Chapter – III

A SKETCH OF RAJA RAMMOHAN ROY’S LIFE
3.0. Introduction

A man’s life is almost inseparable from his deeds and achievements in life. In order to understand Raja Rammohan Roy as a man and in order to have a concept of his activities and contributions towards society and education, his biographical study seems mandatory. This chapter is about a sketch of his birth, his education and his service life which influenced his later personality.

3.1. Raja Rammohan Roy’s Birth and His Family

Raja Rammohan Roy, a pioneer of Bengal Renaissance was born in 1774, seventeen years after the battle of Plessey in the village Radhanagar, in the district Hooghly. At that time Warren Hastings was the Governor General in India.

Raja Rammohan Roy, a nationalist reformer and a believer in the unity of godhead dedicated his life to human service to ameliorate their social, moral and physical conditions. He did it with his unwearied labour and tireless exertions. Example of his unending effort was his serious attempt to eradicate idolatry, rite of Sati and much more social oppression.

The great grandfather of Raja Rammohan Roy, Krishnachandra Banerjee was a respected and prosperous Rarhi Kulin Brahman. For his satisfactory service to the Nawbab of Murshidabad, he was rewarded with a hereditary title of ‘Raya Rayan’, later abbreviated shortly as “Roy”. The third son of Banerjee, Brajabinode a devout Vaishnava was the grandfather of Raja Rammohan Roy,

The fifth son of Brajabinode, Ramakanta Roy, a follower of Vishnu was the father of Raja Rammohan Roy. His mother’s family was a devotee to Sakta culture. His mother’s name was Tarini Devi, a woman with good understanding, strong character and influence. So, from the childhood, Raja Rammohan Roy came into contact of mixed culture. The influences of Vaishnava and Sakta culture were converged on him. From his early life, Raja Rammohan Roy was associated with composite or synthetic culture.
Raja Rammohan Roy’s family was very orthodox in religious matters. He was brought up under a strenuous orthodoxy. His father devoted his life in the name of religion, and mother also dedicated her life in the performance of menial services in the temple of Juggunuth in Orissa.

3.2. Raja Rammohan Roy’s Education

As per the biography of Raja Rammohan Roy by Nagendranath Chattopadhay:

a) At the age of 9 to study Persian and Arabian, Raja Rammohan Roy was sent to Patna where he studied for 2-3 years.

b) Then he was sent to Kashi to study the Hindu scriptures in the Sanskrit language where he stayed for either one year or little more.

c) Again at the age of 16, he travelled for Tibet leaving his home. After spending more or less four years there, he returned to home at the age of 20.

At home, Raja Rammohan Roy started his native education and learnt Bengali and Sanskrit. Afterwards, under local Maulavi or Muslim priests, he was given Persian instructions. Then, in accordance with his father’s opinion, he went to Patna to learn Arabic, Logic and Mathematics. That knowledge of Arabic and Persian was necessary to secure job gainfully. At that time when he was acquiring instruction in Arabic and Persian and was going through the Arabic translation of Aristotle and Euclid, he was deeply moved by the free thinking of the followers of Islam. Gradually he learnt the Muwahhidins, the Sufis, and the Mutazilas and was highly impressed by the challenging nature of Islam.

After acquiring knowledge in Arabic and Persian, Raja Rammohan Roy went to Benaras to acquire knowledge in Sanskrit. He mentioned this fact in his autobiographical note as: - “in conformity with the usage of my paternal race, and the wish of my father, I studied the Persian and Arabic languages, these being accomplishments indispensible to those who attached themselves to the court of mohameddan princes; and agreeable to the usage of my maternal relations. I devoted myself to the study of Sanskrit, and the theological literature, law and religion”. (Collet, 1988, pp 461)
During his short stay at Banaras, Raja Rammohan Roy became well acquainted in the language Sanskrit and was greatly inspired by the ethical teachings of *Upanishads*. He realised the basic and fundamental tenets of the sacred books of *Hindus* and already lost his faith and confidence in the religious fanaticism of the *Hindus*.

Two learned Pandits, namely Sivaprasad Sharma and Mrityunjai Vidyalankar taught *Vedanta Shastra* to Raja Rammohan Roy and they also made him aware of the *Vedanta Darshana*. *Vedanta Sahastra*, a popular Hindu religious text helped Raja Rammohan Roy to understand the real essence and significance of his own religion, with which it became possible for him to purify the then *Hindu* society.

