

Orientalism and Neo-Hinduism

Lecture V

Rammohan Ray and Hindu Renaissance

Rammohan's Biographical Scatch

- *1772
- Father's family - claimed descent from Narottam Thakur, follower of Caitanya
- Grandfather Rarhi - kulin Brahman - abandoned priestly life of a vaidika Brahman - granted the title Raya Rayan as a revenue official of Murshid Quli-Khan, Nawab of Bengal, under Aurangzeb - the title Ray replaced the family cast name - accordance with the custom of laukika Brahmans in Mughal service.
- Father Ramakanta ('Lover of Rama') after 1757 procured zamindari (revenue collection territory) in Raghanagar, Hugli district under vassals of the Mughal emperor. - responsible for Rammohan's training in Arabic and Persian – preparation for government service.
- Rammohan service to Mughals by presenting "the case of Akbar II for an increased pension before the Court of of the Directors of the East India Company – acceptance of the "Raja" title from Akbar II.
- Maternal grandfather Syam Bhattacharya – vaidika Brahman – desaguru among Saktas (12) »» mother Tarini Devi - Sakta from her house, becoming Vaisnava by marriage - responsible for his early training in Sanskrit,
- Married 3 times before getting 9 years (being Kulin Brahman) old, having two sons with second wife.

- About age of 16 – travels - great aversion to British rule and idolatrous system of the Hindus – myth of Buddhist studies in Tibet, Islamic in Patna and Hindu in Benares.
- To Calcutta – contact with East India Company servants through money lending.
- Jobs for East India Company - drifted in and out with the Collector of Dacca-Jalalpur (modern Faridpur, Bangladesh) Thomas Woodforde (1803), Digby (from 1805 until his permanent move to Calcutta in 1815) – during 12 years, being officially the employee of EIC 3 years and 8 months.
- With John Digby – beginnings of English language and Western literature studies. At the same time he also must have been studying Brahmasutras with the pandit, because in 1815 he published his first vedanta essay *Vedantasara*.
- One of his houses - neighbour of Baptist Missionary.
- **He was "an anomaly to many of his Bengali contemporaries. In his Mughal manners and dress, in his newly-acquired English-language skills and European tastes, he was the image of the prosperous nineteenth-century Calcutta babu. Yet in private he hankered to for distinction as a shastric scholar. Ridiculed by the Hindu pandit establishment for imitating the outward appearance of the ashraf (Mughal aristocrat), ... , Rammohan sought scholarly recognition. Although his claim to being a disciple of Calcutta's most eminent pandit, Mrtyumjay Vidyalkar, was not sufficient to gain him that recognition among his countrymen, his vedanta writings were widely quoted by Indologists and western intellectuals." (Robertson 1999: 24).**

First Work – Tohfatu 'l-Muwahhidin

- Persian – written 1803-04, Use of Arabic technical and literary vocabulary, Islamic logic.
- Much attention from twentieth-century writers but unknown to contemporaries - since 1884 available in English translation by Adi Brahma Samaj.
- This time no knowledge of Upanishads
- *Composite of popular beliefs "available to everyone in popular culture of his day, i.e. Christian, sufi, Sunni Islam, bhakti cult, and Vaisnava doctrines thrown together with the teachings of Guru Nanak, Dadu and Kabir.*
- Rejection of **idolatry**, criticism of fraudulent commercialization of established religion hence demoralization of the society. Criticism of established religious leadership, advocacy of **natural religion**. **Blind faith as leading to fanaticism, breakdown of social morality, poverty. Propagation of the test of and ancestral by reason and self experience.** The "**reason and common sense**" are able to relieve us from prejudices which brahmans teach and which cause all social evil in Bengal Rejection of miracles:

It is not in the power of men to believe in what is remote from one's experience and reason, however "habit and training make men blind and deaf in spite of their own eyes and ears". In opposite, believe in whatever after obtaining the proof of it is "possible to every individual man".

Rammohan activist

- **Journalism**

- 1823 censorship upon Calcutta press imposed by Bengal government. Rammohan (founder and editor of Bengali weekly *Saübàd Kaumudã* (1821) and Persian weekly *Mir'atu 'l-akbar* [1822]) instigated series of petitions and for the first time in history as an Indian subject addressed directly the King in *Appeal to the King in Council*.

- **Education**

- 1823 establishment of Sanskrit College proposed by the government - Rammohan opposed it and protested to the Governor-General arguing, that european-style public education prepares Bengali youth better for “the demands and economic opportunities of a modern Europeanized society.” and that government sponsored mass Sanskrit education will only widen the gap between Europeans and Indians and segregates Indians from participation in political and commercial life of their country.
- However, he did not opposed Sanskrit education for select few - 1826 he founded Vedanta College providing instruction in vedanta sastra.
- 1822 English Anglo-Hindu school.

