Chapter – IV

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND BENGAL RENAISSANCE
4.0. Introduction

This chapter deals with the political, social, cultural and educational background of the time of Raja Rammohan Roy. At that time, in every sphere of society and education there was an attitude of non-interference on the part of the Government. Darkness, superstitions, meaningless rites and rituals were decaying the society. The original thinking power of the people was blocked. Culture was decadent. Educationally, the official policy was in favour of revival of traditional oriental learning, though the demand of the age was for western, modern and liberal education, for an inauguration of the new learning. All those were possible if and only if natives could be given instruction in western Science and literature. That could bring a new awakening, enlightenment, which was in high demand then. That new awakening, was termed as ‘Renaissance’, a rebirth of the age old decaying culture and superstitions. This chapter again covers the nature of Renaissance movement as heralded by the father of modern India, Raja Rammohan Roy.

4.1. Political Perspective

The year 1765 was the year when the East India Company moved from being traders to becoming de facto rulers. Consequently there was a crucial shift in their activities too. That transition for the British was possible after they won at the battle of Plessey in 1756, a battle which was initiated by the then Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ul-Daula. Fundamentally East India Company accounted a ‘populous society, thriving economy, and a well developed political institution.’ (Mani, 1998, pp 12). Soon, over much of the Indian sub continents, the British reign expanded from its ‘foothold to its de facto control.’ (Mani, 1998, pp 15) .Gradually the British mastered the whole country. In those days people were less bothered about the ruler and the company itself did not therefore interfere in the day to day acts of the natives. The British in general and the company in particular were very clever in the matter of non-interference in the religious views and social practices of the natives. They used to respect the social and religious perspectives and did not do anything that could be recognized as an attack on the ancient social customs of the natives. They used to take a neutral position thereby
leading to no complaints on the part of the Indians (both Hindus and Muslims) against the conquerors.

4.2. Social Perspective

However, because of that neutral position, natives used to practice and cultivate those rites and rituals which were meaningless and were not at par with the religious doctrines of the Hindus. Brahmins were fully aware of that fact. But since they had their comfort, source of income and happiness in those rites and rituals, they did not bother to stop those peculiarities of the society. Rather they encouraged the ignorant people to follow their scriptures blindly by concealing from them the true meaning of their texts.

4.2.1. Sati - Concept and its Background

Among many decadent traditions, one horrible rite, which was prevalent in the then society, was the ritual suicide of women in the name of religion, Sati. That practice became familiar during the epic period as in Mahabharata; there were examples of faithful wives who cheerfully burnt themselves on the funeral pyre of their dead husbands to prove their truth. (Singh, 1958, pp 192.) In the epic period that rite was considered as a virtuous duty of a faithful wife by means of which the latter could gain heavenly pleasure. That practice was predominantly prevalent among upper caste Hindus, though Hindustan did not invent that practice, only acquired it.

In the humane doctrines of Buddhism, Jainism and much later Sikhism, there was always an attempt to prohibit such rite. However all attempts did not end with success. In Mughol dynasty, under the strong influence of the Mughol empires, that rite was attempted to be stopped. Like the use of compulsion was prohibited by Akbar. During Jahangir’s time, death penalty was prescribed for anyone involved or indulged in that matter. His grandson Aurangzeb issued an order that “in all lands under Mughul control, never again should the officials allow a woman to be burnt.” (Singh, 1958, pp 193). Among Hindu rulers, the name of Baji Rao for condemning that rite with energetic measures in the Maratha dominions deserved to be mentioned.
In one of his reports on Central India, Sir, John Malcom said that “the Mahomedan rulers endeavoured, as much as they could without offending their Hindu subjects, to prevent it.” As per the report of the Asiatic Journal of January, 1824, the practice “was discouraged and even forbidden by the Mughol Government.” (Collet, 1988, pp 83). However that was never absolutely forbidden, as the Mughol Government feared that such a drastic measure may alienate their Hindu subjects.

