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## RAJA RAM MOHAN ROY'S STRUGGLE FOR THE UPLIFTMENT OF WOMEN

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### Abstract:

*The pioneers of all our progressive movements including that of the liberation for women may be divided into two groups. Both the groups recognized the reactionary and coercive character of our social institutions and customs. The enlightened liberal Indians who were known as the reformers recognized the principle of the liberty of the individual. They were permeated with western liberal culture and hence invoked such liberal principles as individual liberty, equality of all human beings irrespective of sex and other distinctions, respect for the personality of the individual and others when they attacked reactionary authoritarian hierarchic social institutions and launched social reform movements including that of the liberation of the Indian women. As regards the rationalist approach Ranade remarked that it was wrong to revive old institutions if they were unable to meet new social needs. "When we are asked to revive our institutions and customs, people seem to be very much at sea as to what it is they seem to revive".*

### INTRODUCTION

The Revivalists also not only appealed to scriptural authorities but also recognized the convincing method of appealing to reason. They invoked the ancient Vedic society to defend their programme of the liberation of the Indian women not because the Vedic society was ancient but because, they said, it was rational since it was based on the equality of man and woman. While arguing in favour of equal rights for women the social reformers appealed to logic, reason, history, the principle of individual freedom and the requirements of social progress.

### RAJARAM MOHAN ROY BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

The advent of Raja Ram Mohan Roy in the arena of Indian social life is a very significant event in the Indian History. He was the man who heralded a new age and welcomed the new culture to India. The Raja born in May, 1772, lived during the period of Indian History when the east India Company was expanding its own empire in India. When two of the greatest revolutions in history, viz., The french revolution which laid down the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity and the industrial revolution which created the economic background for the realization of these ideals and making modern England, took place. From 1818 he began to publish his pamphlets against the custom of sati, and also carried on ceaseless struggle against it through his journal "Sambandh kaumudi." These publications created a great stir among the orthodox section. The latter had started a rival association called "Dharma Sabha" with its organ "Samachar Chandrika" to combat the reformist school. When William Bentinck passed the law prohibiting sati in 1829, the orthodox Hindus did not like it, and they sent a petition to him in 1830. Raja Ram Mohan Roy representing the progressive section sent petition supporting the act.

The Dharma Sabha resolved to appeal to the authorities in England. Raja decided to represent the

other group and in 1832 after due consideration the appeal was rejected. It was during the same year that he helped by others holding progressive views, founded the Brahma Samaj, and association of those who believed in Brahma the spirit –God, the member of which met once in a week for worship. The founders were expressly against the idolatory. They were also against the caste distinctions. They being the representatives of the advanced guard of the society, naturally were the pioneers of the social reform movement and hence “The Brahma Samaj did what orthodox Hinduism was powerless to do: providing a half- way house where men could worship without idolatory. But for seventy years its influence was all pervading in every higher walk of Bengali life and it provided a succession of men for whom the only adequate adjective is” noble.”

Raja died at Bristol of brain fever in September 1833. We shall confine ourselves mainly to his contribution to the cause of downtrodden womanhood in India.

#### **Crusade against Sati (or) Suttee**

There were eight principal evil customs corroding the Indian society during his time. They were “Saha Marana” or Sati, female infanticide, Polygyny, infant marriage, purdah, absence of education among women, Devadasi and the joint family system. Raja's mind was perturbed first and most at the in human custom of suttee. This was because in his young days he had witnessed the “burning alive of his elder brother's widow. It made a powerful and painful impression on his sensitive mind and he decided to eradicate the evil from the society. He organized a committee to provide protection to those who while attempting to save widows from death were threatened with violence by social reaction are his activities ultimately led lord Bentinck to legislate for the prohibition of suttee. The Raja condemned suttee on rational and humanitarian grounds. He also argued that the practice contradicted the most authoritative Hindu scripture which is the fountain source of inspiration of the Hindus.

The practice of suttee was supported by the orthodox section on the grounds that:

1. It was laid down by ancient sages like Anlira, Vyasa, Ilarita and Others.
2. It was supported by the vedas on the ground that it will secure Moksha.
3. It was voluntary
4. A widow will be led astray if she continued to live after her husband's death.
5. Also on the ground “that, women are by nature, of inferior understanding. Without resolution, unworthy of trust, subject to passions and void of virtuous knowledge.

The Raja in the process of the refutation, established his own democratic, rational and humane conception of womanhood. With regard to first argument. Raja declared that Manu Samhita had envisaged ascetic life for a widow, and this view has to be followed because the vedas said that “Whatever Manu says is whole some.”

As to the second contention he says that whatever action is motivated by the idea of benefit should be condemned. He further declares that attainment of knowledge in this world, is to be preferred to the Moksha. The argument that suttee was a free voluntary act of the widow provoked strong indignation of the Raja. He called it a monstrous lie. In the course of the petition he says “your petitioners are fully aware from their own knowledge and from the authority of eye- witnesses, that cases have frequently occurred where women have been induced by the persuasions of their next heirs, interested in their destructions to burn themselves on the funeral pyres are their husbands: that others, who were induced by fear to retract a resolution rashly expressed in the first moment of grief, of burning with their deceased husbands, have been forced upon the pyre and then hound down with ropes, and pressed with great bamboos until consited with the flames, that some, after fleeing from the flames, have been carried back by their relations and burnt to death. All these instances, your petitioners humbly submit, are murders according to every shastra as well as to the common sense of all nations.”

