

“A Pioneer of Hindoo Enlightenment”: Ram Mohan Roy’s Influence on the Abolition of Sati, 1829.

by Françoise Labrique
Wittenberg Class of 1999
Hartje Award

Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) was regarded by both his fellow Indians and by the British officials as one of “the most remarkable Indians...who might well be called the father of modern India.”¹ Roy’s persistent questioning of idolatry and religious superstition enabled him to challenge the religious validity of the Hindu rite of sati.² Roy’s argument that sati was not a religious duty for Hindu widows provided the British, who were concerned with maintaining religious toleration within the Empire, with a justification for abolishing this rite.

When Roy’s older brother, Jagmohan, died in 1811, his widow committed sati. Her death left Roy with the determination to end sati.³ Upon his arrival in Calcutta several years later, Ram Mohan Roy became active in social and educational reforms. He was a staunch supporter of British education and wrote several essays against polygamy and the treatment of women within Hinduism. His 1818 essay, *A Conference Between An Advocate For and An Opponent of Burning Widows Alive*, was a dialogue that illustrated Roy’s views and the irrational arguments of the supporters of sati. Fourteen months later, Roy published a more detailed *A Second Conference*. Taking the position of the “Opponent” to sati in this dialogue with an “Advocate” who argues that women lack the capability of true faith and “are burned in order to prevent them from going astray...”, Roy argued that “if we enumerate... women...as hav[ing] been deceived by men, and such men as deceived by women, I presume that the number of the deceived women would be found ten times greater than that of the betrayed men.”⁴ In this second essay, Roy delved deeper into arguments over scriptural detail and women’s place in Hindu society.

Although Roy abhorred the act of sati, his views on how to rid India of this rite differed greatly from those of the British. When Lord William Bentinck, the Governor-General of India, came to Calcutta in 1828 with the determination to abolish sati, he mistakenly looked to Ram Mohan Roy, an “enlightened native,” for support.⁵ Bentinck, unlike his predecessors who were concerned they would provoke religious upheaval through government intervention against sati, wanted to bring abolition through legislation. Roy, on the other hand, supported a more discreet approach. He suggested to Bentinck that the “practice might be suppressed quietly and unobservedly by increasing the difficulty and by the indirect agency of the police.”⁶ Roy’s concerns about British legislation is expressed in Bentinck’s 8 November 1829 Minute:

He apprehended that any public enactment would give rise to general apprehension; that the reasoning would be: ‘While the English were contending for power they deemed it politic to allow universal toleration and to respect our religion, but having obtained the supremacy their first act is a violation of their profession, and the next will probably be, like the Muhammadan conquerors, to force upon us their own religion.’⁷

Ram Mohan Roy was concerned that once the British interfered with sati by passing legislation, there would be no stopping them from interfering with all other aspects of Indian religious and social life. He opposed British missionary work in India and angered many Christians with his writings on Jesus.⁸ Roy was caught in a complicated web of conflicting opinions regarding sati. Like the majority of the British officials in India, Roy

abhorred the practice and wished to see it abolished. However, he was suspicious that British government officials and missionaries would eventually lose all respect for religious toleration and convert India to Christianity. Roy's campaign against sati "aroused the wrath of his countrymen."⁹ He not only accused Hinduism of superstition and exposing its women "to every misery,"¹⁰ but he was also viewed by many Indians as a British puppet. Christians and Hindus publicly denounced Ram Mohan Roy as a heretic and atheist.¹¹ One Indian writer even described him as a "fellow who has lost his own religion and can't find another."¹² He died in 1833 in England,

"deserted by everyone except two or three Scotch friends."¹³ Roy who was a lover of India and a proponent of women's rights in Hinduism¹⁴ was not credited with influencing the British decision to abolish sati by historians and scholars until the turn of the century, although some scholars such as Harry Field wrote that it was "not Hindu humanity but British legislation which ended suttee."¹⁵ Edward Thompson, in his book *Suttee* barely mentions Roy's contribution to the abolition, claiming "the credit is almost entirely personality, and it is Bentinck's."¹⁶ Ram Mohan Roy disrupted British India through his questioning of the practice of sati and was the catalyst that led to its abolition.

