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The Liberal Visionary: An Analytical Study of the Political Thought of Raja Ram Mohan Roy in Colonial India

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Abstract:

This paper examines the political thought of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and frames him within the contours of the reform movements in early 19th-century colonial India. It follows the way he used both Indian spiritual culture and the western enlightenment ideas to form a liberalistic vision that endorsed constitutional government, civil rights, empowerment of women, and religious peace. The interests of Roy in social reforms, an action that is clearly seen in his participation in the abolition of sati and urging women to be educated were closely linked to his political awakening ideology that social reform was the steppingstone to political awakening. His views against the censorship of the press, on the need to have an informed opinion among the masses and the encouragement of modern studies were the results of a belief in him that only political liberty based on the responsibility of the people was possible. This philosophy of Roy was not some kind of adaptation of European ideas instead; it was a unique Indian insight into liberalism. His work still has useful contributions to today's discussions on democracy, diversity and individual rights.

Keywords: Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Liberalism, Social Reform, Press Freedom, Religious Tolerance.

Introduction:

The early 19th century in Bengal, where Raja Ram Mohan Roy emerged as a reformist, was marked by rigid social customs, religious orthodoxy, and colonial domination. Practices like sati, child marriage, and caste discrimination reflected a stagnant societal order. Roy recognized the grave consequences of these customs on both social cohesion and India's political modernization. He observed that "religious orthodoxies have become causes of injury and detrimental to social life and sources of trouble and bewilderment to the people" (Drishti IAS). This conviction shaped his belief that religious reform was inseparable from social reform and political modernization (Drishti IAS). Roy's intellectual influences were cosmopolitan. He engaged deeply with Western Enlightenment thought, particularly the works of Locke and Montesquieu, which emphasized constitutionalism, separation of powers, and natural rights. Roy argued that these ideas could be adapted to the Indian context, seeking a balance between tradition and modernity (Pol Sci Institute). His reformist zeal reflected not only a critique of indigenous practices but also an aspiration to bring India into the fold of progressive governance.

The colonial backdrop both constrained and catalyzed reform. Roy admired certain aspects of the British system—especially civil liberties and constitutional governance—and sought to extend these principles to Indian society (PW Only IAS). His resistance to press censorship was particularly significant. In 1821, he founded *The Brahmanical Magazine*, the Bengali weekly *Sambad Kaumudi*, and the Persian weekly *Mirat-ul-Akbar* to promote reform and civic engagement (BYJU's Exam Prep).

The intellectual climate was also shaped by new social and religious organizations. In 1815, Roy founded the *Atmiya Sabha*, a forum for free discussion and debate on social and religious issues, including idol worship and superstition (Wikipedia, *Atmiya Sabha*). Later, in 1828, he established the *Brahmo Sabha*, formalized through the 1830 Trust Deed, which envisioned the worship of the “Eternal Unsearchable and Immutable Being” without images, priesthood, or rituals, promoting interfaith harmony and moral introspection (Wikipedia, *Trust Deed of Brahmo Sabha*).

Through such institutions and his writings, Roy positioned himself at the intersection of tradition and modern reformist thought. The intellectual ferment of the era—fueled by colonial contact, missionary influence, and indigenous critique—provided fertile ground for Roy's vision of a rational, egalitarian, and liberal India.

Objective of Research

The objective of this research is to critically analyze the political thought of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, situating him within the broader socio-political and intellectual context of early 19th-century colonial India. It aims to explore how Roy synthesized Indian spiritual traditions with Western Enlightenment ideals to promote liberal values, constitutional governance, social reform, women's empowerment, press freedom, and religious tolerance. The paper also seeks to examine the enduring relevance of his ideas to contemporary democratic, pluralistic, and rights-based discourse in India.

