



RAJA RAMMOHAN ROY AND BENGAL PRESS IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY: A CRITICAL STUDY**Md Yousuf**

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Abstract:

Superstition, religious narrow-mindedness, illiteracy and various anti-social practices made the social life of Bengal in the nineteenth century miserable. As a pioneer of the Renaissance, Rammohun Roy's emergence ushered in a new era in the social, educational and political spheres of Bengal. He started publishing various newspapers to make people committed against all these evils of society and educate them in modern western education. Through Newspaper and Journals, he continued his efforts to promote a community free of prejudice, change women's socio-economic status, eliminate social discrimination, and promote science education. Raja Rammohun Roy, the progenitor of modern India not only left his contribution as a social or religious reformer, but his contribution to various branches is also undeniable. One of the most important parts of literature he was associated with was journalism in English and Vernacular languages. He started a journal called *Sambad Kaumudi* which supposed to be the first Bengali journal, was exceedingly instrumental in bringing about the transformation of thought and life in the province. Journalism was one of the initiatives by which he could cover various socio-religious and political issues. This study mainly discusses Raja Rammohun Roy's views on the press and how the press can bring about reforms in the country's people's political, social, educational and economic life.

Keywords: Newspaper, Journalism, Press, Reform, Bengal, Missionaries.

Introduction: The origin and growth of the press in Bengal has a tremendous impact on the history of the Indian press. The first Newspaper of India printed in Calcutta; James Augustus Hickey published his Bengal Gazette (1780) which became the first Indian Newspaper. Besides Bengali and English, the first Urdu, Hindi and Persian Newspaper also printed from Bengal. But Raja Rammohun Roy thought about conducting journalism on a purely Indian line. Ram Mohan Roy was the originator of the nationalist press in India. Though others had started a few papers before him, his *SambadKaumudi* in Bengali published in 1821 and *MiratulAkhbar* in 1822 were the first publication with a distinct national and democratic progressive orientation. These newspapers mainly used to bear the agenda of social reform and a critical debate on religious and philosophical problems.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy started publishing the weekly *SambadKaumudi* in 1819. He edited this paper with the special assistance of BhawanicharanBanarjee. However, it must be admitted that in the 19th century Bengali newspaper played a very dominant role in the development of modern Bengali prose literature. (Sarkar, 1910) Apart from Fort William college students, no one was so fond of writing prose in Bengali. Therefore, he is also known as 'the father of modern Bengali prose'. (Thangamuthu, 2016) In his *SambadKaumudi* and other pamphlets, Ram Mohan Roy chose Bengali prose to attack contemporary Hindu society's superstition. He wanted to give a new life to the degraded form of Hinduism. In the first number of the journal, Rammohun Roy demanded free primary education for the whole country. Apart from these, he also raised the issue of women's right to education, freedom of the press and a developed form of medical treatment for the Indian. This magazine helped to launch a movement against the practice of *Sati*, the most burning issue of the time. According to the custom of *Sati*, a widow was imputed into the burning pyre of her dead husband. In 1811, Rammohun Roy saw his brother's widow burning alive in her husband's funeral pyre. (Siddarth, 2018) The European officials and the educated and civilized Indians like Rammohun Roy continued to fight against this barbaric practice. His stern action against the practice of *Sati* aroused intense resentment and dissatisfaction in the mind of the orthodox Brahmins. As a result, Bhawani Charan Banerjee left *SambadKaumudi* when it was four years old and started publishing another journal called *Samachar Chandrika* with his other staunch Hindu friends. Through *SambadKaumudi* and other periodicals, he chose Bengali prose to struggle against orthodox Hindu society's evil practices. "In Bengal", says R.W Fraser in his Literary History of India, Rammohun Roy used vernacular Bengali for his prose writings, starting in 1790, with his early essay against idolatry; but neither in his nor in his later writings on the 'Vedanta', in his translations of the 'Upanishads', and his subsequent polemics on the subject widow burning, did the language show any adaptability for becoming a medium to express his vision so clearly and gracefully, as he was enabled to express them in his Sanskrit and English writings". Still, he improved the Bengali prose of his day considerably and instilled a living spirit into it. He showed that the vernaculars were capable of being used for operational purposes, for before his time, they had been merely used for poetic effusions." (Bose & Moreno, 1920)

