He argues that only the Supreme Being is true is the subject of discourse in the Vedanta texts. These texts assert the unity of all worship, directed as it is to the Supreme Being, etc., commonly imply God alone.

He quotes for the Vedas: 'Adore God alone; know God alone, give up all other discourses.' Ram Mohan also said Vedas and Vedanta not only proclaim that there is only one God, one Supreme Being who is to be worshipped, but also that Supreme Being is formless. To these effects, he quotes from the Vedas and asserts that 'accurate and positive' knowledge of the Supreme Being is beyond ordinary comprehension. The Supreme Being can only be known by his 'effects and works' by observing the 'multifarious, wonderful universe and the birth, preservation, and destruction of its elements, one must conclude the presence of one who 'regulates the whole' and it is he who is called the Supreme Being. Here Ram Mohan Roy is appealing to a form of reasoning with the nineteenth-century philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce first called abduction.

- a. Observation: some phenomenon P needs to be explained.
- b. Premise: P would be explicable if hypothesis H were to be true.
- c. Conclusion; there is a reason to believe H is true.

In Roy's case P is the observation of 'the multifarious, wonderful universe'; and the premise is that this can be explained by the hypothesis (H) 'it is assured that there is a Supreme Being or creator'; hence the conclusion 'is the case that there is a supreme being'.

Roy trusted the 'Introduction' of Upanishad, he noted that Vedas contain allegorical representations of the attributes of the Supreme Being, by way of mundane objects, both organic and inorganic, with features that are analogues to those attributes.

Ram Mohan Roy was a supporter of Vedanta Philosophy. He was influenced by the teachings of Vedanta and inspired all countrymen to believe the oneness of God. He understood that if the countrymen would learn Vedanta Darsan, they would the evil effects of idolatry and polytheism as in their supreme scripture also it was held that adore God alone. He had criticized the practice of idolatry. He had felt that practices as destroying the texture of society. He believed the root of all evils was the idol worship. He thought that idolatry and its associated meaningless rituals and rites meant for those people who failed to realize the true meaning of worship. He tried to awake the countrymen from their spiritual error. He would believe that when men would understand the real meaning of religion they would be conscious. That consciousness would guide towards the noble duties of charity to the needy people. Conscious men would understand that respect to others and privation regarding eating, drinking, good and bad omens, not to speak of the distinction of castes, the practices of *sati*, child marriage, etc. These beliefs were received from *Sastras*. So he tried to attack those superstitions to establish modern society.

The fundamental Hindu society, as a consequence, started to oppose the modern theory of Ram Mohan regarding religion in a very spirited manner. Ram Mohan and his associates now faced determined and hostile opposition and were even threatened with social persecution. But Ram Mohan remained firm and true to self, though quite aware of the consequence of his preaching. In the preface to his English work, Abridgement of the Vedanta, he wrote- "By taking the path which conscience and sincerity direct, I, born a Brahmin, have exposed myself to the complaining and reproaches, even of some of my relations, whose prejudices are strong and whose temporal advantage depends upon the present system. But these, however, accumulated, I can tranquilly bear, trusting that a day will arrive when my humble endeavors will be viewed with justice, perhaps acknowledged with gratitude. At any rate, whatever men may say, I cannot be deprived of this consolation: my motives are acceptable to that being that beholds in secret and compensates openly!"

In 1803 he moved to Murshidabad. Here appeared his first publication entitled "*Tuhfat-ul-Muwahidin*" or "A gift to monotheist". '*Tuhfat*' was negative, critical and destructive in

character. In this work, Ram Mohan protested against the ideology and superstition of all creeds and tried to lay a common foundation of all universal religion in the doctrine of the unity of the Godhead. From a cognitive perspective, the contents of *Tuhfat* mirrored the state of Roy's mind-his system of beliefs, knowledge and sensibility, his cognitive identity in other words, at the time. The light of his later writings it can be said that *Tuhfat* was at the very least part of his preparedness. While admitting that true monotheism was a minority, he stressed that their source of strength and not a majority in number. In the same time another work of Ram Mohan in Persian entitled '*Manazararat-ul-Adiyan*' or 'Discussion of various religions' came out. He published a translation of the 'Vedanta Sutra' in 1815 and the Bengali translation of five principal Upanishads- *Isa, Kena, Katha, Mundaka and Mandukhya* Upanishads between 1816 and 1819.

