



## RAJA RAM MOHAN ROY: A BEACON OF HOPE FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN INDIA'S HISTORY

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

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This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of Raja Ram Mohan Roy's substantial contributions to the advancement of women's rights in 19<sup>th</sup>-century India. The study is organized into five sections, each addressing a critical aspect of women's lives during that era. In section one I establish the historical context and the pressing need for societal transformation concerning gender equality. Section two delves into the prevalence of polygamy and its impact on women's rights, highlighting Roy's work in advocating for monogamy and gender justice. Section three examines the abolition of the reprehensible practice of sati, a crucial milestone in the history of women's rights in India. This section will discuss Roy's role in leading the movement against sati and the lasting impact of his efforts. Moving forward, Section four focuses on Roy's fight for women's right to property, a significant restriction in Indian society at the time. This section will analyse his contributions to the legal reforms that empowered women to own and inherit property. Section five centres on the limited educational opportunities available to women and explores Roy's efforts to promote gender parity in education. At last there is a discussion on today's relevance of the Ram Mohan's endeavours towards Women's Rights and Education

**Keywords:** *Social Reforms, Education, India Renaissance, Sati Pratha, Women's rights, Polygamy, Brahma Samaj, Property, Kulinism,*

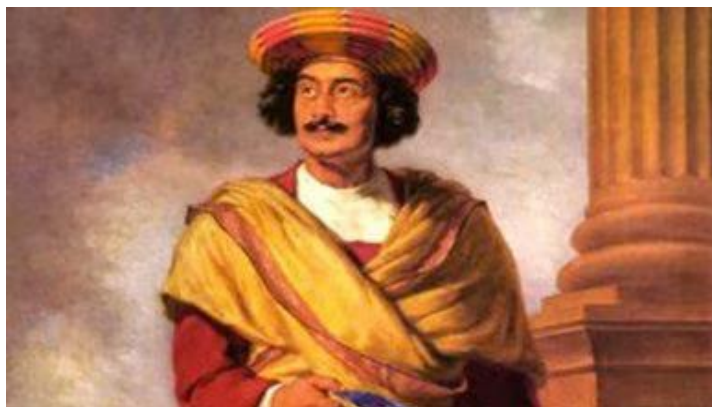
“Women should exist as they did when their husbands were alive. Society has NO right to end the life of a living woman”. – Raja Rammohan Roy

### Introduction

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was also a champion of women's rights in India. He laid the foundations of the women's liberation movement in this country. He revolted against the subjection of women and pleaded for the restoration of their rights. The condition of the Hindu women in those days was very pitiable. They were subjected To different kinds of injustices and deprivations. According to Roy, the root cause of the all-round deterioration of Hindu women was the complete denial of their Property rights.

### Historical Context: A Need for Social Reforms for Women

Throughout prehistoric India, according to Raja Rammohan Roy. He promoted gender equality as well as asserted that women were neither ethically nor cognitively inferior to men. Hindu civilization cannot advance, according to Raja Ram Mohan Roy, until women are liberated from barbaric kinds of tyranny including underage marriage, sati, lack of education and purdah. Roy believed that high caste or affluent widows were 3 options given their conditions present in Bengal in that duration: initially, to endure an awful life as slaves or



to provide for others. The second step they lead an unethical life to maintain their autonomy. Lastly, it showed gratitude to their relatives for them to pass away upon the memorial flame of their respective positions deceased husbands. This section will provide an overview of the critical factors that necessitated social reforms during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in India. Below are the listed social evils practiced for women and sometimes, by women which lead to need for social reforms for them.

**Patriarchal Society:** The Indian society during this period was deeply patriarchal, with men holding power and authority over women. This led to the denial of basic rights, education, and opportunities for personal growth for women. The patriarchal structure reinforced gender inequality and oppression, which required urgent attention and reform. All men or women received treatment equally

**Child Marriage:** A prevalent social practice during Ram Mohan Roy's era was child marriage, where young girls were married off to much older men. This not only resulted in the exploitation of young girls but also severely limited their education and personal development. The practice further contributed to the marginalization of women in society. He himself got married thrice and was married twice in the age of 10 but the case was worse with the women too.

