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THE RELEVANCE OF RAJA RAMMOHUN ROY IN THE PRESENT AGE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY*

It came as a great surprise to me when I was asked to deliver this year's Raja Rammohun Roy Memorial Lecture organized by the Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation. This is a prestigious assignment from a prestigious institution and I accepted it in all humility. My sense of inadequacy in fulfilling this assignment is tremendous when I look at the names of previous speakers. I had the benefit of reading some of the previous lectures and I realize that I cannot match those speakers' depth or width of scholarship. However, these lectures conveyed to me glimpses of the remarkable personality that Raja Rammohun Roy was. For, my knowledge about him had earlier been confined to the rather scanty accounts that appear in school textbooks which highlight his campaign against the custom of *Suttee,* and his attempts at religious and social reforms two centuries ago.

Before I begin with the subject of my talk proper, I would like to pay tributes to the Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation which has sponsored this lecture. I had an opportunity to look at a newsletter of the RRRLF from which I gathered important information of its past and present activities. In a day and age when most libraries are crying over resource crunch, the RRRLF has expanded from modest beginnings and is now known all over India. From 371 libraries in 1971 to nearly

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30,000 in 1997 is a phenomenal rate of growth indeed. I congratulate the Foundation on this achievement.

More than the past, what is praiseworthy is that the Foundation is looking towards the future. By organizing seminars and discussions on the future trends in the library movement, like the Seminar for Western States on Public Library Scenario in the 21st Century at Mumbai last year, the RRRLF has taken a leaf out of the book of life of Raja Rammohun Roy. For, Roy was forever conscious of the new developments and progressive ideas in his times and initiated efforts to use them for the benefit of the society. I am sure, if he were around today, he would have advocated use of the latest in information technology to modernize the library system.

I

After receiving the invitation to deliver the lecture, I took some time to read about the Raja and gradually the magnitude of his efforts began to form a clearer image about the man, his personality, his aspirations and his achievements. So, when I venture to speak today about him, I am guided by the considerable work done by others on him. Indeed, I am reminded of what Kalidasa said when writing the *Raghuvansham :*

Athava kritavagdware margesmin poorvasuribhih
Manau vajrasamutkirne sootrasyevasti me gatih
[Chapter 1, Verse 4]

That is, "My progress along this path is made simple by the work done by the scholars of the past, like that of a thread smoothly going through precious stones in which holes have been pierced by a hard implement." Of course, having said this with his characteristic humility, the great poet went on to deliver a masterpiece. I hold out no such hope!

Having been a fan of science fiction, and having enjoyed H.G. Wells's remarkable story *The Time Machine,* I thought of presenting my ideas in a rather novel fashion. If the Raja had access to a time machine that brought him to the present century, how would he have found the present-day India? Would he have felt happy that the reforms he had been associated with had been implemented? Or would he have found the country as much in need of his reforming crusade as it was two hundred years ago?

II

To set the background to my talk, I briefly recall the life and times of Raja Rammohun Roy. He was born at Radhanagar, Bengal on May 22, 1772 in a prosperous Brahmin family. Thus, he could have led the life of an aristocrat in a region ruled by the British East India Company (the battle of Plassey was fifteen years in the past when he was born). However, this was not to be. He travelled widely outside Bengal, learned several languages, including Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, Hebrew and Greek, besides his native Bengali, Hindustani and English. He studied Western as well as Eastern culture and literature and was able to imbibe from and react to the changing political, social and economic scenario in India.

Part of the reaction was his unceasing criticism of some of the long-held beliefs and traditions of the Hindus, including, of course, the caste division and the ritual of *Suttee*. He broke with tradition in many ways, including translating the *Upanishadas* into modern Bengali and travelling abroad. The former was dictated by his desire to communicate the real wisdom (as opposed to the rituals and superstitions) which was embodied in these texts, to the common reader who would not be conversant with Sanskrit. The latter was part of his fascination for Western culture and the newly-emerging knowledge.

For, Europe at the time was going through the post-Newtonian era of science, and the industrial revolution was beginning. Rammohun Roy had the vision to see that the emerging knowledge from the West could not be ignored rather, one *could not afford to ignore* the knowledge coming from the West. Which is why he encouraged English teaching schools in preference to the traditional Sanskrit-based learning that had been handed down from generation to generation without any significant change or addition. In retrospect, one can now see (what he foresaw with his extraordinary vision) that during his lifetime the world was passing through an epoch when the gap between the East and the West would widen rapidly.