However, in spite of all those serious and noble efforts, it was difficult to condemn the practice from the soil of India permanently. Towards the end of 18th century and in the beginning of 19th century some of the structural and cultural characteristics and changes of Bengal gave rise to its popularity. It became an entertainment for those who used to observe how women were dragged, tied up with the bodies of their dead husbands and forced down on the pyres with the help of bamboo sticks, so that they could not escape from the flames.

4.2.1.1. Reasons behind Sati

Various causes may be there behind such wilful deliberate murder. Among which, the self-interests of the Brahmins and their misinterpretation of Hindu sacred texts were prominent. Along with that, the ignorance of the people, cost of the widows, and decline in culture were also there. The various causes may be listed as follows:

1. In 18th century Bengal, with the new land settlement system, a new group deriving socio cultural status from the British came into being. They lost their historical position and from service castes, they entered into a profession of commerce. They, by the service of investing money in lands, became rich and luxurious and to avoid the cost of maintaining widows they started that practice to gain their social status and virtue.

2. Property distribution law was another cause. To avoid the proposition of the share of property as laid down in the Dayabhaga, mainly that rite was performed. Because in the Dayabhaga, it was held that after the death of the husband, the widow was entitled to the share of his property.
3. Many widows, because of the fearful, upcoming future, committed suicide, as they knew very well that after the death of the husband, there would be a complete bar to their social, cultural and economic freedom. They would not be able to attend festive and religious occasions. They would be under strict diet in food and dressing. So, they knew that after the death of the husband, their life would be miserable from every corner, and therefore in most of the cases they had chosen the path of Sati.

4. The Brahmins were mostly responsible for the rite. As they knew that in that rite, they had their comfort and happiness, they used to make misinterpretation of the Hindu texts, and knowing fully that Sati was not mentioned in the Hindu Shastras, they continued its propaganda for their self-interests and happiness. As Dubious remarked-"How these Brahmins who are so scrupulous and attach so much importance to the life of the most insignificant insect and whose feelings are excited to piety and indignation at the very sight of a cow being slaughtered, can with such savage cold bloodedness and wicked satisfaction look upon so many weak and innocent human beings, incited by the hypocritical and barbarous inducements, being led with affected resignation to a punishment so cruel and undesired."-. (Das, 1970, pp 43).

4.2.1.2. Position of Women

After discussing those causes for that horrible rite, one could easily predict, how distress and miserable the condition of the women was in 19th Century Bengal. They were not entitled to the acquisition of knowledge; they were deprived of exercising all sorts of talents and capabilities and were not given any economic freedom and independency.

4.2.1.3. Kulinism or Polygamy

Though devoid of true knowledge, Kulin Brahmins were considered as the highest caste in the society and in the name of marriage, actually there was sell of girls in the society. After marriage in most of the cases, the husbands remained absent and the wives became dependent on their father and brother for economic reasons. Due that marriage,
their life and position became miserable in the society. At the marriage the wives were considered as the better half of their husband, but after marriage their status became no better than slaves. They had to perform each and every household activity. Like cleaning, scouring the dishes, washing the floor and cooking day and night. In her performances of household activities, if she would have committed slightest or negligible mistakes, she would have to be insulted by her family members. They used to serve food to their family members and after they had finished, the wives would intake whatever was left, no matter whether it was sufficient or not. Because of the Kulinism, if the Kulin Brahmins had two or three wives, the wives were often subjected to mental miseries and they would have often engaged in constant quarrel. Not only that, but also the Kulin Brahmin used to take the side of one wife and treat other badly. The wives were compelled to tolerate all those miseries and grief with their patience and virtue. More miserable was that if a wife, being unable to bear the torture, left home and started staying separately, her husband, applying his magisterial authority generally got back her and used to torture her in various ways and even sometimes the wives were subjected to death by their husbands. Those were the miseries of the women after the marriage in their laws in house. The miseries of the women in the then society were not confined to those pains and sufferings only. It continued after the death of their husbands also.

Soon after the marriage to an infirm and lunatic, the wives became widow and were deprived of their husband’s property. By that deprivation, they became dependent on the family members from a state of sole mistress of the family. Obviously, under such a situation, they were considered as a burden to the family and the family members considered it to be wise to burn them with the dead husband under the cloak of religion. So, after the death of their husband, the widows had three options as: - 1. To live a life of slaves fully depending on others without any hope of support from anybody. 2. for maintenance and independence, to take the path of unrighteousness. 3. To die on the funeral pyre of her dead husband to prove their devotion to their deceased husband by submitting themselves to the most cruel, painful death, in the name of the religion.