Ram Mohan vindicated the purity and monotheism of the Upanishads, and he thought the translation of Upanishads to be a very effective means of providing to the people superiority of the monotheistic creed. His translation of the Upanishads "with a view to making people happy and comfortable" sounded like a "Benthami Slogan", He was the first man to translate and explain the Vedanta in Bengali though he mainly propagated the non-dualism of Sankaracharya. In 1825 he founded the Vedanta College, where along with western Science and Philosophy, students were to be taught Vedanta Philosophy.

Rama Mohan also emphasized that the ethics of Christianity had a greater appeal than its metaphysics. The ideal humanity and the tendency to promote the peace and harmony of mankind, in general, become possible if the liberal notion of one God is followed.

Ram Mohan had studied different religions. He was a great Sanskritist, at the same time he knew Persian well. For his knowledge of Persian and Islamic Philosophy, he was called 'Zabardast Maulavi'. It was through the study of the Koran that he had his first indoctrination in monotheism. Ram Mohan's faith in Vedas, the inspiration he imbibed the monotheism of the Upanishads. In his English and Bengali translations of the Mandukya, Katha, Kena, and Isa Upanishads, Ram Mohan speaks of himself as following "the gloss of the celebrated Sankaracharya". The Upanishads declare that Brahman is everything, *sarvam khalvidam brahman*, that it is the truth of truth, *satyasyasatyam*, and that the *atman* and *Brahman* are one, *ayamatman Brahman*. These statements can be understood either literally or figuratively and interpreted accordingly; Sankara belonged to the line of thinkers who understood them literally. He upheld the non-duality, *Advaita* of the *atman* and *brahman* and as brahman is the only reality for the Upanishads, he contended that the material world and the finite *jiva* have no reality of their own. They are due to extraneous adjuncts, *upadhis*. Ram Mohan found a firm footing in the Vedanta with Sankara's interpretation. Naturally, his crusade against idol-worship was categorical and straight forward. In the preface to his translation of the Isa Upanishad, Ram Mohan refuted all the arguments against image-worship. He asserted that in worship 'all that bear figure and appellation are inventions'. He quoted from Brihadaranyaka Upanishad- *ta-d'* 'adore God alone' and said that the worship of figured beings indicated in. The *Sastras* 'is only applicable to those who are

incapable of elevation of their minds', 'for the benefit of those who are not possessed of sufficient understanding'. He denied that ceremonies and rituals have any necessity for true religion. To Roy, 'a becoming idea of God's superiority and who is capable of elevating his mind will not worship figured beings'. Instead, he devised a pure form of divine worship negating all sorts of popular image-worships and ceremonials. And yet he could not accept Advaita Vedanta entirely. This is shown by the fact that the sacred texts recommended by him included besides Brahmasutra and passages from Sankara's commentary on the Brahmasutra, such texts as *Mahanirvana Tantra, Goudapada-Karika* and the Gita. He also referred to *Manu's Sanhita* and Vishnu Purana. Anyone interprets in Upanishadic or Vedantic texts have to come to grips with the understanding of *maya*. The interpretation of *maya* becomes Ram Mohan's understanding of the 'conventional idealist doctrine of the dependence of matter on the spirit and the creation of the world by God. His originality lay in the avoidance of the extreme monism of Sankara. The term *maya* implies primarily the power of creation, and secondarily its effect. Ram Mohan says: The Vedanta, by comparing the world with the misconceived motion of a snake, when a rope really exists, means that the world like the supposed snake has no independent existence, that it receives its existence from the Supreme Being. In the like manner, the Vedanta compares the world with a dream; as all the objects seen in a dream depend upon the motion of the mind, so the existence of the world depends upon the being of God.