Let me pause here to recall a comment made by the late Abdus Salam, the Nobel Prize winning physicist from this subcontinent. Salam mentions that both the Taj Mahal and the St. Paul's Cathedral are epitomes of excellence in architecture, one from the East and the other from the West. Both were built at approximately the same time and suggest that the two cultures had attained comparable heights in that field. However, in the years to come, England had Newton and a spurt

in the growth of science. The emerging science of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries enjoyed not only royal patronage, but also several individual rich aristocrats patronized science. There were the Royal Society, the French Academy and similar other organizations collectively promoting science. There was no corresponding development in India. Patrons of the liberal arts were many but none of science. It was this culture of science that was beginning to make the difference between the development of India and Europe, a difference that Raja Rammohun Roy noticed and appreciated.

Which is why, when the British wanted to start a Sanskrit College in Calcutta, Rammohun Roy vehemently opposed the proposal and advocated a Westernized syllabus including the sciences, history, geography, economics, etc. He felt that in order to catch up with the West in the fast-growing developments there, it was necessary to equip our students with the modern knowledge.

Not that he was a blind follower of the West and denigrator of the East. On many occasions, he had staunchly defended the Hindu religion against unreasonable attacks by Christian missionaries. It was to argue with them that he learned the Hebrew and Greek languages so that he could study their literature and speak with authority born of knowledge. He was deeply appreciative of the liberal philosophical traditions of India, and his starting of the Brahmo Samaj was to popularize these enlightened ideas. When he went to England in 1830 on behalf of the titular Emperor of Delhi, his lectures and discussions went a long way towards brightening the image of India as a land of wisdom. His untimely death in England on September 27, 1833 due to fever robbed India of his leadership towards modernity.

These are a few glimpses of this extraordinary man whose vision was far ahead of his times.

III

Let me make a few general remarks about people whose vision is far ahead of their times.

It may be thought that visionaries who want to effect social reforms encounter difficulties because of the many subjective elements that enter into the arguments for and against reforms. There are many issues on which the contemporary ideas and beliefs are unable to shed a clear-cut light. Only by hindsight of decades can one judge the rights and wrongs of the arguments. Are things somewhat better so far as science is

concerned? Claiming to be objective (scientists today patronizingly call social sciences "soft sciences"), should science be able to settle its debates relatively easily?

It should, but it rarely can! I would like to give a few examples before returning to Raja Rammohun Roy.

In the fifth century, Indian intellectuals were convinced of the truth of the geocentric theory which had originated in Greece. The dogma had it that the Earth is fixed and the whole cosmos revolves around it. The Indian astronomer Aryabhata, from Kusumapura in the present state of Bihar, had however thought otherwise. In his book *Aryabhatiya,* he writes:

> Anulomagatirnausthah pashyatyachalam vilomagam yadvat
> Achalani bhani tadvat samapashchimagani lankayam
> [Chapter 4, Verse 9]

He gives in this *shloka* the analogy of a person going on a boat, who sees the fixed objects on the land going in the opposite direction, and argues that the fixed stars likewise appear to go westwards because they are viewed from the moving surface of the Earth. Here Aryabhata is pointing to the spin of the Earth around its axis from west to east, which gives rise to the apparent motion of the stars in the reverse direction.

The analogy is exact and clear. Yet, this statement from a respected teacher and scholar like Aryabhata was ignored by his contemporaries and even by later astronomers! Because, the statement did not fit into the overall set of beliefs of the time. Ten centuries later, Copernicus said the same thing, stating further that the Earth also goes round the Sun. His book was banned from circulation. History tells how Giordano Bruno and Galileo Galilei suffered for defending the Copernican ideas.

Lest you think that the twentieth century is different and there has been progress towards objectivity, look at the case of Wegener, who, in 1915, proposed the idea of continental drift. The idea arose from the finding that the land-masses of the continents fit like jigsaw pieces, if lifted and put together. Wegner argued that the upper crust (the 'plates') on the Earth's surface may have broken and the pieces drifted apart. Collisions of plates could give high mountain ranges. Thus, the Himalayas would have formed by the plate of the Indian subcontinent moving into and colliding with the Asian plate.

These ideas were pooh-poohed by the geophysicists of his time and throughout his life Wegener had to suffer neglect or ridicule. It was only around 1950, after his death, that the idea gained support to the extent that it is the accepted theory today.

