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Topic: - Ram Mohan Roy: Civil and Religious Rights

Introduction

Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) was one of the makers of modern India. He is generally hailed as "the father of Modern India". Though Roy was modernist in his approach, he always tried to link modernity with tradition. He attempted the creative combination of secularism and spirituality, of Western and Eastern philosophy. His attitude towards religion was eclectic. He wanted to present the concept of universal religion by combining the best features of all leading religions of the world. He is also known for his advocacy for Civil Rights.

Ideas on Religion

Universal religion

A review and revaluation of religion was Roy's primary concern. He was of the opinion that rationality and modernity needed to be introduced in the field of religion and that "irrational religion" was at the root of many social evils. He was interested not only in reforming the Hindu religion, but also tried to remove the discrepancies among the various religions of the world. He undertook a serious study of comparative religions and realised in due course that true Hinduism, true Islam and true Christianity are not fundamentally different from each other. He hoped that the universal religion for mankind could be established by combining the best elements of all religions. This concept of universal religion meant not merely religious tolerance, but also transcending all the sectarian barriers of separate religions. Roy, thus attempted a spiritual synthesis, stressing the unity of all religious experience. To promote his ideas of 'Universal religion' he wrote a book name 'The Universal Religion' In 1829.

Atmiya Sabha and Brahmo Samaj

Roy established societies and association to spread rationalism among Indians. In 1815 he founded Atmiya Sabha and in 1828 Rammohan Roy established the Brahmo Samaj for this purpose. The Samaj acted as a forum for religious and philosophical contemplation and discussion. The Brahmo Samaj does not accept the authority of the Vedas, has no faith in avatars or incarnations, and does not insist on belief in karma and the process of death and rebirth. Influenced by Islam and Christianity, it denounces polytheism, image worship, and the caste system.

Impact of Islamism

Besides Bengali and Sanskrit, Roy had mastered Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, Greek, Latin and 17 other leading languages spoken in the world. Roy's familiarity with such diverse languages, exposed him to a variety of cultural, philosophical and religious experiences. He studied Islam thoroughly. The rationality and the logical consistency of Arabic literature impressed Roy greatly. The Sufi poets made a deep impact on Roy's mind. The Quaran's concept of Unity of God fascinated Roy.

Reinterpreting Hinduism

When Roy examined the Hindu religious texts and practices, he was greatly disturbed with polytheism, idolatry and irrational old evils. As a Sanskrit scholar, Ram Mohan had studied the Hindu scriptures in depth and he believed that today's ill practices in Hinduism is not its

pure form but only a perverse form. He translated Vendantic texts in various languages so that the true philosophy of Hinduism can reach people. He decided to fight against the orthodoxy in Hindu religion. He was a firm believer of the Advaita philosophy which left no scope for such tendencies. Roy was quite sure that unless the Hindu society underwent a religious and social transformation, it would not become fit for political progress. He was convinced that these longstanding customary practices really did not form the core of their religious faith. They, in fact, had no place or support in the religious texts of the Hindus. Roy wanted to draw the attention of his countrymen to the ancient purity of their religion. To him, this purity was well reflected in the Vedas and the Upanishads. In order to prove that blind faith and superstitious beliefs and practices had no basis in the pure Hindu religion, Roy undertook the difficult task of translating the Upanishads into English and Bengali. He gave elaborate notes and comments with these translations and distributed them free of cost amongst the people.

Views on Buddhism

Roy also had studied the teachings of the Buddha Dhamma. It is said that in the course of his travels he reached Tibet. There he was pained to see how the principles of Buddhism were blatantly violated and how idol-worship, which had no place in the Dhamma of Lord Buddha, had come to be accepted. He strongly criticised the practices.

Role of Christianity

As a Dewan in the revenue department, he got an opportunity to study the Tantrik literature as well as the Jaina's Kalpasutras and other scriptures. He also mastered the English language and acquainted himself with political developments and ideas like rationalism and liberation in England and Europe. The knowledge of English not only facilitated Roy's contacts with Englishmen but also opened up a whole new world to him. In Roy's own words, he now gave up his initial prejudices against the British and realized that it was better to seek help from these enlightened rulers for the betterment of the condition of the ignorant and superstitious masses. He became a strong advocate of English education and a supporter of British rule. Roy admired the Bible as much as he did the Vedanta and the Quran. Many of his critics thought that two major features of Roy's Brahmo Samaj, namely, the opposition to idol-worship, and the practice of collective prayer were borrowed from Christianity. He also compiled "The Precepts of Jesus" with a view to prove how the teachings of Christ could be better adapted to rational man's use. At the same time, it has to be noted that he was no blind admirer of the Christian faith.

From what has been said above, it should be clear that it is unfair to charge Roy with seeking to Christianise Hinduism. Rather it was Roy's ardent desire to revive Hinduism in its pure and universal form. He pleaded for an Advaita philosophy which rejected caste, idolatry and superstitious rituals. Thus, Roy was someone who had gone beyond narrow divisions of religious faiths. He embraced all that was the most valuable and the most inspiring in Hinduism, Christianity and Islam.

