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## Rammohun Roy and the Break with the Past

ON THE BICENTENARY OF his birth, the title of “Father of Modern India” bestowed on Rammohun by many might appear utterly sacrosanct; an exploration of the assumptions lying behind such a statement still seems not unrewarding. If this ascription of parentage is to mean anything more than a rather pompous and woolly way of showing respect, the implication surely is that something like a decisive breakthrough towards modernity took place in Rammohun’s times and in large part through his thought and activities. I propose to investigate, in the first place, the precise extent and nature of this “break with the past”. Second, the unanimity with which a very wide and varied spectrum of our intelligentsia – ranging from avowed admirers of British rule through liberal nationalists to convinced Marxists – has sought a kind of father figure in Rammohun and a sense of identification with the “renaissance” inaugurated by him remains a historical fact of considerable importance. Subsequently I will try to analyse some of the implications of this well-established historiographical tradition based on the concept of a break in a progressive direction in Bengal’s development at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

For the sake of clarity it would be convenient to begin by stating in a very schematic and somewhat provocative manner the propositions I intend to try and establish.

1. Rammohun’s writings and activities do signify a kind of a break with the traditions inherited by his generation.

2. This break, however, was of a limited and deeply contradictory kind. It was achieved mainly on the intellectual plane and not at the level of basic social transformation; and the “renaissance” culture which Rammohun inaugurated inevitably remained confined within a Hindu-elitist and colonial (one might almost add comprador) framework.
3. What may be loosely described as the negative aspects of the break became increasingly prominent as the nineteenth century advanced. The Bengal Renaissance from one point of view may be presented not as a “torch-race”, as Nirad C. Chaudhuri once described it, but as a story of retreat and decline. And perhaps a certain process of degeneration can be traced even in some of Rammohun’s later writings.
4. The limitations and contradictions of Rammohun can be traced back ultimately to the basic nature of the British impact on Indian society. The conceptual framework required for the proper analysis of this impact is not the tradition-modernisation dichotomy so much in vogue today in Western historical circles, but the study of colonialism as a distinct historical stage.<sup>1</sup>
5. With few exceptions, history-writing on Rammohun and on the entire Bengal Renaissance has remained prisoner to a kind of “false consciousness” bred by colonialism which needs to be analysed and overcome in the interests of both historical truth and contemporary progress.

## I

It is generally agreed that Rammohun’s true originality and greatness lay in his attempt to synthesise Hindu,<sup>2</sup> Islamic, and Western cultural traditions; the precise character of this “synthesis”, however,

<sup>1</sup> For a brilliant analysis of this important theoretical problem, see Bipan Chandra, “Colonialism and Modernization”, Presidential Address, Modern India Section of the Indian History Congress, Jabalpur Session, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> Thus Brajendranath Seal and Susobhan Chandra Sarkar are in perfect agreement on this point, despite their otherwise quite different attitudes – Seal,

has often been obscured by a flood of laudatory rhetoric. Synthesis has often meant either eclectic and indiscriminate combination, or a kind of mutual toleration of orthodoxies. H.H. Wilson in 1840 quoted the Brahman compilers of a code of Hindu laws under Warren Hastings as affirming “the equal merit of every form of religious worship; . . . God appointed to every tribe its own faith, and to every sect its own religion, that man might glorify him in diverse modes . . .”<sup>3</sup> Ramakrishna Paramahansa was saying very similar things a hundred years later, and both Mughal tolerance and early British non-interference were grounded upon a politic acceptance of the need for a coexistence of orthodoxies. Such attitudes seem very attractive when compared to early-modern European religious wars, but they also have certain fairly obvious conservative implications.<sup>4</sup> It needs to be emphasised that “synthesis” with Rammohun, at least in the bulk of his writings, meant something very different; it implied discrimination and systematic choice, directed by the two standards of “reason” and “social comfort” which recur so often in his works. This is the true Baconian note struck, for instance, in the famous letter to Lord Amherst in 1823. Here, as elsewhere, panegyrist and debunkers alike have tended to miss the real point. The entire debate on the foundation of the Hindu College seems more than a little irrelevant as the “conservatives” were also quite intensely interested in learning the language of the rulers on purely pragmatic grounds, and there is surely nothing “progressive” in English education per se. What remains remarkable is Rammohun’s stress on “Mathematics, Natural

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*Rammohun the Universal Man* (Calcutta, n.d.), pp. 2–3; Sarkar, *On the Bengal Renaissance* (Calcutta, 1979), pp. 14–15.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in K.K. Datta, *Survey of India’s Social Life and Economic Condition in the 18th Century* (Calcutta, 1961), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Barun De has dealt with this ossifying role of both Mughal and early-British “toleration” in two very stimulating articles—“A Preliminary Note on the Writing of the History of Modern India” in *Quarterly Review of Historical Studies*, vol. III, no. 1, 2 (Calcutta, 1963–4); and “Some Implications of Political Tendencies and Social Factors in (Early) Eighteenth Century India”, in *Studies in the Social History of India (Modern)*, ed. O.P. Bhatnagar (Allahabad, 1964).