### 3.3. Raja Rammohan Roy’s Religious Conflicts with his Parents

After returning from Patna and Varanasi, Raja Rammohan Roy was well versed in the ancient classic literature and became well aware of the monotheistic flavour of the *Hindu Shastras*. He found the prevalent popular religious doctrines of the Hinduism as superstitious and narrow minded. He understood that the present popular rites, views, ideals and beliefs of Hinduism were very much influenced by absurdities and peculiarities, out of which idolatry and ceremonies deserved mentioned. People the then used to perform the mechanical rites which were debasing and degenerating from the view point of the society. He boldly and openly criticised those ceremonies. That led to a conflict with his devotee parents and because of that conflict; Raja Rammohan Roy left home and went to Tibet where he spent 2/3 years.

Thereafter Raja Rammohan Roy settled down at Varanasi and went through a rigorous study of Sanskrit literature. Soon he became well versed in the system of *Darshanas* or the system of Philosophy, *Upanishads*, *Puranas* and *Tantras*. He studied and made multifarious researches in three *Vedanta Shastras*, namely the *Upanishad*, the *Brahma Sutras* with Sankara’s commentaries and the *Gita*. Those researches helped him to build his own personal religion and philosophy. In Benares, Raja Rammohan Roy was under an employment of copying manuscripts up to July 1803 till his father’s death. Afterwards he returned to Bengal.
3.4. Raja Rammohan Roy’s Service Life

3.4.1. Work under Thomas Woodforde

Raja Rammohan Roy started his service life as a private munshi of the Collector of Dacca Jalalpur (modern Faridpur, Bangladesh), Thomas Woodforde. Up to 11th May 1803, Raja Rammohan Roy was in that post. After which he resigned from that post because of his father’s illness. When again Woodforde became the Registrar of the Appellate court of Murshidabad, Raja Rammohan Roy joined him as his private secretary or munshi. It was at that time he wrote a Persian tract with Arabic introduction, Tuhufat ul Muhiwiddin. He wrote that tract in between 1803-1804.

After Thomas Woodforde, Raja Rammohan Roy joined John Digby as his private munshi in May 1805. From the post of munshi, he held the post of Sheristadar or head clerk of the Faujdari Adalat. He was in that post also under John Digby. For nearly about ten years, he was associated with John Digby in his service career. Their association continued up to 1814.

3.4.2. Activities at Rangpur

With John Digby, Raja Rammohan Roy went from Ramgarh to Jessore and Bhagalpur and finally in 1809, he went to Rangpur. At Rangpur, he organized an informal club at his residence, where in every evening he conducted discussions and controversies on various topics of religion. He was able to continue with such arguments and discussions, because of his vast study of various cults and cultures. In those discussions, Hindu, Mahommedan and Jain Pandits participated and also Marwaries of Rajputana who were Jains by faith and belonged to different communities used to attend.

During his stay at Rangpur, Raja Rammohan Roy made a careful study of Tantra Shastras and was associated with Hariharananda Tirthaswami. At that time he was well versed in Vedantic literature, Kalpa Sutra and other works of Jaina. He made a well versed knowledge in Jaina scripture also. Because of his free and open discussion and
criticisms of popular rites and rituals of Hindu religion, he used to face opposition from his counter party, so called orthodox circles of the Hindu society.

3.4.3. A Summary of Raja Rammohan Roy’s Business Life

Synopses of the events from 1795 to 1815 are as under:

1795:- after four years of travel (from 1790) Raja Rammohan Roy returned to Benares. His father on information from Harihrananda recalled him and employed him in his estate.

1796:- before joining to Rani Vishnukumati’s estate, (Burdwan Raj) as muktear, Ramakanta divided his immovable property among his three sons.

1798:- Raja Rammohan Roy was preparing to go for Benares, for the study of Hindu scriptures.

1799:- The estates Govindapur and Rameswarpur were purchased. Raja Rammohan Roy left for Benares.

1803:- Raja Rammohan Roy returned from Benares and acted as a private munshi to Thomas Woodforde at Dacca. However get resigned and returned home on hearing of his father’s illness. However whether or not he was present at the dead bed of his father was again a matter of dispute.