Research Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature, relying on historical-analytical and interpretive methods. Primary sources include Roy's writings, petitions, and speeches, while secondary sources consist of scholarly books, peer-reviewed articles, and reputable academic websites. Data was collected from academic databases, historical archives, and institutional repositories. The analysis uses thematic coding to identify and interpret recurring ideas in Roy's thought, situating them within the socio-political conditions of colonial India and linking them to present-day democratic frameworks.

Foundations of Raja Ram Mohan Roy's Liberal and Constitutional Ideas

Raja Ram Mohan Roy's political vision was shaped by a rare synthesis of Indian spiritual traditions and Western Enlightenment principles. As Ramachandra Guha observes in *Makers of Modern India*, Roy “engaged with the challenges posed by both colonial rule and Indian conservatism,” positioning himself as India's first true liberal thinker (Guha 45). At the heart of his ideas lay a commitment to reason and civic reform. In *Raja Ram Mohan Roy: The First Liberal of India*, Guha portrays Roy as “perhaps the first Indian thinker who engaged with the challenges posed by both colonial rule and Indian conservatism”—someone who “fought for the freedom of press and promoted modern education” (Guha). Roy's love for constitutional principles is evident in his clear-cut argument that governance should be separated between legislators and executors to prevent abuse of power, “Unchecked power often leads the best men wrong and produces general mischief” (*Political Theory and Thought* 34-37).

Roy combined this with a critical yet constructive attitude toward British rule. He believed that, while colonial governance was foreign, British parliamentary procedures and liberties could benefit India—so long as they were adapted responsibly. He proposed mechanisms such as a free press, independent commissions, and input from respected Indian minds to ensure just legislation (37).

What made Roy truly distinctive was how he fused these liberal ideals with Indian spiritual heritage. In *Political Theory and Thought*, Roy argues for a kind of secularism that does not divorce religion from life, but rather “broadens the base of religion as humane culture by ridding it of superstition, ritualism and blind conformity” (37).

Roy's political thought was no copy of Western liberalism—it was rooted in Indian ethos, yet daringly modern. His liberal framework combined constitutional liberty, educational reform, a free press, and a reimagined spirituality—an intellectual architecture designed to meet India's unique cultural and social challenges.

Socio-Religious Reform as a Catalyst for Political Awakening

Raja Ram Mohan Roy's political thought cannot be separated from his socio-religious reform agenda. For Roy, political liberty was inseparable from social progress; without social emancipation, he believed, no true political awakening could occur. His campaign against sati, his advocacy for women's rights, and his efforts to promote a rational, ethical religion were not merely moral crusades — they were deliberate steps toward preparing Indian society for self-governance. The abolition of sati in 1829, achieved largely through Roy's petitions and reasoned arguments to Governor-General Lord William Bentinck, stands as a testament to how moral reform can lead to political engagement. Roy's opposition was grounded not only in humanitarian concern but also in his interpretation of Hindu scriptures, which he argued did not sanction such practices (Guha, *Makers of Modern India* 42). By mobilizing both traditional authority and Enlightenment ideals, Roy demonstrated a political strategy: reform from within to gain legitimacy for broader liberal principles.

Equally significant was his advocacy for women's education and property rights. In his tract *Remarks on Settlement in India by Europeans* (1826), Roy linked social reform to economic and political development, arguing that “no nation can be civilized and happy without the education of its women” (Guha, *Raja Ram Mohan Roy: The First Liberal of India* 23). Such statements reveal his conviction that democracy and modern governance required an enlightened citizenry, male and female alike.

Religion was another sphere where Roy sought transformation. Through the *Atmiya Sabha* (1815) and later the *Brahmo Sabha*, he promoted monotheism, religious tolerance, and rational worship, distancing himself from orthodox ritualism. His emphasis on moral universalism, influenced by both the *Upanishads* and Christian Unitarianism, reflected his belief that religion could serve as a moral foundation for a just political order (*Political Theory and Thought: Western and Indian Traditions* 36). By encouraging interfaith dialogue and religious reform, he was laying the cultural groundwork for an inclusive Indian nationalism.