Reverend James Long says that Rammohun Roy published another English magazine called *Brahmanical Magazine*. It was first published in 1821. The main motive of publishing this magazine was to protect Hinduism from Christian missionaries' onslaught. In *Brahmanical* magazine, he wrote trying to explain Christian missionaries the *Vedanta* philosophy of Hinduism and concept of monotheism in *Vedanta*. His profound knowledge of Christianity and the scriptures overwhelmed many Christians, including



missionaries and scholars of a different subject. In Brahmanical magazine, he attacked the Christian concept of 'Trinity' and compared it to polytheism. He believed in 'Unitarianism' according to which God existed in one person. He condemned the idea of 'Trinity'—influenced by the Rammohan Roy's interpretation of monotheism, Rev. William Adams, a young Baptist missionary converted to Unitarians in 1821. (Tagore, 1966),(Collet & Sarkar, 1914).How Adam's mind changed and his conversion 'Trinitarianism' to 'Unitarianism' is known from his letter to his friend wherein he writes as follows:"It is now several months since I began to entertain some doubts representing the supreme Deity of Jesus Christ, suggested by a frequent discussion with Ram Mohon Roy, whom I was endeavoring to bring over to the belief of that's a doctrine, and in which I was joined by Mr. Yates, who also professed to experience difficulties on the subject. Since then, I have been diligently engaged in studying afresh the Scriptures with a view to this subject, humbly seeking divine guidance and illumination. I do not hesitate to confess that I cannot remove the weighty objections that present themselves against this doctrine. I do not mean to say that there are no difficulties in rejecting it, but the objections against it compared with the arguments for it, appear to me like a mountain compared with a molehill." (Parekh)

Ram Mohon Roy also formed a Unitarian committee with Rev. William Adam to dispel Christians' prejudices and propagate Christianity's truth. Adam's conversion to Unitarianism and Ram Mohon Roy's sarcastic criticism of hardline Christians angered many Christians, notably Dr Tytular, a Hindu college professor in 1823. In *Brahmanical Magazine*, Rammohon strongly opposed Christian missionaries' conspiracy to convert people of other religions to Christianity by showing them the lure of worldly wealth and possessions. In the long conflict between Ram Mohon Roy and Christian missionaries, many Americans and Christian missionaries extended their sympathies to Rammohon's social reform movement, such as T. Rose, Rev. Henry and the 'London Unitarian society'. The London Unitarian society even reprinted his *Percept of Jesus* and *Appealed to the Christian public*. Utilitarian like Jeremy Bentham, Stuart Mill and the great historian William Roscoe, socialist Robert Owen and William Borough all spoke against slavery. It supported Rammohon Roy's struggle against religious orthodoxy and narrow-mindedness. His religious belief mainly based on Upanishad's doctrine of self-knowledge, Buddhism's social message, strict monotheism of Islam, and Christianity's ethics. (Mazumder, 1993)

In 1822, Rammohon Roy started publishing India's first Persian Newspaper *Miratul Akhbar*. (Ahmed, 1965) Through this weekly, published every Friday, he connected with the people and expressed his own political and social views on improving their social conditions. Persian was still used as court language and communicated with the educated, intellectual and the top policymakers of the country. Rammohon highlighted the social and administrative evils of the time and explained various international events, such as the British Government's injustice in Ireland and the Turks' support in Greek liberation war and condemned the Baptist missionaries on multiple issues. All his publications apart from politics and theology were equally focused on educational values. He had also discussed scientific topics in *MiratulAkhbar*, such as the "Properties of the Magnet", "Behavior of Fishes" and "Description of Ballon" etc. Rammohon Roy wrote in the *MiratulAkhbar's* prospectus that the purpose of publishing this magazine was not to praise its organizer or well-wisher or slander anyone. In the second number, he discussed the British constitution. The Persian editorials of *MiratulAkhbar* were translated into English and published in James Buckingham's the 'Calcutta Journal'. Following the rules of licensing regulations of 1823, which were considered the precursor of the 'Vernacular press act of 1878', Indian newspapers stopped writing on political issues for seven long years. In protest of this law, Raja Ram Mohan Roy quit the publication of *MiratulAkhbar* and severed his ties with *SambadKaumudi*.