4.2.1.4. Europeans and the Sati

When in the name of the religion, such mockery was continuing, it was not possible for a wise man to sit idle. Earlier, though not always successful, the Hindu and Mughal
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rulers attempted to stop that practice. That time Europeans after coming into force, made efforts to stop it. Some European officials took endeavour in that regard, though the overall official policy was indifferent in that matter. First, a Collector of Shahabad, M.H. Brooke took a deliberate and bold step at Sahabad district to stop Sati, in January 1789, and wrote a letter to the then Governor General, Lord Cornwallis on 28th January, 1789, seeking his guidance for taking right course of action. M.H. Brooke mentioned that considering the horrified nature of the ceremony or practice of Sati, at which human nature would shudder, he could not permit its occurrences within his jurisdiction. But, he continued that he was bit confused regarding the correctness of his action. Therefore, M.H. Brooke asked the Governor General to provide him particular instruction in that matter.

However, Governor General was not in favour of permitting him to refuse widow burning. The Government did not allow M.H. Brooke to apply any coercive measure or official power to prevent the occurrences of Sati. The logic of the Government was that such a ceremony of Sati was sanctioned by the religion of the Hindus and the natives had never been prevented by the ruling power from its observances. Under such a situation, if M.H. Brooke, by means of his official power, would have prohibited the rite, the natives would start showing their devotion for such custom in an increasing manner and consequently the practice would be widespread than before.

After sixteen years, another British Magistrate, Mr. Elphinstone at Gaya in Bihar, interfered with the observance of that popular rite but as he was “not aware of the existence of any order or regulation to prevent such a barbarous proceeding” (Collet, 1988, pp 85), gave a writing to the Governor General demanding correct directions and instructions in that matter.

Meanwhile few unofficial personalities had also been troubled about that matter of Sati, among them the name of William Carey, a Serampore missionary deserved to be mentioned. When he stepped into India, at the time of Governor General Lord Wellesley, he found that cruel custom. Also he met with official indifference. He made a statistical survey by his own and brought to the notice of the Government that in 1803 alone, within a thirty miles radius of the capital, there had been some 438 cases of Sati.
Thereafter, Lord Wellesley asked Nizamat Adalat and the learned Muslim divines and Hindu Pandits thereon to give their precise opinions and sanction in that matter of Hindu rite. On that in June 5th 1805, the Nizamat Adalat sent its reply enclosing their opinion as: “women who desire to join their husbands on the funeral pyre can do so provided they have no infant children to look after, they are not pregnant or in the period of menstruation, or are not minors. If a woman having an infant child can make proper arrangements for the raring of the child, she can burn herself along with the dead body of her husband. But it is against the Shastras or customs to apply drugs or intoxicants and to make a woman lose her senses. Before a woman performs concremation she must take the solemn oath and perform some other ceremonies. If a woman performs the ceremony of concremation then she enjoys company of her husband in heaven for as many years there are hair on the body- for three and a half crore years.” (Singh, 1958, pp 196).

However, with those opinions of the learned Hindus, ultimately no fruitful rules and regulations were drawn up. At last in April 17, 1813, instructions were again drawn up and that time the instructions sanctioned the practice of Sati if it was approved by the Hindu religion and law, but where the same religion and law forbidden the practice, the practice would be banned. In other words, those instructions banned Sati if it was not performed voluntarily with the wilful sanction of the widows, who were not pregnant, under sixteen and intoxicated then. So that meant the order was to “regulate it”, (Singh, 1958, pp 197) not prohibit it.