These socio-religious reforms were not side projects but central to Roy's political vision. They addressed structural inequalities, challenged oppressive traditions, and nurtured a public sphere in which reasoned debate could flourish. In this sense, his social reform work was a form of political pedagogy, preparing Indians to participate in constitutional politics. Roy understood that without breaking the chains of social orthodoxy, political rights would remain hollow promises. His reforms thus served as a bridge between the personal and the political, between moral renewal and the quest for national self-determination.

Advocacy for Press Freedom, Civil Rights, and Religious Tolerance

Raja Ram Mohan Roy's political legacy is inseparable from his pioneering advocacy for civil liberties in colonial India, most notably the freedom of the press. At a time when the East India Company sought to curb dissenting voices, Roy argued that the press was not merely a vehicle for news, but “the vehicle of public instruction” and the foundation of an informed citizenry (*Political Theory and Thought* 36). In his petition against press restrictions in 1823, he insisted that without free press, the government would remain ignorant of the needs of the people, and the people would remain ignorant of the actions of the government.

Roy's commitment to civil rights extended beyond the question of expression. In *Makers of Modern India*, Ramachandra Guha notes that Roy's petitions to the British Parliament reveal “a mind deeply conscious of the dignity of the individual, and the rights which no authority—native or colonial—should infringe” (Guha 112). His demands were grounded in the belief that colonial governance, if it claimed legitimacy, must uphold the rights of those it governed.

Religious tolerance was another pillar of Roy's vision. Influenced by his readings of the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, Islamic texts, and Christian theology, Roy developed a theology of universalism that rejected sectarian exclusivity. In the *Trust Deed of the Brahmo Sabha* (1830), he enshrined the worship of “the Eternal Unsearchable and Immutable Being” and forbade all forms of religious discrimination. As *Political Theory and Thought* observes, Roy's approach sought “to broaden

religion into a moral and rational pursuit, free from ritualism and fanaticism” (Guha 37).

His editorial work reinforced these ideals. Through journals such as *Sambad Kaumudi* and *Mirat-ul-Akbar*, he promoted debates on social reform, religious tolerance, and the rights of women—issues he considered inseparable from the project of nation-building. He believed that “political liberty must be rooted in moral liberty,” and that a plural, tolerant society was essential for a free India (Raja Ram Mohan Roy: *The First Liberal of India*).

Roy’s advocacy for press freedom, civil rights, and religious tolerance was not only ahead of its time but also laid the groundwork for the constitutional guarantees that independent India would later enshrine. His vision was of a society where reason, open debate, and mutual respect formed the foundation of public life.

Political Reform, Education, and the Role of Public Opinion

For Raja Ram Mohan Roy, political reform was not an abstract ideal but a practical necessity for India’s regeneration under colonial rule. He believed that governance must be grounded in accountability and representation, and he repeatedly urged the British administration to create structures that would allow Indians a voice in legislation (Chatterjee 35). His petitions called for the inclusion of educated Indians in the legislative process, arguing that “laws framed without the knowledge of the people’s circumstances cannot secure their welfare” (Guha, *Makers of Modern India* 114). Scholars like Bruce Carlisle Robertson note that Roy’s political demands were radical for his time, as he sought to “bridge Enlightenment liberalism with Indian traditions of governance” (Robertson 78).

Education formed the bedrock of Roy’s reformist strategy. He considered ignorance the greatest obstacle to political and social progress. To address this, he championed the introduction of Western sciences, philosophy, and modern pedagogy in Indian schools while retaining the best of indigenous learning traditions (Kopf 36–37). In his address to the Governor-General, Roy stressed that “enlightened education is the only sure foundation for a nation’s moral and political advancement” (Guha, *Raja Ram Mohan Roy: The First Liberal of India* 92). His founding of institutions like the Hindu College in Calcutta reflected this belief in education as an instrument of emancipation (Sarkar 45).

