

Chapter II

Raja Rammohun Roy and Vedanta

Rammohun Roy is a janus figure in Indian Renaissance. His activities and interests can be best understood in the light of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century traditions, which are relevant for such an understanding. The elements of modernity in him and the break with tradition are of help to discover Rammohun Roy's image as the 'father of Modern India'. It is in the light of this situatedness in a tradition and the criticism of culture grounded in the reinterpreted sacred texts that we can evaluate the role played by Vedānta in Rammohun's thoughts and activities.

But before we turn to that a few words on the expressions 'tradition' and 'modernity' and the relation between them are called for. Etymologically 'tradition' means that which has been transmitted or handed down to us by our forefathers. In religion 'tradition' means 'safe-keeping of a vault'. In this sense 'scriptures' are parts of tradition. But tradition does not mean incorporation of all that our forefathers did. Nor does it simply mean something old and obsolete. Tradition is what we choose to preserve and maintain. The element of choice presupposes the value-orientation of a community. 'Tradition' is a value term, and speaking about it we are making value judgements. 'Tradition' is different from traditionalism where there is conservatism in upholding a tradition with a vengeance or as a

reaction against changes in the customs, practices and institutions of society.

The essence of modernity is change. Changes occur and recur in it. Human society is a record of wonderful changes. Changes may take place either consciously or unconsciously, suddenly or gradually, thoroughly or partially. In the former cases it is called revolution, otherwise it may be called evolution or reform.

As to the relation between tradition and modernity we may say that although society exists as a time process, to understand the social structure we must view it as a historical phenomenon seeking the changing facts as well as observing and marking the underlying continuity which is provided through the sustaining forces of custom, mores, sanctions, and agencies of coercion and control. The two are inseparable aspects of one and the same social phenomenon, and though they can be distinguished, they can hardly be separated. Social changes presuppose a tradition, however slight, and tradition implies social changes however slow. Let us now see how tradition and modernity shaped Raja's thoughts and activities. If the above observation is unexceptionable, we can see that a sharp tradition-modernization dichotomy is not intellectually conducive to the appreciation of the cultural processes – the cauldron of large scale industrial, social and economic changes in the colonial India to which Rammohun Roy belonged.

Indeed if by tradition we mean a stable set of ideas and institutions, then the eighteenth century society in which Rammohun Roy was born was too fluid and too complex to be viewed in the light of such a simplicistic analysis. Nor was progress so unilinear in the nineteenth century as to justify an absolute tradition-modernisation polarity¹. However with the advent of the British there were changes in the external realities, and adjustments in the shape of new concepts, structures and innovations become requisites to avoid crises or collapse. Even if the colonial India did not exactly experience a tradition – modernity polarity, there indeed was an interface of the traditional authority and contemporary realities. Indian society was a traditional society in the sense that it was controlled and guided by the prescriptions of the *Smṛti* (*Smṛti* – *s'āsita* – *samāj*). It was marked by a bewildering polytheism, by hundreds of useless hardships and privations regarding eating, drinking, good and bad omens, not to speak of the distinction of castes, the practices of *sati*, child-marriage, prohibition of widow-marriage etc. All these were said to receive the sanctions of the *S'āstras* which expressed the controls of transgression in the shape of *dāna*, *dakṣhinā*, *s'uddhi* and *prāyas'citta*.

Deploring the situation, which was tolerated by the masses, Rammohun wrote, "... the multitude of religious rites and ceremonies and the laws of purification have totally disqualified them from undertaking any difficult enterprise ..."². The liberal ideas from the West, the secular ideas of rights of man, and the critical spirit of the West prompted by its

rationalism came face to face with change resisting social and religious authority. It is in this background that we wish to explain the Janus-like character of Rammohun. He looked back to a tradition in search of monotheism, and looked forward to a sort of Protestant reformation within the Hindu milieu. He is, properly speaking, the Martin Luther of modern India. When he looked back he distinguished between traditions and thereby suggested that 'tradition' is not what has been the case in an unbroken manner. There was the tradition of *Smārtas* implying idol worship and rituals. Rammohun did not care for it. He criticized idol-worship in his private conversations and public speeches, in articles, pamphlets, and a number of special works. "... I opposed the advocates of idolatry ...", he wrote. "I published various works and pamphlets against their errors, in the native and foreign languages ... I endeavoured to show that the idolatry of the Brahmans was contrary to the practice of their ancestors, and the principles of their ancestors, and the principles of their ancient books"³. Instead he went further towards the reified monism of Samkara, which was thought to epitomize the best of religious insights.