The learned Pandits of the Nizamat Adalat gave sanction in favour of Sati following the Shastric injunction of Angira, Vyas, and Brihaspati. In a reply to a question asked to the Pandit of the said adalat, that: - if a widow became agreed for Sati but later denied it, then, what would be her outcome? In that case what would be the attitude of her relatives towards her? Ghanashyam Sharma, the said Pandit, to that question, replied that if a widow did not commit to be Sati, then she was not liable to do any praischitto, and in that case her relatives could accept her, but, if a widow committed first and then denied, then she would be liable for doing praischitto, afterwards her relatives could accept her, and Ghanashyam Sharma also showed that it was written in the Shastras.
Afterwards the following rules were prescribed regarding *Sati*:

1. No force would be applicable for that rite to the widows of the *Brahmins* and other castes.
2. No intoxication.
3. Proper age for *Sati* would have to be determined as per the *Shastras*.
4. During pregnancy no such rite would be performed.

*Sati* would be banned under the above mentioned circumstances.

**4.2.1.4.1. Company’s Order in 1812 or 1813**

So, as per as the Company’s order of 1812/1813, the rite or custom of *Sati* was permitted under such a situation where the widows performed it willfully without being pregnant or otherwise. In 1815 and 1817 two other sets of instructions were circulated, as:-

I. Annual returns of the cases of *Sati* were to be sent to District Magistrates.

II. Relatives were made to give prior intimation of *Sati* to the police and certain Categories of widows were declared as ineligible for *Sati*.

So the Magistrate and Police were instructed "To allow the Suttee in those cases where it is countenanced by their religion and to prevent it in others in which it is prohibited by the same authority." (Collet, 1988, pp 85).

Only from that time the matter of *Sati* came into the proper notice of the British. They used to take regular statistics in that matter from 1815.

**4.3. Socio- Religious Perspective**

The degraded practice of *Sati* which shaded the society with blood brought it under a very lower limit of decay and degeneration. The thinking power, mind and the progress of the men were blocked. In religion, worship of numerous God and Goddess, polytheism created sectarian bias. Morally people were required to show their respect towards others. A simple code of religious doctrine, which could bind men and could bring peace and harmony, was required. That moral doctrine was required to raise the
notion of the common people to a high standard of God and to save them from debasing religious beliefs and practices like tyranny, injustice, corruption, fanaticism and inequality which were surrounding the then society. The aspirations of the people as well as their value system were collapsed. From socio religious perspective, there was hopelessness and despair for the natives as a whole, general as well as elite.

Generally two communities, *Hindu* and *Muslim* used to live peacefully so long as religious fanaticism did not enter into the realm of their mind. However, in 19th century Bengal, there was no such uncorrupted realm. Therefore, social oppression and religious fanaticism engrossed the society thereby declaring the age as an age of ‘ideological fanaticism, religious bigotry, economic injustice or social oppression.’ (Barua, 1988, pp 83).

Moral, social and religious values were destroying the hope, comforts and happiness of the general as well as elite masses. They used to perform those social customs as supported by their vague and fanatic religious doctrines, devoid of any meaning and significance. Out of many such rites, self-inflected injuries, child sacrifice and burning of widows were deserved to be mentioned.

### 4.4. Cultural Perspective

Culturally also the society was in a paralysed condition. *Hindu* society was deprived of proper cultural values. They were misguided by the religious commentaries. On the other hand, for *Muslim* society, there was a complete stop and shattering to the Persian culture, as the major source of their inspiration. The Indian society was passing through a stage of stagnancy and degeneration. Cultural values were collapsed. There was no unity of religion and morality, thereby leading to ignorance, bigotry, superstitions and social and cultural decadence.

### 4.5. Educational Perspective

Undoubtedly the reason behind such ignorance and apathy in every sphere of religion, society and culture was the lack of education. Education at that time was a ‘plaything
of power politics’. (Barua, 1988, pp 82). True system of education with proper emphasis on Science was rejected. More emphasis was placed on orientalism. But that oriental culture was not conducive to remove superstitions, and backwardness. Democratic education, conducive for public good, i.e. in a word a complete system of education was absent then. Proper education with a unity with rationalism was very much felt then. At that time an urge for a strong official policy recommending modern, liberal and western education was felt.

