

## RAJA RAMMOHUN ROY: FROM IDOLATROUS TO CIVIL SOCIETY Shekar K.<sup>1</sup> & Shreedhar Barki<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Dept. of Political Science, Davangere University,  
Shivangotri, Davangere.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Government First Grade College, Bagepalli,  
Chikkaballapura.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18848504>

### ABSTRACT:

Roy perceived the contemporary Indian society as corrupted, shocking, barbarous and uncivilized. It became corrupted due to the inculcation of idolatry, deviating from the worshipping of one 'Supreme Being.' This diversion was the root of all social evils in the Indian society such as widow burning, caste system, polytheism, idolatry and other superstitions. According to Roy, the Indian priests, as in the west, played an important role in corrupting the Indian society. They introduced idolatrous practices for their own benefit and selfishness. The research question which this article deals with is whether the Indian society was really corrupted or if it was the repercussion of the import of the western model? This article delves into the latter part of the research question. Roy adopted the same model of 'corruptness and restoration' of the west. Roy intended to purify Indian society by introducing the 'real scripture of the Hindus', i.e. Vedas and established various organizations including Atmiya Sabha and Brahma Samaj to inculcate the 'doctrines' of the 'real Hinduism'.

### KEYWORDS:

Idolatry, Social Evils, Raja Rammohun Roy, Hinduism, Indian Society.

.....

### INTRODUCTION:

Raja Rammohun Roy, who laid the foundation for social reform in India, intended to reinstate Indian society from its uncivilized position to civilized. His perception towards Indian society was aligned with the western notion. He accepted the western criticism of the Indian society: corrupted; idolatrous; barbarous; shocking; uncivilized and superstitious. He thought along the same lines as the Protestants: as the Catholic priests corrupted Christianity, the Indian Brahmins corrupted the 'Pure Hinduism.' As Protestants introduced the doctrine of 'sola scriptura', Roy introduced the forgotten precepts of Vedas by translating them into Bengali and other languages to enable the common people to access the 'concealed'. In this

way Roy tried to reform Indian society from its uncivilized to civilized. The first section of this article provides the details on Roy's perception towards Indian society and reason for its degeneracy. The second section deals with his effort of introducing 'Hindu scripture' to elevate the mind of 'Hindu' from idolatrous practices. The third chapter delves into the organizations he established to inculcate the doctrines of the 'real Hinduism'. The final section deals with how Roy's whole ideal of reform was crystallized.

## I

Roy's perception of his contemporary Indian society was not positive, if not uncivilized. He identified a lot of social evils such as sati, idolatry, polytheism, caste system, etc. According to Roy, Indian society was idolatrous. Because of its idolatrous nature the social evils existed, "social abuses found in Hindu India, such as sati or widow burning, were part and parcel of idolatrous religion" (1999: 106). For Roy, these idolatrous practices, which were "inconvenient or rather injurious rites, more than any other pagan worship", destroyed the texture of the Indian society, "exceptionable practices, which not only deprive [Hindus] in general of the common comforts (Hindoo of caste can only eat once between sunrise and sun – cannot eat dressed victuals in a boat or ship nor in a tavern – nor clothed – nor any food that has been touched by a person of a different caste – nor if interrupted while eating, can he resume his meal) of society, but also lead them frequently to self-destruction (As at Prayaga, Gunga Sagar, and under the wheels of the car of Jagannath), or to the sacrifice (As, for instance, persons whose recovery from sickness is supposed to be doubtful, are carried to die on the banks of the Ganges) of the lives of their friends and relations" (1832:43f). According to him Indian society was more corrupted than any society in the world, "...Hindus in general more superstitious and miserable, both in performance of their religious rites, and in their domestic concerns, than the rest of the known nations on the earth..." (cited in Collet 1914:36). Roy was very regretful about, "the obstinate adherence of [his] countrymen to their fatal system of idolatry, inducing, for the sake of propitiating their supposed Deities, the violation of every humane and social feeling. And this in various instances; but more especially in the dreadful acts of self-destruction and the immolation of the nearest relations, under the delusion of conforming to sacred religious rites." (1832:99)