Philosophy, Chemistry, Anatomy and other useful Sciences”,<sup>5</sup> a bias totally and significantly lost in the ultimate Macaulay-style literary education introduced in 1835 mainly under the pressure of financial needs!<sup>6</sup>

It would be quite unhistorical, however, to attribute Rammohun’s rationalism entirely to a knowledge of progressive Western culture. His earliest extant work, *Tuhfat-ul Muwabbhidin* (c. 1803–4), was written at a time when, on Digby’s testimony, Rammohun’s command over English was still imperfect;<sup>7</sup> yet this “Gift to Deists” was marked by a radicalism trenchant enough to embarrass many later admirers.<sup>8</sup> Here the criteria of reason and social comfort are used with devastating effect to establish the startling proposition that “falsehood is common to all religions without distinction.”<sup>9</sup> Only three basic

<sup>5</sup> “Letter to Lord Amherst, 11 December 1823”, *English Works of Rammohun Roy* (henceforth *EW*), vol. IV (Calcutta, 1947), pp. 105–8.

<sup>6</sup> “I am sure you will do all you can to educate the natives for office and to encourage them by the possession of it . . . We cannot govern India financially without this change of system.” Ellenborough, President of the Board of Control, to Bentinck, 23 September 1830, quoted in A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed, *Social Ideas and Social Change in Bengal, 1818–1835* (Leiden, 1965), pp. 151–2. Financial economy demanded more employment of Indians on small salaries, but Orientalist educational policy could not produce this kind of cadre.

<sup>7</sup> In an introduction to an 1817 London reprint of two tracts of Rammohun, Digby stated that the “Brahmin . . . when I became acquainted with him, could merely speak it [English] well enough to be understood upon the most common topics of discourse, but could not write it with any degree of correctness.” Rammohun seems to have perfected his knowledge of English only after entering the service of Digby. They met each other first in 1801, but Rammohun became his *munshi* only in 1805. S.D. Collet, *Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, ed. D.K. Biswas and P.C. Ganguli (Calcutta, 1962), pp. 23–4, 37–8.

<sup>8</sup> Collet dismissed it as “immature” (op. cit., p. 19). Rajnarain Bose in his preface to the 1884 English translation of the *Tuhfat* rather condescendingly referred to it as an “index to a certain stage in the history of his [Rammohun’s] mind. It marks the period when he had just emerged from the idolatry of his age but had not yet risen to . . . sublime Theism and Theistic Worship . . .” Reprinted in Rammohun Roy, *Tuhfat-ul Muwabbhidin* (Calcutta, 1949).

<sup>9</sup> Roy, *Tuhfat-ul Muwabbhidin*, op. cit., Introduction.

tenets – common to all faiths and hence “natural” – are retained: belief in a single Creator (proved by the argument from design), in the existence of the soul, and faith in an afterworld where rewards and punishments will be duly awarded – and even the two latter beliefs are found acceptable only on utilitarian grounds.<sup>10</sup> Everything else – belief in particular divinities or “in a God qualified with human attributes as anger, mercy, hatred and love”,<sup>11</sup> the faith in divinely inspired prophets and miracles, salvation through “bathing in a river and worshipping a tree or being a monk and purchasing forgiveness of their crime from the high priests”,<sup>12</sup> and the “hundreds of useless hardships and privations regarding eating and drinking, purity and impurity, auspiciousness and inauspiciousness”<sup>13</sup> – is blown up with relentless logic and shown to be invented by the self-interest of priests feeding on mass ignorance and slavishness to habit. Such beliefs and practices are condemned as both irrational and “detrimental to social life and sources of trouble and bewilderment to the people.”<sup>14</sup> We have come perilously close, in fact, to the vanishing point of religion, and the logic seems to have frightened even the later Rammohun himself. Prolific translator of his own works, he never brought out English or Bengali editions of the *Tuhfat*.

In Rammohun’s later writings, too, the concepts of reason and social comfort or utility tend to crop up at crucial points in the argument. The illogicalities of the orthodox Christian doctrines of the Trinity and atonement through Christ are brilliantly exposed. The prefaces to the Upanishad translations and the *Brahma-Pauttalik Sambad*<sup>15</sup> ruthlessly analyse the irrationalities of contemporary Hindu image-

<sup>10</sup> “. . . they (mankind) are to be excused in admitting and teaching the doctrine of existence of soul and the next world although the real existence of soul and the next world is hidden and mysterious for the sake of the welfare of the people (society) as they simply, for the fear of punishment in the next world . . . refrain from commission of illegal deeds.” *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8. This is an assumption fairly common, incidentally, in later Brahma *upasana*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Almost certainly by Rammohun, according to Stephen Hay.

worship, and religious reform is urged time and again for the sake of “political advantage and social comfort”.<sup>16</sup> From 1815 onwards, Rammohun tried to anchor his monotheism on the Upanishads as interpreted by Sankara, yet there is never really any question of a simple return to the Vedanta tradition. Vedantic philosophy had been essentially elitist, preaching Mayabad and monism for the ascetic and intellectual while leaving religious practices and social customs utterly undisturbed at the level of everyday life. Rammohun’s originality lay firstly in his deft avoidance of extreme monism. Mayabad in his hands gets reduced to the conventional idealist doctrines of dependence of matter on spirit and the creation of the world by God,<sup>17</sup> and the Vedantic revival is thus reconciled with a basically utilitarian and this-worldly approach to religion. Even more striking is Rammohun’s scathing attack on the double-standard approach so very common in our religious and philosophical tradition – this is bluntly attributed to the self-interest of the Brahmans:

Many learned Brahmans are perfectly aware of the absurdity of idolatry, and are well informed of the nature of the purer mode of divine worship. But as in the rites, ceremonies, and festivals of idolatry, they find the source of their comforts and fortune, they . . . advance and encourage it to the utmost of their power, by keeping the knowledge of their scriptures concealed from the rest of the people.<sup>18</sup>

The “purer mode of divine worship” should be open to householder and ascetic alike.<sup>19</sup> The practical relevance of all this for social reform

<sup>16</sup> Rammohun to Digby, 18 January 1828, *EW* IV, p. 96.