One reason for this opposition was that theorists could not find a plausible explanation for the dynamics of continental drift. However, nature had previously presented many phenomena for which there were no established theories. Do we reject the reality of a phenomenon just because we can't understand it? Scientists follow the dictum: "Do not trust a theory if there are no observations to support it." This sounds reasonable. Here, and on many occasions, however, we encounter the opposite thought, viz. "Do not trust an observation if there is no theory to understand it." Does it sound reasonable ?

IV

Like Aryabhata, Bruno, Galileo and Wegener, Rammohun Roy had ideas and vision not conforming to the attitudes of his times. It is sometimes said that he was born ahead of his times. So, the question naturally arises as to how his ideas would have fared in the present century. Since he was ahead of the 18th and 19th centuries, would the 20th century have caught up with him? This is the basic question I wish to address today. But before coming to specifics of Rammohun Roy's ideas, let us ask as to how the fag end of the present century differs from the period of his times.

If one compares the states of human existence at the ends of successive centuries, one would find that the maximum change has taken place between the last and the present century. Thanks to the scientific revolution, the human lifestyle has changed dramatically. I recall once listening to the science fiction writer Ray Bradbury make the point that the life of a human being who lived through most of the 20th century, was science fiction converted to reality. For someone with a childhood period in the 1920s, the notions of jet and supersonic air travel, cellular phones, lunar and planetary spacecrafts, computer-controlled automation, television, nuclear power, electronic mail and web-surfing, all would have appeared science fiction to start with, but attaining reality during his/her lifespan. Naturally therefore, the contrast between Rammohun Roy's period and the present times is extreme.

These changes have not been confined to the West, although the wind of change has blown from that direction. In his times, Rammohun

was anxious that India should not lose out on the new knowledge coming from the West, which is why he had discouraged the traditional Sanskrit-based education in favour of the English-speaking schools and colleges. In his letter to the British Governor General Lord Amherst, he said :

> ..... the Sanskrit system of education would be best calculated to keep this country in darkness, if such had been the policy of the British legislature. But as the improvement of the native population is the object of the government, it will consequently promote a more liberal and enlightened system of instruction, embracing mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry and anatomy with other useful sciences ..... .

In those days, the general reaction to Western education was negative. The educated classes had to be convinced to accept Western education. Today, we see an opposite picture! It is generally accepted that to get on in this world, education in an English medium school is essential. Indeed, so far as our urban areas are concerned, some local languages feel threatened by this 'invasion' of English.

Whether the premise is corrected or not is debatable. I for one have long taken the view that, at the school level, subjects requiring comprehension, rather than memorizing, subjects like mathematics and science, are best taught in the mother tongue of the child.

I therefore wonder if the Raja had got on his time machine and come to the present day, what would his reaction have been? Would he have approved the general acceptance that Western-style education has received in India? Since he had advocated it so strongly, there is reason to expect that he would have approved. But he would have been surprised at the growing popularity of English as a language, especially now that we are no longer governed by the British. With his highly patriotic nature, he would have deplored the fact that the native Indian languages are feeling threatened. I think he would have campaigned for the Indian languages and cultures in all their diversity. At the same time, being accustomed to thinking beyond the national boundaries, which characteristic of his was indeed remarkable when seen in the general ambience of his times, he would have advocated the need to learn English as the link language of the world.

V

Rammohun Roy had campaigned vigorously against the then prevailing and long traditional custom of *Suttee*. The word *suttee* describes a virtuous and saintly woman. But it came to be identified with a specific act of such a woman, namely, voluntarily burning herself on the funeral pyre of her dead husband, to show her *total* dedication to him. There have been legends of women carrying out this act of self-sacrifice. In reality it became a custom of subtly gettting rid of widows; far from being voluntary, it became mandatory. If a widow did not submit to this cruel act, she did not have much to look forward to. She would be facing a life of humiliation, and even torture.

Rammohun Roy had in general been a campaigner for the upliftment of women and his fight against the *suttee* custom was a natural culmination of all his efforts in the campaign against traditionalists. Here one is reminded of Galileo's campaign against the followers of Aristotle whose thoughts on nature and science had dominated Europe. To project his arguments in the right context, Galileo wrote a book called *Dialogue between Two World Systems*. In this book there are three characters, one a traditionalist who blindly follows Aristotle and the geocentric world system advocated by him and elaborated upon by Claudius Ptolemy. He has to defend the traditional ideas against the second character who is a follower of the heliocentric world system of Nicolaus Copernicus. A third character plays a neutral role of an observer in the dialogue. Through these arguments Galileo clearly demonstrates that the traditional thinking was all based on wrong and illogical grounds.