Ramanuja's philosophy did not appeal to him much. He rather availed himself of his intimate knowledge of the *Tantras* to bring about an apotheosis of the uncatagorizable *Brahman*, by turning it into a deity. The *Upniṣads* are in fact a mixed bag containing suggestions for monism, dualism as well as pluralism. Commentators have worked over interpreting elusive texts in support of their favourite predilections. But somehow, may

be, as guided he was by a motive of purging Hindu religious life, he found in Samkara's *bhāṣya* a kindred note much to his liking. It should be carefully noted that it was not a case of revivalism. Rather it was a regeneration of one's cultural heritage. It was a discovery of and search for a religion philosophically oriented as monotheism.

In his English and Bengali translations of the *Māndūkya*, *Kaṭha*, *Kena* and *Īśa Upaniṣads*, Rammohun speaks of himself as following "the gloss of the celebrated Sunkuracharyu"⁴. The *Upaniṣads* declare that Brahman is everything, *sarvam khalvidam brahmah*, that it is the truth of truth, *satyasya satyam*, and that the *ātman* and *brahman* are one, *ayam ātman brahmah*. These statements can be understood either literally or figuratively and interpreted accordingly, Samkara belonged to the line of thinkers who understood them literally. He upheld the non-duality, *advaita* of the *ātman* and *brahman* and as *brahman* is the only reality for the *Upaniṣads*, he contended that the material world and the finite *jīva* have no reality of their own. They are due to extraneous adjuncts, *upādhis*.

Rammohun found a firm footing in the Vedānta with Samkara's interpretation, in the light, of course, of his own understanding. Naturally, his crusade against idol-worship was categorical and straight forward. In the preface to his translation of the *Īśa Upaniṣad* Rammohun refuted all the arguments against image-worship. He asserted that in worship 'all that bear figure and appellation are inventions'⁵. He quoted from *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* – 'adore God alone' and said that the worship of figured beings

indicated in the *Śāstras* 'is only applicable to those who are incapable of elevation of their minds', 'for the benefit of those who are not possessed of sufficient understanding'. He denied that ceremonies and rituals have any necessity for true religion. For, any person who has "a becoming idea of God's superiority and who is capable of elevating his mind will not worship figured beings'. Instead he devised a pure form of divine worship negating all sorts of popular image-worships and ceremonials.

It is to be noted that Rammohun did not accept Samkara's Advaita doctrine in its purity. He was trying to propagate the metaphysical idea of the Advaita as a religion. The absolute or the Supreme Being is not undifferentiated or indeterminate. Rather, he is beyond the apprehension of the senses, out of the reach of the corporeal organs of action and is without origin. He is everlasting, all pervading, omnipresent, absolutely incorporeal and unchangeable. It is he whom wise men consider as the origin of the universe⁷. The Supreme Being thus possesses all the divine attributes in an infinite degree and there is nothing secular about him. He alone is the object of propitiation and worship. In a tract called the *Religious Instructions Founded on Sacred Authorities*, Rammohun wrote in 1829 that worship of the Supreme Being "signifies the contemplation of his attributes. This worship was to be performed by bearing in mind that the Author and Governor of this visible universe is the Supreme Being ..."⁸.

Rammohun proposes a scheme of offering prayer directly to the one God. "The sole regulator of the universe is but one ... whose worship is the

chief duty of mankind”⁹. “The illustrious Sankaracharya declared ... the adoration of the Supreme being, to be entirely independent of Brahmanical ceremonies”¹⁰.

And yet he could not accept Advaita Vedānta entirely. This is shown by the fact that the sacred texts recommended by him included besides *Brahmasūtra* and passages from Samkara’s commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*, such texts as *Mahānirvāna Tantra*, *Goudapāda-Kārikā* and *the Gītā*¹¹. He also referred to Manu’s *Samhitā* and *Viṣṇupurāṇa*. Any one interpreting Upanisadic or Vedantic texts has to come to grips with the understanding of *māyā*. The interpretation of *māyā* becomes, in Rammohun’s understanding the ‘conventional idealist doctrine of dependence of matter on spirit and the creation of the world by God’¹². His originality lay in the avoidance of the extreme monism of Samkara. The term *māyā* implies primarily the power of creation, and secondarily its effect. Rammohun says :

The Vedanta, by comparing the world with the misconceived motion of a snake, when a rope really exists, means that the world like the supposed snake, has no independence existence, that it receives its existence from the Supreme Being. In the 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, so the existence of the world is dependent upon the being of God ...¹³.

Roy's monotheism was watered not by Samkara alone, but was fertilized also by his access to the *Quran* through Arabic and the *Bible* through Hebrew. In point of fact he wanted to discover monotheism in his own tradition, while Islam and Christianity served him as models. Although Rammohun always believed himself to be a follower of Hinduism, his ideas in the field of religion and ethics were worked out under the impact of the monotheistic doctrines of Christianity and Islam. His fierce opposition towards idolatry has been attributed to the influence of Islam at a tender age. Rammohun, with his bearings in Islamic rationalism and other modes of relativisation, finding an affinity with Unitarianism, attempted to extract an ethical universalism from Christianity by shifting the "moral precepts" from the historical and doctrinal parts of the *New Testament*, since the latter were open to doubt and disputation in India, especially the unconvincing "miraculous revelations which are much less wonderful than the fabricated tales handed down to the natives of Asia". The moral doctrines would be intelligible alike to the learned and unlearned.

