

Raja Ram Mohan Roy's Contribution to Women Education

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Abstract

Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) was a visionary reformer whose contributions to women's education and social reform changed the course of Indian history who Celebrated as the Father of Modern India. In the backdrop of imperial oppression and hardened patriarchy, Roy fought for the eradication of regressive practices like sati and child marriages as well as for the right to widow remarriage and women's property rights. He was a revolutionary by trying to promote women's education, stressing the role of modern secular education in increasing women education so that it can empower them and help in the development of society. Roy's pragmatic agreements with the British administration and his founding of the Brahmo Samaj set up platforms for progressive legislation and social discourse. He has left an important reference for the contemporary policies that aim to remove the gender discrepancies in education and employment, proving that his idea has importance till date in making an egalitarian society. An integration of intellectual advocacy with grassroots mobilization had empowered Raja Ram Mohan Roy, an icon of his time, to become a pioneer and revolutionise Indian society and help in the journey of generations of reformers.

Keywords: Raja Ram Mohan Roy, women's education, social reform, Indian Renaissance, gender equality, Brahmo Samaj

1. Introduction

The towering figure in the annals of Indian history remembered as a visionary reformer, social activist and an ardent proponent of modern education is (1772–1833) Raja Ram Mohan Roy. A man whose often moniker is referred to as 'the Father of Modern India' Conceived social, religious and educational reforms during the turbulent and messy 19th century, India was then in the middle of its own dark colonial and old traditions. His intellectual curiosity combined with introduction to various philosophies including that of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity helped him shape the progressive ideology on which today a modern, enlightened India is founded (Majumdar, 1953). Roy lived in a time when the social structure had been riddled with inequality and injustice, most particularly for the women who bore the brunt of oppressive customs. During this period the social scene was dominated by evils such as limited education, child marriage, sati (widow immolation), harsh restrictions on women's property and legal rights (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2008). Roy was deeply dissatisfied with the systemic subordination of women to the domestic sphere and prevented from such self development. In that world of pervasive patriarchy, Raja Ram Mohan Roy formulated and articulated his opposition to those norms. He realised that they were only doing women a disservice if they did not use education to empower them and that that was how society really benefited. The education of women achieved the status of a cornerstone of his more

comprehensive reformist ethos coloured by a firm belief in the enlightenment and rationality as the instruments of social change. Roy's brand of reform was revolutionary as well as calculated; the combination of traditional Indian values and modern thought. He fought to eradicate the dogmas and deformed practices which enchained Indian society by preaching a future-looking vision in the line of equality and justice and human dignity. Central to his vision were his firm belief in modern education, he held it to be the key to ending the vicious cycle of ignorance and oppression. His approach, however, wasn't confined to men, rather he argued that a society wouldn't progress unless at least half of its population was educated and marginalized. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a trail blazer whose ideas had a profound impact, not only his time, but also subsequent generations of reformers and policy makers who followed in his footsteps — this recognition of the transformative power of women's education.

2. Advocacy for Women's Rights

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was distressed to no end over the general suppression of women in 19th century India and dedicated his life to changing that. His campaign against sati -- the barbaric practice of widow immolation -- led him to condemn it as human and irrational, as diametrically opposed to the true spirit of religion. Roy's narrow study of ancient Hindu texts allowed him to argue that sati was neither in keeping with scriptures nor in consonance with moral principles. His relentless work for evoking legislation led to the enactment of the Sati Regulation Act of 1829 which outlawed the practice under British rule during a fight for the rights of women (Chakravarti, 1935; Ball, 1933).

Roy made his voice too equally loud against the prevalence of child marriage, which he claimed that it robbed girls of health, autonomy and potential. The devastating consequences have included maternal mortality and diminished access to education, he stressed, and called for urgently needed reforms that put the interest of women and children first. Child Marriage was never something, he repeated that it was detrimental to individual families, it was detrimental to the entire society (Rather, 2022; Sarkar & Sarkar, 2008). Besides challenging harmful customs, Raja Ram Mohan Roy advocated widow remarriage and women's property rights which, he felt, were important first steps toward gender equality. Roy fought for widows' right to remarry and live a life that was more than pollution bereft. It was a daring thought that the conservative elements objected to dearly. Just as he fought for reforms in inheritance laws to allow women to acquire rightful property, to thereby secure their economic empowerment (Carroll, 1983; Majumdar, 1983). The British administration crucially prevailed upon Roy to concretize his reformist ideas from an intellectual plane into legislative frameworks. His pragmatic approach to advocacy included his ability to engage with colonial authorities and his use of legerdemain to lead them to Social Reform through his influence. He combined intellect arguments with grassroots mobilization, set a ground for the progressive legislation and inspire future reformers to struggle for gender justice (Nazir, 2011; Upadhyaya, 1990).

