



International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS)

A Peer-Reviewed Monthly Research Journal

ISSN: 2394-7969 (Online), ISSN: 2394-7950 (Print)

Volume-I, Issue-I, February 2015, Page No. 103-106

Published by: Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.irjims.com>

Economic Thought of Raja Rammohun Roy: The Earliest Spokesman of Free-trade in India

Abhisek Karmakar

Asst. Prof. in Pol Science, Raja Rammohun Roy Mahavidyalaya, Hooghly, India

Abstract

Raja Rammohun Roy, one of the makers of modern India was the earliest advocate of liberal economy in India. Like so much about Rammohun his economic ideas were controversial. In his economic ideas, from a broader perspective, Rammohun should definitely be regarded as the earliest member of liberal school. But from a closer observation a huge ambiguity can be estimated in his economic thought. On issues like Colonial economy, Permanent Settlement, Zamindary System, colonization he was so ambivalent that even the contemporary Bengal press remained divided on the question of where to locate him. Did he support the economic policy followed by the East India Company? What was his stand towards contemporary Zamindary System? What was his argument about the free trade or laissez faire economy? These are the interesting questions which the present article is dealing with. So, the main object of this paper is to focus on the economic thought of Rammohun Roy in the early Nineteenth century.

Key Words: *Colonial Economy, Colonization, Economic Ideas, Zamindary System.*

The rigorous social, political and economical activities of Rammohun Roy made him the pioneer of the Renaissance and modernity in Bengal and in India as well. Through his vigorous and radical views and activities almost in all spheres of society, viz. religious and social reformation movements, education, law, tolerance, public opinion, civil liberty, rule of law, separation of power, freedom of press and economic thoughts altogether, it may be argued, he came to be known as the pioneer of liberalism in India. No wonder, some scholars compared him to the position occupied by John Locke in the case of European liberalism and democratic tradition. Did he support the economic policy followed by the East India Company? What was his stand towards contemporary Zamindary System? What was his argument about the free trade or laissez faire economy? These are the interesting questions which the present article is dealing with. In other words, the main object of this paper is to focus on the economic thought of Rammohun Roy in the early Nineteenth century.

In his economic ideas, from a broader perspective, Rammohun should definitely be regarded as the earliest member of liberal school. But from a closer observation a huge ambiguity can be estimated in his economic thought. On issues like Colonial economy, Permanent Settlement¹, Zamindary System, he was so ambivalent that even the contemporary Bengal press remained divided on the question of where to locate him. He supported the zamindary lobby against the regulation which threatened to resume all rent-free lands, simultaneously, he lamented on the miserable condition of the cultivators being victims of 'Zamindar's avarice and ambition' (Roy, 1977: 50). Moreover, despite being aware of the shortcomings of the Permanent Settlement he never had a word to abolish it fully (Poddar, 1982: 29-32). In 1832, in his evidence before the Select Committee of British Parliament on various matters concerning cultivation in India, the *Bengal Harukuru* accused him of acting like a 'Zaminder', while the *Samachar Chandrika* labeled him 'hostile to the interest of the landholders' (Sen, 2012: 135). For such ambiguities some critics, specially the Derozians accused him and his like-minded contemporaries as 'half liberals' (*Bengal Harukuru*, 26th Oct, 1831)).

Notwithstanding such criticisms, the tremendous significance of the liberal ideals of Rammohun about economic policies and private property of an individual can never be undermined. Remarkably, in his economic ideas he was of the opinion that every individual is free to advance his happiness and

interest, which sounded much like Benthamite slogan. His recommendations on various issues like: introduction of free trade or *laissez faire* economy, criticism against the monopoly of East India Company on Salt issue, opening the market for foreign capital and foreign skills, removing restrictions on European settlements in India, Indigo plantation by Europeans— were strikingly similar to the prescriptions in Bentinck's *Minute* of May 30, 1829, which were justly described by some as 'a powerfully written liberal tract' (Pant, 1988: 120-21).

The individualist Rammohun being an ardent supporter of individual property believed that it is a holy duty of the government to guarantee the right to property of people. Unlike contemporary British thinkers he favored land ownership to be vested in the hands of individual instead of to the state. Answering to the Select Committee he claimed, "From a reference to the laws and the histories of the country, I believe that the lands in India were individual property in ancient times." Therefore on the issue of state intervention on landed estates he argued, "Every man is entitled by law and reason to enjoy the fruits of his honest labour and good management" (Roy, 1977: 45-47). Such a view of private property made him comparable to renowned English liberal thinker John Locke whom he greatly admired and brought him close to the position of the British Whigs who believed in private property as a fundamental social principle (Sen, 2012: 133-37). Similarly, in his "Rights of Hindus over Ancestral Property" he argued that the "validity of existing titles to property should not be, not the contracts founded on the received interpretation of the law should be violated by the government (Roy, 1945: 22-23, Part-I).

