

Ram Mohan Roy's *Neo-Vedanta* and Role of *BrahmoSamaj* as a Socio-Religious Hindu Reform Movement of Nineteenth Century Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Pluralistic Bengali society experienced religious encountering from time immemorial. This encountering resulted in amalgamation and syncreticism that was a threat to the individual identity of every religion generally and Hinduism particularly. In the course of history, many reform movements were launched by Hindus and among these one is BrahmoSamaj that was a socio-religious reform movement. The founder of this movement was Ram Mohan Roy, who is called the father of socio-religious reform movements of nineteenth century Bengal. On one hand, he incorporates the ideas of Muslim Sufis, western scientific look, utilitarian and deistic thought for his socio-religious reform program, on the other hand, from Hindu philosophical schools, he adopted the Advaita Vedanta of Shankaracharya. In the Ram Mohan's selections of Advaita Vedanta the influence of Orientalist and Christian Missionaries can not be ignored. That facilitates him to design his neo-Vedanta which in its basis shares the concept of formless one God of Shankaracharya Advaita Vedanta. But it deviates from classical Advaita Vedanta in shifting of authority from Vedas to Upanishad, abandoning of idol worship, caste system, polygamy (kulinism) and widow burning. Because Shankar's Advaita Vedanta accepts all these Hindu socio-religious duties as part of his dharma.

Key Terms:BrahmoSamaj, Advaita Vedanta, neo-Vedanta, Orientalists.

1-INTRODUCTION

Hinduism witnessed the process of regeneration and reformation through various movements in history. Although these movements were flag holders of exactly individual philosophy, but generally these were following the route of spirituality, secularity and scientific aspects of Vedic customs. Whole interrogation was for constructing an egalitarian society. The foundation of which was emptied of caste, gender and race discrimination¹. Hindu social reform movements of fourteen to Eighteen century are treated under the influence of Islam, monotheistic and democracy². One of such social reformer and caste crusader was Sri Chaitanya (1486-1534), advocator of the *Vaishnava* school of *bhagtiyoga* in Bengal. His reform movements appeared distinct from other movements as no other reform movements of Bengal attained recognition and acceptance from whole India except his movement. The reason of proliferation and promulgation of this movement in India seemed to reside in its lacking of particular Bengalism³. Chaitanya's main concern was the exaltation of

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Krishna over all other Hindu deities and liberating and reforming Hinduism from *Brahmanical* oppression. He accuses caste system detrimental to Hindu society because it had shaken the foundation of Hindu society. He declares the model of universal brotherhood of man on the basis that the soul of every human being is the accommodation of Krishna. That was the key message that opens the door for *Brahmin* and *Shudras* equally⁴.

The reform movements of the nineteenth and twentieth century in Bengal brought socio-religious and intellectual revival and regeneration in Bengal which is termed as Bengal Renaissance. This period was replete with not only intellectual discussions, but also with the critique of prevalent socio-religious ideas. The credit of all these intellectual activities could be given to colonial rule, missionaries' criticism and English education in schools and colleges. These factors allowed the penetration of freedom of idea and post-Enlightenment rationalism in Hindu society. Traditional Hindu sacred text was critically evaluated in the light of these new ideas and Christian morality⁵. Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) is called the father of these socio-religious reform movement in Bengal who founded the *BrahmoSamaj* movement⁶.

2-RAM MOHAN

Ram Mohan was born in an orthodox *Vaishnava* family in the village of Radhanager (Mushidabād district) in 1772. His mother was from a *SaktaBrahmin* family who readily adopted the deities of her in laws after marriage⁷. She was considered strong character, religiously devoted and intelligent woman. Her religious devotion influenced Ram Mohan from his childhood and he was devoted to Vishnu in his childhood⁸. His family was trusted with court responsibilities of Muslim rulers of Murshidabād. Thus his childhood was vulnerable to many religious influences⁹.

2.1-His Early Education and its Influences on his Religious Ideology

He received his early education neither from Calcutta, the seat of the East India Company, nor to Hindu *Patshala*. But his early education was from the Muslim *Madrassa* in Patana (c.1780)¹⁰. This was due to the high degree of self-confidence of his family on their religious upbringing of him that they sent him to Islamic *Madrassa* at a tender age¹¹. There he learnt Arabic, Persian and became interested in *Sūfism*¹². Ram Mohan Roy's affinity to Hafiz's ecstatic humanity can be matched *Tuhfat* when he writes

“Be not after the injury of anyone,
For the rest you may do what you will,
For in our way and conduct,
There is no other sin, but this (injuring others)”¹³.