Similar to Raja Ram Mohan Roy, education and public discourse were shown to be very important in challenging existing societal mindsets. He was master in the art of essay, article, and speech, with powerful critiques of patriarchal norms and a visionary ideal of an egalitarian society. At its core, his endeavor to eliminate the colonial legacy of systemic subjugation of women was in line with his overall philosophy of human dignity and equality, marking him as a pioneer in the global feminist movement (Ganesh et al., 2022; Mitra, 2003). Raja Ram Mohan Roy moved from

fighting the oppressive customs to laying a solid foundation of modern feminism with his tireless advocacy for women's rights. To this day, his contributions stand as a time of reform and education able to reconstitute the world, and put in motion efforts for gender equality in modern society.

3. Efforts to Promote Women's Education

He was a proponent of modern education and thought that education was the key to the transformation of society. In a society that was rigid and conservative, where women were not even allowed to learn, Roy gave an importance to education of women which was unthinkable. He realized that women should be empowered by education in order to bring positive change and equality in society. This passion could be seen clearly in his many initiatives, partnerships, and writings that he had published for women to be granted the same opportunities for learning as men (Das, 1958; Sarkar & Sarkar, 2008). His contribution to the field of education can be first seen in the founding of Hindu College in 1817, a premier learning institution in India that offered Western-style education system. In the beginning, Roy's efforts concentrated on male education but he had a wider vision of offering these opportunities to women and eradicating the age long trend of gender disparities in education (Majumdar, 1983). He devoted much effort to persuading people that women should be educated not only to become better individuals but also to improve morality and intelligence of the society (Upadhyaya, 1990). Understanding the weaknesses of the conventional religious teaching, Roy argued for an updated syllabus that comprise of science, mathematics and literature among others. He considered these disciplines as necessary in empowering women with the necessary skills and information that can enable them to engage in public and political domains. He also stated that education of women is important as educated women can help in developing the nation, can raise aware citizens and can protest against any social injustice (Ganesh et al., 2022; Nazir, 2011).

Roy's most significant contribution to education for women was his support for the work of Christian missionaries and educators, with whom he collaborated to promote a liberal, non-sectarian education. With each other, they created schools for girls, this somewhat going against the grain of the principles of the society at the time that considered education as something that is not needed or even harmful for women. This is evident in the partnerships Roy had with educators like David Hare and Alexander Duff, wherein Roy used available resources with an aim to reform (Chakravarti, 1935; Mitra, 2003). Besides institution building, Raja Ram Mohan Roy allowed his pen to do the work by promoting women education. His essays and articles in newspapers and journals of that time presented a persuasive and cogent position on the issue of female literacy. Roy opposed the stereotype which stated that the most suitable place for a woman was in the kitchen and that education was a privilege rather than a necessity for women to work and gain respect in society (Kabeer, 2008; Saryal, 2014).

His role proved crucial in preparing the ground for other movements which called for female literacy in India. He encourage many reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Jyotirao Phule to work for the education of women. The schools and educational policies which came into existence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were a clear implication of Roy's vision, thus underlining the fact that his influence on the Indian education system remained felt for a long time (Majumdar, 1953; Kumar, 2022). The priority that Roy gave to secular and modern education for women also reflected his general ideology of social reform. For him, education was not only liberation but liberation from oppression and social injustice. In this regard,

his advocacy for women education was a point in a clear stratagem of building a society that was free from vices of irrationality, inequality and injustice (Sharma, 2005). It is important to note that the struggle for women education was a challenging task for Raja Ram Mohan Roy. He met a lot of opposition from his conservative counterparts who felt that his ideas were an attack on the norms and ethos of the society. However, the passion he had for the cause and his leadership skills, and his eloquence through reason and scholarship saw him through to successfully convincing the Indian society. His contributions remain relevant to the struggles for equity in education and make a powerful statement about the role of information in the process of change. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's efforts towards education of women is more than just vision, he had a clear understanding of the relation between education, women's liberation and development of a society. He provided the tentative measures for the future educational changes and has set up the main policies of gender balance and inclusion which is still practised by educational systems of India.