4.5.1. Official Policy in Education

However the then official policy was working in an opposite direction of the demand of the age. They mainly emphasised on Hindu learning, through the medium of Sanskrit thereby blocking progress, modernity, advancement of learning and enlightenment. Without caring for the demand of European Science and literature, the acting official policy was trying to revive traditional, oriental system of education.

All those were caused because during the early years of its administration, the East India Company also did not bother for the benefits and progress of the natives of the country. They, in the field of education, also took a policy of non-interference. Court of Directors though recognized "the utility and the importance of establishing a free and direct communication with the natives" and "their acquiring a knowledge of the English language as "the most effectual means of accomplishing that desirable object" - but in practice they limited their efforts only to grant annually to few schools-- (Sen, 1967, pp 91)

Company initially decided to establish institutions like Calcutta Madrassa (1781) or the Benaras Sanskrit College (1791) with the twofold objectives of the promotion of the study of Arabic and Persian languages for qualifying the sons of gentlemen so that they could hold the position of lucrative offices in the state or could be able to expound the law for assisting European judges in their administrative affairs. Secondly, by such activity and course of action, the Company wanted to ensure the Government that they were paying utmost attention to the natives and to and their system.
Naturally it is evident that the official policy was in favour of diffusing the knowledge of Hindu learning through the language Sanskrit. However that policy of the Company was criticised by Charles Grant as early as in 1792. Grant was very much in favour of cultivation of European Science and literature through the medium of English. He opined for the diffusion of western knowledge as he believed that that knowledge would rectify the opinion of the general mass and would make them free them from mental bondage with the help of new ideals.

4.5.2. Lord Minto’s Minute

1. In a Minute to the Court of Directors on March 6, 1811, Lord Minto drew attention to the fact that Science and literature were “in a progressive state of decay among the natives of India”; that the abstract Sciences were abandoned, and no branch of learning cultivated but what is connected with the peculiar religious doctrines of the people.” (Sen, 1967, pp 93). He mentioned of the disuse of many valuable books and urged the Government for their revival.

2. He (Minto) further expressed that due to lack of education, man was depriving from all comforts and benefits. They were also deprived of all moral and religious tenets and thereby were involved in crimes, perjury, forgery and others.

3. Therefore Minto proposed that “some additional expenses should be incurred with a view to the restoration of learning in the extensive provinces subject to the immediate Government of this Presidency”; (Sen, 1967, pp 94) and for that his recommendations were the reformation of the college at Benaras and the establishment of the colleges at Nadia and Tirhoot. In those colleges, he mentioned for general superintendence, pensions to distinguished teachers, nomination of teachers by different committees, public library and last but not the least the duty of the librarian to procure books

4.5.3. The Period from 1813-1823

Section 43 of the East India Act of 1813, first gave official recognition to the East India Company for ameliorating the intellectual condition of the natives of India, and in their
Charter Act they mentioned that for that purpose, annually a sum of not less than one lac of Rupees should be set aside and should be utilised for reviving and improving oriental literature, and thereby encouraging the learned natives of India towards intellectual advancement. It was also decided in the Charter Act that the money should be utilised for initiating scientific education and for acquainting the inhabitants of the British territories in India with the knowledge of the Sciences.

The Court of Directors agreed “with Lord Minto that vice is the ordinary con-committant of ignorance; and that one of the best securities against crime in any country was the diffusion of knowledge among its population.” However “vice and crimes” as per their opinion, would not be suppressed by the establishment of two or three Hindu Colleges. “For extensive reformation of the morals of the people, we must look to sources of instruction far more abundant and universally accessible.” The common rudiments of knowledge were being taught by numerous village schools in the country. The foundations of general virtue and intelligence had to be laid in these schools, if the eradication of vice and crime from the country is the objective of the Government. – (Sen, 1967, pp 97).

They were of opinion that excellent systems of ethics as contained the language Sanskrit could help the natives to acquire the knowledge of the Sciences. They continued that in the texts of natives which were written in Sanskrit, there was mentioned of codes of laws and compendiums of duties, which could help the native officers in their judicial affairs. They opined that there were many tracts in Sanskrit on the subject of merit on the virtues of plants and drugs and their application in medicine, might prove useful for the Europeans practising in those affairs. They further advocated that there were treatises on Astronomy and Algebra written in native language that might prove useful for establishing links of communication between naives and European officers. Therefore, they concluded that study of oriental literature should be encouraged among the inhabitants of India.