His fierce opposition towards idolatry has been attributed to the influence of Islam. His work *Tuhfatul* discloses his belief in the unity of Deity, his infinite power and finite goodness and in the immortality of the soul. The Percept of Jesus was, however, attacked by the Christian men of divinity in and around Calcutta. Ram Mohan Roy's faith in monotheism went side by side with his fierce crusade against idolatry. Ram Mohan Roy did not like the *Advaita* doctrine of Sankara's. He was trying to propagate the metaphysical idea of Advaita as a religion. The absolute or supreme being is not undifferentiated or indeterminate. Rather he is out of reach of the corporal organs of action and is without origin. Ram Mohan Roy proposes a scheme of offering prayers directly to the one God. Sankaracharya declared the adoration of Supreme Being to be entirely independent of Brahmanical ceremonies. So he could not totally accept Advaita Vedanta. He recommended other text such as Brahmasutra, Mahanirvana Tantra, Goudapada-Karika and the Gita. He also referred to Manusamhita and Vishnupurana. The term *maya* primarily implies the power of creation' and secondarily its effect'. He compared the world like the supposed snake has no independent existence, that it receives its existence from the Supreme Being. Vedanta compares the world like a dream, as all the objects seen in a dream depend upon the motion of the mind, so the existence of the world is dependent upon the being of God. Again, Christ's moral teachings also led him to challenge the Trinitarian doctrine in Christian orthodoxy. He wrote a series of tracts, beginning with 'the Precepts of Jesus, the guide to peace and happiness extracted from the books of the New Testament. He speaks of the Christian missionaries' attempt to blind me and my countrymen with the idea of 'a human God'. Christian Unitarianism is as much anathema to

Roy's universalism as Hindu Polytheism and idolatry. In this way he led to Christian Unitarianism, as to Hindu Monotheism, for each is a culturally, historically, and the ethnically determined manifestation of the Universal Religion. The religious beliefs of people of every country are connected with social customs and moral practices.

Sir Brajendranath Seal, a great poet, and philosopher discovered that Roy's theology something more than the invention of the BrahmoSamaj: Roy had drawn on his studies in comparative religion to arrive at a 'universal scripture' which underlay all scriptures. Roy had found that each followed its own path to one ideal- 'the ideal of Universal religion'. All religions are a manifestation of a single, universal religion. Seal ascribes to Roy a goal that was the belief of universal religion. He tells us that the way to 'commemorate' Roy best is to 'go over in our minds' the conflict that he was paused with. According to Seal the conflict involved the three cultures of civilization-the Hindu, the Islamic and the Christian. Roy's goal or desire was that to discern 'a point of rapport, of concord of unity among them. According to Seal Roy was one of the

heroes of synthesis and conciliation. He is a prophet of humanity who envisioned an enlightened India as a golden link between east and west.

3. Conclusion

In a word, Ram Mohan Roy's invention of Brahmoism, a philosophical contribution as a representation of a new monotheistic movement was largely independent of the influence of British Orientalism. Ram Mohan had discovered the theory of monotheism through the philosophy of Hindu, Islam, and Christianity. He tried to show the unity of different religion. This concept of monotheism had a great role in the nineteenth-century renaissance. Human being must have to be rational in bringing about the revolution. Ram Mohan played his role to this renaissance. Brajendranath Seal comments that "Ram Mohan was cosmopolitan, rationalist thinker with a universal outlook on human civilization". Rabindranath Tagore comments that "He was born at a time when our country having lost its link with the inmost truths of its being, struggled under a crushing load of unreason, in abject slavery to circumstance".

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