

RAMMOHUN ROY
MODERN INDIA' FIRST PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL
SADHAN C DUTT MEMORIAL LECTURE,

Jawhar Sircar

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At the outset, I thank Shanta Ghosh, Anjum Katyal and all others who conceived this wonderful initiative for a Nabanna Earth Weekend at Santiniketan in the middle of spring. It is an honour for me to begin the cultural event by delivering the Sadhan C Dutt Memorial Lecture. We hear the term 'public intellectual' so often but many of us may need to know what precisely it denotes.

India's eminent historian, Romila Thapar, has made my task easier by discussing it in a recent book entitled *The Public Intellectuals in India* (Aleph, 2015). At the third Nikhil Chakravarty Memorial Lecture organised in 2014, Romila Thapar delivered a speech entitled '*To Question or Not to Question? This is the Question*'. In it, she expresses her anguish at the fact that we do not question enough — even though India has a long tradition of public debate, and she cites the Buddha. For our purposes, a public intellectual is not just one who knows a lot, but is one who utilises his or her acquired knowledge and interrogative skills to relate to society and to analyse its issues. He or she refuses to be in a comfort zone and raises pertinent questions, however uncomfortable they may appear. What defines public intellectualism is the ability to communicate intellectual pursuits to a broader public and to question the normative structure — irrespective of whether society is prepared to accept these views or not. For instance, as a public intellectual, Rammohun's entire life was one of unpopularity and struggle, for he questioned those premises that were beyond question, and he did it all the time.

Right from the Upanishadic period, India has an age-old culture of questioning existing beliefs, texts, systems and public authorities both the religious and the secular or political. We have briefly mentioned Gautam Buddha in this regard. But the hard fact is that this practice had fallen into utter disuse by the late medieval and early modern periods. This is when Rammohun arrived. There is no doubt that he surpassed all his contemporaries in India and, in fact, emerged as the first Indian citizen that the British ruling class took serious note of — in the six decades that followed the Battle of Plassey. He was just a private citizen, a native subject of British colonial power in India, with absolutely no special status or wealth. It goes, therefore, to his sole credit that he could, nevertheless, create a position for himself and succeed in influencing British policy in favour of social reforms. Roy was the first Indian public intellectual to excel in placing critical issues in the public domain,

especially before the English authorities, in their own language — with courage, conviction and confidence.

As we shall see, he held their attention as he presented well-researched content on several issues with his proven command over the English language. Equally striking was the fact that the British took cognisance of him — even when they disagreed — which implicitly, conferred on him a certain degree of ‘relative equality’ of status that colonists were usually loathe to accord to darker subject people. In order to appreciate the high regard with which he was viewed by the British, even in London, we may see a notice in the *Missionary Register* of London. It appeared as early as 1816, when Rammohun had just about begun his lifelong mission to reform the Hindu religion. It describes him before a poorly-informed British public as “*a Brahmin.....of great consideration and influence, shrewd, vigilant, active, ambitious, pre-possessing in his manners, versed in various languages.....*”. It then goes on to relish his battles against “Hindu idolatry and superstition” (Majumdar page 4). We are yet to come across any record of an Indian thinker and public activist who received such high consideration in Britain till then. Not only was his public intellectualism known in Britain 15 years before he made his first and last voyage to the country that controlled India, but we also see that in the summer of 1818, the *American Review* also extolled him. It declared that “the learned and philosophic Rammohun Roy” of distant Kolkata was “*a virtuous.....individual who had advocated the cause of truth, amidst obstacles from which any ordinary mind would have shrunk*” (*Calcutta Journal*, October 1818). The next such Indian to earn such handsome praise came full 75 years later — we refer to Swami Vivekananda and his iconic *Chicago Address* of 1893. So far ahead of others was Rammohun Roy.