Rammohun's monotheistic religious position was close to the Unitarianism. So persuasive an advocate was he that in a discussion with a Presbyterian missionary on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, he won the latter over to Unitarian views. The Presbyterian Church was protestant in intent though it adhered to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity: God as Father,

as Son, and as Holy Spirit. Presbyterianism enjoyed popularity in the eighteenth century England, and carried on missionary activity in India during Rammohun's times. It is important to notice that this Christian doctrine of the Trinity is one of the major grounds for Islamic criticism of Christian Theology. To the Muslim it seems a movement towards polytheism.

Indeed, Rammohun's monotheism can be attributed to his training in three separate strands of philosophy. His acquaintance with the Perso-Arabic literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the study of Vedānta and other philosophical works in Sanskrit and his close contact with the Unitarians and other Christian missionaries among the European inhabitants of India—all these had their influence in the formative period of his thought. Rammohun's ideas of Islamic and Christian monotheism were not unqualified. He endeavoured to argue for the essential Islam and basic Christianity as he did for the true import of Hindu scriptures. His interpretation of Islam was written in his youth and it was written in Persian. It went unnoticed by the Moslem community, and an English translation of the work was not published until after his death. This work, entitled *Tuhfatul Muwahhiddin* or *Gift to Monotheists*¹⁴ discloses his belief in the unity of the Deity, his infinite power and finite goodness and in the immortality of the soul. His *The Precepts of Jesus* was, however, vigorously attacked by the Christian men of divinity in and around Calcutta. David Kopf claims that Rammohun was using Unitarianism in an Indian way in

his crusade against idolatry and his advocacy of monotheism making a kind of cultural transference from the 'synoptic gospels to Sankaracharya'¹⁵. This belies the observation of some writers¹⁶ on Rammohun that whatever role Raja played in nineteenth century India was the result of Western education. It was nothing special in that significant changes were already brought about by the entire group of English educated men and no single person could be given the credit for that. We may also note that years before the publication of *The Precepts of Jesus*, Rammohun published the translations of the *Brahama-Sūtra*, the five *Upaniṣads* and Samkara's *Ātmānatmāviveka*.

The foregoing considerations should bring home the idea that Rammohun was not a traditionalist *simpliciter*. He discovered his own tradition, and in the course of his discovery he laid the foundations of comparative study of religions. He implied that every religion has a philosophical core, and as for Hinduism it was Vedānta. It is also a noteworthy fact that Vedānta was not there in Bengal at that time. Nadia as the centre for Sanskrit learning was famous for its study of Navya - Nyāya . Except Madhusudan Saraswati, there has not been Vedantins of repute and significance. We may say a distant forerunner of Rammohun was Chaitanaya, and he was ambivalent in his attitude towards Vedānta .

Rammohun's faith in monotheism went side by side with his fierce crusade against idolatry. These two processes of reconstruction and

criticism went together. These may be said to be the two sides of the same process. At the age of sixteen – an age hovering between boyhood and youth, this fearless man wrote a tract on “The idolatrous system of the Hindus”. The spirit of monotheism, which he imbibed in later life from Vedānta and the contemplation of the eternal beatitude of the Supreme Being, went hand in hand with his battle against idol-worship. The opposing processes of restoration of faith in a single God and the negative task of waging war against polytheism went together. In the introduction to his *Abridgement of the Vedānta*, he states,

My constant reflection on the inconvenient or rather injurious rites, introduced by the peculiar practice of Hindu idolatry which more than any other pagan worship destroys the structure of society, together with compassion for my countrymen have compelled me to use every possible effort to awaken them from their dream of error ... and my making them acquainted with their scriptures enabled them to contemplate with true devotion the unity and omnipresence of Nature’s God”¹⁷.

He went on to say that idolatry is traced in the *Upaniṣads* by those who are totally ignorant and are unable to raise themselves to the spiritual level. In other words, monotheism, as he conceived it to be the true meaning of Vedānta, was inconsistent with idolatry. In the introduction to the

English translation of the *Māndukya Upaniṣad*, he condemned idol-worship as the "... source of prejudice and superstition and of the total destruction of moral principles as countenancing criminal inter-course, suicide, female murder and human sacrifice"¹⁸.

