

RAMMOHUN ROY—FATHER OF NEW INDIA

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WE are hearing a great deal today about the New India. One who knows only the old, dreamy, mystic India of other days needs read only a little concerning what is taking place in that land today to convince himself that there is indeed a New India. Whence came the *New India*? When did it begin to be *New*?

This past year in scores of cities throughout India there have been held elaborate celebrations of the one hundredth anniversary of the death of the man who is almost universally acclaimed as the Father of *New India*. I refer to Raja Rammohun Roy, scholar, seer, editor, politician, educator, reformer, writer, ambassador, religious genius. It is natural perhaps that at such a time some extravagant claims should be made by his admirers, but most of the statements herein quoted were not remarks thrown off in the heat of impassioned public utterance but written deliberately and published. For instance C. F. Andrews, himself a religious figure of no mean proportions, declares:

A long and careful study of world history has convinced me that Raja Rammohun Roy was by far the greatest religious genius of the nineteenth century. . . . Even today after a hundred years we are only slowly and hesitatingly working out the supremely vital principles for which he had lived and died.¹

Mr. P. C. Roy, president of the Academy of Bengali literature says of him:

It was Rammohun Roy who pointed out in the midst of his pitch dark and obscure surroundings with the accuracy of a mariner's compass the route to a New India, an India free from the thralldom of unreason, great in the sphere of thought and action, great among the nations of the world. A man of transcendent genius, his writings form a permanent part of the intellectual heritage of Modern India.²

D. N. Bannerjea, writing of India's Nation Builders rates him first among the other great Builders. He says:

¹*Modern Review*, Vol. 54, Nov. 1933. pp. 5. 14-15.

²Roy, P. C. In an announcement of publication of Complete Works of Rammohun Roy, Dec. 1933.

Beyond dispute, the hero of the present sketch stands head and shoulders above his contemporaries and even many of his successors, as the premier Nation-builder of India. His great towering personality stands in solitary, majestic outline, dwarfing by its contrast, even greater men of a later day. For in passing judgments on the achievements of the Raja we must remember the obstacles he had to encounter; the organized forces of conservatism and decadence against which he had to stand up and fight, and the difficult times during which he flourished. And never did man fight more valiantly, or was more obedient to the heavenly vision.³

The greatest living Indian writer, Rabindranath Tagore, presiding at a celebration in his honor in the Senate Hall of Calcutta University paid him the following tribute:

Rammohun inaugurated the modern age in India. . . In the dark gloom of India's degeneration Rammohun Roy rose up, a luminous star in the firmament of India's history, with prophetic purity of vision and unconquerable heroism of soul. . . he rescued us from the penury of oblivion. . . He is the great pathmaker of the century who has removed ponderous obstacles that impeded our progress at every step and initiated us into the present era of world-wide cooperation of humanity.

Rammohun was the only person in his time in the whole world of man to realize completely the significance of the modern age. He knew that the ideal of human civilization does not lie in the isolation of independence, but in the brotherhood of interdependence of individuals as well as of nations in all spheres of thought and activity.⁴

And finally one of his English biographers says of him:

Rammohun stands in history as the living bridge over which India marches from her unmeasured past to her incalculable future. He was the arch which spanned the gulf that yawned between ancient caste and modern humanity, between superstition and science, between despotism and democracy, between immobile custom and a conservative progress, between a bewildering polytheism and a pure, if vague, Theism. He was the mediator of his people, harmonizing in his own person, often by means of his own solitary sufferings, the conflicting tendencies of immemorial tradition and of inevitable enlightenment.⁵

This is high praise. What indeed did Rammohun Roy do to deserve such encomiums? Time will permit only brief mention of the

³Banerjea, D. N. *India's Nation Builders* Chapt. II p. 42.

⁴Address by Rabindranath Tagore in the Senate House, Calcutta University, Navavidhon, Nov. 1933, p. 4.

⁵Collet, S. D., *Life and Letters of Rammohun Roy* p. 155.

outstanding contributions in each of the many fields in which he was interested.

It was probably in the field of religion where he did his greatest work. Had he done nothing for India beyond founding the Brahma-Samaj he would have earned a secure place in history, but that after all was only the tangible institutional expression of his reforming spirit in the realm of religion. That new spirit has been caught up and embodied in a hundred other forms. Three things in particular mark Rammohun Roy off from his contemporaries in this area of life. First, his strong reaction to the polytheistic, idolatrous worship of the day. Second, his emphatic avowal of an ethical monotheism. Third, his warm acceptance of the Christian gospels and of *Jesus* in the Unitarian sense.