According to Roy, Brahmin priests were the reason for the present idolatrous status of the Indian society. The pure Hinduism was hidden behind the curtain of Sanskrit language by the Brahmins, “[The Vedas which contains the real Hinduism] being concealed within the dark curtain of the [Sanskrit] language, and the Brahmins permitting themselves alone to interpret, or even to touch any book of the kind, the [Vedanta], although perpetually quoted, is little known to the public” (1832:4). The Brahmins did hide the ‘real spirit of Hinduism’ for their own benefit, “many learned Brahmins are perfectly aware of the absurdity of idolatry, and are well informed of the nature of the purer mode of divine worship. But as in the rites, ceremonies, and festivals of idolatry, they find the source of their comforts and fortune, they not only never fail to protect idol worship from all attacks, but even advance and encourage it to the utmost of their power, by keeping the knowledge of their scriptures concealed from the rest of the people.” (1832:88). The common men, believing the Brahmin masters, were following the idolatrous practices, “Their followers too, confiding in these leaders, feel gratification in the idea of the Divine Nature residing in a being resembling themselves in birth, shape, and propensities; and are naturally delighted with a mode of worship agreeable to the senses, though destructive of moral principles, and the fruitful parent of prejudice and superstition” (1832:88). According to Roy idol-worship, introduced by the Brahmin priests, was the “the source of prejudice and superstition, and of the total destruction of moral principle, as countenancing criminal intercourse, suicide, female murder, and human sacrifice.” (1892:26).

## II

Roy intended to establish the ‘civil society’ by reforming the Indian society by reintroducing the ‘real spirit of Hinduism’ in the place of Idolatry. For Roy, unity of God-head was the ‘true Hinduism’, which was the core of the ‘Hindu scriptures.’ But the common people didn’t know the truth because it was “concealed within the dark curtain of the Sanskrit language”, which the “Brahmins permitting themselves alone to interpret, or even to touch any book of the kind.” Roy translated this hidden treasure to make his countrymen aware of ‘true Hinduism’, “[Translation of abridgement of Vedanta, he trusted], by explaining to [his] countrymen the real spirit of the Hindoo Scriptures, which is but the declaration of the unity of God, tend in a great degree to correct the erroneous conceptions,

which have prevailed with regard to the doctrines they inculcate.” (1832:43). “The [Veda] has allegorically represented the God in the figures of the universe”, forgetting the allegorical representations of the supreme deity, Roy believed, “[the Hindus] firmly believe in the real existence of innumerable gods and goddesses, who possess, in their own departments, full and independent power; and to propitiate them, and not the true God, are temples erected and ceremonies performed. There can be no doubt, however, and it is [Roy’s] whole design to prove, that every rite has its derivation from the allegorical adoration of the true Deity; but at the present day all this is forgotten, and among many it is even heresy to mention it” (1832:5). In the introduction part of the [Mundaka] Upanishad Roy expressed that “an attentive perusal of [Mundaka Upanishad], as well as of the remaining books of the [Vedanta], will, [he] trust, convince every unprejudiced mind, that they, with great consistency, inculcate the unity of God; instructing men, at the same time, in the pure mode of adoring him in spirit.” (1832:25). In the preface of Katha Upanishad, he opined that “this work not only treats polytheism with contempt and disdain, but inculcates invariably the unity of God as the intellectual principle, the sole origin of individual intellect, entirely distinct from matter and its affections; and teaches also the mode of directing the mind to him.” (1832: 57). Roy expressed the result of his efforts of translating the scriptures as, “a great body of my countrymen, possessed of good understandings, and not much fettered with prejudices, being perfectly satisfied with the truth of the doctrines contained in this and in other works, already laid by [him] before them, and of the gross errors of the puerile system of idol worship which they were led to follow, have altered their religious conduct in a manner becoming the dignity of human beings.” (1832:57f) Still Roy was unhappy that most of the people were yet following idolatry. But he was confident that the idolaters would embrace the “true system of religion which leads its observers to a knowledge and love of God, and to a friendly inclination towards their fellow-creatures, impressing their hearts at the same time with humility and charity, accompanied by independence of mind and pure sincerity. Contrary to the code of idolatry, this system defines sins as evil thoughts proceeding from the heart, quite unconnected with observances as to diet and other matters of form.” (1832:58).