But it is not just for this extraordinary gift of communication that we remember Roy — we admire his unwavering faith in rationalism that he expressed through his writings and campaigns. Rammohun had complete mastery over Sanskrit and Bengali and skilled enough to converse and write well in Persian, Arabic and English. More important is that his dexterity as a polyglot and as a polymath conferred on him a rare adroitness to navigate between different cultures and ideas. He is, indeed, a true maker of a composite India, for he drew the finest from each of the civilisations that these languages represented. He was thus the first Indian of the 19th century who embodied India’s age-old tradition of plurality and was uncompromising his war against superstition and obscurantism. We will not elaborate on this point, as we are all aware of his struggle to abolish Sati, but we will emphasise his role as the first public debater in modern India.

We shall touch upon his role in spreading English education and his passionate plea for women’s rights, education and empowerment — the first Indian in modern India to do so. He is surely the father figure of the Indian Renaissance and the best known rationalist of early modern India, who suffered for his beliefs from the orthodox, both Hindu brethren Christian. It is interesting to note that even as they contested his interpretations and arguments, they could hardly ever deny his grasp

over both religions and scriptures. What we need to take note of is that Rammohun thus created the first discursive public space in India. He was a pioneer of journalism and fought for equal treatment of Indians by the colonial regime. In his deposition before the House of Commons in 1832-33, which again made his position quite unique, he was fearless enough to complain against the misdeeds of the East India Company. As a public intellectual, he raised the issue of exploitation of the peasantry by the Company-installed zamindars.

Not only did Rammohun Roy strive for English education — as did the Hindu orthodox — but he was also the severest critic of the East India Company's avowed policy on education. On the 11th of December 1823, Rammohun wrote to Governor General Amherst against the priority given to Sanskrit over English. He was clear that any education in Sanskrit "*can only be expected to load the minds of the youth with grammatical niceties and metaphysical distinctions of little or no practical use.....to society.....The Sanskrit system of education would be best calculated to keep this country in darkness.*" (Tagore 1966, page 27). He wanted to bring in 'light' through education in the English language, for the sake of its brilliance and its treasury of knowledge — not like Macaulay, who wanted it for the mass production of clerks and British loyalists. But when influential Indians, primarily from the rich upper castes of Bengali society, got together with David Hare to set up the Hindoo College (renamed later as Presidency College) to impart English education to Indian students, Rammohun had to step down. This was the price he had to pay for being a public intellectual; for antagonising the class of rich orthodox Hindus with his unwavering rationalism. Mr Hyde East, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who presided over the meeting on 4th May 1816 that finalised the proposal for setting up the college, records his commendable attitude (Tagore, page 29). Rammohun continued, nevertheless, to be on the sidelines of this initiative and it is interesting to note that when Hindoo or Presidency College ultimately produced an extremely radical group of students under Derozio, it accused Rammohun of not being radical enough .

He continued in his mission to spread western education and in 1822, he gave a big grant to start a High English school of the Unitarian Association, that had both David Hare, the noted educationist and Reverend Adam in its management. To disprove that he was not intrinsically against traditional education, he also set up a Vedanta College in 1826. In 1830, he encouraged Reverend Alexander Duff to set up his General Assembly institution that was later to metamorphose into the Scottish Church College. Roy utilised his weekly newspaper, *Sambad Kaumudi*, to air his views on education and made repeated pleas to the government to expand English education, free of cost. It is very interesting to note that he began a series of articles on popular science in this paper that covered topics like the echo, magnets and their properties, balloons, and the behaviour of fishes. We see yet another first from

Rammohun and he was definitely the first Indian to popularise science education in modern India.

A less known fact is that when Rammohun became the first Indian to write directly in English to the Governor General of India, Lord Minto in 1809, he actually introduced a new literary genre — that would be famous later as ‘Indian writing in English’. He was not the first Indian writer in the English language, as one Sake Dean Mohamed had published his travel accounts in 1793, making it the first English book to be written by an Indian. But Rammohun’s writing in the English language was much prolific and certainly more serious than Dean Mohammad’s. As BS Cohn said, “*in writing to the Governor General in the language, style, and manner he did, Rammohun was announcing to the British ruling class in India that he possessed command of the very language that was their language of command.*” (Cohn, page 16-56). Rammohun wrote more significant pieces in English from 1816, when he published a short translation of the Hindu sacred text, the *Vedanta* and followed it up with two Sanskrit *Upanishads* in English. He kept writing in English quite regularly, producing two or three tracts every year, and also continued translating many of his Bengali pieces into English. 1823 was particularly busy year, as it when Rammohun Roy published as many as nine English works.