In 1818, Rammohun Roy published a tract, which is in the form of a dialogue between an 'Advocate' of the traditional customs and an 'Opponent'. This was written in Bengali and circulated free. (He knew that his compatriots would not spend money on a pamphlet that defied their traditional beliefs!) It was also translated into English under the title: *The Conference between an Advocate for and an Opponent of the Practice of Burning Widows*. A second tract published in 1820 and entitled *A Second Conference* was dedicated to Lady Hastings. As in Galileo's tract, the argument was presented on both sides and the reader was left to decide for himself.

One example of the type of argument can be given. It was argued by the 'Advocate' that *suttee* was performed for gratification in this world and next, as it guaranteed a place in Heaven for thirty-five million years!

To which a counter-argument was given that performing a meritorious act with a motive for personal gain robs it of all its merit. A quotation from *Kathopanishad* was given to substantiate this :

"Faith in God which leads to absorption is one thing and rites which have future fruition for their object, another. Each of these producing different consequences, holds out to man inducements to follow it. The man who of these two chooses faith is blessed; and who, for the sake of reward, practises rites is dashed away from the enjoyment of eternal beatitude."

In his general arguments in support of better treatment of women, the Raja stressed the fact of how they had been denied normal decency, let alone given privileges, and how despite these disadvantages, they had acted with courage and magnanimity. His arguments not only highlighted the need for a sense of justice for the fair sex, but also showed their strengths against the weaknesses of men. The logic of his arguments greatly appealed to the educated younger generation.

Despite his strong advocacy for it, in the face of great social opposition, the Raja was unhappy when the *suttee* was abolished by an act of the British Government. For, he believed in bringing about the desired change in social attitudes through arguments, persuasion and conviction of the merit of the case, rather than through legislation. In this context, how would he have reacted to the present scenario of dowry-deaths?

Although we claim to have a more enlightened society today, compared to two centuries ago, certain mental attitudes have not changed despite legislation. Even amongst the so-called educated families, the birth of a girl-child is greeted at best with subdued pleasure, certainly not comparable to the euphoria greeting the arrival of a boy-child. The treatment of the two in a family can be uneven, not only in the planning for their education, but also in day-to-day interaction. A bright girl, with all her merit in school, will not be given encouragement to attain her full potential, whereas the parents will try to go to great lengths to provide as strong an opportunity as possible for their son.

There are exceptions to this scenario, of course, but I think nobody will question the existence of a general imbalance between the sexes in our society, which begins even before birth nowadays because unscrupulous medical practitioners help identify a female foetus and destroy it.

But nothing can compare in cruelty with the act of 'bride-burning' as it has come to be called. Legislation exists banning dowry; it certainly

exists so far as taking human life is concerned. Whereas we may point an accusing finger at the tradition-ridden society of Rammohun Roy's time for burning widows, what can we say of our own society which, by its inertia, condones today's dowry deaths? Legislation apart, as pointed out by Roy, social awareness of the evil is more important.

VI

Rammohun Roy was a social reformer and his concern for better treatment of women was part of his general concern for liberal attitude, humanism and enlightened way of looking at life, brought about by the dawn of the age of science and technology. Since religion played a dominant role in public life of his times he went on to reform religion itself. In 1823, about the then current Hindu religion he had this to say:

> I regret to say that the present system of religion adhered to by the Hindus is not well calculated to promote their political interest. The distinctions of castes introducing innumerable divisions and sub-divisions among them has entirely deprived them of patriotic feeling, and the multitude of religious rites and ceremonies and the laws of purification have totally disqualified them from undertaking any difficult enterprise. It is, I think, necessary that some change take place in their religion, at least for the sake of their political advantage and social comfort.

The Brahmo Samaj started by him was meant to present a reformed and enlightened version of the Vedic Hindu religion. The songs sung at the prayer meetings of the Brahmo Samaj were in praise of a universal God residing as a friend and a guide in the heart of the devotee. The Samaj was against idolatry and recognized only one God or Supreme Being. It admitted members irrespective of caste and creed. The basis of unification was a common philosophy of universalism practised and preached by the ancient sages. Thus, contrary to the prevailing customs, which encouraged a rigid religious outlook, he was seeking to revive the liberal aspects of ancient Hinduism, to free the religion from shackles of rituals and traditions.

However, let us come to modern times. How would he have found the system today? Are we any better off compared to our forefathers of two centuries ago? Far from being united through the new knowledge

about nature and the universe brought by science, we seem bent on religious revivalism, no matter what religion we look at. Attitudes within different organized religions are hardening and, instead of joining hands, people of different creeds adopt confrontationist poses.