Like several contemporary liberal thinkers, Rammohun championed the idea of free trade, the entry of foreign capital, abolition of all restrictions over European settlers and land revenue reforms to help the process of building more wealth and prosperity in India. When the emerging new middleclass and its bases of property and professions were taking shape in the early nineteenth century Rammohun showed great confidence in the workings of the new institutions and enrichment to attain the greatest good of the greatest number (Sen A., 1975: 129). The opening of the East India trade to private enterprise was begun by the Charter Act of 1813 and culminated by the Act of 1833. During this long span of two decades Rammohun and his associates were inclined to free trade and endorsed their ideology of utilitarian liberalism. In December 1829, Rammohun, Dwarakanath, Prasanna Kumar and some liberal-minded Europeans participated in a meeting held at Calcutta Town Hall on the issue of *Laissez-faire* economy, where, it was Rammohun who gave formal support to the proposal of colonization raised by Dwaraknath Tagore and they championed the idea of free trade policy and petitioned to the Parliament "to throw open the China and India trade, and to remove all restrictions against the settlement of Europeans in India" (Collet, 1962: 270). Even Kalinath Roy, one of the close and like-minded associates of Rammohun took an initiative to sign a petition to Parliament in favour of colonization (Poddar, 1982: 32). Later in 1832, in the paper entitled 'Settlement in India by the Europeans' (14th July, 1831) Rammohun emphasized the need to allow Europeans of 'character and capital'² to settle freely in India.

It is important to note here that such activities of Rammohun and his contemporary co-modernizers have been vehemently attacked by several scholars time to time. It is not that such critics have totally been wrong or biased in their points. But it must be remembered that the overall development of the country was the absolute object of Rammohun and his associates. The *Samachar Darpar* published by Prasanna Kumar Tagore on 15th Oct 1831 published that it was not the intention of Rammohun and his associates that "the English should come and cultivate the ground and become landlords" (Majumdar, 1967: 45). What Rammohun wanted was the further penetration of 'European skill' and 'capital' to impart superior knowledge and public spirit, which would bring about an industrial regeneration in India. If the 'European character' and 'capital', he believed, would settle freely in India then the enlightened public opinion would be developed and consequently, the political rights of the Indian would be secured. So it may be argued that the far reaching social and political considerations led Rammohun to recommend greater incorporation of European skill and capital (Roy, 1977: 56). He even firmly hoped that if the Indians would developed to wealth, intelligence and public spirit by the settlement of numerous liberal minded Europeans, the mixed community so formed would consequently emerge as the United states of America formerly did against the arbitration of Britain and attained freedom, and later emerged as one of the soundest democracy based on liberal ideals.³

Beside such arguments, the reason behind favouring colonization (in the meeting at Calcutta town Hall in December, 1829) was his deep concern for huge drain of Indian wealth. He was well aware that the industrial revolution in India can never happen without British bourgeoisie class and therefore to overcome the problem of drainage he suggested that the Europeans accumulating capital in India should be encouraged to settle in India so that the wealth might not go out of the country. Thus, he, before Dadabhai Naoroji focused on the 'Drain Theory', which the latter made so popular in later (Pant, 1988: 121). Again, he raised the question to reduce land revenue but was aware that it would cause financial crisis of the state. So he suggested to lower administrative costs by recruiting larger number of Indians in place of Europeans. In this way he may be regarded as the earliest champion of Indianization of the civil services which later became one of the significant nationalist demands in the second half of nineteenth century. Thus, Rammohun, though often accused of misreading the nature of colonial rule and colonization, wanted the European settlers to develop the skills and mechanism by superior modes of cultivation, which ultimately would help his countrymen to brush aside all problems in social, political and economical spheres of life by a force of enlightened liberal spirit.

Rammohun and his associates, the early representatives of Indian renaissance and modernity made a significant contribution to the creation of liberal ambience in the nineteenth century. Of course, they admired British rule and considered it as a divine boon. But it is not that they were anti-democratic. Instead, Rammohun, it may be claimed, even in colonial Bengal, rightly anticipated the inherent truth of democracy, i.e. the freedom of mind and free expression of views about social and political matters can never be flourished in a climate of omnipotent social dominance over individual. So, he admired the British rule not for colonization but for the development of modern liberal ideal, which, he firmly believed would help his countrymen to emancipate their minds from age-old bondages of pre-modern society and culture. What he wanted was to build a connection between society and the state which, to a great extent was amorphous in the pre-colonial Mohammedan era. Therefore, by his illustrious activities he tried to prevent the newly founded alien rule from being totally indifferent to the social and cultural needs of the native community (Chakraborti, 1979: 20-21).