### III

In 1815, Roy established Atmiya Sabha, the chief purpose of which

was spiritual worship and “subvert idolatry”. This organisation had the intention of spiritual improvement of its countrymen. It met once in a week and “its proceedings consisted in the recitation of texts from the Hindu Scriptures, and the chanting of Theistic hymns composed by Rammohun and his friends.” This way, the Atmiya Sabha commenced a movement for the revival of worship of single God-head and by doing so abolishing the idolatrous practices, “[Atmiya Sabha] was at once a brains-trust, a forum for free discussions on fundamental religious issues and a platform for agitation against such social evils as the Suttee, Kulinism and the caste system. It also lent powerful support to widow-remarriage and the right of Hindu women to the property of their fathers or husbands. It was the spearhead in the fight for religious reforms.” (1970:28).

Unitarian Association was established by Roy for the amelioration of his countrymen. The aim of this association was, “...to destroy ignorance and superstition, bigotry and fanaticism, to raise the standard of intellect, to purify the theories of morals, and to promote universal charity and practical benevolence will be considered as within the scope of their design. The melioration of the physical condition of the numerous native population, the encouragement of the useful arts and of industrious habits amongst them and the consequent increase of their social and domestic comforts, the Committee regards as legitimate objects of pursuit, as all experience shows that it is only when the first wants of nature and society are fully supplied that the higher degree of improvement in intellect, in morals, and in religion, can be expected to follow.” (1970: 50f).

Roy established Brahma Samaj in the year 1828. The trust deed was dedicated to “worship and adoration of the Eternal, Unsearchable, and Immutable Being, who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe, but not under, or by any other name, designation, or title, peculiarly used for, and applied to, any particular Being, or Beings, by any man, or set of men, whatsoever; And that no graven image, statue or sculpture, carving, painting, picture, portrait or the likeness of anything, shall be admitted within the messuage, building, land, tenements, hereditaments, and premises; and that no sacrifice, offering, or oblation of any kind or thing, shall ever be permitted therein; and that no animal or living creature shall, within or on the said messuage, building, land, tenements, hereditaments and premises, be deprived of life, either for religious purposes or for food; And that no eating or drinking (except such as shall be necessary, by any

accident, for the preservation of life), feasting or rioting be permitted therein or thereon; And that, in conducting the said worship or adoration, no object, animate or inanimate, that has been, or is, or shall hereafter become, or be recognized, as an object of worship, by any man, or set of men, shall be reviled, or slightingly or contemptuously spoken of, or alluded to, either in preaching, praying, or in the hymns, or other mode of worship that may be delivered or used in the said message or building; And that no sermon, preaching, discourse, prayer or hymn be delivered, made or used in such worship, but such as have a tendency to the promotion of the contemplation of the Author and Preserver of the Universe, to the promotion of charity, morality, piety, benevolence, virtue, and the strengthening the bonds of union between men of all religious persuasions and creeds.." (1914:160). It is clear from the trust deed that the motive of the Brahma Samaj was to reform the Indian society from its idolatrous nature to the worship of one Supreme-being.

#### IV

Westerners criticised the Indian society. Did Roy accept these criticisms? The response is affirmative as all the efforts of Roy were intended to eliminate this criticism. Roy translated several principal books, passages, texts of the Vedas to prove to the westerners that the ancient 'real Hinduism' was pure and the contemporary was corrupted, "The present is an endeavour to render an abridgment of the same into English, by which I expect to prove to my European friends, that the superstitious practices which deform the Hindoo religion have nothing to do with the pure spirit of its dictates." In the preface of Katha Upanishad, he wrote, "The present publication is intended to assist the European community in forming their opinion respecting Hindoo Theology, rather from the matter found in their doctrinal scriptures, than from the [Puranas], moral tales, or any other modern works, or from the superstitious rites and habits daily encouraged and fostered by their self-interested leaders." (1832: 57). In the introduction part of Kena Upanishad, he wrote, "As many European gentlemen, especially those who interest themselves in the improvement of their fellow creatures, may be gratified with a view of the doctrines of the original work, it appeared to me that I might best contribute to that gratification, by translating a few chapters of the [Veda] into the English language, which I have accordingly done, and now submit them to their candid judgment." (1832: 44). In his first tract on burning of widow he

