

RAM MOHUN ROY AND THE BRAHMO SAMAJ

As the nineteenth century dawned, Western economic and religious ideals began to impact India as the British spread throughout the country. The establishment of the East Indian Trading Company by the British, as well as the spread of Christian missionaries throughout India, provided many Hindus contact with European education, religion and economics (Leneman 22). Although Christian missionaries were adamant in pushing the Christian religion upon those in India, there were many Hindus that opposed such attempts at conversion. They desired to remain loyal to their Hindu faith despite verbal persecution by the British (Leneman 22) [Many did not agree with the Western idea of an all encompassing law, as *dharma* and the belief in *karma* are the only real laws in traditional Hinduism. See Leneman (1980)]. Many individuals began to speak of reshaping their Hindu beliefs and political ideals to create greater economic advantage as well as social and religious comfort (Bhatt 24, Leneman 22). Among these individuals was Ram Mohun Roy, who was born a Rarhi Brahmin from Bengal (Killingley 5) [Many different spellings of the name Ram Mohun Roy occur due to translation differences. See Killingley (1993)]. Roy believed that India could develop only through learning from the Europeans, and consequently he looked to reform Hinduism (Kopf 313). The Brahmo Samaj is an Indian religious movement started by Roy in Calcutta in 1828 based on this idea of reformation that he saw as being necessary (Bhatt 24, O'Malley 224).

Ram Mohun Roy was born a Rarhi Brahmin in 1774 in Bengali in a Vaisnava family. Many of his ancestors held positions of high esteem among the Mughal rulers in Bengal (Killingley 5) [See Killingley (1993) for more on the debate as to the year Roy was born]. Little is known about Roy's early life except that he was educated in a number of languages, both Indian and European, and opposed aspects of the Hindu faith such as Idolatry (Leneman 22) [Due to his opposition to idolatry and other Hindu practices, Roy was not allowed into his own house for four years from age sixteen to twenty. See Leneman (1980)]. He traveled through much of the area near Calcutta and

Bengal where he first came into contact with the British through the East Indian Trading Company (Killingley 6). Roy was considered a political liberal, and opposed the East Indian Trading Company economic ideals as he favored free trade (Killingley 8). Although he opposed the East Indian Trading Company, Roy was receptive to Western ideas and incorporated them into his beliefs (Killingley 57). He became outspoken in the political world and was desirous to more fully empower the upper class of India by pushing European education and striving to get the East Indian Trading Company to grant privileges to Indians (Bhatt 24).

Although Roy turned primarily to the Hindu Vedic scriptures for his belief, he incorporated much of Christian and Islamic thought. He said that he would borrow books and ideas from other religions to “purify Hinduism” (Killingley 59). His primary belief was in the worship of the God of Nature who was the only true God and creator of the universe. He formed a small group in Calcutta based on this belief called the Atmiya Sabha, who in 1828 changed their name to the Brahma Samaj (Killingley 10, O’Malley 224) [Brahma Samaj has been translated as “House of God,” “society of the believer,” and “society of the worshippers of the One True God.” See O’Malley (1935), Bhatt (1968) and Leneman (1980)]. The Brahma Samaj stated their objective as: “The worship and adoration of the eternal unsearchable, and immutable Being who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe” (O’Malley 224). They believed that God was a father figure and that all humans were in fact brother and sister (O’Malley 224). It was open to any who wished to join, no matter their caste, skin color, or previous religious beliefs, and attempted to strengthen the relationship between people of all religions (Bhatt 24, Leneman 23).

Although the beliefs of Roy and the Brahma Samaj were predominantly based on the Hindu religion, they opposed many traditional Hindu beliefs and practices such as reincarnation, animal sacrifice, and *sati* [The practice of *sati* involves a widow throwing herself on the cremation fire of her husband, allowing herself to be consumed by the flames, and thus freeing her husband from his sins and moving on

into eternity together]. The Brahma Samaj believed that salvation was obtained through worship of God and that a person could have direct communion with God (O'Malley 225). In a type of afterlife, an individual's soul would be punished or rewarded for their dealings in this life, although the traditional Hindu view regarding the transmigration of souls was not incorporated into the belief (Killingley 46-47, O'Malley 225). In his first writing, *Tuhfat al-Muwahhidin*, Roy speaks about that afterlife of the soul and the punishments and rewards received (Killingley 46-47) [For more on the teachings of the *Tuhfat al-Muwahhidin*, see Killingley (1993)]. Roy also became extremely vocal in his opposition to the practice of *sati*, and his persistence led to the practice becoming illegal in 1829 (Leneman 23). Roy was also very concerned with the education and increased economic opportunities granted to women and this carried through to the beliefs of the Brahma Samaj (Kopf 314, O'Malley 226).

