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Rammohan Roy

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Foreword

**RAMMOHAN ROY: A CATALYST OF INDIAN
SOCIO-RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION**

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There are multiple ways of responding to realities. Of these, attention may be drawn to two ways of encountering realities in our socio-religious existence. While one group would strive obstinately to remain the same, the other would keep itself open to the unfolding realities and try to integrate the best from them so that the socio-religious realities could constantly evolve to serve better the needs of the human race. As the first of these two considers itself as being divinely ordained and intends to happily remain the same for ever, considering itself as an absolute and unchangeable reality, it would adopt more of a fundamentalist attitude and would shun any prospect for progress. However, the open approach to reality enables its subscribers to look at the socio-religious realities more as human and, hence, evolving to suit the constantly unravelling personal and social consciousness. Accordingly, an open approach would make socio-religious realities more dynamic and progressive in order to recognize and respond to the exigencies of life.

These approaches are visible particularly among the adherents of various religions. Those who are open to other religions would welcome the best of the knowledge and practices in order to purify and enhance, unite and strengthen themselves, whereby they would become more dynamic and capable of responding to the needs of the time, thus, making themselves more relevant to the changing times and places. If we closely analyse the dynamics of different religions like Hinduism or Christianity in adapting themselves to the changing needs of the people and places, we would understand their ability to let themselves evolve without losing their core identity. Although there would be

simultaneous movements within such religions to resist changes and remain the same and, thus, to be more fundamentalist, the growing religious consciousness at certain stages would indicate a paradigm shift gradually setting in. Although it is possible that such a paradigm shift may be gradually introduced, when it results from a total distrust of the religious hegemonies and oppressive social structures, it may turn out to be more urgent and, sometimes, violent in abolishing ineffective and malfunctioning systems, and in establishing new patterns that would enhance personal and collective human existence.

It is interesting to note that these transformative processes begin to set in mostly through the instrumentality of one individual or a group of individuals whose consciousness experiences a necessity for change. It arises out of their acute awareness of the unsuitability of the systems and structures that are unjust, oppressive, and dehumanizing. Such an altered consciousness usually results from the fact that they are exposed to the reality of other religions and societies by way of their socio-religious encounters, their deeper study and reflections upon the sources of religious faith and social structures, and their realization that it is necessary to change in order to be authentic persons and creative and responsible societies; simultaneously, they believe that it is also possible for them to work out better alternatives without losing the essence of belonging to a particular religion or society. In this context, it is noteworthy that such individuals are able to understand the spirit and meaning of the religious scriptures and law books that go far beyond the literal understanding of them. They are convinced that such sources, be it religious or secular, are to be interpreted in view of facilitating better integration of life at personal and communitarian levels, leading to the establishment of more authentic and humane systems of social existence. For, as it is reiterated by the *Gaudium et spes*, a document issued by the Vatican Council II, human person is “the subject and goal of all social institutions” (GS 25), and if any of the systems do not contribute towards the enhancement of human life and dignity,

they must be either reformed or renewed, or should be definitively eliminated for good.

The life and activities of Rammohan Roy, who is credited with the titles such as “Father of Modern India” or “Maker of Modern India” offer us a telling example of a person who could integrate the best from various religions and societies that he encountered during his lifetime and could make a positive transformation in his life; this led to his pioneering activities in setting a roadmap of social and religious transformation in India, which touched and changed the life of his compatriots. In fact, due to his ingenuity and courage, he could bring about an epoch-making transformation in the life of modern India, for which he fought almost single-handedly. If not for the drastic and forward looking steps that Rammohan could initiate, probably the destiny of India itself would have been different.

Having known the religion of his parents, i.e., Hinduism, in depth, to which he belonged all through his life and invested his energies to renew its true spirit and reform its structures and practices, Rammohan Roy cherished an openness towards religions and peoples of other faiths. The deeper understanding of a number of languages, such as Bangla, Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit, which he acquired as a young boy and the opportunities to be familiar with the theological positions of different religions paved the way for Rammohan to shape his own thought and action patterns. Indeed, with the openings he had, he developed more into an independent thinker, who eventually took a lead in conceiving religious and social regulations for the sake of enhancing the life of individual human beings and the society as a whole. As he became convinced of certain noble teachings and best practices that would contribute to the wellbeing of humanity, he made his earnest attempts to bring them to public attention even if his attempts were misunderstood or challenged by his fellow-citizens. For example, *Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness* which Rammohan wrote shows his openness to other religions and religious scriptures and his readiness to integrate the

best teachings and practices into the life of all so that humanity as a whole could benefit from them.