<sup>17</sup> “The term Maya implies, primarily, the power of creation, and secondarily its effect, which is the Universe. The Vedanta, by comparing the world with the misconceived notion of a snake, when a rope really exists, means that the world, like the supposed snake, has no independent existence, that it receives its existence from the Supreme Being. In like manner the Vedanta compares the world with a dream: as all the objects seen in a dream depend upon the motion of the mind, as the existence of the world is dependent upon the being of God . . .” *The Brahmanical Magazine*, no. 1, Calcutta 1821, *EW* II, p. 146.

<sup>18</sup> Preface to the *Translation of the Ishopanishad*, Calcutta, 1816, *EW* II, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

becomes clear through a reading of Rammohun's tracts on sati, where concrementation with its shastric promises of heavenly bliss is proved inferior to ascetic widowhood which may lead to "eternal beatitude" and "absorption in Brahma".<sup>20</sup> Mrityunjay Vidyalankar had anticipated this argument in 1817,<sup>21</sup> but the author of the *Vedanta Chandrika* obviously could not relate his humanitarian stand on a particularly gruesome abuse to a general philosophy. And surely only Rammohun in his generation could have written the deeply moving closing section of the *Second Conference* with its passionate repudiation of the unequal treatment of women "thus dependent and exposed to every misery, you feel for them no compassion, that might exempt them from being tied down and burnt to death!"<sup>22</sup>

In sheer intellectual power, Rammohun stands far above his contemporaries, and a comparison with Ramram Basu, for instance,<sup>23</sup> is utterly ludicrous. Yet certain limits and qualifications need to be emphasised.

In the first place, the uniqueness of Rammohun's rationalism cannot be taken as finally settled till much more is known about the intellectual history of eighteenth-century India, and particularly perhaps about its Islamic components. Brajendranath Seal found in the *Tuhfat* clear evidence of the influence of early Muslim rationalism (the Mutazalis of the eighth century and the Muwahhidin of the twelfth);<sup>24</sup> what remains unexplored is the precise way in which

<sup>20</sup> *First and Second Conferences between An Advocate For, and An Opponent Of, The Practice of Burning Widows Alive* (Calcutta, 1818, 1820), EW III, pp. 91, 111.

<sup>21</sup> *Friend of India*, October 1819, summarised Mrityunjay's arguments, quoted in Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay, *Mrityunjay Vidyalankar (Sabitya-Sadhak-Charitmala)*, vol. I, pp. 29–34.

<sup>22</sup> EW III, p. 127.

<sup>23</sup> Such a comparison has been made by Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay in *Sabitya-Sadhak-Charitmala*, vol. I; and more recently by David Kopf in *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance* (Berkeley, 1969), chapter XII, apparently on the strength of an invocation to Brahma at the beginning of Ramram Basu's *Lipi-mala* (1802).

<sup>24</sup> Brajendranath Seal, *Rammohun the Universal Man* (Calcutta, n.d.), p. 4. The detailed discussion of the same question in Nagendranath Chattopadhyay,

this tradition was transmitted to the young Rammohun studying Persian and Arabic at Patna. A comparison of the *Tuhfat* with the *Dabistan-i Mazahib* of the mid seventeenth century – of which there does not exist as yet any adequate English translation – might prove quite illuminating. The “remarkably secular” character of much later Mughal historical writing may be another significant pointer in this context.<sup>25</sup> The Hindu intelligentsia of nineteenth-century Bengal (and maybe Rammohun, too, to some extent, after he had mastered English) turned their backs entirely on such traces of secularism, rationalism, and non-conformity in pre-British Muslim-ruled India – and their historians have by and large faithfully echoed the assumption of a completely new beginning with the coming of English education. An uncritical use of the renaissance concept is seldom a helpful analytical tool.

As has been implied already, a certain retreat from the fairly consistent and militant rationalism of the *Tuhfat* is evident in Rammohun’s later religious and social tracts.<sup>26</sup> The slide back took place at both the levels of social practice and intellectual argument and can be explained partly, though not perhaps entirely, by Rammohun’s reform-from-within technique. In 1819, private meetings of the Atmiya Sabha had freely discussed and criticised “the absurdity of the prevailing rules respecting the intercourse of the several castes with each other . . . the restrictions on diet . . . (and) the necessity of an infant widow passing her life in a state of celibacy.”<sup>27</sup> But Rammohun in his published writings and public life paraded his outward

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*Mahatma Raja Rammohun Rayer Jivan-Charita* (3rd edition, Calcutta, 1897), chapter 17, is acknowledged by the author to have been entirely based on Brajendranath’s ideas.