The Foundation of Brahma Samaj

- Polemics with Marshman >> close relationship with Baptist missionaries (William Yates, William Adam).
- With them - work on **translation of the New Testament** to Bengali >> problem of philology – Yates' withdrawal (fear of Arianism) >> Adam and Ray - establishment of a **Unitarian church in Calcutta**, correspondence with American and British Unitarian organizations (since 1823).
- Financial support mostly from Rammohun Dwarkanath Tagore - financial responses in England inadequate >> Rammohan and his closest friends >> "a reform within Hinduism would be a far better approach than that of attempting to establish a Unitarian church where Hindus would never play a leadership role equal to that of British members." (Lavan 2005: 6) >> **Brahma sabhà (1825)**.
- Trust Deed proposed - a place for **public meetings of all sorts** "for the worship and adoration of the **Eternal, Unsearchable and Immutable Being, who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe.**" (Robertson, 45) In fact - meeting ground for "many former Atmiya Sabha members, who followed Rammohan's version of advaita vedanta, and agreed with his views on education, commerce, government and above all sati.

Adam's description of Brahma worship

- *letter to Rev. Joseph Tuckerman of Boston in 1829:*

The service begins with two or three Pandits singing, or rather, chanting in the cathedral style, some of the spiritual portions of the Ved, which are next explained in the vernacular dialect to the people by another Bengali ... and the whole is concluded by hymns both in Sanskrit and Bengali, sung with and accompanied by instrumental music, which occasionally interposed between other parts of the service. The audience generally consists of from fifty to sixty individuals, several Pandits, a good many Brahmins and all decent and attentive in their demeanor. (Lavan, 6)

From Sabha to Samaj: Debendranath Tagore

- 1833 the charter putting an end to restrictions on Christian missionary activity, since 1835 Thomas Babington Macauley and Governor-General Lord William Bentick - secularised western education against the Oriental traditions, after 1830 activity of Scottish Presbyterian Alexander Duff - Christian mission with a rationalist and modernist outlook.
- >> Debendranath Thakur - **Tattvabodhini Sabha** - parallel to Brahmo Sabha: established 1839 to: „was to **stem the rapid growth of Christianity while familiarizing the Hindu population with its own scriptural tradition through extensive publications.**“ (Lavan, 8)
- Main tool against the missionaries - were Debendranath's school (founded 1840) to oppose values of Duff's missionary school and teach in Bengali rather than in English.
- 21st December 1843 Debendranath and twenty others took an oath binding them to tenets of the Brahmo Sabha, and since it was relatively inactive between 1833-1843, some scholars date the establishment of **Brahmo Samaj** to date of Debendranath's oath.

Rammohan in England

- Set on journey on 17 November 1830 – first known transgression of the traditional restriction on overseas journeys.
- The objectives - to inform about his views regarding the current state and future prospects of India, to get more insight into the European, British culture and foremost, **“to lobby for Lord Grey’s reform Bill (...), to be present during the debate on the renewal of Eastern India Company Charter, to counter the considerable influence in England of his Hindu opponents’ lobby for repeal of the Sati Act, and perhaps most important of all to visit the country he had long admired.”** (Robertson, 46)
- Summer 1832 voyage to France - presented to King Luis-Philippe.
- 27 September, 1833, after brief illness he died in the care of Unitarian friends in Bristol.
- In Britain admired for “dissemination of European knowledge an literature” well as for literary quality of his English works.
- Reactions to his death in Indian press - 'died the man who materially aided, if he did not originate the impulse for independent thinking and more elevated moral tune', first introduced “Vedant system of theology and spiritual worship of God into Bengal”, or 'was damned with all non-Christians.'

Controversies – The Beginnings

- *A Defence of Hindu Theism (1817)*, published 1820 – reply to letter written by Sankara Sastri (head of the Madras Government College), published in *Madras Courier* of 26 December 1816 (32).
- *An Apology of the Pursuit of Final Beatitude independently of Brahmanical Observances*, published also in Sanskrit and Hindi, originally as *Subhramania sastrir sahit bicar* (1820) – after public debate with Sivanath Sastri – a Madras pandit of the Sadr Diwani 'Adalat (Appellate Court) – at December 1816 meeting of Atmiya Sabha.
- After Sivanath Sastri's failure to silence him and stem his growing popularity Sakta leadership delivered *Vedantacandrika* - most probably by Radhakanta Dev (Mrtyumjay Vidyalankar could also be involved), translated by William Hay Macnaghten, Assistant Registrar of the Sadr Diwani 'Adalat (*An Apology of the Present State of Hindoo Worship*) - Rammohan reply - *A Second Defence of the Monotheistical System of the Veds (Bhattacharyer sahit bicar, 1817)*.
- ***Other works of unorthodox view, written under pseudonyms, some ascribed to Rammohan – often written by members of âtmâya Sabha: Gosvâmâr sahit bicâr (Dispute with Goswami) – replay to private letter published in June 1918 - and Kabitâkârer sahit bicâr (Dispute with a Poet), 1820.***