It was that stage when he was influenced most profoundly by *Mutazilites* and *Muwahiddun*¹⁴. This was the reason that he discussed the religious theology in his *Tuhfat* by borrowing all terms of Islamic theology¹⁵. This education marked

turning point when he abandoned image worship and fell out his father on this issue. Then he went to Tibet. His only hope to get united with his family was residing in the fulfillment of the condition that his father posed him. That before returning home Ram Mohan had to spend twelve years in Varanasi, the center of Hindu learning from where he learnt Sanskrit and Hindu sacred texts. While he was engaged in learning Sanskrit and Hindu sacred texts he also studied English that made his entrance possible in the East Indian Company in Calcutta¹⁶.

His life in Calcutta can be divided into two phases. The first phase comprised of the period from 1814-1820 in which his main focus was the reformation of Hinduism. During this period he also studied the Bible to equip himself with Greek and Hebrew languages. He tried to reform Hinduism through speeches and writings to circulate his idea in public. His all efforts made him succeeded in bringing the enlightened Hindus in close bondage with him. This bondage latter on attaining the form of an organized body *Atmiya Saba*, primarily a religious group. The main concern of this religious group was discussion of the religious matters and to revive the worship of the one True God contained in the Hindu scripture and in the teachings of the sages. *Atmiya Saba* was active from 1815-1819 but the publication of the *Tuhfat* gave Ram Mohan Roy designation of religious reformer¹⁷.

The *Tuhfat* was his first writing that highlighted his ideas regarding religious Universalism and religious pluralism. These two key concepts of religious Universalism and pluralism revolved around the simple faith in the oneness of True God. In it, he looks contemptuously at the socially deleterious religious practices of Hinduism. This pamphlet forecasts the genetic makeup of *BrahmoSamaj*. It also showed his appreciation and inclination towards western scientific look on the one hand and Utilitarian and Deist thought on the other hand¹⁸. In the introduction of the *Tahfat* he wrote about the universal thinking of human beings regarding on existence; the divine Being. Beside this man's inclination towards God/gods or to some particular form is an incomparable quality that man attains through trainings. He further adds that in society majority of people follow their spiritual leaders and in doing so, they waste their time on false legendary stories. And if any one of this majority tries to find the truth from religious texts, then that person is considered to be tempted by Satan and the distractions of his world and hereafter also¹⁹.

The second phase of Ram Mohan contained the period from 1820-1827. During this phase, he involved himself in various argumentative activities with Christians. The debates between Roy and Marshman of the Serampore mission was one example among many. Roy believes that the Bible has no superiority over other scriptures, but Marshman did not agree with Roy's opinion. The Marshman Challenged the selection of Roy in 'Precept of Jesus' and Marshamn devised seven positions to prove his point of view. Roy nullified his proves from the text of Bible²⁰. The culmination of his efforts in second face could be seen in

the foundation of the *BrahmoSamajin* 1828. That equipped him with the consciousness that Hindu reformation could not be possible until it was based on Hindu foundations²¹.

3-RAM MOHAN AND DOCTRINES OF *BRAHMO SAMAJ*

The foundation of the *BrahmoSamaj* was the symbolic representation of the idea that took many years to crystallize out in his mind. The foundation of this idea was laid on the fact that faith regarding the oneness of God must be fulfilled on the criteria of firstly, reason based judgment and secondly, reconciled with Scripture²². This was the turning point where he utilizes the *Advaita Vedanta* of Shankaracharyaacharya but with a new interpretation. This interpretation was based on the amalgamation of different approaches on rationality, scientific, western philosophy, and utilitarianism and to some extent Christian ethics. The resulted interpretation transformed the *Advaita Vedanta* to *neo-Vedanta* that was the key concept of the *BrahmoSamaj*. As an organization, it was started for social and religious reform, but it was passed through different phases in history. In the first phase, Ram Mohan established monotheism and the worship of one formless God²³. He considers Upanishad superior to all other sacred book as Upanishad captured the monotheistic spirit of Hinduism, based on reason not on faith. He rejects image worship because he believes that any Hindu practices which lack authenticity from the Upanishad, need to be discarded²⁴.