<sup>25</sup> Barun De, “A Preliminary Note on the Writing of the History of Modern India”, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> For an analysis of the difference between the *Tuhfat* and the post-1815 religious writings, see Susobhan Sarkar, “Religious Thought of Rammohun Roy”, idem, *On the Bengal Renaissance*, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> *India Gazette*, quoted in *Asiatic Journal*, 18 May 1819; J.K. Majumdar, ed., *Raja Rammohun Roy and Progressive Movements in India* (Calcutta, 1941), p. 18.



conformity to most caste rules (even to the extent of taking a Brahman cook with him to England!), wore the sacred thread to the end of his days, limited his direct attack on caste to a single *Vajra-suchi* translation, and, concentrating all his social-reform energies on the single-sari issue, possibly even added to a slight extent to Vidyasagar's difficulties by hunting up all the texts glorifying ascetic widowhood. Such deviousness was perhaps not even tactically very wise, since the contradiction between theory and practice soon became the commonest orthodox charge against Rammohun, and one to which the reformer could only make the not entirely satisfactory rejoinder that his critics were equally inconsistent.<sup>28</sup> On the conceptual level, the claims of reason are now balanced and increasingly limited by Upanishadic authority as well as by a conservative use of the social comfort criterion. Even in the *Tuhfat*, belief in the soul and in an afterlife were accepted as socially advantageous although doubtfully rational. In the Introduction to *Kenopanishad* (1823), we get the following key passage:

When we look to the traditions of ancient nations, we often find them at variance with each other; and when . . . we appeal to reason as a surer guide, we soon find how incompetent it is, alone, to conduct us to the object of our pursuit . . . instead of facilitating our endeavours or clearing up our perplexities, it only serves to generate a universal doubt, incompatible with principles on which our comfort and happiness mainly depend. The best method perhaps is, neither to give ourselves up exclusively to the guidance of the one or the other; but by a proper use of the lights, furnished by both, endeavour to improve our intellectual and moral faculties, relying on the goodness of the Almighty Power . . .<sup>29</sup>

Collet's biography quotes Sandford Arnot stating that

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, *Chari Prasna* (1822) and *Pashanda-Peeran* (1823) and Rammohun's replies, *Chari Prasner Uttar* (May 1822) and *Pathya-Pradan* (1823), published together in *Rammohun Granthabali* (Calcutta, n.d.), vol. VI. The *Brahma-Pouttalik Sangbad* (1820) defends the observance of caste, diet, and other social rules by the believer in Brahma as a matter of expediency even while emphasising their relative unimportance, pp. 138, 158, 164.

<sup>29</sup> *EWII*, p. 15.

As he [Rammohun] advanced in age, he became more strongly impressed with the importance of religion to the welfare of society, and the pernicious effects of scepticism . . . He often deplored the existence of the party which had sprung up in Calcutta . . . partly composed of East Indians, partly of the Hindu youth, who, from education had learnt to reject their own faith without substituting any other. These he thought more debased than the most bigoted Hindu . . .<sup>30</sup>

In sharp contrast to the sense of rational discrimination which had been the keynote of the *Tuhfat*, the later Rammohun also reveals a certain eclecticism, a desire to be all things to all people, so much so that in England both Unitarian and Evangelical Christians tried to claim him as their own. James Sutherland described him in 1830 “on questions of religious faith” as “in general too pliant, perhaps from his excessive fear of giving offence or wounding the feelings of anybody”, a contrast indeed with the young man who had written the *Tuhfat*.<sup>31</sup>

While the *Tuhfat* was soon almost forgotten, the religious writings and activities of the later Rammohun did leave a permanent legacy in the shape of the Brahmo Samaj. Yet it can be questioned whether Brahmoism was ever anything more than a rather unsatisfactory halfway house. It leaves an impression of incompleteness even when considered in purely intellectual terms as a modernist critique of orthodox Hinduism. While fire was concentrated from the beginning on image-worship, caste was not attacked with anything like the same zeal till the 1860s, and the fundamental belief in karma – perhaps an even more formidable barrier to radical social change – seems to have escaped serious criticism.<sup>32</sup> More important is the fact that

<sup>30</sup> Collet, op. cit., p. 371.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 370.

<sup>32</sup> In the *Kavitakarer Sahit Vichar* of 1820 (summarised in Nagendranath Chattopadhyay, op. cit., pp. 124–7) and the *Brahmanical Magazine*, no. 11, 1821 (*EW* II, p. 156), Rammohun came very near to an acceptance of the Karma doctrine – “The Supreme Ruler bestows the consequences of . . . sins and holiness . . . by giving them other bodies either animate or inanimate” (*EW* II, p. 156). To the true Vedantist, of course, Karmaphal belongs to the subsidiary world of illusion, but then Rammohun never accepted the full monist logic.