Caste has not disappeared despite its official derecognition. Although it is considered a feature of the Hindu religion, it seems to have its influence even in other religions! Because, if a person is converted from the Hindu religion to some other religion, the legacy of his or her caste survives for the purpose of social intercourse. In fact, with the introduction of various kinds of reservations the subtle differences amongst the backward and "other backward" classes have also become emphasized. Refer again to what Rammohun wrote about the caste-ridden society of his times, to the quotation I read out a little while ago. Does it not apply as well to modern times?

I am sure the Raja would have thrown up his hands in despair at the current situation. If science and technology have failed to bring enlightenment to even the educated, then what can we say about the vast mass of our uneducated citizenry?

VII

The phrase that is current these days but which was not used in the Raja's times, although he advocated it in many of his speeches and works, is the 'scientific temper'. Rammohun Roy was a rationalist in his advocacy of reason and freedom of thought. His criticism of the existing religion and its rigid practices and caste barriers was inspired by a desire to make it consistent with the changing world of his times.

That attitude is even more relevant today as the inputs of science and technology in our daily life are growing at a tremendous pace. Thanks to the information explosion through cellular phones, fax, electronic mail and the websites, the isolation of the East from the West, prevailing in Rammohun Roy's times, is no longer operative. It is said that access to information brings about revolutions in thinking and living. Information is supposed to dispel ignorance. Has it happened in our country? I give a few instances to show that, despite these technological inputs, the grip of misinformation and superstitions on our society is still very strong.

In my centre in Pune, we have the latest in computer technology in aid of research in astronomy and astrophysics. There is electronic mail, fast access to international websites, data link with important

astronomical data-centres in the world and, of course, the latest astronomical software for processing observational data and theoretical computations. I was once describing these to an educated lady in Pune. After being suitably impressed, she asked: "Can I get a computerized horoscope made here?" Nothing that I could say concerning the demonstrated non-science or pseudo-science that goes under the name of astrology would alter her firm belief that her life was determined by her birth-chart.

Statistical studies have demonstrated that there is no correlation between matching birth-charts of couples and the quality of their married life. Yet, the practice of matching birth-charts before arranging marriages is very common, not only amongst the illiterates but also amongst the highly educated and sophisticated strata of our society. When there is neither a scientific reason nor even an empirical evidence for the effect of planets on human lives, important decisions, ranging from forming ministries to moving into a new house or buying a car or starting a new business, are taken with deference to the so-called auspicious or inauspicious times.

A new fad that has recently caught hold of our educated classes is the so-called *Vastu-Shastra*. The phrase means the science of architecture. In reality, can what goes under the name be called architecture or science? Both the architects and the scientists would reply in the negative. Yet, an impression is created that by taking a holistic view of life, one should integrate certain specific rules for constructing one's abode so as to ensure a prosperous life. Which way should your kitchen window face, in which direction should your bedroom be located, how many steps should your staircase have, etc., are issues supposedly linked with your health, wealth, marital success, long life, etc. People occupying distinguished positions in the society have demolished parts of their houses to rebuild them in accordance with the rules of *Vastu-Shastra*. In some cases, public money has been spent in order to effect such alterations. No rational justification of these rules has been given, but an impression is created that you break them at a great cost to your well-being. When rationalist groups, along the lines of Rammohun Roy, challenge these tenets, these challenges are not taken up.

Another instance that I wish to cite is of misinformation that travelled so fast, not only from one corner of the country to another, but also from one corner of the globe to another. I refer to the news that the Lord Ganesha was drinking milk. I wonder what Raja Rammohun Roy,

with all his opposition to idol worship, would have made of this event! That there was nothing remarkable, let alone supernatural, in the incident was explained by scientists with practical demonstrations in many places. The real miracle was the way the news spread so rapidly: it was no divine miracle, but the outcome of information technology that I referred to earlier.

Such instances tell us that as a nation we are still living in the dark ages with the same outdated ideas that the Raja was fighting against. Beneath the veneer of the hightech, the social fabric today is as hidebound as it was in his times.

VIII

The benign face of British rule in India is often presented as bringing new technology originating in the industrial revolution in Europe to India. Thus industries, good roads, railways, telegraph, etc., were brought in by the British. Rammohun was appreciative of such benefits, although in his lifetime, they were rather nebulous. However, he was very conscious of the exploitation that the British rule represented, in terms of unequal trade conditions. He knew that no foreign agency enters the country purely from philanthropic considerations. The technology that the British offered and sold was accompanied by outflow of funds from India to Britain. For example, a sympathetic servant of the East India Company admitted that the annual remittances to London on individual accounts amounted to as much as two million pounds per annum for several years.