This is, of course, syncretism, and in the fact of syncretism in India one finds nothing new. Hinduism is itself a vast syncretic faith wrought out of very diverse elements which from time to time have been incorporated into it. Kabir and Nanak represent the blending of Hinduism and Islam. Rammohun Roy comes on the scene when Christianity, in its Protestant form at least, is beginning its vigorous drive for the conversion of India. He represents, therefore, the first definite tangible blending of Christianity with Hinduism. Not that he got all his new ideas from Christianity. As a matter of fact his education included the learning of Arabic and part of his reading was from the Koran. His monotheism, therefore, may well have derived from that source, but his later acquaintance with the gospels and with Jesus was undoubtedly the most compelling influence upon his religious thought. He did not become a Christian, although the Unitarians had great hopes that he would do so. He did, however, support the Unitarian mission in its Indian work, both financially and by his pen and voice, and his concept of Jesus was certainly close to the Unitarian. But he also attended freely the worship services of Trinitarian groups and gave powerful aid particularly to the educational work of the early Scotch missionaries. But to the end of his life he remained a Hindu and found in the ancient sacred writings warrant for his views. He did not a little to stimulate a new study of the scriptures by his translation of portions of them into the vernacular, Bengali, and into English.

He was an earnest seeker after truth and sought it in many directions. He has been called by some the father of the science of comparative religion. Whether this is warranted, and I am unable to

agree that it is, he did apply himself to the study of the Koran, the Old Testament, and New Testament as well as the Hindu Scriptures, each in the original, but his was not the objective scientific approach of the student of comparative religion. He was in search of religious truth. It gave him a firm basis for his deepening conviction as to the Divine Unity and the Unity of Mankind. Who of his century glimpsed this more surely than he, and who by pen and voice did more to give currency to these ideas? Sir Rabindranath Tagore is hailed universally as expressing the soul of New India. It is worth while noting that Tagore stands in the direct tradition of Rammohun Roy for he is himself the most illustrious member of the Brahma-Samaj, the grandson of the Dwarkanath Tagore, who was closely associated with Rammohun Roy in the founding of that Society, and son of Devendra Nath Tagore the most outstanding leader of the Samaj in the years following the death of the founder.

In the field of education also Rammohun Roy was influential, and not the least of the factors making for the New India was education. It will be recalled that up to the beginning of the nineteenth Century the English, represented by the East India Company had concerned itself hardly at all with other than commercial interests in India. There began to emerge, however, a sense that something more was owing to the Indian people and a certain sum was appropriated for education. Of what sort should the education be? To the credit of the English at first at any rate they decided that it should be a truly Indian education in the ancient literature and thought of India, a true Sanskrit College. But just here Rammohun Roy took issue with them. "The Sanskrit system of Education would be the best calculated to keep this country in darkness," he declared.⁶ What India needed was an acquaintance not alone with her own lore (Rammohun Roy never denied that this was good: indeed, he did much to stimulate study of it by founding a Vedanta College in 1826) but with the new knowledge of the west, the science, the philosophy, and history of the vigorous western world. Thus, in part through Rammohun Roy's influence began the penetration of western ideas into Indian education. The New India is in a real sense a logical outgrowth of this process. We have already noted the aid he lent to Alexander Duff in the establishment of his great educational work in India. To be sure the New India now feels that education

⁶Collet. op. cit. p. 72.

has been altogether too western and that it has had the effect of denationalizing her youth. It is, nevertheless, worth noting that the leaders in the swing-back to a more truly national education are themselves for the most part the products of the educational system which they now condemn.

If the emergence of a strong national press had any effect in promoting the rise of the New India, then again Rammohun Roy qualifies as the Father of New India for he is credited with being the founder of native journalism in India. In 1821, he founded the *Sambad Kaumudi* or "The Moon of Intelligence." Later when the English Governor-General ordered the suppression of a certain paper it was Rammohun Roy who wrote the vigorous protest against the order, a document which has frequently been characterized as the *Areopagitica* of India. When the Governor-General ignored the memorial and upheld the Press Ordinances, Rammohun Roy and his associates appealed to the King in Council. "In a language and style forever associated with the glorious vindication of liberty, it invokes against the arbitrary exercise of British power the principles and traditions which are distinctive of British history," writes Collet.⁷ But it was without avail for the Privy Council upheld the Ordinance. In thus daring to oppose the dictates of the foreign government, he stands first in the long line of those who have set themselves against the arbitrary control of Indian life by England.