Those recommendations of the Court of Director revealed the fact that the then official policy was in favour of the encouragement of Sanskrit scholars and the improvements of oriental literature through the reorganization of village schools. They were
indifferent towards the promotion of the knowledge of western Science and literature among the natives.

4.5.4. Moira’s Recommendations

The question of real implementation of the object of Charter Act and the fruitful use of the money set aside for the diffusion of the proper system of education was also discussed by Lord Moira and he, in his Minute, on 2nd October, 1815, wrote to the Court of Directors that: - “Any intervention of Government, either by superintendence or by contribution should be directed towards the improvement of existing tuition and to the diffusion of it to places and persons out of its reach.” (Sen, 1967, pp 98). He further added that the village school masters had failed to check the tendencies towards moral depravity, so as a remedy, the village schoolmasters should be supplied with “little manuals of religious sentiments and ethical maxims.” (Sen, 1967, pp 99)

He further continued that in the existing colleges, students used to get instructions in certain formularies by the professors, who could not teach those formularies efficiently. So in most of the cases, the students failed to understand the spirit of the lessons. Not only the professors, but also, he mentioned that the equipments and the mental alertness for teaching Science in the existing native colleges were also lacking. Therefore he said that under such a situation, liberal Sciences would be revived among the natives after connecting with their fundamental learning, so that gradually the natives would be able to understand the relationship of different branches of learning. They would be at the same time able to understand the utility of Science in their business activities and could direct their enlarged thought towards the morality and on the sublime duty of men

4.5.5. Serampore Trio

Meanwhile, several institutions namely Hindu College (1817), The Baptist Mission College, Serampur (1818), The Bishop’s College (1820) were established for promoting western culture. So side by side the two systems of education namely oriental system through the language Sanskrit and western system of education through the language English went on developing. In 1818, by the English missionaries, named
as William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward, the first English missionary college, Serampore College was formed to give access to western education in Arts and Science to all students irrespective of class, caste, colour, creed and sex. At Maldah and Dinajpur, Carey worked under administrative impediments, Mr. Ward was an expert printer and Mr. Marshman was a teacher. In 1800, Serampore Press was established. In three directions, the activities of the Serampore Mission were spread. Carey became a “first rate linguist, propagandist, author and a man of letters.” (Banerjee, 1998, pp 20). Initiative in educational endeavours was taken by Marshman and Ward gave his leadership in making the Serampore press instrumental in printing. They worked together and earned the epithet ‘The Serampore Trio.’ (Banerjee, 1998, pp 21). Carey translated the New Testament into Bengali in 1801. In 1810, Calcutta Benevolent Institution was established by Carey and Marshman. More than 20 schools were established by the Trio alone by 1815. There were 115 schools by 1817. In 1818, the Serampore College which was established and mentioned earlier was the outcome of that momentum.

In 1818, along with the establishment of Serampore College, Serampore Trio also started journal, *Samachar Darpan*. Carey became its pillar who was associated with that paper from 1818 to 1823. So, in the field of Bengali language, literature, journalism, education and literary translations, Trio had made immense contributions.

### 4.5.6. Fort William College

In 1800, another landmark in Indian history was the foundation of Fort William College. Serampore Trio was also associated with that college. That college was established as a seat of oriental learning at the time of Governor General, Lord Wellesley. That college had translated thousands of books in Arabic, Hindi, Urdu, Persian, Bengali, and Sanskrit into English. So, the first of intellectual endeavour was associated with the establishment of the Calcutta Madrasa (1781), the Asiatic Society (1784) and the Fort William College (1800). At Fort William College, William Carey joined as the head of the Bengali department and appointed notable Sanskrit scholar, Mrityunjoi Vidyalankar to write Bengali prose. Under whose supervision, more than one hundred local linguists were appointed for the work of translations. In that college,
there were both Indian and European staffs. The college also had made provision for training to the young officials. Beginning of all those activities of the Serampore Trio and Fort William College influenced Bengali language and literature and prepared the base for a new type of education, western education, a new type of mental horizon.