1804:- Raja Rammohan Roy became private munshi to Woodforde at Murshidabad. His book, Tuhufat ul Muhhiwidin was published.

1805:- Raja Rammohan Roy became private munshi to Digby and went to Bhagalpur, then Jessore and then again came back to Bhagalpur.

1809:- Raja Rammohan Roy went to Rangpur with Digby in the same capacity and worked also as an advisor to the Udasi estate at Rangpur. At that time, Harihrananda came to stay with him and Raja Rammohan Roy was engaged in translating Upanishad in English, Bengali and Hindi. In 1814-15 he also went on a mission to Bhutan.

1815:- Digby left Rangpur for home (Britain), Raja Rammohan Roy came to Calcutta in 1815.

3.4.4. Raja Rammohan Roy and John Digby

Raja Rammohan Roy joined John Digby in 1805 and was associated with him for nearly ten years. He started his association as a private munshi and then became his
head clerk. While working with Raja Rammohan Roy, John Digby discovered in him a quality of acuteness in his understanding power. John Digby was very much pleased with that ability of Raja Rammohan Roy. During that long association, John Digby had never considered Raja Rammohan Roy as a subordinate clerk of him; rather he always appreciated his knowledge, wisdom and intellect.

Under John Digby’s association, Raja Rammohan Roy learnt English language with his power of accuracy. Initially when Raja Rammohan Roy met John Digby, he was not very much well acquainted with that particular language. At that time, he was not able to speak English fluently with a degree of correctness. Under John Digby, Raja Rammohan Roy pursued all the public correspondences and in accordance with his work, he used to make conversation with the European gentlemen. Not only that, but also, he used to read English newspapers every day. All those facts helped him to develop good command over the language English. At that time during his long association with John Digby, Raja Rammohan Roy not only got the opportunity to increase the proficiency over the language, but also became well versed in the knowledge of the social, political, economic and culture of the West. That was possible as he studied their political and economic development and became well aware of their western culture. Because of his good knowledge of English; it became possible for Raja Rammohan Roy to grasp the knowledge of western Science and literature which helped him in his later life to shape his own religion and culture.

At that time, Raja Rammohan Roy also made a study of empirical philosophy. He read Bacon to Locke and Newton and was enriched with scientific thought. Writings of political thinkers like Montesque, Blackstone, Bentham and Tom Paine and as well as of Voltaire and Volney, Gibbon and Hume also influenced him. All those studies and knowledge infused a rational thought in the mind of Raja Rammohan Roy, which enabled him to illuminate the poor and weak condition of his own religion and thereby to ameliorate the social, moral and educational conditions of his countrymen.

Before his association with John Digby, Raja Rammohan Roy was attached to the Fort William College. After the establishment of that college, in 1800, in Calcutta, when it became a meeting place for European and Indian scholars, Raja Rammohan Roy was associated with them.
In 1809, when John Digby became the Collector at Rangpur, he, for appointing Raja Rammohan Roy in the post of Dewan, wrote a letter to the secretary of the Board of Revenue, as Digby knew very well that Raja Rammohan Roy was a man of acute understanding, integrity and ability. In that letter to the Board, John Digby mentioned all those points in Raja Rammohan Roy’s appreciation, which he found in the due course of his association. John Digby knew very well that a man, like Raja Rammohan Roy with profound knowledge, wisdom and ability was appropriate for that post. But surprisingly, the Board, refused to accept John Digby’s recommendations for Raja Rammohan Roy. The surprise was that it was not Raja Rammohan Roy’s ability that was put under question by the Board, rather it was the effect of an unpleasant encounter that took place between Raja Rammohan Roy and the Collector of Bhagalpur, (at the beginning of 1809) Sir Frederick Hamilton. That incident was known to the Board and they therefore refused to accept Raja Rammohan Roy’s name for the post of Dewan. Though the board failed to give any correct and clear reason on that ground, they however reacted unfavourably in that matter.