Ram Mohan shifted authority of the Hindu religious text from Vedas to Upanishad. This shifting of authority to Upanishad enabled him to fight for the emancipation of women, eradication of the caste system and propagation of western knowledge. He tries to safeguard the legal rights of women in his *Brief Remarks Regarding Modern Encroachment on the Ancient Rights of Female* 1822. He also works for the abolition of the *sati* (widow burning) and he fully supported the anti-*sati* Regulation passed by Bentinck's Government²⁵. The religious tenets of the *BrahmoSamaj* were embodied in the Trust deed²⁶. Trust deed included the ideas that *Brahman* (formless God) should be worshiped by utilizing *AdvaitaVedanta*. So no images were kept and no rituals were allowed. The participation in the worship of God in *BrahmoSamaj* was not credited on the basis of Hindu religion. The follower of any religion could participate in *Samaj's* worshipping practices. All religions were respected in *BrahmoSamaj* and this further tried to create the atmosphere of worldly brotherhood²⁷.

BrahmoSamaj failed to attract the Hindu masses due to his modern beliefs and also due to his emphasis on borrowing the ethical precepts of the Jesus teachings²⁸. This resulted in a limited membership of *BrahmoSamaj* from high caste and educated upper classes Hindus. In 1833 the death of Ram Mohan was the greatest loss of an ardent leader of the *Brahmo Samaj*²⁹. The revival of the declined *Brahmo Samaj* after the death of Ram Mohan Roy constitutes the second phase of *Brahmo Samaj*.

3.1-Debendra Nath Tagore and *BrahmoSamaj*

In this phase DebendraNath Tagore (1817-1905) managed the affairs of *BrahmoSamaj*. This era was very important for Brahmo because it was Debendra who succeeded in introducing two new elements to Brahmo faith; covenant and a scripture. The Covenant consisted of the confession of each *Brahmo* for his sympathy for its principle and objectives. While in scripture those texts of Upanishad are selected that confirms the religious experiences of the pure in heart³⁰. He prepared treaty of *Brahmo* that emphasized the devotee to pursue a religious life prescribed by *Vedanta* and worshiped the formless God by reciting the *GayatriMantra*³¹. He rejected the infallibility of the Vedas and his book *Brahmo Dharma* that is the compilation of the sacred text from Upanishad and *smrti*, attained the status of official catechism of this movement³². He criticizes Ram Mohan Roy for his inclination and preference of the Christian morality on Hinduism by considering the superiority of Hinduism over all religions³³. RabindraNath Tagore established the *Tattvabodhini Sabah* for promoting *Brahmo dhrama*³⁴. He tried to counter affect the spread of Christian missionaries' by starting a Bengali paper and a school for *Brahmo* missionaries³⁵. He was the one who acquiped the Brahmo with missionary character by adopting Vedanta as the base of Brahmo. They started enlisting the services of preachers and in the short duration of two years (1861-1941) the numbers of Samjes increases rapidly in Bengal³⁶.

3.2-Keshab Chandra and *BrahmoSamaj*

Keshab Chandra was inspired by Ram Mohan Roy and like him he had a wide range of reading religious text; Holy Quran, Avesta, Bible, Upanishad and Bhagvatagita. So he adopted the electric and synthetic approach in his philosophical and religious thoughts. He believed that God is creating force and that force can be realized through the harmony and designing of the nature³⁷. In 1857 he joined the hand with RabindraNath Tagore to revitalize the *Samaj* and their united efforts were succeeded to a significant level³⁸. KeshabSen left no stone unturned to make the *BrahmoSamajas* a dynamic all India organization. He took the responsibility of propagating and preaching *BrahmoSamaj*teachings, but in 1866 a split resulted in the portioning of the old *BrahmoSamaj* into two organizations. *BrahmoSamaj* of India was headed by Keshab Chandra While Adi- *BrahmoSamaj* was under the leadership of DebindraNath Tagore³⁹. The reasons of this split can be seen in the rift between Keshab and old members of BrahmoSamaj on on the issues of Reshab demand of abandoning the Brahman symbols of sacred threads, permission for female to join Brahmo and inter-caste marriage⁴⁰. KeshabSen aimed to conduct the inter caste and community marriages of *Brahmo* organization. Keshab Sen wanted to integrate the ethical teachings of Christ into *Brahmo* movement⁴¹. Latter on the *Brahmo Samaj* of India underwent another partition. But Keshab Sen services regarding fund raising for flood victims, the foundation of the schools for boys and girls, protest against child marriage, appeals for widow remarriage and inter caste marriages could not be ignored without acknowledging⁴².