The argument of a widow being led astray is according to the Raja not at all sound. A woman can carry on illicit activities even if her husband is alive. Moreover, after the death of her husband, she is under the control and surveillance of the family, so she can be watched over with greater vigilance. And Raja further declares that the method of suttee is not a humane or morel solution of the problem. He advanced a different solution, that of making knowledge, culture and a higher conception of life accessible to women, so they will not indulge in a morbid chase after fleeting and immoral enjoyments.

The Charge of inferior understanding has no tads because no opportunity has been still given to a woman for the full flowering of her latent talent and capacity. Regarding lack of resolution in woman, the Raja remarked, that this is contradicated by the fact that there are cases where widows voluntarily became

suttees. Regarding moral inferiority of woman more women are betrayed in life by men than the number of women who betray men. Polygyny is a concrete proof, of man being more prone to passion than women. Raja tried to meet the orthodox on their own arguments in the first instance and then relied on humanitarianism, rationalism, and liberalism in favour of his contention. Raja tried to bring out that the ideological sanction behind the social pattern and institutions was in the main supplied by misinterpretation of the sacred texts or by relying on contentions of some less familiar authorities who were not backed by such eminent authorities as Manu. Further, by lifting the discussion of the problem from a mere emotional and sentimental to a rational plane, Raja could easily refute the arguments of the exponents of age-worn pattern.

### WOMEN AND PROPERTY RIGHTS

Raja next took up the problem of the right of inheritance for women. He said that all ancient law givers had awarded the mother an equal share with her son, in property left by a person. Only the later commentators like the authors of Dayabhaga restricted the right of the mother. Raja realized that the economically helpless position of the woman, especially after her husband's death, led them to voluntary practice of suttee at least in some cases. For a widow three courses were open.

The first was to survive the husband and live a dependent miserable life of a widow, the second alternative was to live an unrighteous life for maintenance. The last line of action was to die on the funeral pyre. In the case of voluntary suttee, they chose the last. Thus the Raja for the first time linked the practice of suttee with the problem of property. He also for the first time stressed the need of making existing laws known to the common people.

As regards daughter's right the Raja observed that she is entitled to one-fourth the portion which a son has the right to inherit. But the modern law givers like those of the Dayabhaga school asserted that the daughter was entitled only to her marriage expenses. Callous and selfish brothers in order to save marriage expenses even sell their sisters. Raja suggested that the government should enact and enforce laws to remove these disabilities of women, but an end to such callous practices of society, and bring economic freedom and education to them.

### His Crusade against Kulinism

Before considering the Raja's attitude to Kulinism it is necessary to understand what kulinism means. As Sir Risley describes, Kulinism is a sort of hypergamous division. The kulin women were restricted in the choice of their husbands to the kulin group because it was the upper most section of the Brahmins of Bengal. In this condition the husbands are at a premium in upper groups and they become the object of vigorous competition. The poorer people have to resort to borrowing or any other means to see that their daughters marry. This objective situation at times led to a wholesale polygyny, which created considerable havoc in Bengal in those days the girl in Hindu society was required to be married before puberty and further she had to be married in her endogamous group, and as the husbands were less in supply than demand, great competition for them arose. Secondly, it led to the wholesale polygyny because the fresh bridegroom being not available, they were married as second or third wife to the already married males. "It led to various consequences.

- (i) Secret Infanticide. The husbands being so costly, girls were secretly put to death in childhood.
- (ii) Ruin of the family life, the husband was not required to maintain the wife. As soon as he married the next woman he might discard the former without incurring any liability. These discarded women either stayed with their parents or took resort to certain other illegal activities.
- (iii) Huge amount for dowry: tremendous sums had to be given as dowry to the bride grooms. The educated people did not stop this evil custom but on the contrary tried to increase the dowry. It has been recorded that "The usual rate demanded by one who had taken the degree of bachelor of laws in Calcutta University was credibly informed not many years ago Rs. 10,000 or nearly Rs. 700" "This is likely to lead to the practice of ill assorted marriages, e.g., when the father is unable to pay such exorbitant price, he would try to seek/find aged husband who would demand less money. At times the husband never saw the wife, and if he died the wife became a widow at a very early age.
- (iv) It led to the imposition of duties of married life without the privileges of that state to the female sex. Thus it can be seen that the evil was so crying that all social reformers in Bengal made its abolition as one of the basic items of their programme of social reform. The Raja very vehemently attacked kulinism. He said that shastras were also opposed to such practices. Manu considered a father a seller of the offspring if he took money.

### CONCLUSION

The Raja further observes that the shastras allowed second marriage only when certain conditions existed. Raja suggested that a law court should study the circumstances and only if satisfied should permit the second marriage. The Raja saved the widow from self-immolation on the funeral pyre of her husband. As such a custom was a barbarous one, it was stoutly opposed by a noble and daring soul like Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Who was popularly acclaimed as a foremost social reformer of our country?

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