opined that “the evils and disgrace brought on this country by the crime of female murder [will be ceased]” by the introduction of ‘true Hinduism.’ Mulk Raj Anand pointed out that “Ram Mohan Roy had noticed the justifiable criticism of Christian missionaries of Hindu idolatry. Lord Hastings words castigating the Hindus as ‘being nearly limited to animal functions’, may have stung him to the quick. He had admitted the decay of the Hindu faith into unholy rituals. And he had translated the main Vedas, writing long dissertations on them, interpreting Hinduism as a pure faith in the Cosmos as deity.” (1989: vii). How did Roy come to know that the ‘true Hindu religion’ became ‘false Hindu religion’? “As a youth,” Roy said to Mr. Duff, “I acquired some knowledge of the English language. Having read about the rise and progress of Christianity in apostolic times, and its corruption in succeeding ages, and then of the Christian Reformation which shook off these corruptions and restored it to its primitive purity, I began to think that something similar might have taken place in India, and similar results might follow here from a reformation of the popular idolatry.” (cited in Collet, 1914:261). Therefore, Roy intended to rescue the society from the Brahmin priests who “in the rites, ceremonies, and festivals of idolatry, [...] find the source of their comforts and fortune, they not only never fail to protect idol worship from all attacks, but even advance and encourage it to the utmost of their power, by keeping the knowledge of their scriptures concealed from the rest of the people. Their followers too, confiding in these leaders, feel gratification in the idea of the Divine Nature residing in a being resembling themselves in birth, shape, and propensities; and are naturally delighted with a mode of worship agreeable to the senses, though destructive of moral principles, and the fruitful parent of prejudice and superstition.” (1832:88). In the defence of Hindu Theism, Roy opined that the Brahmins “with the view of maintaining the title of God which they arrogate to themselves, and of deriving pecuniary and other advantages from the numerous rites and festivals of idol worship, constantly advance and encourage idolatry to the utmost of their power.” (1832:138). To eliminate this ‘idolatrous religion’, which was the source of all evil practices, Roy endeavoured to reintroduce the dictates of ‘pure Hindu religion.’ To make available their ‘disused’ ancient and spiritual scripture, which was concealed in the veil of Sanskrit language, Roy translated them into Bengali and other vulgar languages and distributed them free of cost. He

established Atmiya Sabha and Brahma Samaj to inculcate the ‘doctrines’ of the ‘real Hinduism.’ Thus, Roy became ‘the Martin Luther of India’, ‘the father of Indian renaissance’ and ‘the father of modern India.’

### References:

1. Anand, M.R. (Ed.). (1989). Sati. B.R Publishing Corporation.
2. Collet, S. D. (1914). The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy (H. C. Sarkar, Ed.). R. Cambay & Co. Calcutta.
3. Rammohun Roy, R. (1832). Translation of several principal books, passages, and texts of the Veds, and of some controversial works on Brahmunicipal theology.
4. Rao, B. (1993). ‘The heathen in his blindness...’: Asia, the West and the dynamic of religion (Vol. 64).
5. Salmund, Noel A. (1999). Hindu Iconoclasts: Rammohun Roy, Dayananda Sarasvati, and Nineteenth-Century Polemics Against Idolatry.
6. Tagore, S. (1970). Raja Rammohun Roy (Builders of Modern India series). Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India

### Funding:

This study was not funded by any grant.

### Conflict of interest:

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

### About the License:

© The Authors 2024. The text of this article is open access and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.