4-RAM MOHAN ROY'S SELECTION OF VADANTA FOR *BRAHMO SAMAJ*

It is noteworthy here that the reinterpretation of the *Vedanta* was institutionalized in *BrahmoSamaj* by Ram Mohan. This ideology of Ram Mohan Roy revolved around the Universalistic interpretation of the Hinduism. His ideology on one side utilized the Indianized adaptation of Enlightenment and Unitarian Christianity. And on the other hand, he relied on monotheistic theology of Upanishad and *Vedanta*. The rationalized and modern interpretation of the selective monotheistic theology of Upanishad and of the *Advaita Vedanta* resulted in *neo-Vedanta* of Ram Mohan Roy. In its concern with the *neo-Vedanta* was humanistic that was devised for the betterment of the Bengali population by implementing socio-religious reforms. But here Ram Mohan unconsciously introduced the secularization of the Bengali strata by propagating the naturalistic interpretation of the religion⁴³.

Ram Mohan's selection of *Advaita Vedanta* to reform and revive Hinduism was not obvious due to following reasons. Firstly, Ram Mohan belonged to *Vaishnavas* and secondly, in Ram Mohan Roy's Bengal the *Vedanta* philosophy was less popular as compared to the other Hindu school of thoughts. Among these schools the most popular were the devotees of Krishna and the goddess Kali. Thirdly, Ram Mohan was the *Brahmin* Hindu who was trained in Muslim *Madrasa* in Arabic, Persian and Islamic theology. But he abandoned this Islamic framework for the promotion of particular *AvaitaVedantic* Hinduism⁴⁴. Then what made him to select Vedanta? The answers of this question seem to reside in the socio-religious and political condition of Bengal. Ram Mohan appeared to represent that age when Hinduism was evaluated and interpreted by the Europeans in term of its origin and decay, between its past and present⁴⁵. These Europeans comprised of Orientalists and Christian missionaries whose role in the Ram Mohan Roy's selection of *Avaita Vedanta* is very significant. Orientalists' coinage of the assumption of the golden age of Hinduism that depicts the pristine Hindu culture played the key role in shaping the Ram Mohan's ideology. As these Orientalists considered the Hinduism of their time a mere corruption and decay of the traditions due to prejudice, polytheism, image worship and gender discrimination⁴⁶. Their clear demarcation of Hinduism resulted in popular Hinduism and real Hinduism. They showed no interest in popular Hinduism, but considered real Hinduism as a set of hard and fast doctrine that were derived from the Hindu sacred text which they placed as religious authority⁴⁷. Enlightened Orientalists used Unitarianism and humanism⁴⁸ the criterion of classical golden age of Hinduism that found culmination in the monotheistic concept of *Avaita Vedanta*. The philosophical interpretation of the Upanishad and Gita appeared to appeal their interest and agenda. These texts also seemed to be anti-clerical and anti-ritualistic that supported their western intellects⁴⁹.

Voltaire depicts this pristine age in his claim that "the first Brahmins, who were kings and pontiffs all at once, could establish religion only on the basis of universal reason"⁵⁰. He further said "that our Holy Christian religion is solely

based upon the ancient religion of Brahma”⁵¹. It could be said these were oriental's selective text methodology of Upanishad and their axiom of the pristine monotheistic concept of God that pursued Ram Mohan toward *AdvaitaVedanta*.

Christian missionaries in Nineteenth century considered Upanishad and *Advaita Vedanta* the climax of Indian thought as they considered it the transitional point that would enable these Hindu monotheistic teachings to attain accomplishment in Christianity. These missionaries envisioned in *AdvaitaVedanta* the preparatory phase of mass conversion of Hindu to Christianity. They believed that universal message of the Christ is present in *Advaita Vedanta* priority to satisfy their inclusivist Christian spirits⁵². These were the socio-religious encountering factors that seemed to highlight the *Advaita Vedanta* as a central key to reform Hinduism.