End Notes

¹ Rustom Pestonji Masani, *Britain in India: An Account of British Rule in the Indian Subcontinent* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 52.

² Sati (Suttee), the act of self-immolation whereby a Hindu widow voluntarily burns herself on her husband's funeral pyre. For further works exploring sati and British civilizing works: Aruind Sharma, Ajit Ray, Alak Heib and Katherine K. Young, ed., *Sati: Historical and Phenomenological Essays* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988); V.N. Datta, *Sati: A Historical, Social and Philosophical Enquiry into the Hindu Rite of Widow Burning* (New Delhi: Mandrar Publications, 1988).

³ The validity of this story has been questioned by some scholars such as V.N. Datta, *Sati: A Historical, Social and Philosophical Enquiry into the Hindu Rite of Widow Burning* (New Delhi: Mandrar Publications, 1988), 120. This has also been supported by Cromwell S. Crawford, *Ram Mohan Roy: Social, Political and Religious Reform in 19th Century India* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1987), 105. who claims: "the fiery death of his sister-in-law...forged in him a determination to save all the sisters of his land from this unworthy rite."

⁴ Sophia Dobson Collet, ed., *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy* (London: Harold Collet, 1900), 34.

⁵ Lord William Bentinck, "Minute." in *Lord William Bentinck*, ed. Demetrius Boulger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), 101.

⁶ "Minute," 101.

⁷ "Minute," 100.

⁸ Collet, *The Life and Letters*, 37. In 1820, Roy wrote *Precepts of Jesus and Appeal to the Christian Public* and the next year, *Second Appeal to the Christian Public*, which questioned the morals of some Old Testament stories and the divinity of Christ.

⁹ V.N. Datta, *Sati* (New Delhi: Mandrar Publications, 1988), 127.

¹⁰ Collet, *The Life and Letters*, 35.

¹¹ Jogendra Ghosh, *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy* (Calcutta: Oriental Press, 1885-1887), 285.

¹² Ghosh, *The English Works*, 287.

¹³ Brojendranath Banerjee, *Raja Rammohun Roy: Mission to England* (Calcutta, 1976), XII.

¹⁴ Roy focused his arguments against sati by defending the innocent women affected by the practice. The British, on the other hand, viewed sati as an act that violated all human decency.

¹⁵ Harry Field, *After Mother India* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 106.

¹⁶ Edward Thompson, *Suttee* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1928), 77-78.

Works Consulted

- Bentinck, Lord William. "Minute." In *Lord William Bentinck*, ed. Demetrius Boulger, 96-111. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892.
- Bose, Shib Chunder. *The Hindoos As They Are: A Description of the Manners, Customs and Inner Life of Hindoo Society in Bengal*. Calcutta: W. Newman & Co., 1881.
- Collet, Sophia Dobson, ed. *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*. London: Harold Collet, 1900.
- Crawford, S. Cromwell. *Ram Mohan Roy: Social, Political and Religious Reform in 19th Century India*. New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1987.
- Datta, V.N. *Sati: A Historical, Social and Philosophical Enquiry into the Hindu Rite of Widow Burning*. New Delhi: Mandrar Publications, 1988.
- Field, Harry. *After Mother India*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929.
- Kumar, Radha. *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1990*. London: Verso, 1993.
- Masani, Rustom Pestonji. *Britain in India: An Account of British Rule in the Indian Subcontinent*. London: Oxford University Press, 1960.
- Richter, Julius. *Indisch Missionsgeschichte (A History of Missions in India)*. Translated by Sydney H. Moore. Edinburgh and London: Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, 1908.
- Sharma, Aruind, Ajit Ray, Alak Hejib, and Katherine K. Young, eds. *Sati: Historical and Phenomenological Essays*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988.
- Thompson, Edward. *Suttee*. London: G. Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1928.