Ideas on Liberty and Civil Rights

Liberty

Roy can be described as the earliest advocate of liberalism and the precursor of the liberal movement in India. Liberalism had emerged as the most valuable product of renaissance and reformation in Europe. It captured some of the best brains in the 19th century Europe and America. It became the dominant ideology of the first phase of religious and social reform in India. Liberalism, in brief, stands for the value and dignity of the individual personality; the central position of Man in the historical development; and the faith that people are the ultimate source of all power. Quite naturally liberalism insists on the inviolability of certain rights of the individual without which no human development can be thought of; it insists on human equality and also on the tenet that the individual should not be sacrificed for the sake of society.

Liberty was a pivot around which the entire religious-socio-political thought of Roy revolved. His protest against idolatry, his agitation against Sati, his demand for modern western education and his insistence on freedom of press, right of women etc. were all expressions of his intense love for liberty. For him, liberty was a priceless possession of mankind. He was the first to deliver the message of political freedom to India.

Civil Rights

Civil rights and liberty refer to the legal instruments of protection of the individual from arbitrary acts of government. This includes personal freedom, right of movement, right of association, freedom of thought and expression, faith and worship, equality before the law, right to fair trial etc. This incorporates all the rights that the citizens get from the state, law and judiciary.

Roy was the first to create an awareness for civil rights amongst the Indians. He was grateful to the Britishers because they made available to Indians all those civil rights which were enjoyed by the Queen's subjects in England. But he also criticised British government in the matters where they discriminated Indians to give them civil liberties as compared to the citizens of England.

Freedom of expression

Roy gave the greatest importance to the right to freedom of opinion and expression. To him it included the freedom of creativity of mind and intellect, as well as the freedom of expressing one's opinions and thoughts through different media. According to Roy, freedom of expression was equally useful to the rulers and the ruled. Ignorant people were more likely to revolt against all that the rulers did, they could turn against authority itself. In contrast an enlightened public would be opposed only to the abuse of power by authority and not to the existence of authority itself. The free press, the Raja argued, had never caused a revolution in any part of the world. But many examples could be cited where, in the absence of a free press, since the grievances of the people remained unrepresented and unredressed, the situation had become ripe for a violent 'revolutionary' change. A free and independent press alone could bring forth the best in the government as well as the people.

Restriction on freedom of press

Roy, however, was not against the reasonable restrictions on the freedom of press. He even accepted some additional restrictions on the Indian Press, which were not imposed on the press in England. Such restrictions, he believed, might be necessary here as some Indians were likely to encourage hatred in the minds of the natives towards the British rulers. Roy also justified the restrictions imposed with a view to check the seditious attempts of creating hostilities with neighbouring friendly states.

Right to property and views towards peasants

Roy believed in the sanctity of right to property. Similarly, he believed that a strong middle class had an important role to play in socio-political dynamics. He was for the emancipation of poor peasants who were exposed to the exploitation of zamindars. He wanted the government to reduce its demands of taxes. He however differed from the other western liberal thinkers in one important respect, viz. role of state and sphere of state activities. In his

scheme of things, the state is expected to bring about social reform, in protecting the rights of the tenants against the landlords etc.

Liberty in other countries

He always supported liberty. His support for liberty was not confined only in India but he supported liberty throughout the world. When the Spanish colonies in South America were liberated in 1823, he organised a party to celebrate the occasion at the town hall in Calcutta; he supported the Greeks to fight against the Turks; He demanded freedom to Ireland; He congratulated the people of Naples on successfully revolting against the Bourbon King.

Freedom from British rule

Roy supported freedom movements all over the world but never demanded freedom for India. He never participated in the freedom movement of India. He never initiated that kind of a movement because he was very well aware of the ground realities in India. He was of the opinion that Indians don't have the vibrant nationalist qualities. He feared that there will be anarchy and chaos if the British left India immediately. He firmly believed that the British will make India a free country when Indians will meet all the conditions of eligibility. But he was aware of the fact that this will take a long time. Indians will take a long time to develop.

Conclusion

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Some important Facts

- ‘Father of Modern India’; ‘Pioneer of Indian Renaissance’ ‘Prophet of National Awakening’
- Abolished ‘Sati’ in 1829

Concepts

- Liberal Humanism
- Civil Rights
- Universal religion
- World Congress
- Cosmopolitanism

Societies

1. Atmiya Sabha in 1815,
2. The Calcutta unitarian Association in 1821
3. Brahmo Sabha in 1828

Journals

1. Brahminical Magazine’;
2. Bengali weekly - ‘Samvad Kaumudi’;
3. Persian weekly - ‘Mairat Al Akbar’;
4. English weekly - ‘Bengal Gazette’

School/colleges:

1. Hindu College (Presidency College); with David Hare 1817
2. The Anglo Hindu School 1822
3. Vedanta College 1826
4. Scottish Church College with Alexander Duff 1830

Books/essays:

1. Tuhfat – ul – Muwahhidin (A Gift to Monotheism) 1803;
2. The Precepts of Jesus - The Guide to Peace and Happiness (1820)
3. Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females (1822)
4. The Universal Religion (1829)
5. History of Indian Philosophy (1829)
6. Many translations of Vendantic texts and Upanishads in Hindi, Bengali, English