Ram Mohan got the final impetus for *AdvaitaVedantic* Hinduism from the criticism and polemic published literature of Christian Missionaries on Hindu Doctrine. He published his apologia for Hindu Doctrine in *TheBrahminicalMagazine* in 1821 and 1823. The controversy began in 1821 when *SamacharDarpan* published a letter that was raising doubts on Hindu Shastra and inviting for satisfactory answers. This letter was the continuation of the missionary polemic against Hindu religion. Ram Mohan gave defense to Hinduism and tried to prove that the doctrine of Hinduism was more logical than the missionary's doctrine of the trinity. In 1823 Serampore Missionaries published and distributed literature that bitterly criticized Vedas with the charge of atheism as knowledge of God is unattainable by men. These all objections that they raised were from the Ram Mohan Roy's translation of *An Abridgement of Vedanta* that he published in 1816. Ram Mohan Roy later gave satisfactory answers of all these objections⁵³. Similarly; Serampore Missionaries in 1823 published polemical literature that criticized Vedas as atheistic in nature and placed Hinduism on the lower rungs of evolutionary plane⁵⁴.

Here it could be concluded that the selection of the *Advaita Vedanta* for Hindu reformation and revival of Ram Mohan Roy was interconnected with the socio-religious interaction of the Christianity and Hinduism. Here the rationalistic contribution of the M'utazilite school of Muslims cannot be ignored also. The real credit on one hand appeared to go to Orientalists axiom of classical golden age of Hinduism and pristine monotheistic concept of God in Hinduism which Christian missionary tried to gain mass conversion for Christian faith. And on the other hand the attack and criticism of Christian missionaries to point out the fallacy of the theological doctrine of Hinduism, Missionaries considered theism of the Hindu religion inadequate at Hindu school did not contain monotheistic beliefs and moral code for social life⁵⁵.

Among the six philosophical schools of Hinduism only *Advaita Vedanta* is that school that describes the nature of the relationship between the creator and creation. The culmination of this relationship could be seen in the monotheistic *Advaita Vedanta* of Shankaracharyaacharya. That emphasized that *Brahman* is *atman* and *atman* is *Brahman*. *Advaita Vedanta* of Shankaracharyaacharya was reinterpreted by Ram Mohan Roy into *neo-Vedanta*. What was the link between this traditional *Advaita Vedanta* and *neo-Vedanta* of Ram Mohan Roy?

The *neo-Vedanta* of Ram Mohan Roy and *Advaita Vedanta* of Shankaracharyaacharya shares the common ground of monotheistic Brahman. But these both differ from each other regarding authority of the religious Hindu sacred book. *Advaita Vedanta* of Shankaracharyaacharya considers the Vedas the absolute repository of truth. While according to *neo-Vedanta* the spiritual experiences are primary in nature and Vedas are relative truth as these lacked records of the experiences of enlightened *rishis*. Thus Vedas are not infallible and vulnerable to criticism. Ram Mohan Roy took the task of reform movement by abolishing caste prejudice, widow remarriage, child marriage and *sati*⁵⁶ by putting the metaphysical non-duality to political and ethical domain. This is an attempt to relate the Absolute with empirical world which demarcates *neo-Vedanta* from *Advaita Vedanta*. In classical *Advaita* the liberation remains linked with the metaphysics unification of *atman* with *Brahman*⁵⁷.

5-CONCLUSION

In the end it can be concluded that Ram Mohan Roy utilized the approach of neo-Vedanta for his socio-religious reform movement. His neo-Vedanta was resulted due to his adoption of monotheistic Hindu theological philosophy of Shankar's Advaita Vedanta that was reinterpreted in Muslim Sufis, M'utazilite, western logics, Utilitarianism and deism framework. But in his selection of the Advaita Vedanta the contribution of Orientalists and Christian Missionaries can not be ignored who succeeded in setting the axiom of classical golden age of Hinduism in its pristine concept of one formless God in Hinduism. But during this course Ram Mohan Roy fails to maintain link with Shankar's Advaita Vedanta when he rejected the authority of Vedas, caste system, polygamy and widow burning. Ram Mohan worked hard to promulgate worshiping of one God, widow remarriage and authority of the Upanishad.

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