Brahmoism – in spite of the retreat from unadulterated rationalism begun by the later Rammohun and continued on a greatly enhanced scale by Debendranath and Keshabchandra – still remained far too intellectual and dry a creed to be ever successful as a popular religion. It failed to make any attempt to link up with the popular lower-caste monotheistic cults which seem to have been fairly numerous in eighteenth-century Bengal, particularly in the Nadia-Murshidabad region.<sup>33</sup> Rammohun did include a favourable reference to earlier monotheistic movements in his *Humble Suggestions* (1823),<sup>34</sup> but neither he nor his followers followed up the hint. Here as in so many other things English education placed an impenetrable barrier between the nineteenth century and the immediate pre-British past, which perhaps had contained certain healthy non-conformist elements along with much that was undoubtedly utterly ossified. In a conversation with Alexander Duff, Rammohun once made an interesting comparison between contemporary India and Reformation Europe;<sup>35</sup> we have only to pursue this optimistic analogy a little to see how it breaks down at practically every point. The Protestant Reformation had united the intellectual polemics of men like Erasmus with the less sophisticated but much more virile tradition of late-medieval popular heresy. The Catholic hierarchy in sixteenth-century Europe represented a highly organised and very often partly foreign system of exploitation, a kind of nodal point around which all the tensions of contemporary society had accumulated. Brahman oppression of lower castes, while far less systematic, was and is a reality; but it was hardly the most crucial problem for an Indian then being rapidly exposed to the full blast of colonial exploitation. Above all, the Reformation

<sup>33</sup> Kalikinkar Dutta mentions in particular the Karta Bhaja, the Spashtadayaka, and the Balarami sect: op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> *EWII*, p. 200.

<sup>35</sup> “As a youth,” he (Rammohun) said to Mr Duff, “I acquired some knowledge of the English language. Having read about the rise and progress of Christianity in apostolic times, and its corruption in succeeding ages, and then of the Christian Reformation which shook off these corruptions and restored it to its primitive purity, I began to think about something similar might have taken place in India, and similar results might follow here from a reformation of the popular idolatry.” Collet, op. cit., p. 280.

had succeeded not because its theology was intrinsically superior, but due to its linkage with a host of other factors – incipient nationalism directed against the papacy, the princely drive to establish territorial sovereignty, the greed for church lands, the bourgeois quest for hegemony over civil society – all conspicuously and inevitably absent in colonial Bengal. To expect a European-style Reformation in such a context reveals a rather pathetic kind of false consciousness.

The negative, alienating aspects of the English education which Rammohun and his generation so ardently welcomed are of course fairly obvious today. In fairness to Rammohun, certain qualifications should be made here. The traditional Sanskrit- or Persian-educated literati were also utterly alienated from the masses; the 1823 letter pleaded for Western scientific values, and not necessarily for English as the medium of instruction; and there were elements of a kind of mass approach in Rammohun's pioneering translations of the shastras into the vernacular, his promotion of Bengali journalism, and the efforts by Atmiya Sabha members and Hindu College students to bring out Bengali versions of English scientific and literary texts.<sup>36</sup> The seventh issue of the *Sambad Kaumudi* contained "An Address to the Hindoo Community, demonstrating the necessity of having their children instructed in the principles of the Grammar of their own language, previous to imposing upon the Study of Foreign Languages",<sup>37</sup> and in 1833 the students of Rammohun's Anglo-Hindu school started the Sarbatattva-deepika Sabha, pledged to the use of Bengali alone.<sup>38</sup> Yet the general attitude of our intelligentsia towards Western culture and particularly the English language contrasts

<sup>36</sup> Rammohun is said to have written a geography textbook (Nagendranath Chattopadhyay, op. cit., pp. 325–6). The Atmiya Sabha member Brajamohan Majumdar was working on a translation of Fergusson's *Astronomy* on the eve of his death: S. Hay, ed., *A Tract Against Idolatry* (Calcutta, 1963), Introduction. Salahuddin Ahmed (op. cit., chapter I) cites a 1832 reference in the Bentinck Papers to translations by Hindu College students.

<sup>37</sup> Summary in *Calcutta Journal*, 31 January 1882; J.K. Majumdar, op. cit., p. 288.

<sup>38</sup> *Sambad Kaumudi*, quoted in *Samachar Darpan*, 19 January 1833, ibid., pp. 273–5.

oddly with that displayed, for instance, by Sultan Mahmud II of the Ottoman Empire in an address to medical students in 1838: “You will study scientific medicine in French . . . my purpose in having you taught French is not to educate you in the French language; it is to teach you scientific medicine and little by little to take it into our language . . .”<sup>39</sup> In intellect and general culture Rammohun and other stalwarts of our renaissance were certainly far superior to this not particularly enlightened Sultan; but colonial subjection often puts blinkers on and distorts the greatest of minds.

If the culture of the Bengal Renaissance was highly elitist in character, it soon became also overwhelmingly and increasingly alienated from the Islamic heritage. Rammohun himself had been deeply rooted at first in the composite upper-class Persian culture of the eighteenth century, as both the *Tuhfat* and the *Mirat-ul-Ukhbar* bear witness. Explaining Rammohun’s exclusion from the committee which founded the Hindu College, Hyde East stated that the Orthodox Hindus “particularly disliked (and this I believe is at the bottom of the resentment) his associating himself so much as he does with Mussulmans . . . being continually surrounded by them, and suspected to partake meals with them.”<sup>40</sup> In 1826 Adam reports him as about to commence on a life of Muhammad,<sup>41</sup> an interesting project which never materialised. A long historical footnote to the *Ancient Rights of Females* (1822) blamed Rajput “tyranny and oppression” almost as much as Muslim misrule for the degeneration of India from a supposed golden age in which Brahmans and Kshatriyas had balanced each other.<sup>42</sup> Yet already in Rammohun there are also strong traces of that concept of Muslim tyranny – and of British rule as a deliverance from it, hence fundamentally acceptable – which soon became a central assumption of virtually every section of the intelligentsia, conservative, reformist, and radical alike. In the Appeal to the King in Council against the 1823 Press Regulation, it is stated that “under

<sup>39</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (Oxford, 1968), p. 85.