3.5. Settlement in Calcutta

When early in 1815, John Digby departed from Rangpur; Raja Rammohan Roy left Rangpur and settled down at Calcutta for the next sixteen years. In Calcutta, first he purchased a garden house in the Circular Road which is now occupied by the Deputy Commissioner of Police, North district Calcutta and its number is No 113, Upper Circular Road. Another house of Raja Rammohan Roy was situated in Amherst Street, which was known as “Simla house”.

For the next sixteen years, Calcutta was a centre for all sorts of reformatory activities of Raja Rammohan Roy. He started his social reformation and the very basis of that reformation was religion. He had never opposed to the religious practices and principles as held in the sacred Hindu Shastras. He had only refused their perversion. To make his countrymen well acquainted with their true religious doctrines, he first made a thorough study of comparative religion and afterwards realized the basic tenets of all fundamental conflicting religions. He translated Vedanta and Upanishad into Bengali, Hindustani and English, because of the well awareness of the Hindus as well
as for the benefits of the Europeans. He wanted to enable the *Hindus* to reach to the highest notions of their *Shastras*. In 1815, for religious discussions, he established *Atmiya Sabha* and to spread the message of one true God, he founded his *Brahmo Samaj*. He wanted to connect his countrymen with the pure and pristine form of *Hindu* religion. Raja Rammohan Roy actually wanted to reconcile the spirituality of the East with the modernity of the West.

To uproot the custom of deliberate wilful murder of women in the name of religion, Raja Rammohan Roy wrote tracts and pamphlets in both Bengali and English and distributed them free of costs among his countrymen. He wanted to arouse their consciousness against that dogmatic slumber, so that his countrymen would take initiative in that matter and would mobilise their opinion for the eradication of that horrible custom. That was actually happened in 1829, by Lord William Bentinck when he passed the ‘*Sati* Regulation Act’.

### 3.6. Raja Rammohan Roy and Law Suit

Many times because of liberal open views and because of open criticism of orthodoxy of *Hindu Shastras*, Raja Rammohan Roy offended his devotee mother, Tarini Devi and she filed suit consequently against him.

A passage from William Adam’s ‘*A Lecture on the Life and Labour of Raja Rammohan Roy*’ (delivered at Boston, U.S.A in 1845) can be quoted as: ‘........when the death of Rammohan’s elder brother made him the head of the family she (his mother) instituted suits against her son both in the king’s and Company’s courts, with a view to disinherit him as an apostate and infidel, which according to strict *Hindu* law, excludes from the present and disqualifies, for the future possession of any ancestral property, or even according to many authorities, of any property that is self-acquired’. (Adam, 1977, pp 4.)

Another suit was filed against Raja Rammohan Roy on 23rd June 1817, in the Equity Division of the Supreme Court by Govindaprasad, the son of Raja Rammohan Roy’s brother, Jagamohan. Lastly however Govindaprasad lost the case.
3.7. Conclusion

Through his multifarious researches, Raja Rammohan Roy came to know that the foundation of all the three religions, mainly, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity is the same. He had studied the *Vedanta* and also learnt Hebrew and Greek to study Christianity. When he was at Patna and Varanasi, he went through a study of the ancient *Hindu* literature and realised that a synthesis of the basic elements of the three religions could be possible after excluding dogmas, superstitions and rituals. He later matured that idea or realisation into the concept of universality and universal religion.

In 1820, he published “The Precepts of Jesus”, the Guide to peace and happiness. In that book, he wanted to retain the ethical teachings of the Christ and therefore excluded all miraculous and dogmatic principles and practices, as created by the man later. For retaining the same notion of the unity of God, in 1826, he established the Brahmo Samaj. His Brahmo Samaj was meant to worship Eternal, Unsearchable and Immutable Being, the Author and the Preserver of the Universe as well as to fight against all sorts of social oppressions.

He had a great desire for visiting England. On April 8, 1831, he arrived in England and received universal cordiality and respect. In England, he also reissued his important Essay on the ‘Rights of Hindus over Ancestral Property.’ He visited France and wished to visit America. But unexpectedly he died of brain fever at Bristol, September, 27, 1833.

Thus through this chapter, the researcher found the various contributing factors in developing Raja Rammohan Roy into a matured, successful and ideal personality.
References


“Raja Rammohun Roy inaugurated the modern age in India. He was the father of Indian Renaissance and the prophet of Indian nationalism”.

Rabindranath Tagore