4. Role in Social Reforms

Raja Ram Mohan Roy's reform activities did not just limit to the education of women; he wanted social revolution where people would be equal, just and rational. Being one of the major leaders of the Indian renaissance, he strove to break the barriers of the social order that upheld the oppression, ignorance, and backwardness of the society. It was thus a social order in which reason, respect for human personality, and justice would replace hierarchy and prejudice (Majumdar, 1983; Sharma, 2005). One of the main strands of his activities was the foundation of the Brahmo Samaj in 1828, a society which sought to cleanse Hinduism of its superstitions and social vices. The Brahmo Samaj served as a social organization and through which progressive values of gender equality, caste eradication and religious acceptance were championed. Through the organization that Roy supported, he encouraged people to adopt right values and thinking such as shunning ignorance, in the form of idol worship, social inequalities through caste system and promiscuity through polygamy. These principles were rather consistent with his advocacy for woman's rights, because he believed that women's freedom is the key to the moral and intellectual rebirth of society (Ganesh et al., 2022; Chakravarti, 1935).

Working with British officials was one more essential element of Roy's reformist approach to governance. Being aware of the fact that legislation can be a powerful instrument of social change, he collaborated with colonial officials in the formulation of liberal laws. His most significant accomplishment in this respect was his effort in the banning of the practice of sati through the Sati Regulation Act of 1829 which was a victory for the fight against oppression of women (Ball, 1933). Even though the regulation banned the practice of burning of widows, Roy knew that the change did not end at practicing the act. Therefore, he employed his work, words and associations to foster a spirit of reason and compassion that was to underpin the new laws (Carroll 1983). He was also against the custom of Sati, and for women's right to property and inheritance and widow remarriage. These endeavors bore fruit with the legal enactment of the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856 which was in sync with Roy's ideology towards gender justice (Rather, 2022). Phule's pragmatic approach to advocacy through both reason and pressure paved the way for other reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Jyotirao Phule to keep up the fight for social justice (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2008).

Not only legislative changes but Raja Ram Mohan Roy also understood that the society can be changed through enlightenment. He spoke and wrote a lot on matters of social change

during his time. His articles in the news papers and journals of his time were full of reasons for equality and justice. In his writings, Roy underlined the ethical and pragmatic values of women's emancipation and stressed that education was the women's right and even the way to make an independent and rational decision (Nazir, 2011).

Roy's interest in change was not only limited to religious issues but also extended to dislike of casteism. He criticized the caste system that was very much divided and said that it does not allow people to move up the social ladder. Through the Brahmo Samaj and his writings, he supported eradication of caste and encouraged meritocracy stating that one can progress only by talent and work and not by birth (Kabeer, 2008). It is noteworthy, however, that Roy was a reformist even in his own time, and his ideas of gender equality, social justice, and religious tolerance were quite modern. The fact that Raja Ram Mohan Roy propounded education, legal rights and change in the societal perception of women at the same time paved way for the modern India and inspired many reform movements of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Some of the aspects that made him outstanding include: his understanding of the colonial politics and his fight for the indigenous people's rights which shows that he was an intellectual leader (Upadhyaya, 1990; Mitra, 2003).

Raja Ram Mohan Roy's innovations in social change were radical, both in the short and long term. Understanding the structural biasness and fighting for humanistic values he paved way for a new India. For this reason, his vision of a society that is governed by reason, justice, and equality still remains relevant to the present day reformers and policy makers.

5. Impact of His Efforts

Raja Ram Mohan Roy in his course of action made a revolutionary change in the perception of the society towards education and rights of women. His reformist spirit not only provided the foundation for the emancipation of women in mind and spirit but also stirred up succeeding generations to take up his cause. Through her actions, Roy inspired the change that would lead to many reforms in the contemporary Indian society through the elimination of oppressive measures and the support for positive legislation.

Transformation of Societal Attitudes

Raja Ram Mohan Roy made all efforts towards the emancipation of women with regard to education and brought about change in the thinking of the society. At that time women were expected to stay at home and handle household chores with no chance of learning or interacting with anyone. Thus focusing on the importance of education and its contribution to women emancipation, Roy was able to show how it affects the overall society progress. His measures broke some of the most profound stereotyping which hindered the advancement of women, and persuaded families to value education for their daughters' future (Majumdar, 1983).

The Social Media and Its Impact on Education Policies

Raja Ram Mohan Roy laid down the seeds for women's education and after his death many schools and institutions were founded with the aim of imparting education to women. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Jyotirao Phule, who continued his work, opened institutions that extended the fight for women education. This momentum shifted the education system to enrol more girls' schools in the last quarter of the 19th and early 20th century paving a way for women education (Kumar, 2022).