<sup>40</sup> Letter of Hyde East to the Earl of Buckinghamshire (Fulham Papers), cited in Salahuddin Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>41</sup> Collet, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

<sup>42</sup> *EW I*, p. 1.

their former Muhammadan Rulers, the natives of this country enjoyed every political privilege in common with Mussulmans, being eligible to the highest offices in the state". But "their property was, often plundered, their religion insulted, and their blood wantonly shed", till "Divine Providence at last, in its abundant mercy, stirred up the English nation to break the yoke of those tyrants and to receive the oppressed Natives of Bengal under its protection."<sup>43</sup> The basic theme, without Rammohun's qualifications, crops up throughout the nineteenth century at the most unexpected of places: in the Derozian Maheshchandra Deb condemning the seclusion of women in Hindu society before the Society for Acquisition of General Knowledge,<sup>44</sup> and in the rationalist Akshaykumar Dutt adversely comparing Muslim with British rule,<sup>45</sup> just as much as in Bankimchandra. An analysis of the ramifications of this concept, which research today is incidentally rapidly demolishing as in any way a just appraisal of the late Mughal India, surely would be the most interesting and most neglected of themes. British historiography certainly played a crucial role here,<sup>46</sup> and with the rapid disappearance of knowledge of Persian, the region's westernised intelligentsia became entirely dependent on it for knowledge of their immediate past. This is perhaps one contribution of British Orientalism to the Bengal Renaissance which merits more attention than it has received in the past.

Consideration of Rammohun's attitude to British rule leads, naturally, to a discussion of his political and economic ideas. Two rather tentative suggestions may be made in this connection. In the first place, it is just possible that the pattern of retreat fairly evident in Rammohun's religious and social thought has its counterpart also in his political ideas. The *Autobiographical Letter* contains a tantaliz-

<sup>43</sup> Collet, op. cit., Appendix I B, pp. 431, 449.

<sup>44</sup> Mahesh Chundra Deb, "A Sketch of the Condition of the Hindoo Women (1839)", in Gautam Chattopadhyay, ed., *Awakening in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1965), pp. 94-5.

<sup>45</sup> *Sangbad Prabhakar* 21.8.1247/1840; Benoy Ghosh, ed., *Samayikpatre Banglar Samajchitra* (Calcutta, 1962), vol. I, pp. 160-1.

<sup>46</sup> For this, see J.S. Grewal, *Muslim Rule in India—The Assessments of British Historians* (New Delhi, 1970).

ingly brief reference to Rammohun's early travels being animated by "a feeling of great aversion to the establishment of the British power in India",<sup>47</sup> and a Bangladeshi historian has recently speculated on the possibility of some connections with anti-British zamindar and even peasant groups in Rangpur.<sup>48</sup> The evidence here is admittedly still very scanty; certainly the Rammohun who is so much more familiar to us all somehow managed to combine an impressive interest in and sympathy for liberal and nationalist movements in England, France, Naples, Spain, Ireland, and even Latin America with a fundamental acceptance of foreign political and economic domination over his own country. Within this basic framework, Rammohun did blaze the trail, of course, for several generations of moderate constitutionalist agitation, focusing on demands like Indianisation of services, trial by jury, separation of powers, freedom of the press, and consultations with Indian landlords, merchants, and officials on legislative matters. His critique of the zamindari system and plea for an absolute ban on "any further increase of rent on any pretence whatsoever" strike a sympathetic chord in progressive hearts even today.<sup>49</sup> Yet here too perhaps a tendency towards growing moderation and a kind of centrism may be traced. The *Bengal Herald*, of which Rammohun was a principal proprietor, on 9 May 1829 announced as its objective an opposition "equally to anarchy, as to despotism",<sup>50</sup> and by 1832 Rammohun was paying the price for this centrism in the shape of

<sup>47</sup> The authenticity of this letter, published by Sandford Arnot after Rammohun's death, has been often challenged; but it is difficult to imagine what motive Arnot could have had in completely inventing the passage I am using. (Collet, op. cit., Appendix VIII, p. 497.) See also Victor Jacquemont's testimony (1829): "Formerly when he (Rammohun) was young, he told me this in Europe, the ruler of his country, was odious to him. The blind patriotism of youth made him detest the English and all who came with them." J.K. Majumdar, ed., *Indian Speeches and Documents on British Rule* (Calcutta, 1937), p. 41.

<sup>48</sup> Mufakharul Islam, "Rammohun Royer Ajnatabas", *Itihas* (Dacca), Bhadra-Agrahayan, 1376.

<sup>49</sup> "Questions and Answers on the Revenue System of India" (1832), *EW* III, p. 45.