The religious beliefs of people in every country are connected with social customs and moral practices. The social and moral frontier of Raja's faith was the unquenching spirit in containing idol-worship and abolishing the practice of 'sati'. Rammohun's attempt was basically a modern affair inasmuch as he did not accept anything as tradition simply because he found it. His monotheism was propagated not merely as an armchair philosophy. It was a living faith in that it marked the unity between the universal and the individual, between God and man, between humanity and nationality. The spirit of enquiry and investigation, which was his passion, inaugurated a age of reason in India. There have been conceptual and philosophical debates in ancient days. But none dared to criticize ancient texts and mobilize public opinion to purge society of its age-old customs. In terms of his endeavours in these directions he enshrined reason as the arbiter of social practice and this prevented him from lapsing into crude, bare-faced cultural relativism with its paraphernalia's of social and moral evils.

We may now look at his role, which we have earlier likened to Martin Luther. According to Rabindranath Rammohun's greatest achievement was his Bengali translation of Vedānta¹⁹. With this discursive Bengali prose was born. Luther in translating the *Bible* in German did a

similar service to German prose. In decades that followed reforms have been suggested in vernacular, but the practice was doubtlessly pioneered by Rammohun. It is not denied that land deeds and legal documents were being written in Bengali. But that was a prose of a different *Genre* than the prose of Rammohun's Vedānta. And hence Rabindranath's evaluation that Rammohun's publishing the books in Bengali antedated the literary renaissance that followed within decades.

The way religion is classified today is called typology. The dominant mode of each religion is sought to be captured. The influence of three typologies is discernible in Rammohun – religion of majestic from Islam, where God is so great that man is totally insignificant; religion of love from Christianity and religion of soul from Samkara Vedānta. Religion of majesty has two sources; there can be two kinds of majesty –Islamic and Judaic (Rammohun knew Hebrew well). There are discussions on the sublime in Kant's aesthetics. Colridge in his essay "Table Talk" says that this has come from Jewish influence. Rammohun, when he was formulating the *Brāhma* faith, or if we care to attend to the songs composed by him, we will find that the emphasis is on an over majestic God and not on love. There may be the motivation, namely, to what extent Vedānta can be secularized bypassing Rāmānuja or in other words to what extent Rāmānuja can be made non-sectarian.

It is not quite correct to say that his Vedantism was in its main features a reconstitution of the Rāmānuja's line²⁰. Rāmānuja stands for a sect. In the awareness of Brahma as Saguna there is a Swagata bheda

between Jiva and Brahma. Worship follows from this relationship. Vishnu is the object of the religious attitude. The sign of Vishnu is a part of the ritual of worship. Rammohun wanted to leave out this ritual. In contrast in the *brāhmadharma* of Devendranath Tagore the emphasis is on love and this has been manifested in many of the songs of Rabindranath on whom the father's influence was unmistakable.

This pole of loving relationship with God is almost absent in Rammohun. It can be said that Rammohun is suffering from a rationalistic fallacy. Religion is the total man's reaction to the absolute. As Kant says, religion is morality touched with emotional fulfilment. If the emotional element is left out religion cannot reflect the total man. Rammohun attempts to produce a syncretic ethical universalism, which could not only forge a consensual, relatively secular morality grounded in uncamouflaged pragmatic interest. The fact that various sections of the Bengal elite could unit across differences about women or education, on issues relating to revenue, judicial matter and freedom of the press reveals a common interest in demarcating an area of civil life separable from religion. But lines were being drawn differently — the frequent recall of religious sanctions to define the civil added to the confusion. There is a feeling that secular ethic floundered on veiled proselytising ambitions or in other areas on the conflation of religious and civil laws (primarily derived from Islamic and Hindu religious texts). Radhakanta Deb protesting against the abolishing of widow immolation later became a founder of dharماسabha and Rammohun found it necessary to recall the *Śāstras* while arguing against customary

social norms regarding sati or mal-practice regarding property rights for women.

It has been said that Rammohun's modernism was half hearted as '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 framework. We remain content to say that such criticisms tend to put Rammohun in a mistaken perspective. The many and far-reaching ramifications of his prolific genius — whether his prose writings in English, Bengali, Sanskrit, Arabic or Persian; his urge for social reforms or his proposals for the possible mode of education to be imparted to the Indians — were centred in one purpose. The root of his life was enlightenment through religion. As is rightly said by his biographer, Miss Sophia Dobson Collett '... the secret of the whole movement was religious.'

The Vedānta provided him with the cultural category while his interpretation of it as monotheistic yielded a comprehensive, holistic theory, which provided a comprehensive critique of culture, society and ideology. It laid bare the structure of society, and the range of its transformation. Raja's monotheistic Vedānta provided us with an idea of the paradigms of social change — why one paradigm is better than another. It enabled us to consider the comparative adequacy of ways of life that might claim our allegiance. In such humanitarian vision lies Raja's lure and his share in India's modernity.