Controversies with Traditionalists

- **âtmiāya sabhà – founded 1815** - community with a common aim - to purge the ancient sacred tradition of modern-day corruptions (**made by Brahmans**). Rammohan had gathered around him many who were eager to do battle with the Hindu establishment.
- Some of polemical tracts querring with Rammohan were published in ***Samàcàr Candrikà*** – voice of the Calcutta pundits edited by a former follower of Rammohan ***Bhavànācaran Bandyopādhyà*** (1787-1848) – next to Radhakantha most active antagonist of Rammohan and one of founding members of **Dharma Sabhà** - “the pro-sati, anti-Rammohan society.” He and his pandit collaborator “charged the Rammohan party with living impure lives while presuming to instruct others in true religion.” (Robertson, 37) Rammohan party replayed by accusing opponents of “not living according to the dictates of sastra.” (37)
- **Dharma Sabhà** - founded in 1830. Cause of its establishment - **Sati Act** (4 December 1829). **Support of the richest babus in Calcutta, it had few Brahman members. However “[a] number of Sanskrit College pandits subscribed anonymously to it in the beginning.”** (Robertson42)
- Rammohan's letter comprising Sanskrit Collge to the General Committee of Public Instruction opposed by his opponents' letter claiming that his notion does not at all represent “any portion of the natives of India” (Robertson, 44).

Precepts controversy – Serampore Mission

- Cause - Rammohan's *Precepts of Jesus* and *The Guide to Peace and Happiness* – excerpts of ethical teaching of Christ according to four Gospels, published by Serampore Mission Press on Rammohan's expenses.
- Missionaries believed to be misled “by a trusted prospective Brahman convert” (Robertson, 39) >> public criticism >> Rammohan responded to Marshman in three *Appeals to the Christian Public* – two published at rival Calcutta Baptist Mission Press, but even here missionaries alarmed by “Ramohan's heresy” - refused to publish *Final Appeal*...
- Marshman's defence published in London in 1822 as *A Defense of the Deity and Atonement of Jesus Christ in Reply to Rammohun Roy*.
- Rammohan could not accept the God-like character of Jesus and took him as a moral personality giving good moral prescription.
- Marshman - the Scripture, the God's word, must be received as a whole. Highlighting just the part and other leaving aside degrades the God's majesty. And Scripture speaks that Jesus “was God incarnate, both divine and human” (40) Accused Rammohan from Arian heresy; “Marshman's case against Rammohan was the Evangelical Christian case against Deism.”

- “the *Precepts, Appeals* and Marshman's replies together did as much to disseminate Christian teachings as had been accomplished almost since William Carey's (d. 1834) arrival in Bengal in 1793.” (Robertson, 41)

- **Missionaries and “natural light”:**
- The idea of “**natural light**” (originally present in Indian tradition but obscured in later times (Halbfass, 209) - the point to which missionaries attached their hopes – expecting it to be point of deliverance from idolatry and superstition and receiving “the divine light of Christian revelation”).
- Hence their hopes and support for Rammohan and their disappointment “when he stopped, so to speak, half-way, for **he never recognized such specifically Christian beliefs as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, adhering instead to a Unitarian, deistic concept of God and lines of reasoning which had been used to challenge Christianity within Europe.**” (Halbfass, 209)
- His queries with missionaries and dogmatists “became an important medium for Hindu self-presentation and self-assertion. *The Precepts of Jesus* (1820) and their appendix, the *Final Appeal to the Christian Public*, show the extend and seriousness of Rammohan’s Biblical studies, but they also demonstrate his exclusive focus on ethics, and his disregard for matters of Christian faith and dogma.” (Halbfass,

Rammohan and his Contemporaries

- “In his Mughal manners and dress, in his newly-acquired English-language skills and European tastes, he was the image of the prosperous nineteenth-century Calcutta babu. Yet in private he hankered to for distinction as a shastric scholar. Ridiculed by the Hindu pandit establishment for imitating the outward appearance of the ashraf (Mughal aristocrat) ... [he] sought scholarly recognition. Although his claim to being a disciple of Calcutta’s most eminent pandit, Mrtyumjay Vidyalankar, was not sufficient to gain him that recognition among his countrymen, his vedanta writings were widely quoted by Indologists and western intellectuals.” (Robertson).
- Quoted by Wilson and Colebrooke (what did not happen even to Mrtyumjay Vidyalankar – 'colossus of learning').
- *Persona non grata among* influential Calcutta babus X recognized as the spokesmen for the Hindu community by Bengal Government and Asiatic Society of Bengal.
- "Heralded as a pioneering scholar" in London, even though his membership in Asiatic Society was refused. But The French Societe Asiatique had elected him to honorary membership already on 5 July 1824 (Robertson, 66).