The multifarious social concerns of Rammohun made him think of socio-cultural, political and economic issues in contemporary India. He was never a man who dwelt in the mere abstract set of ideas but was also a man of action enriched with enormous self confidence and great optimism. That is why Rabindranath Tagore (1935: 1) in the celebration of his death centenary referred to him as 'a luminous star in the firmament of Indian history'. He bore such an optimistic revolutionary spirit which neither the animosity of Hindu orthodoxy, nor the hostility of the Christian missionaries, nor the distrust by the British rulers (as evinced in the official reaction to his letter to lord Armherst on Educational Policy) could act as a damper to his illustrious activities (Chaturvedi, 1988: 83-84). His rational introspection made him realize that progress of liberal ideals in India was to be conditioned not by contemplation alone, but by action; not by pessimism, but by self-realization and most importantly, not by isolation from the West but by healthy interaction by imparting the treasures of western knowledge, gift of science and humanistic ideologies.

Notes:

1. Prior to the settlement, about one-third of the cultivable land in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa lay waste. The British Government felt that by giving permanent land tenures in return for a system to fixed revenue, private individual could be induced to extend and improve cultivation. As a consequence, the area under cultivation really increased to a considerable degree. (See, Sen Asok, 1975: 110-20, Pantham, 1986: 44.)
2. For details, see Roy (1947), "Settlement in India by the Europeans" in Nag and Burman edited *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy (Part-III)*, Sadharan Brahma Samaj, Kolkata.
3. In the reference Canada can also be cited as a proof. For details, (see Roy, Part-III, 1947: 84.)

References:

- Bengal Harukuru*, 'Hindoo Reformers' October 26, 1831 in Binay Ghosh Edited *Samasamayikpotre Banglar Samaj Chitra* (1966), Ramkrishna Press, Kolkata
- Chakraborty, R., (1979), 'Rammohun Ray: His Vision Of Social Change' in Mukherjee Amal kumar edited *The Bengal Intellectual Tradition: From Rammohun Ray to Dhirendranath Sen*, K. P. Bagchi & Company, Kolkata.
- Chaturvedi, T., N.,(1988), 'Raja Rammohun Roy and His Quest for Rationalism' in B. P. Barua edited *Raja Rammohun Roy and the New Learning*, Sangam Books Ltd., Kolkata
- Collet, S., D., (1962), *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, (Edited by D. K. Biswas and P. C. Ganguli), Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, Kolkata
- Majumdar, B., (1967), *History of Indian Social and Political Ideas: From Rammohun To Dayananda*, Bookland Pvt. Ltd., Kolkata
- Pant, A., D., (1988), 'Rammohun Roy and Indian Liberalism' in B. P. Barua edited *Raja Rammohun Roy and the New Learning*, Sangam Books Ltd., Kolkata
- Pantham, T., (1986), 'The Socio-Religious and Political Thought of Rammohun Roy' in Pantham, T. and Deutsch, K. L. edited *Political Thought in Modern India*, Sage Publication, New Delhi
- Poddar, A., (1982), *Rammohun Uttorpaksha* (in Bengali), Uchcharan, Kolkata
- Roy, R., (1945), "The Rights of Hindus Over Ancestral Property" in Nag, K. and Barman, D. (Edited), *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, Part-I, Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, Kolkata
- _____, (1947), "The Judicial System of India: Questions and Answers" in Nag, K. and Barman, D. (Edited) *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, Part-III, Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, Kolkata
- _____,(1977), "The Revenue System of India: Questions and Answers", in *Selected Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (The Government of India), New Delhi
- Sen, Asok (1975), 'The Bengal Economy and Rammohun Roy' in V. C. Joshi edited *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization in India*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., Delhi
- Sen, A., P., (2012), *Rammohun Roy: A Critical Biography*, Penguin- Viking, New Delhi
- Tagore, R. (1935), 'Inaugurator of the Modern Age in India' in Chakraborty, S. C., (Ed), *The Father of Modern India* (Commemoration Volume of the Rammohun Roy Centenary Celebration, 1933), Part-II, Rammohun Roy Centenary Committee, Kolkata