**Sati:** Sati, or the widow immolation practice, was another deeply ingrained tradition in which widows were expected to commit suicide by immolating themselves on their husband's funeral pyre. This practice led to the untimely deaths of many women and reinforced the idea of women being subservient and disposable. Addressing this issue was crucial for the social reform movement. Raja Rammohan Roy's battle against the heinous practice of sati was multifaceted and strategic. He targeted three significant aspects to bring about its abolition. Firstly, he worked on altering public opinion by using various platforms like writings, speeches, discussions, and agitations. He effectively argued that sati had no religious sanction and that any governmental intervention in banning it would not be an infringement on religious freedom. Secondly, Roy sought to persuade the rulers of his time to recognize their responsibility as civilized authorities to put an end to this cruel custom. By doing so, he aimed to gain their support and cooperation in the fight against sati. Lastly, Roy delved into the root causes of sati, focusing on the ignorance, illiteracy, and denial of property rights experienced by Hindu widows. He believed that by addressing these underlying issues, he could help eliminate the practice of sati. By shedding light on the connection between women's rights, education, and the eradication of sati, Roy's approach was both comprehensive and visionary.

**Lack of Education:** Due to societal norms and restrictions, women were largely denied education during Ram Mohan Roy's times. This lack of education further perpetuated their subordination and limited their chances of personal growth and development.

### **Polygamy and Roy's contribution to abolish polygamy**

Rammohan Roy was born into a radi brahmin family engaged in the administration of land revenue, under the Mughals and later under the East India Company and the Maharaja of Burdwan.

Burdwan, the district where Rammohan Roy was born, was pre- dominantly hindu. According to a census taken in the year 1815-16, There were about one and a half million people in Burdwan, of whom 200,000 were Muslims. Among the Hindus, brahmin (260,000), sadgopa (161,784), bagdi (147,168), and agrahari (107,656) were the four largest caste groups in the district, but none of them were dominant. There were many centres of unorthodox cults in Burdwan. The demographic evidence shows that there was a high ratio of male to female among the lower castes. The situation was the reverse among higher castes. Except for Hughly, amongst all British districts in India Burdwan had the highest instance of satis recorded.

In the district, the most influential and affluent family was the Burdwan Raj family, who were migrants from Panjab and belonged to the Khetri caste. They arrived in Burdwan during the seventeenth century as junior Mughal administrators. The Khetri Rajas often had complex relationships with local notable Radi Brahmin families, such as those of Bharat Chandra Roy and Rammohan Roy. Rammohan Roy, as previously mentioned, was born into a Radi Brahmin family. In 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, Radi Brahmins played a significant role in social reform and nationalist movements.

The strict marriage laws within the Radi Brahmin caste had a considerable Impact on women's status. Many women remained childless, and a considerable number of men were left unmarried. Marriage, particularly in Bengal during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, held importance not only for procreation but also for determining high rank and social standing among men.

### **Kulinism**

The challenging and intricate marriage laws within the Radi Brahmin community were largely influenced by a practice called Kulinism. The exact origin of Kulinism in Bengal is uncertain, but it is likely that it emerged as a protective measure to preserve the purity of high castes during the Muslim invasions. Given the Radi Brahmins' close interactions with Muslims, they adhered strictly to Kulinism and observed it more stringently. According to tradition Ballal Sen introduced kulinism amongst Hindus in Bengal but it was during the reign of Lakshmana Sen (thirteenth century A.D.) that radi brahmins were divided into two groups: kulins (families of high lineage) and strotriya (families of regular scholars of the Vedas, who had lost

rank by intermarrying 'with families of inferior birth'). Strotriya was further subdivided into two groups, suddha or siddha (pure) and sadya or kasta (impure).

Radi brahmins followed a rule of hypergamy. The rule was that kulin women could only marry kulin men but kulin men could marry both kulin and suddha or siddha women. Women from the kasta group could only marry men of that group. Unequal and irregular marriages involved loss of reputation and rank. There arose a new class of brahmins known as bansajas. The bansajas were those kulins who had lost their rank on account of misconduct - want of charity, discipline and more importantly, no due observance of marriage laws.

In the fourteenth century Devivara, a ghatak (genealogist and match-maker) from Jessore district, introduced reforms amongst the kulins. This had further complicated the marriage laws. Kulins were divided into three grades, swabhava, bhagna and bansajas. Thus Mukhuti families were bound to marry their sons to the daughters of the Chatterji and Banerji families and vice versa. If, for example, the Mukhuti had only one marriageable son and the Chatterji or Banerji, ten daughters approaching puberty the former must marry all ten or all must remain spinsters. There was a strong demand for kulin bridegrooms from all classes of brahmin families.

### **Marriage as a Business?**

In the early nineteenth century some swabhava kulin males made as much as two thousand rupees by marrying lower class Brahmin girls. Most girls stayed back at their parental homes and the marriages were generally not consummated. In parts of Bengal kulin boys of ten started their careers as professional bridegrooms and before they turned twenty they might be married to many wives of ages from five to fifty.