Can it be said in any true sense that Rammohun Roy was the Father of the New Nationalism of India? There are those who claim that it can, but beyond the expression of a spirit it can hardly be affirmed that he was. But perhaps just that spirit of *freedom* which was so characteristic of Rammohun Roy is the basis of the New Nationalism. On one occasion he wrote "I want to be free, or I don't want to be at all." "That," writes an admirer, one who has for years championed India's freedom, "was a clarion note which meant nothing less than the political as well as the spiritual rebirth of his country. The spirit of that note has spread until today all India is feeling the mighty thrill of it."⁸

Probably Rammohun Roy is best known popularly for his contribution to the emancipation of Indian womanhood, and certainly no feature of the New India is more marked than the rapidity with which Indian women are emerging from their enforced seclusion into

⁷Collet. op. cit. p. 69.

⁸J. T. Sunderland, *Modern Review* Vol. 54, p. 391.

the active intellectual, political and social life of the nation. The most notable of his contributions was toward the abolition of *sati* or widow burning, perhaps just because it was the most terrible of the evils that existed. Impelled at first to fight it from having himself seen a sister-in-law literally forced against her will to mount her husband's funeral pyre and held in the flames until her life was extinguished, he was not the first to condemn it, but his was the most influential opposition. He wrote vigorously denouncing it. He showed conclusively that there was nothing in the sacred scriptures to warrant such a practice. This resort to their own writings for material to combat the orthodox who condemned him as an opponent of the faith was characteristic of the man. There were many things in the Vedas and other scriptures that Rammohun Roy on other occasions criticized and fought, but he was keen enough strategist to know that the most effective arguments against orthodox practices would be from scriptures. The authority of the Vedas so well recognized among the peoples would, if found opposed to a given practice, do more to undermine that practice than anything else he might bring against it. It was his desire to let the people see what the Vedas really taught that led him to translate portions of them into the vernacular.

It was the British Governor, Lord Bentinck, who finally abolished legally the practice of *sati*, interestingly enough over the protest of Roy who though convinced of the iniquity of the practice did not believe that governmental suppression was the best way to deal with it, but that the government at last came to the point of prohibiting it was in no small degree due to the vigorous attacks Rammohun Roy made upon it. A modern Indian contemplating the orthodox resistance to such reforms as the prohibition of child-marriage and temple prostitution cried, "Thank God that Rammohun Roy lifted a torch which young India is determined to keep alight. If left to the mercies of orthodoxy India would soon slip back into her mixture of culture and brutality, mysticism and cruelty, where human lives would count less than those of animals."⁹

Apparently forgetful of the fact that Roy opposed governmental action to prevent *sati*, this same writer goes on to declare:

If young India today wants self-government it is that it may deal with the orthodox in the proper way. Such ordinary legislation as the raising of the age of marriage for girls,

⁹Shoran S. Singha, "Father and Founder of Modern India," *Contem. Rev.*, Vol. 144, p. 442.

should not be held up by a foreign power out of the deference to the opinion of the orthodox. That human beings created by God in His own image should be prevented from using wells, or roads or schools because the orthodox oppose it, should not be tolerated by the State. Rammohun Roy proved that a bold action in the name of justice and humanity would be supported by enlightened opinion, and that opinion today is a thousand times stronger than in the days of Bentinck. This should be a clear challenge to the administrations of 1933 to sweep aside the man-made barriers which are imprisoning the body and soul of India.¹⁰

The statement at least tends to link Rammohun Roy up with New India of which this is a typical expression.

But while his most vigorous effort was dedicated to the destruction of *sati*, he, although himself married in his youth to two wives, wrote cogently against polygamy and advocated widow remarriage, to the very great distress of the orthodox. The Brahma-Samaj which he founded has continued through the years, the implacable foe of these and other disabilities under which Indian womanhood found and still finds itself where orthodox Hinduism controls. No wonder that the leading women of India met to do him honor in the Centenary Celebration in Calcutta University.