4.6. Bengal Renaissance

The demand of the age in accordance with a dark background of society, politics and education, was a warm welcome of western civilization, an awakening. That dawn of modern awakening was termed as Renaissance. Needless to say that after the Charter Act of 1813, the complex, many sided socio-cultural movement which influenced company’s educational policy was designated as Renaissance. In India, Renaissance, the new awakening started with Bengal, so it is termed as Bengal Renaissance. The literal meaning of Renaissance was revival or rebirth of ancient tradition, culture and literature. Those new ideal and movement transformed Bengal with the influence of western knowledge and culture. Out of those changes, the most important single notable factor was the beginning of the English education.

4.6.1. Background of Bengal Renaissance

The main reason for that new awakening was to pull out the men from medievalism, casteism, purdaha and other social evils to an age of development and illumination. i.e. from social, educational and religious stagnation to an age of light. Renaissance functioned as a process of removing men from superstitions to Science. At that time in accordance with fatal socio religious backdrop and with regard to the dead creativity, Renaissance came as a process of removing all those obstacles. Those decaying culture and tradition coupled with corruption and conservatism blocked the mental, physical health of the people of the society. ‘

4.6.2. Role of Renaissance Scholars

The period of age old darkness and narrowness with old, worn out moral and religious ideas were required to be eradicated at a time when the movement of Renaissance came into being. That movement revived the old heritage and glorious past. Appreciating the
impact of modernity in mobilising public opinion, against Hindu superstitions naming Sati, polygamy, child marriage, and caste division; inter caste hatred, dowry and untouchability, that movement stressed on the revival of the elements of positivity in India’s past. All those were possible, as felt by the Renaissance scholars, if there was freedom of the will.

Renaissance scholars were emphasised over the dignity, sovergenity and the personality of man. They recognised man as the noblest and beautiful creation of God who could act, create and enjoy everything God has created. Renaissance humanist held the view that to redeem one; they must depend upon themselves, not on God or middlemen. They claimed that man must understand religious doctrines with rationality and relevance, with Science excluding metaphysics and then only they would be able to reject dead social conventions, modes and practices. Man, as per their opinion, should judge everything with their reasoning ability and with his intellectual and moral personality.

4.6.3. Nature of Bengal Renaissance

The most notable feature of Bengal Renaissance was the revival of oriental culture. Classical Bengali language and literature was analysed rationally and developed, refined and refreshed by that movement. Rationality in religion was sought for.

Apart from that, Bengal Renaissance emphasised over the recognition of the dignity of individual. The personality, worth and identity of the individual were given due importance. Freedom of the individual, liberty and emancipation of the women thereby leading to the improvement of their condition were also sought for through that movement and momentum.

Other feature of Bengal Renaissance was the acceptance of modern scientific attitude of the West, modern liberal views instead of medieval superstitions. Instead of ancient Sanskrit system of education, that movement gave due importance on western Science, Philosophy, Literature through the medium of English. Modern, liberal and scientific education encompassing newness, freedom of opinions, views; ideals were also urged
through that movement. Simply, it could be said that a new momentum and a new direction to social, cultural and political sphere free from old value system was mainly the nature of that many sided complex movements.

4.6.4. Raja Rammohan Roy- The Pioneer of Bengal Renaissance

The first phase of Bengal Renaissance was led by none other than Raja Rammohan Roy, who by his farsighted vision, zeal, compassions and efforts successfully led the movement and created the modern age at a time when it was of utmost importance. R.C. Majumdar had rightly called Raja Rammohan Roy as “One of the greatest representatives of the New Age and he reflected in himself many distinguished features that heralded the Renaissance in Bengal.” Rabindranath had remarked “He was born at a time when our country having lost its link with the innermost truths of its being, struggled under a crushing load of unreason, in abject slavery to circumstances. In social usage, in politics, in the realm of religion and art, we had entered the zone of uncreative habit, of decadent tradition and ceased to exercise our humanity.” (Bose, 1976).