Licensing Regulations or *Press act* of 1823 was passed under John Adams' governor-generalship. The unlicensed press was a penal offence under this law. This law placed many Indian language newspapers or Newspapers edited by Indians. (Behra, 2012) Ram Mohan Roy and James Silk Buckingham were two influential personalities of this period which continued to work indefatigably for the freedom of the press. In their struggle for the freedom of the press, they had to face as much opposition as they had the support of the people of their own country. James Buckingham was a good friend and admirer of Raja ram Mohan Roy also fought for the freedom of the vernacular press. Buckingham's *Calcutta journal* published twice a week, the editor's job is to admonish governors of their faults and tell unpalatable truth. "When Raja Ram Mohan Roy published the *SambadKaumudi* in December 1821, Buckingham supported his initiative and wrote: "The pleasure which we regard the effusions of the native press does not arise from the intrinsic value of this production, but as an earnest of what it may produce when it has attained maturity." Predicting England's future achievement, he said that the introduction of the free press could bring moral and social reforms in the country. (Barns, 1940) Buckingham fearlessly edited his Newspaper till 1823, after which he was deported. In England, he started publishing another paper the *Oriental Herald*, by which he exposed real picture of the administration in India. While a British parliament member, he strongly opposed the bill to renew its charter. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime minister of independent India, called James Buckingham the first "defender of the freedom of the press in India" for his immense contribution to the cause of freedom of the Vernacular press in India. (Sharma, 2019) In protest against 'Adam's regulation' of 1823, Raja ram Mohan Roy stopped publishing his *MiratulAkhbar* on 4 April 1823.

During the governor-generalship of lord Bentick, the Government had a positive attitude towards the Indian media and the Indian language press. His first necessary steps were to abolish the practice of *Sati*. It is also known that lord Bentick invited raja Ram



Mohon Roy to discuss the possible response to the proposed legislation. His regular writing on this subject greatly impacted the enactment of the anti-Sati resolution. The law was finally passed despite much opposition from other orthodox Hindu society. The orthodox Hindus filed a petition on 14 January 1830 against the abolition of the Sati which was asserted to be a "sacred duty", any interference that constituted "an unjust and intolerant dictation in matters of conscience". Search for the truth developed in Rammohon Roy at a very young age, at the age of only 14, set him apart from his generation's other personalities. At the age of 15, he travelled to various places in India and Tibet to search for the truth, and during his trip, he found many real-life experiences which widened the scope of his thought and ideas. He endured much opposition from people close to him. *Samachar Chandrika* is a radical Hindu newspaper edited by Bhawani Charan Bandopadhyay which presented traditional staunch Hindutva doctrine against Rammohon Roy's anti-Sati movement. He answered his critics' questions with extremely humble language and logical argument with his ideals. He was a good conversationalist and patient enough to debate and compiled many books and tracks at his expenses. In his journalism, 'Brahmanical magazine,' published in English, the *SambadKaumudi* (Moon of Intelligence) in Bengali and *MiratulAkbar* in Persian, was the only essay that helped to propagate the truth based on reason and argument. According to him, the press's freedom was the freedom to follow the fact and develop a way of life proved by reason and experiment. He spoke very clearly about the freedom of the press and said that it was the duty of the rulers to preserve the freedom of the press in any situation and at any time. According to him:

"Every good ruler, who is convinced of the imperfection of human nature, and reverences the eternal governor of the world, must be conscious of the great liability to error in managing the affairs of the vast empire; and, therefore, he will be anxious to afford every individual the readiest means of belonging to his notice whatever may require his interference. To secure this important object, the unrestricted liberty of publication effectual means can be employed. And should it ever be abused, the established law of the land is very properly armed with sufficient powers to punish those who may be found guilty of misinterpreting the conduct or character of the Government, which are effectually guarded by the same laws to which individual must look for the protection of their reputation and good name." (Natarajan, 1955) Two truths of Ram Mohon's life stood in the way of his life. At first, he had to counter the people who pushed his family against him; then, he had to endure many outside attacks. The Bengali weekly was temporarily closed down when its editor, Bhawani Charan Banarjee, left to protest against Ram Mohan Roy's struggle against Sati system's practice.

Conclusion: In a democratic country like India, the press's importance is immense because it is considered the fourth pillar of democracy. Raja Ram Mohan started publishing Newspaper in the early 19th century with a distinct social and democratic outlook. He opposed all forms of social inequality by publishing various journals and magazines and building an Egalitarian society. On the one hand, as Roy continued to fight against multiple forms of evil and superstition in the community, on the other hand, Rammohon Roy wrote a various article in newspapers and journals for the promotion and dissemination of modern western education. He regularly wrote against racism and for the promotion of women's education. He also opposed various anti-social activities of the Government through the publication of *Miratul-Akbar* and highlighted various national and international events in front of the people. During Ram Mohon's time, newspapers and journals helped promote and disseminate Bengali Prose literature. In a word, through Newspaper and he has highlighted various social, political and contemporary issues and expressed his view on how to overcome it. Like James Silk Buckingham, he realized the importance of a free press in building a democratic, modern and scientific society. Therefore, from the above discussion, anyone can recognize the importance of newspapers and press in political, economic and social fields.

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