The debate in his times was between feudal monopoly and free trade. Rammohun Roy and his friend Dwarakanath Tagore both were for free trade, since they felt that through free trade bringing in Europeans and their new technologies, the stagnant development in India would become dynamic. They encouraged industry to grow in Bengal's countryside. They were aware that joining hands with the colonials would also bring in exploitation by them. But they felt that this was to be balanced against the benefits of industrialization in the country, which would put India on the world map.

This debate is echoed in the present economic debate between liberalization and free-market economy on the one hand and state-controlled economy on the other. I am not an economist and so will refrain from passing a judgement in the present debate. But even a naive person like myself can see the similarity between the issues

debated then and now. Do we open the country fully for the multinationals and risk being exploited by them, or do we keep the economy under strict control? Certainly, if the Raja were around today, he would have an opinion, a firm opinion in this debate.

IX

Another contemporary issue which erupts into a debate now and then, in which Rammohun Roy would have participated with great personal involvement, is the freedom of the press or, more generally, the freedom of the media. In his times the newspapers were carrying out the jobs of informing as well as expressing and building up opinions on contemporary issues. The exploitations of the East India Company naturally formed subject matter of these news and views. There were tussles between the authorities at Fort William and the editors of newspapers. At one stage, in 1799, the Governor General, Lord Wellesley, imposed censorship laws to curtail the freedom of the press. These laws included prior inspection of news and views by the Government and approval before publication.

In the course of time the laws became somewhat less rigid. Still a lot of control remained. Against this background, James Silk Buckingham started the *Calcutta Journal* which took cudgels on behalf of freedom of speech. Rammohun Roy, who shared similar views, got along well with Buckingham, although unlike him he kept a less confrontationist attitude. Later he brought out two papers himself, the *Sambad Kaumudi* in Bengali and *Mirat-ul-Akhbar* in Persian, both languages he knew so well. He used these papers to air several issues of social relevance to create a national consciousness amongst Indians, Hindus as well as Muslims.

Again, we find in him a person who was ahead of his times, who saw in the press an instrument to be used to assert freedom of expression, to air views of urgent social relevance and, above all, to create a general awakening amongst the masses.

These issues continue to acquire wide connotations today as the media expand their scope. The print media, as in Rammohun's times, are of course still there, but they are being overtaken by the electronic media, by TV and internet, for example. To what extent will governments be able to censor out information? That information is a powerful weapon which all governments would like to control cannot be denied. That if they do so through Draconian measures, people like Roy will be needed is also beyond question. But I suspect that as it becomes possible to

transmit information through many channels and that much more easily, it will be that much harder to erect an iron curtain around it.

X

To summarize, the many qualities for which Rammohun Roy is known in pages of history are as relevant today as they were in his times. This may appear surprising at first sight because our present age of science and technology is supposed to be very different from the times of Rammohun Roy. So one might have thought that his ideas and perceptions would be out of date today. Not so! His approaches to education, social reforms, rationalism, free trade and freedom of expression are as relevant today as they were then.

Of course, when one examines the life of Raja Rammohun Roy, one notices a few self-contradictions and shortcomings. Patriots may not like his soft corner for the new conquerors of his land. While stressing the simplicity of a non-feudal environment, he himself lived like an aristocrat. While speaking against several age-old religious rituals, he could not give up some himself. While campaigning against the *suttee* custom, he was unhappy when a legal ban was imposed on the custom. Some of these attitudes may be ascribed to the then prevailing environment in which he was brought up and from which he could not make a complete break. Nobody can claim to be perfect in this real world: what one has to see is how best the man coped with the prevailing social situation and how sincerely and incessantly he strove to change it for the better.

I recently came across an article on Rammohun Roy by Professor Mohit Kumar Ray, which quotes the following tribute to the Raja from Rabindranath Tagore :

> "Rammohun, alas, were you alive today! Bengal badly needs you. We are a talkative lot; teach us to work. We are proud; teach us to sacrifice ourselves. We are fickle-minded; teach us to remain firm in life by dint of our character. We are blinded by the external blaze; teach us to use the light within in discriminating things and to pursue only that which brings permanent good to our country."

Tagore said this in 1884 against the backdrop of the situation then prevailing. More than a century later, I can think of no better tribute to the extraordinary man.