Rammohun Roy’s preference for English often overshadows another aspect, i.e., his contribution to the development of the vernacular in modern India. He is among the earliest pioneers of Bengali prose and he was among the first to choose prose over the age-old tradition of verse. Rammohun settled in Kolkata in 1814 as he needed to be in the centre of things to be able to convince the colonial rulers. He considered it also essential to reach out to his countrymen and began to use Bengali as an effective instrument to seek popular support for the socio-religious reforms that he had embarked upon. His command over English, Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic had already been established — but he needed the Bengali language more than others, in order to get his people on his side. He communicated in Bengali to counter the vicious campaign that had been launched against his progressive ideas. But like Ramram Basu and Mrityunjoy Vidyalankar, he found that the Bengali language of the time did not have sufficient numbers of the ‘right’ words or expressions to convey the desired meanings, where such polemical battles were concerned. All three, therefore, innovated and enriched the language with Sanskrit words.

He was positively the first Bengali in modern India to democratise knowledge through the vernacular language. The esoteric Hindu scriptures were beyond the grasp of most of his countrymen in Bengal, as all of them were in Sanskrit. Besides, they were the exclusive property of a very narrow class of Brahmanical scholars. His transliteration of the *Vedanta* texts in 1815 served the twin purposes of reaching these teachings and their purport to the common Bengalis and to give his interpretation. It was also a fact that the Rig Veda or the Vedanta were hardly well known to the common people who were more familiar with Vaishnava and Tantrik texts. Rammohun invoked the authority of Veda-Vedanta as none had done before him —

primarily to convince people that sati and infanticide had no legitimate basis in ancient Hinduism. Amiya P Sen estimates that between 1815 and 1829, Rammohun and his co-workers had produced 23 tracts and pamphlets in Bengali that were exclusively on religious subjects, while they churned out 15 more such literary pieces in the English language. Besides the two commentaries on the *Vedanta Sutra*, Roy's Bengali translations also consisted of the essence of five *Upanishads*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Isha*, *Manduka* and *Mandukya*. These gave him a head start in what began as an almost single-handed battle against an entire phalanx of Hindu obscurantists. Summing up Roy's contribution, Rabindranath Tagore said that "a revolutionary change was noticeable in Bengali prose with the advent of Rammohun in the field of Bengali literature" (Tagore, page 31).

Rammohun's cross-cultural skills enabled him to traverse different worlds reflected through several distinct languages, with ease, and at will. We move on to another remarkable cross cultural skill of Rammohun — his command over Arabic and Persian. In the hagiography that surrounds much of what Rammohun did, we are taught that he was sent to Patna at the age of nine to learn Persian, Arabic and Islamic studies, but this is not substantiated by any evidence. The next story that appears in all 'histories' relating to him is that he went to Benaras at fourteen or so, to pick up Sanskrit and understand Hindu texts. From the painstaking research done by historian and Bengali literary critic, Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay, we come to know that there is no evidence of either the Patna story or the Benaras phase. Rammohun picked up Sanskrit at fourteen from a local Brahman scholar, Nanda Kumar Vidyalkar and he mastered it later, on his own, with the guidance of other local scholars. As for Persian, he familiarised himself in the same manner that his father and grandfather had done before him. Both were quite adept in Persian as they had served in the revenue departments of the Nawabs of Bengal where this skill was essential. He had a flair for languages, which helped him pick up Arabic from the Islamic establishments that flourished in Bengal, thanks to six centuries of unbroken Muslim rule. He brushed up his knowledge of both these languages during his first serious stint in Kolkata from 1801 to 1803 when he served in the Dewani Adalat.