The Kulinism system, therefore had adverse effects on Strotriya, Bhagna, and Bhansaja Brahmin males. Due to the preference for marrying daughters into high-class Kulin families, many of these men struggled to find suitable brides. As a result, there was a significant number of unmarried men within these groups, which further complicated the marriage dynamics and social dynamics within the Brahmin community.

### **Roy's Contribution to ban Polygamy**

He attacked polygamy using the shastras as a foundation. He wrote strongly against polygamy. He pointed out how the hindu shastras did not permit more than one marriage except under certain specified conditions. "This horrible polygamy among the Brahmins is directly contrary to the law given by ancient authors." A second marriage while the first wife was alive was allowed only on the ground of specified physical or moral defects.

He was married by his father at nine years of age to two child-wives. To both he felt himself bound to remain faithful, but on the death of one (in 1824), who was the mother of the children, he became in practice as in theory a monogamist. Mr. Adam mentions that he was in question strongly against polygamy. To express his disapproval, he included clauses in his will that would disinherit any male descendant, including sons, who had more than one wife simultaneously. However, it should be noted that his opposition to polygamy was based on practical considerations rather than religious beliefs.

### **From Struggle to Triumph: Sati and Roy's Crusade Against it**

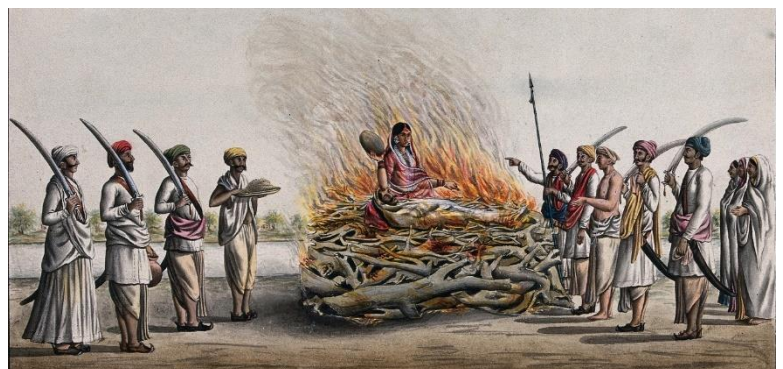
"The cause of English education which he had championed was now on the eve of official victory. And he had witnessed the abolition of Suttee."

The phrase "Sati," now known as "Suttee" in the English language, signifies a devoted woman, as "Sat" denotes "truth." Nevertheless, this term is primarily associated with a widow who chooses to sacrifice herself by burning on her husband's funeral pyre. This tradition, euphemistically called a "rite," was not uniformly practiced throughout India but was followed to different extents among diverse communities and social strata in the country.

The custom of the suicide of the Sati is nevertheless very ancient since as early as the days of Alexander, The Greeks found it was observed among one of the tribes at least of the Panjab. The first Brahmanical testimony we find to it is that of the Brihaddevata which is perhaps of quite as remote antiquity ; in the epic poetry there are numerous Instances of it.

### **1811 : Death of Jaganmohun Roy and suttee of his widow: Rammohun's vow**

At the death of his eldest brother Jaganmohun in 1811, the widow became a suttee. It is said that Rammohan had endeavoured to persuade her beforehand against this terrible step, but in vain.



When, however, she felt the flames she tried to get up and escape from the pile ; but her orthodox relations and the priests forced her down with bamboo poles, and kept her there to die, while drums and brazen instruments were loudly sounded to drown her shrieks. Rammohan, unable to save her, and filled with unspeakable indignation and pity, vowed within himself, then and there, that he would never rest until the atrocious custom was rooted out and he kept his vow. Before 19 years had fully elapsed, that pledge was redeemed by the Government decree abolishing suttee, Dec. 4, 1829.

### **1818, Nov 30: Publishes the English edition of his first tract on suttee**

In November 1818, Raja Rammohan Roy published his initial work on this subject, presenting it as a dialogue between a proponent and an adversary of the custom. On November 30th of the same year, he released an English translation of his first piece, titled '**A Conference between an Advocate for, and an Opponent of, the Practice of burning Widows Alive.**'

Rammohan Roy penned a rebuttal to challenge the verdict of the highest lawgiver, Manu, as well as to emphasize the core teachings of the Vedas and the Gita. He also referred to Smriti Shastra, a secondary authority, which forbade all violent deaths. Furthermore, he highlighted the Mitakshara, a text on inheritance, which valued the preservation of life over the act of dying on a deceased husband's funeral pyre.