Public opinion, in Roy’s view, was the lifeblood of a just society. He argued that a government that ignored public opinion would inevitably lapse into arbitrary rule. The press, public meetings, and learned societies were all, for him, vehicles for shaping informed public discourse. In *Makers of Modern India*, Guha observes that Roy’s writings “displayed a conviction that an educated public could serve as a check on both native despotism and colonial arrogance” (115). As historian Aparna Vaidik notes, Roy’s advocacy for a free press was instrumental in shaping early Indian nationalist discourse (Vaidik 203).

Roy’s approach to political reform was thus holistic: he sought to unite institutional change with educational advancement and the cultivation of civic engagement. He recognized that reforms imposed from above would remain fragile unless they were supported by a population capable of critical thought and moral responsibility. This insight, rare for his time, placed him firmly in the lineage of modern liberal thinkers who understood that democracy was not only about institutions but also about the people who sustained them (Bayly 67).

Legacy and Contemporary Relevance of Roy’s Political Thought

Raja Ram Mohan Roy’s ideas outlived his own era, shaping the intellectual and political currents of modern India. His advocacy for constitutional governance, civil liberties, education, and religious tolerance anticipated the democratic framework enshrined in the Constitution of India more than a century later. As Ramachandra Guha notes, Roy “laid down the moral and intellectual foundations upon which later generations would build the case for self-rule” (*Makers of Modern India* 117). Historian Sugata Bose further argues that Roy’s vision of a secular and rational society influenced key figures in the Indian independence movement (Bose 89).

Roy’s influence extended beyond his lifetime through the Brahmo Samaj, which continued his

mission of social and religious reform. The emphasis on reasoned faith, equality, and moral uplift resonated with later leaders such as Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi, who adapted his principles to their own struggles for justice and independence (Sen 37). Gandhi's vision of *sarva dharma sambhava* (equal respect for all religions) bore an uncanny resemblance to Roy's universalist theology (Chakrabarty 112).

In contemporary India, where debates about freedom of expression, religious harmony, and the role of education in democracy remain pressing, Roy's thought retains striking relevance. His belief that "political liberty must be rooted in moral liberty" (Guha, *Raja Ram Mohan Roy: The First Liberal of India* 105) speaks directly to current concerns about balancing rights with responsibilities. Likewise, his insistence that public opinion, formed through an educated and informed citizenry, is the cornerstone of governance resonates in an age of mass media and rapid communication (Khilnani 56). As political theorist Partha Chatterjee asserts, Roy's legacy continues to challenge authoritarian tendencies in modern democracies by emphasizing the necessity of an engaged and enlightened citizenry (Chatterjee 210).

7. Conclusion

Raja Ram Mohan Roy's political thought was both a profound reflection of his historical context and a forward-looking vision that transcended his own era. Emerging during a period of colonial subjugation and rigid social orthodoxy, Roy championed a liberal philosophy rooted in constitutionalism, individual rights, educational reform, and religious tolerance. His advocacy for freedom of expression, equality before the law, and the dismantling of oppressive practices such as sati demonstrated his belief that true progress required both moral courage and institutional change. What set Roy apart was his ability to synthesize diverse intellectual currents. Drawing upon ancient Indian philosophical traditions, Islamic rationalist thought, and Enlightenment ideals from the West, he constructed a political vision that was neither derivative nor parochial. This blending of indigenous and foreign influences enabled him to speak convincingly to both Indian society and colonial authorities, framing reform not as imitation but as renewal.

Roy's political thought was also inherently inclusive. He envisaged a polity where governance would be accountable, where education would be universal, and where religion would be a matter of personal conscience rather than state imposition. His insistence on rational debate over dogma anticipated modern democratic discourse, while his emphasis on moral responsibility underscored the ethical foundation of public life. In the twenty-first century, as India navigates challenges of democracy, pluralism, and equitable development, Roy's ideas remain strikingly relevant. His intellectual legacy serves not only as a historical milestone but also as a living blueprint for a politics grounded in reason, justice, and human dignity.

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