To this already imposing list of contributions to the beginnings of New India it may be added that he is regarded as the Father of Bengali literature, Collet says of him:

Bengali owes much to Rammohun. It was his writings chiefly which raised it into a literary language. As by Wyclif in England and Luther in Germany, so also by Rammohun in Bengali the despised dialect of the common people was made the vehicle of the highest ideas and became thereby permanently elevated. Reformation in religion has often proved ennoblement in language.¹¹

He was likewise the first Brahmin to cross the ocean, thus starting a steady stream of visitors from India to England and the rest of the world. The things these travellers saw and heard in foreign lands and returned to repeat constituted one more of the important factors making for the birth of the New India.

The closing years of his life he spent in England, the official representative of the Emperor of Delhi, on whose behalf he came. But he was more than an ambassador of the decaying court of the

¹⁰Ibid., p. 442-443.

¹¹Collet. S. D. Life and Letters of Rammohun Roy p. 75.

Moguls, he was unofficial ambassador of the Orient to the Occident, interpreting East to West and by his letters and writing, for he died and was buried in England, interpreting West to East—thus contributing to the interpenetration of culture and ideas out of which the New India was born.

As in the case of most great figures, particularly of religious leaders or reformers, the biographers of Rammohun Roy tend to idealize him, and to invest some quite ordinary events with deep significance. As in the case of many such figures in the West, the life of Rammohun Roy is now being investigated objectively and new sources apparently not before tapped are being brought into use. Mr. Brajendra Nath Banerji has contributed a number of articles to leading Indian magazines in recent years based on the examination of old court records and other sources not used by earlier biographers.

The investigations of Mr. Banerji result according to the author in the modification of a number of stories about him. First, there is some question about his wide travels within or outside of India and his prolonged sojourns in centers of Islamic, Hindu, or Buddhist learning.¹² Second, the story of his disinheritance on account of his religious beliefs is seen to be untenable. "As we have already seen Rammohun did receive his share of the paternal property and there was no discrimination against him on any ground whatever."¹³ Third, he finds no proof that father and son were alienated during the father's life time. "Though of course Rammohun did not help his father with money in his distress."¹⁴ Fourth, the author thinks he has shown that excessive stress has been laid on the religious aspect of his career. The new information he says, "shows Rammohun in another aspect of his life which is not perhaps less important for a correct understanding of his personality. What his biographers totally fail to perceive was that religion, or rather intellectual and dialectic preoccupation with dogma, was only a part of Rammohun's being and that he had other matters (including his own worldly advancement) no less near to his heart. This distortion of perspective the new material helps to correct."¹⁵

If such enforced rectifications of the life story of Rammohun Roy do indeed rob his admirers of some of the more or less senti-

¹²Calcutta Review, Vol. 49, page 254.

¹³Ibid, page 255.

¹⁴Ibid, page 256.

¹⁵Ibid.

mental myths that had grown up about him, nothing that has appeared or is likely to appear can obscure the true figure of Rammohun Roy or rob him of his place as a forerunner of the New India that is still struggling to be born. The cherry tree story is not vital to the life of George Washington, however much it may be valued sentimentally.

The celebration of the Centenary has evoked widespread response in India. As planned it was to include a number of meetings of various kinds: A conference of religions in honor of his contributions to comparative religions; a woman's meeting honoring him for his service to womanhood; a literary conference in honor of his contribution to Bengali literature; as well as temporary exhibits of materials relating to Rammohun Roy such as letters, portraits, editions of his books, etc.

Of more lasting importance were the plans for a new Centenary Edition of his works including not only those which have appeared but several new documents which have not yet been published. Already announcements of the edition, published on a subscription basis have been circulated. It is to embrace both his English and other language publications. Further, a Rammohun Roy Anthology is promised as well as a commemorative volume of tributes paid him by both East and West.

In addition, plans have been inaugurated looking toward a panel for him on the Reformer's Monument in Geneva, and of still greater importance a living monument in the form of an endowed memorial chair of Comparative Religions either in Calcutta University or by rotation in other Indian Universities. Surely no monument could be more fitting for the man who did pioneer work in the study of so many different faiths.

Whether all these plans will be carried out in this time of great financial depression may well be doubted. May I suggest that American scholars interested in the Orient at least can help toward the publication of his works by seeing to it that their university libraries are subscribers to the proposed Centenary Editions. But the ambitious character of the plans does serve as something of a measure of the importance which the leaders of the present-day New India attach to him whom they unite in considering as the true Father of that New India.