<sup>50</sup> Cited in J.K. Majumdar, op. cit., p. 328.

an attack from two fronts. His evidence before the Commons Select Committee was denounced as unduly harsh on zamindars by the Dharma Sabha organ *Samachar Chandrika*;<sup>51</sup> much more surprising, and little known, is the whole series of articles in the *Bengal Hurkaru*,<sup>52</sup> violently attacking the reformer for being too soft in his critique of Company maladministration and far too tactful on the question of zamindari oppression of the peasants. “How could Rammohun Roy in these replies”, it asks, “forget the Seventh Regulation of 1799 . . . the very plague-spot of our administration? Rammohun went to England as a ‘voice from India’ to tell the wrongs, and the sufferings, and to assert the rights of her children, we find . . . in these papers a mere Zamindar.”<sup>53</sup>

The *Bengal Hurkaru* also attacked Rammohun for not being unqualified enough in his support for English colonisation in India, and the newspaper was edited by James Sutherland, an ex-associate of James Silk Buckingham of *Calcutta Journal* fame. This brings us to the second point: the need to analyse, in greater depth than has been usual so far,<sup>54</sup> the close links between British free-traders – the carriers, very often, of Utilitarian ideas – and men like Rammohun or Dwarkanath who combined zamindari with money-lending and business enterprise.<sup>55</sup> With both groups, enthusiastic acceptance of the basic British connection was combined with a more or less sharp

<sup>51</sup> *Samachar Chandrika*, quoted in *Samachar Darpan*, 7 July 1832; *ibid.*, pp. 490–3.

<sup>52</sup> *Bengal Hurkaru*, 20 and 22 June, 22 November 1832; *ibid.*, pp. 483–8, 496–501.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 484, 488.

<sup>54</sup> See, however, Salahuddin Ahmed, *op. cit.*, chapters I and V, for some discussion on this point.

<sup>55</sup> Dwarkanath’s multifarious business activities need no elaboration; Rammohun built up his fortune initially through money-lending and dealings in Company papers, from the proceeds of which he started purchasing land from 1799. (Collet, *op. cit.*, p. 14.) He later developed close connections with agency houses and in a letter to the Court of Directors (23 July 1833) asking for a loan after the collapse of Mackintosh and Co., stated that the latter had been “My Agents as well in general pecuniary transactions as in receiving my rents and managing my landed property.” (*EWIV*, p. 129.)



critique of many aspects of Company administration and economic policy. Rammohun and Dwarkanath took a very prominent part in the Town Hall meeting organised by free-traders in December 1829 which petitioned parliament “to throw open the China and India trade, and to remove the restrictions against the settlement of Europeans in India”: they improved the occasion by a full-throated defence of indigo planters.<sup>56</sup> The *India Gazette* of 2 July 1829, incidentally, had published a letter from an indigo planter attacking zamindari oppression of peasants and demanding rent reductions, to which a zamindar had replied four days later with a catalogue of misdeeds associated with indigo.<sup>57</sup> In a speech in 1836, Dwarkanath declared that twenty years ago the Company had treated all natives as servants, but things had changed vastly for the inhabitants of Calcutta thanks to the British free-traders; he proceeded to repay that debt by joining in the protest against a “black act” which had sought to curtail the right of European settlers in the *mofussil* to appeal to the Supreme Court against the decisions of district tribunals.<sup>58</sup>

In a very interesting article on the “Prospect of Bengal” published by the *Bengal Herald* of 13 June 1829, an English writer tried to teach his “Native friends” a few lessons in comparative social history. The growth of a “middling class” had brought about the English Revolution of the seventeenth century, while Spain and Poland still remained backward and miserable due to the absence of such a development. In Bengal after 1813, “the lesser restrictions on commerce and greater introduction of Europeans” had vastly enhanced the value of land, and “by means of this territorial value, a class of society has sprung into existence, that were [*sic*] before unknown; these are placed between the aristocracy and the poor, and are daily forming a most influential class.” The inflow of English manufactures from “Liverpool, Glasgow, etc.” was extremely welcome, since sooner or later “a reciprocity of trade must take place . . . if England expects that India will prove a

<sup>56</sup> Collet, *op. cit.*, p. 270; J.K. Majumdar, *op. cit.*, pp. 438–9.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Salahuddin Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>58</sup> Kishorichand Mitra, *Dwarkanath Tagore*, Bengali translation, ed. Kalyan Kumar Dasgupta (Calcutta, 1962), pp. 60–1.

large mart for her produce, she must remove the restrictive, almost prohibitory duties on Asiatic produce . . .”<sup>59</sup> The Rammohun–Dwarkanath section of our intelligentsia seems to have swallowed in toto this free-trader logic and visualised a kind of dependent but still real bourgeois development in Bengal in close collaboration with British merchants and entrepreneurs. The utter absurdity of this illusion is very obvious today. A single Dwarkanath did not herald a bourgeois spring and the years from 1813 to 1833 – coinciding almost exactly with the most active period of Rammohun’s public life – saw the number of houses paying *chaukidari* tax in Dacca go down from 21,361 to 10,708.<sup>60</sup> The catastrophic decline in cotton handicrafts threw at least a million out of jobs in Bengal,<sup>61</sup> in “a revolution . . . hardly to be paralleled in the history of commerce.”<sup>62</sup> The founding father of our Renaissance remained utterly silent about such developments.