What is remarkable is that he published his first book on religion entitled *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhidin* (A Gift to Monotheists) sometime between 1803 and 1804. Max Mueller considered it his primary and overriding statement on religion. In Islam, he was attracted not only to its strict monotheism but to its rational approach, rather than to Sufi mysticism that had attracted countless Hindus before him. Brajendranath Seal analyses Roy's marked preference for the rational streak in Islam and traces it to the *Mutazili* of the 8th century and also to *Muwahhidin* of the 12th century (quoted in Banerjee, page 56). As the first modern Indian, he set down the agenda, so to say, for others to follow — which is a deep abiding respect for the best that Islam, Christianity and Hinduism had to offer. His rationality led not to atheism, as it often does, but to a strong 'secular' approach and an unshakable belief in India's basic plurality. Incidentally, in 1829, Rammohun published his book *Universal Religion* — somewhat like Akbar had done (Sen page 151).

Rammohun Roy's campaign for women's rights comes out best in the second tract that he wrote against sati in 1819, in which he contested the views of orthodox Brahman Sanskrit scholar, Kashinath Tarakavagish that glorified sati. This writing is also the first known essay on gender issues in modern India where he negated the argument that women were essentially ignorant and unintelligent. He threw the counter question as to why no attempt was made to educate them to attain their real worth. He refused to accept that women were lax in morals and vociferously accused men of duping them and leading them astray. Rammohun was the first advocate of women's rights in modern India — far ahead of others and his campaign against sati was only a part of his overall mission for the upliftment of women in India. In his later works, he argued that "*the burning of widows often brought material gains to the male members of the widow's family*" (Basu, page 32). It is noteworthy that the incidents of sati, that were hardly ever reported in Bengal during the rule of the sultans and nawabs (when most Hindus were usually neither rich nor powerful) went up remarkably in the post-Plassey period — once the upper castes gained the most from British rule.

In 1822, Roy wrote strongly against Hindu laws that had steadily gone on depriving women, throughout history. In his monograph that was entitled *Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females According to the Hindoo Law of Inheritance*, Roy took cudgels against Bengal's *Daybhaga* law and insisted that the rights enjoyed by women in ancient times had been eroded over time. He came down heavily against polygamy that was in vogue among the Brahmans and the upper castes of Bengal. Incidentally, his personal relationships with the women in his family were far from satisfactory and his mother was estranged to the extent of filing a court case against him.

Among his other contributions as the first public intellectual of modern India, was his role as a journalist. Roy was quick to realise the power of the press and in 1821, he began publishing his Bengali newspaper called the *Sambad Kaumudi* and in 1822, he began a newspaper in Persian '*Mirat ul Akhbar*' (mirror of news). Within a year, however, he stopped its publication to protest against the Press Regulations Act that imposed licensing and several restrictions on free speech. We may recall that Rammohun is best remembered by the Indian language press for his strong petition to the British government against the Press Act. He was so dogged that he went all the way up to the British Crown to protest, after he lost his case in the Supreme Court. Roy also brought out a religious periodical, the *Brahminical Magazine*, to counteract missionary propaganda and he was closely associated with other progressive Hindu journals like *The Reformer*, *The Inquirer* and the *Gyan Auneshun*.

As a true public intellectual, Rammohun embarked on a crusade against the discriminatory provisions of the Jury Act of 1826 that introduced divisions between Indians and Europeans and between the believers of different religions. That is exactly what made him a brilliant public intellectual whose words made the British

ruling class and the informed public sit up and take note — in India as well as in England.

To recapitulate, he was surely the first modern Indian and an uncompromising rationalist who possessed extraordinary skills as a public intellectual and a crusader for justice. His battle against Sati and other evils; his sincerity in spreading western education and rationality; his espousal of the cause of women are all the stuff of legends. His great achievement was to create the first discursive public space in India, which he could thanks to his command over five languages. He was the first major Indian communicator in the English language who assumed a level of equality with the colonial rulers in his debates with. He crossed different cultures and civilisations with the ease of a born internationalist. He also popularised the scientific temper and, as modern India's first public intellectual, Raja Rammohun Roy was certainly miles ahead of other Indians of his time.

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