Empowerment Through Education

Roy was aware of education as a tool for empowering women and this way, women were given an active role in the social and political affairs. Women with education and knowledge started to work, involve in social activities, and even rule. This change was particularly visible in the active participation of women in the struggle for India's independence and their subsequent inclusion into the political and social structures (Ganesh et al., 2022).

Continuity and Current Application

We can see the heritage of Raja Ram Mohan Roy not only in history, but also in the present and future endeavors for equality of women and men in education and in other spheres of life. His work laid down the foundation for many movements that followed, thus encouraging people and organizations to embrace gender equality and fight for women's rights.

It was Raja Ram Mohan Roy's work that not only changed the perception of women education during his lifetime but also paved way for most systematic change that is still taking shape in India. His dream of an enlightened society with equal opportunities and progression of women continue to inspire policy makers, educators and revolutionists. The impact of his/her work can be seen in the progress that has been made in India in terms of gender equality; education truly is the key to change.

6. Evaluation of His Contributions to Education and Reform

It is, therefore, not a stretch to say that Raja Ram Mohan Roy provided the foundation for the Indian Renaissance the renaissance that opened the door to modern India. Because of his support for women education he was able to break system of gender inequality that placed women as second class citizens in the society. When women's education was still a completely new and quite controversial concept, Roy dreamed of a society in which men and women would be equal in their pursuit of knowledge and moral growth of the nation. By encouraging secular and modern education he wanted to emancipate women but also to break the chain of illiteracy and oppression that prevented the development of society (Sharma, 2005; Majumdar, 1983). His attempt to introduce new subjects like science, mathematics and literature into the curriculum rather than confining education to religious teachings reveal his progressive vision and appreciation of the value of knowledge (Das, 1958). Roy's reformist streak was not limited to education only, he was an advocator of progressive legislation, social justice, and human rights. He was able to marry the cerebral with the physical, to make sure that his ideas became reality; for example, he campaigned against the practice of sati and helped to pass the Sati Regulation Act of 1829, and later, the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856. All these legal achievements reflected the idea of Roy on the role of education and legal change for social change (Chakravarti, 1935; Carroll, 1983). Also, his

establishment of the Brahmo Samaj gave an opportunity for the continued campaigning for gender balance, religion tolerance and against caste system. These efforts are archetypal of Roy's social justice approach to change where education was perceived as a tool and a goal in the advancement of justice and equity (Ganesh et al., 2022).

In the present scenario, the importance of Raja Ram Mohan Roy's agenda is as real as it could be. Despite the gains made in education and women rights, India still has some of the worst gender gaps in literacy, labor force participation, and tertiary education enrollment. Thus, there are still many challenges for female education, especially in the rural and economically backward regions. Thus, Roy's ideas about universal education and its role in the economic emancipation and dignified life of women are still adhered to by politicians and social reformers (Nazir, 2011; Kumar, 2022). His dream of an equal society where education becomes a tool for liberation for the self and the community finds echo in the current social initiatives like the Right to Education Act and the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao campaign for the education of the girl child. The advocacy of Roy for women education was not a reaction to the conditions of his time, but a vision of the future where a society based on reason, equality and human density would be formed. His vision to see the effects of education on the economy, politics and culture in the future is proof of the significance of his work. By over coming the barriers posed by the society and presenting a clear picture of the future, he showed that education could be used to bring change (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2008; Upadhyaya, 1990). Furthermore, his endeavour to make secular, modern education as a integrating force in a pluralistic society paved way for India's post independence education policies and thus ensuring that his vision for the future of India will remain relevant in the country's path of development.

7. Conclusion

Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the father of women's education and social reform in India must be celebrated for his legacies. Through speaking out against inequality and fighting for change, Roy laid the groundwork for fighting for women's rights and social justice. His contributions to exposing secular, inclusive education show that knowledge has the power to transform the lives of people and society. The-total ban on Sati, encouraging widow remarriage and campaigning for women education can be seen as part of his vision for the larger reform of society on rational and justice based society. Despite the fact that the topic is still relevant in the modern world, India still faces certain issues like gender gap in literacy and employment. Roy's absolute dedication to equality and justice remains a model for all the subsequent attempts at change, which are still being made to this day. The integration of education with other social changes also shows his progressive thinking, which makes him one of the most progressive leaders of modern India. The influence of Raja Ram Mohan Roy prevails even today to prove that leadership can bring about change in the society and thus it is important to commemorate his works as a part of the Indian history and culture.

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