Within the next generation, the Bengali “middle class” was rapidly squeezed out of even comparador-type business activities and left dependent on the professions, services, and land – almost entirely divorced, in other words, from productive functions since, thanks to the Permanent Settlement, rent receipts flowed in with a minimum of entrepreneurial effort. Bourgeois-liberal values remained bereft of material content. In Rabindranath’s *Gora* – the best literary summation perhaps of the cultural world of “renaissance” Bengal – none of the characters seem to have to work for a living; the contrast, say, with Dickens, where “work plays an essential part in the characters” approach to life, is illuminating.<sup>63</sup>

## II

Rammohun’s achievements as a moderniser were thus both limited and extremely ambivalent. What is involved in this estimate is not really his personal stature, which was certainly quite outstanding;

<sup>59</sup> J.K. Majumdar, op. cit., pp. 434–7.

<sup>60</sup> N.K. Sinha, *Economic History of Bengal*, vol. III (Calcutta, 1970), p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 7–8.

<sup>62</sup> Proceedings of the Board of Trade, July 1828, cited in *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>63</sup> Humphry House, *The Dickens World* (London, 1961), p. 55.

the limitations were basically those of his times – which marked the beginning of a transition, indeed, from pre-capitalist society, yet in the direction, not of full-blooded bourgeois modernity, but of a weak and distorted caricature of the same which was all that colonial subjection permitted.

This is emphatically not the conventionally accepted view of Rammohun or of the renaissance he inaugurated. It must be obvious that this interpretation is entirely based on published and fairly well-known material and has not involved original research. That being so, a brief analysis of the assumptions underlying the established historiographical tradition seems called for.

From the Dharma Sabha down to R.C. Majumdar and David Kopf, Rammohun of course has had numerous critics and debunkers, but, instead of exposing his real contradictions and limits, criticism has in the main either picked on utterly irrelevant and trivial issues like the alleged Muslim mistress or the illegitimate Rajaram, or concentrated on trying to disprove Rammohun's claim to priority in such things as English education, campaign against sati, or monotheism – accepting by implication therefore their presumably revolutionary nature. The early attacks were clearly motivated solely by the desire to preserve the social and religious status quo. Attempts have been made occasionally to find proto-nationalists among the Dharma Sabha men,<sup>64</sup> but even at the height of the anti-sati agitation, the *Samachar Chandrika* declared: "None of our countrymen feel a pleasure in hearing anything to the disadvantage of the Honourable Company; they always pray for the welfare of the Government . . . We have been subject to no distress under the government of the Company; it is only the abolition of Suttees which has given us disquietude . . ."<sup>65</sup>

If Rammohun was closely allied with British free-trader liberals, no less intimate were the links between *Samachar Chandrika* and *John Bull*, the Tory defender of Company interests founded by the Reverend James Bryce.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> By David Kopf, for example, op. cit., pp. 266–72.

<sup>65</sup> *Samachar Chandrika* quoted in *John Bull*, 9 March 1830, in J.K. Majumdar, op. cit., p. 330.

<sup>66</sup> The strange but very significant alliance between the Hindu orthodoxy

Around the turn of the century, Hindu revivalism did strike a rather temporary alliance with extremist nationalism, and this led sometimes to an interesting reevaluation of Rammohun. While still clinging to the father image, the highly revisionist Brahmo Bipin Chandra Pal argued that English education had little or nothing to do with Rammohun's achievements; he went on to present the latter as almost the first of the Hindu revivalists who rightly rejected Western rationalism and instead tried to balance reason with shastric authority.<sup>67</sup>

The fact that denigration or reevaluation of Rammohun from the Hindu orthodox or revivalist angle has been motivated by a desire to validate a defence of the social status quo is fairly obvious; what require closer analysis perhaps are the premises of the "progressive" hero-worship tradition particularly, though not exclusively, associated in Bengal with Brahmoism. Several strands can be distinguished here. Full-throated admiration for Rammohun and the entire Bengal Renaissance had been connected occasionally with avowedly pro-British views. Jadunath Sarkar provided a classic instance of this, with his well-known purple passage at the end of the Dacca University *History of Bengal* (1948) on Plassey as "the beginning . . . of a glorious dawn, the like of which the history of the world has not seen elsewhere . . . truly a Renaissance, wider, deeper, and more revolutionary than that of Europe after the fall of Constantinople . . ."

J.K. Majumdar, who edited three invaluable volumes of documents on Rammohun, also published in 1937 a collection of *Speeches and Documents on British Rule, 1821–1918* marked by a quite remarkably sycophantic principle of selection: Gandhi figures in it for example only as the recruiting sergeant of 1918. Such attitudes, of course, had become relatively rare after the development of nationalism, but liberal patriots remained warm admirers of Rammohun as the pioneer of social reform and constitutionalist agitation.

The Marxist approach has been somewhat more ambivalent. From Rabindra Gupta (Bhowani Sen) in the Ranadive period to

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and the *John Bull* is vividly reflected in a large number of extracts published by J.K. Majumdar: cf. for example, nos. 34, 36, 39, 184, and 185.

<sup>67</sup> Bipin Chandra Pal, "Yuga-Prabartak Rammohun", in *Nabayuger Bangla* (Calcutta, 1955); a reprint of Pal's article in *Banga-bani* 1328–31 (1921–4).