. . . Women are In general inferior to men on bodily strength and energy; consequently the male part of the community, taking advantage of their corporeal weakness, have denied to them those excellent merits that they are entitled to by nature, and afterwards they are apt to say that women are naturally Incapable of acquiring those merits. But if we give the subject consideration, we may easily ascertain whether or not your accusation against them is consistent with justice. As to their inferiority in point of understanding, when did You ever afford them a fair opportunity of exhibiting their natural capacity? How then can you accuse them of want of understanding? If, after instruction in knowledge and wisdom, a person cannot comprehend or retain what has been taught him, we may consider him as deficient; but as you keep women, generally void of education and acquirements, you cannot therefore, in justice pronounce on their inferiority. . . . Secondly. You charge them with want of resolution, at which I feel exceedingly surprised: for we constantly perceive, in a country where the name of death makes the male shudder, that the female, from her firmness of mind, offers to burn with the corpse of her deceased husband; and yet you accuse those women of deficiency of resolution. Thirdly... (read from Sophia Dobson Collet, *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohan Roy*)

There is a case in Asiatic Journal for March 1818, which states that the priests were induced to light the pile first, Rammohan having maintained that the Shastra required this, and left it open to the widow to ascend the pile and enter the flames afterwards if she chose, his expectation of course being that she would not so choose. But this case proved exceptional ; the two widows both fulfilled the Suttee's ideal, and "deliberately walked into" the flames, the younger widow having previously "with great animation, addressed herself to the bystanders in words to this effect : 'You have just seen my husband's first wife perform the duty incumbent on her, and will now see me follow her example. Henceforward, I pray, do not attempt to prevent Hindu women from burning, otherwise our curse will be upon you.'"

### **1820, Feb. 26. Publishes English version of his second tract on Suttee**

A Second Conference followed, fourteen months later (Feb 20, 1820) and was dedicated to Lady Hastings in the following words. "The following tract being a translation of a Bengali essay, published some time ago, as an appeal to reason in behalf of humanity.. In his second work, the opponent vehemently defended the women involved in this practice and challenged the accusations made by the advocate. He argued that the criticisms directed towards women were vague, invalid, and subject to extreme injustice. Moreover, he referred to the prevalent custom of kulinism, which further contextualized his stance.

Raja Rammohan Roy's efforts to abolish the practice of sati were multifaceted. In 1815, he founded the Atmiya Sabha, a society that brought together like-minded individuals to discuss and raise awareness about the issue. Through his Bengali journal, Sambad Kaumudi, which he started in July 1819, he openly criticized the practice of sati to educate the public about his campaign's importance. Additionally, he utilized other newspapers like Samachar Darpan and Bangadut to amplify his message.

Finally, The Sati Regulation Act of 1829, enacted under Lord William Bentinck, officially outlawed the custom of sati in India. This legislation declared the practice unlawful and subject to punishment by the legal system, marking a significant milestone in the fight against this tradition.

### **Empowering Women through Property Ownership: Roy's Crucial Contribution**

Rammohan Roy in the year (1822) published a valuable tract on "Modern encroachments on the ancient rights of females according to the Hindu Law of inheritance." In this he applied to social reform the method he had found fruitful in theological discussions. By numerous citations he proves that "All the ancient law-givers unanimously award to a mother an equal share with her son in the property left by her deceased husband, in order that she may spend her remaining days independently of her

children."<sup>1</sup> But unfortunately later jurists made void, by their expositions, this salutary law. As a consequence "both stepmothers and mothers have, in reality, been left destitute in the division of their husband's property and the right of a widow exists in theory only among the learned but unknown to the populace." Hence, "a woman who is looked up to as the sole mistress by the rest of a family one day, on the next becomes dependent on her sons and subject to the slights of her daughters-in-law." On the death of their husbands women had only three courses before them : Firstly, To live a miserable life as entire slaves to others without indulging any hope of support from another husband. Secondly, To walk in the paths of unrighteousness for their maintenance and independence. Thirdly, To die on the funeral pile of their husbands, loaded with the applause and honour of their neighbours.

Raja Rammohan Roy's efforts to improve the socio-economic status of widows and secure their financial autonomy extended beyond the abolition of sati. He urged the British administration to enact legislation that would address the inherited restrictions and empower widows. These initiatives led to the passing of the Special Marriage Act of 1872, which included provisions for separation and the transmission of assets to women. Furthermore, the Married Women's Property Act of 1874 played a crucial role in enhancing women's rights. This legislation expanded the definition of stridhan (women's ownership) and granted widows entitlements to both their husband's part and an amount equivalent to a son's portion

### **Roy's Pivotal Role in Advancing Women's Education**

Rammohan Roy believes "Proper education and facilities for improvements, women would prove in no way inferior to men." For him, lack of education and opportunities was the cause of women inferiority to men.