Among the traditional Hindu practices that were most opposed by Roy and the Brahma Samaj, was that of polytheism and the practice of idol worship (O'Malley 224). Roy argued that idol practice was extremely inappropriate because it gave God a visible form. As Roy and the Brahma Samaj believed in the spiritual, yet unseen existence of God, this contradicted their belief (Killingley 74). Roy used the Upanisads, which he had previously translated into English, to validate his belief and opposition to idolatry (Killingley 74). He taught that one should turn to contemplation of the Eternal Being as the proper way of worship. This would lead to actions of charity, morality and virtue leading to salvation (O'Malley 224).

Upon the death of Ram Mohun Roy in 1833, the Brahma Samaj which had flourished in Bengal began to decline. In 1843, Devendranath Tagore, who previously had adopted the beliefs of Roy, added further aspects of Orthodox Hinduism and Christianity to the Brahma Samaj which led to resurgence in the movement (Leneman 23). A number of years later Keshab

Chunder Sen joined the movement and aided Tagore in this resurgence. Sen was influenced by Christianity a great deal in his younger years and brought many of his Christian beliefs with him when he joined the movement. In 1867, Tagore felt that Sen had become radical and extreme in his Christian influences and a split in the Brahmo Samaj occurred (Leneman 23). Tagore held on to the more traditional aspects of Hinduism and started the Adi Brahmo Samaj, while Sen took his Christian influences and started the Brahmo Samaj of India (Bhatt 24-25, Leneman 23). The younger generation, who had grown up with heavy Western influence followed Sen, while others in the movement who could not give up the majority of traditional Hindu beliefs remained with Tagore (Leneman 23). Under Sen, the Brahmo Samaj of India turned to radical social reform, considered Christ an ideal Hindu Yogi, and held Sen in a type of deity status (Bhatt 25). Sen eventually adopted a greater belief in Christ and this led to a split in the Brahmo Samaj of India. This split led to the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, started by those who opposed Sen and the adoption of a belief in Christ as more than a *yogi*. Sen, and his followers founded the Church of the New Dispensation (Leneman 24).

Today, the Brahmo Samaj and the various branches that occurred through these divisions are considered to be more of a religious movement than a sect or group (O'Malley 225). It has mostly been confined to Bengal, and has never obtained full status throughout India (Bhatt 26). The political beliefs voiced by members of the Brahmo Samaj as well as the changes to the traditional Hindu religion have led many to believe that Brahmo Samaj is a socio-political movement that acted as a force in Indian nationalism (Bhatt 24, Leneman 30). Ram Mohun Roy and the Brahmo Samaj defended aspects of Hinduism while reforming other aspects that they felt would benefit India (Leneman 30). Although not popular throughout India today, the Brahmo

Samaj and the work of Ram Mohun Roy were instrumental in Hindu Renaissance and reform in Bengal during the nineteenth century (Kopf 313).

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

Bhatt, Gauri Shankar (1968) *Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and the Church-Sect Typology*. Review of Religious Research, Fall 68 Volume 10.

Ghose, Jendra Chunder (eds.) (1982) *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications.

Killingley, Dermont (1993) *Rammohun Roy in Hindu and Christian Tradition*. Newcastle: Grevatt and Gravatt.

Kopf, David (1979) *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Leneman, Leah (1980) "The Hindu Renaissance of the Late 19th Century." *History Today*, May 1980 Volume 30.

O'Malley, L.S.S. (1935) *Popular Hinduism: The Religion of the Masses*. Cambridge University Press.

Related Topics for Further Investigation

Arya Samaj
Adi Brahmo Samaj
Brahmo Samaj of India
Church of the New Dispensation
Dev-Samaj
Debendranath Tagore
Dayanand Saraswat
Gayatri
Hindu Renaissance
Indian Nationalism
Keshub Chunder Sen
Orthodox Hinduism
Sadharan Brahmo Samaj
Vedanta

Notable Websites

<http://www.chanda.freeseerve.co.uk/brahmoframe.htm>

<http://www.thebrahmosamaj.org/>

<http://www.wmcarey.edu/carey/philnum/roy.htm>

<http://www.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/rajarammohunroy.html>

<http://dewi.com/~uuf/Sermons/012305.html>

<http://nichirenscoffehouse.net/gen/rajah1.htm>

<http://voiceofdharma.org/books/hhce/Ch8.htm>

<http://ram-mohan-roy.biography.ms/>

Article written by Brett Steed (March 2006), who is solely responsible for its content.