Raja Rammohan Roy’s Renaissance movement emphasised over the dimension of rationality in religion, newness in education and humanity in society by eradicating casteism and superstitions. He upheld the causes of monotheism and universalism in religion. He was very much opposed to polytheism in Hinduism and trinity in Christianity. He made a thorough study of comparative religion and realized that the fundamental base of all those three religions was the same that was the worship of one true God. He wanted to make his countrymen aware of that inner significance of religion. By studying the basic teachings of *Upanishad, Vedanta* and *Gita*, he realised the commonness of all three religions and advocated the wholeness of different cults and religions through his Renaissance movement. He actually made a historical synthesis of all those three fold religions- Hinduism, Christianity and Islam.

His movement was based on rationality. He advocated the cause-effect relationship behind each and every happening. He asserted that man should not follow his scriptures blindly, rather judge them with reason to overcome all dogmatic slumbers. He had
never rejected *Hindu* Shastras, only interpreted it in the light of reason. He believed in the intellectual capacities of man and advocated that man should make an enquiry into the nature and principles of religious doctrines before their acceptance. He held the notion that man must challenge the validity of the doctrines with truth and reason and must distinguish truth from untruth. Not only that, but also, Raja Rammohan Roy advocated that man must understand the cause effect relationship to avoid all sorts of supernatural powers. Through that movement, he emphasised over the inductive reasoning, feelings and emotions of man.

Raja Rammohan Roy proposed that an analysis of the religious experiences by the man with the help of reason and rationality could only help them to understand the truth and the true meaning of their sacred books. Under such a realization and understanding, man could free themselves from the bondage of the *avatar* or prophet. Raja Rammohan Roy believed that the presence of *avatar* was absolutely unnecessary to make people aware of the central message of God. By exercising one’s sense, reason and knowledge, man would be able to understand God’s message. Raja Rammohan Roy wanted that the natives must apply their conscience. Otherwise, he knew that out of ignorance, man would be dependent on the *avatar*. Raja Rammohan Roy wanted to make that fact clear that God could not perform miracles. He was opposed to any miraculous performances. So, in his ‘Precepts of Jesus’, he also excluded the concept of miracles. He was sure of the fact that by the exercise of the inductive reasoning, insight and intellect, man could realise the higher notion of God, for that no external help was required. Only internal conscience could make that concept clear that the creator could not create impossible things. To understand that high, lofty ideals of life, Raja Rammohan Roy believed that man would have to exclude supernatural and metaphysical doctrines.

Through his Renaissance movement, Raja Rammohan Roy stressed over the eradication of social oppressions, superstitions, ignorance and sectarian bias. He was opposed to caste system and for bringing people of different class, castes and communities under one roof of common worship, he founded the *Brahmo Samaj*. That *Samaj* reacted against social stagnation and tirelessly worked for cultural, social and educational upliftment. His Renaissance movement emphasised over common public good, “*Lokasreya*”. He was always vocal for individual rights, liberty and against
inhumanity and superstitions. Raja Rammohan Roy believed that through that movement, man would be conscious about their rights and privileges. They would be able to analyse and scrutinise their scripture in the light of reason and accordingly could shape their own culture and religion.

So, during that dismal stage, when the social, educational and political conditions were unstable, Raja Rammohan Roy shaped his own religion and culture by pouring into it the best from various foreign religions and cultures.

4.7. Conclusion

Thus, it can be concluded by saying that at the end of 18th century and in the beginning of 19th century, slavery engrossed our whole country. In religion, society, education, culture and politics, we faced a decadent tradition and an attacking humanity. At that time, as a representative of modern age, Raja Rammohan Roy appeared as a prophet of new awakening. That new awakening which brought a new sense of consciousness among the countrymen was Renaissance, and during its first phase, that movement was rightly nurtured by none other than Raja Rammohan Roy. His role as a pioneer of Bengal Renaissance would help us further to analyse his contributions in society and education for the benefits of his countrymen.
References

- Ibid. Rammohun the Father of modern India, (pp 263-340).
“Individual progress is the touch stone and the measuring rod of social progress, but the individual progress could be secured only by organizing and establishing the condition of social progress.”

Raja Rammohan Roy