There were numerous educated women in ancient India. Hindu Brahnavadinis, those women who remained single and learned the Vedas for the whole of their existence, or the Sadyodvahas, who's evaluated the vedas up until they were, tied the knot, were two different sorts of learned women. Old Indian scholars Lilavati, Bhanumati, and Gargi Maitrayee were well-versed in every major Sastras and ancient writings.

He advocated for gender equality as well as said that women did not act less intelligently or ethically than males. Therefore, Rammohan Roy was a great advocate for women's Educational opportunities and held to opinion so women must not be kept in purdah or restricted within their houses, must rather receive a similar educational opportunity as men to ensure individuals might confront against the injustices committed towards females and combat many societal ills. Roy established the Anglo-Hindu school around 1822, so that boys or girls could attend classes there together. He founded the Brahma Samaj, which performed great effort to promote women's educational opportunities or persuade households in send their daughters as well as women to attend school, in 1828.

### **Ram Mohan Roy: A Pioneer in Promoting Gender Equality and Its Reflection in Contemporary Times.**

Raja Ram Mohan Roy's contributions to the Indian society and education system were profound and far-reaching. He played a significant role in fostering nationalism and independent thought among the Indian people, which has grown into a banyan tree of influence. His initiatives led to the establishment of institutions like the Hindu College, now known as Presidency University, and the Scottish Church College, under the University of Calcutta.

These educational institutions offer a wide range of degree programs, including arts, sciences, and education. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's efforts in introducing Indian society, culture, and values to foreigners helped dispel negative attitudes towards Indians, earning him the title of 'the first cultural pioneer of India.' His work in bridging the gap between Eastern and Western education and culture has left a lasting impact on India's development.

The National Education Policy 2020 states that reputed foreign universities in India will be able to open their campuses and provide quality education to them. In other words, it is clear that the National Education Policy 2020 places special emphasis on establishing a link between East and West education.

The dowry system, despite being outlawed since 1961, remains a persistent issue in India, leading to various forms of abuse and unfortunate incidents. The need for a more radical approach to eradicate this practice is evident. In this context, the legacy of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, a renowned social reformer who played a crucial role in abolishing practices like sati and child marriage, serves as an inspiring example.



Roy's determination and activism during the 19th century demonstrate the power of an individual's efforts in bringing about significant social reforms. His relentless pursuit of justice and equality for women can guide us in our fight against the dowry system. By drawing inspiration from Roy's legacy, we can work collectively to raise awareness, implement stricter enforcement of existing laws, and encourage a change in societal mindsets to ultimately put an end to this detrimental practice.

The eradication of the dowry system in India requires a multi-faceted approach that involves education, advocacy, mobilization of public opinion, legal measures, and the empowerment of women. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's approach in the eradication of Sati can serve as a lesson for the eradication of the dowry system in India

### **Rammohan Roy has also left imprints in the Constitution of India like:**

The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 prohibits polygamy, polyandry, and child marriage and concedes equal rights to women to divorce and remarry. The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 provides for women the right to parental Property. The Special Marriage Act, 1954 provides rights to women on par with men for Inter-caste marriage, love marriage, and registered marriage. The Act sets the minimum age for marriage at 21 for men and 18 for women. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 declares the taking of dowry an unlawful activity and thereby prevents the exploitation of women. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 provides for immediate and emergent relief to women in situations of violence of any kind in the home.

### **Conclusion**

Raja Rammohan Roy's contributions as a social and political thinker in 19<sup>th</sup> century India were ground breaking and forward-thinking. He fearlessly engaged in debates about the true essence of Hinduism and Christianity, fought for civic improvements, and championed the idea of free trade economics. His dedication to the rights and welfare of Hindu women was noteworthy, as he advocated for their rights and promoted the study of western science and mathematics. Additionally, Roy's support for Indian vernacular languages played a crucial role in preserving the nation's cultural heritage.

Rammohan Roy Also worked for women empowerment like he worked against polygamy, and for eradication of sati pratha, rights of property to women ( widow wife, daughter) for him, patriarchy made the women more vulnerable and led to subjection by men. He also worked for education for women by making up colleges and institutions like Hindu College and Brahma Samaj . Later also raised awareness for the empowerment of the women among open- minded people.

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