Being a thorough religious person who had an unquenchable quest for the ultimate truth, he did not settle for the available understanding of the sacred scriptures or for the *status quo* of social existence. As he could delve deep into the inner recesses of the sacred scriptures, not only of Hinduism, but also of Islam and Christianity, among others, Rammohan was strongly convinced that true religion was strictly monotheistic. Although his conviction in this regard originally came from his association with Islam and Quran, gradually he made sincere attempts to establish that Hinduism too had been built upon the same foundation and, therefore, there was no need for Hindus to feel belittled when it comes to the true monotheistic beliefs. Armed with the languages of the sacred scriptures of both Hinduism and Islam, and later of Jainism and Christianity, Rammohan could explore the sacred scriptures of Hinduism as well as other religions and make strenuous efforts to integrate the best from other religions into his Hindu religious faith. Instead of creating an amalgamation of the best from other religions, his effort was to go into the depth of the sacred scriptures, and look for such noble visions that could create a renewed humanity within the precincts of Hinduism itself. Although, at that time, his attempt was not necessarily embraced by many, we could see its impact factor in terms of the socio-religious transformation that sprang from the initiatives that Rammohan had started during his lifetime.

After having realized that the social structures of India require thorough revamping, especially due to the injustice and inequality meted out to various classes and categories of people, for example, among different castes and between man and woman, he initiated a number of reforms within the society. If we could understand the dynamics of the society of nineteenth century India, we would greatly appreciate his courage and sagacity which enabled him to stand firmly against all sorts of social bigotry and superstitious practices. It is of great importance that Rammohan

Roy was in the forefront in the nineteenth century Bengal to fight for the rights of women, freedom of the press, religious tolerance, etc., and made all possible attempts to campaign for a new judicial system that would cater to the common welfare of all the people. His fight against the social evils, such as untouchability, discrimination against women, particularly visible in the inhumane practice of *Sati*, etc., shows Rammohan's pioneering steps to reform the Hindu India of the medieval times. His groundbreaking initiatives to empower women in a conventional society which did not recognize the identity of women and made every effort to restrict even their rights to ancestral property and to remarry in case their husbands meet with untimely death, etc., show his conviction that a civilized and healthy society should accord rights to all members irrespective of their differences in terms of gender, caste, colour, or creed.

In fact, we see that such a persistent call was felt by Rammohan after he had understood the true nature of Hinduism through his familiarity with other religions, particularly Islam. As a true Hindu, instead of condemning the religion of his ancestral faith due to its failures and weaknesses, he adopted a positive attitude which, in turn, enabled him to delve deep into the inner recesses of Hinduism. It led him to the realization that the best that he encountered in other religions could be located in the sacred scriptures of Hinduism itself, although the later additions and interpretations had made it inaccessible and impractical for ordinary Hindus. In order to remedy this situation, he sagaciously undertook deeper study of various sacred scriptures, and his insistence and commitment to study each scripture in its own original language is certainly praiseworthy. While many of the practicing faithful of different religions did not have the knowhow and the interest to study their own sacred scriptures in original languages, here was a seeker who walked the extra mile to unearth the wisdom from the original texts on his own and to integrate the best into his life vision and to open up the same path for his compatriots. In this attempt, even though he had to face the wrath

of the majority conventional society, he remained unperturbed all through and made renewed attempts to recoup all his resources to fight against them and to bring about reform of the oppressive structures and emancipation for the victimized masses in the Indian society.

A man of strong convictions and determined action programme, Rammohan Roy opened up his wisdom and resources to transform younger generations through his persistent attempts to start new educational ventures. While he learnt the classical languages such as Sanskrit, Arabic, Hebrew, and Greek, his love for English was unmistakable as he realized its potential for opening up the horizons of Indians to the West as well as to partake in the modernist ideas and liberalist ideals, which he believed would liberate India from the conventional clutches of socio-religious bigotry and backwardness. His educational endeavours crystallized in the institutions such as Hindu College and Vedanta College bear a stamp of his personal convictions; this made it possible for him to take every possible step to renew the thinking of youngsters and to reform the socio-religious structures of the Hindu society. Roy paid special attention also to empower women by propagating and promoting their education, which gradually enabled them to stand up against the unequal treatment meted out to them in the Indian society.

In all, the life and achievements of Rammohan Roy offer us an inspiration and a striking model for effective socio-religious transformation which should move in the direction of personal empowerment and social emancipation contributing towards the common good of the society as a whole. The reform that he initiated, though not popularly supported by many of his compatriots due to their unconventional and controversial nature, set in motion a great unparalleled movement of social transformation that still bears its fruits in various other movements and organizations that are in existence in the politically independent India of our times.

Rammohan Roy and Bengal Renaissance: A Study of the Reformist Thought of Raja Rammohan Roy and Its Sources by Rev. Prof. Dr. Thomas Mampra CMI, my own revered Professor of Philosophy, is a significant and praiseworthy attempt to bring out the salient features of this reform movement, which had triggered an effective and lasting ripple effect in the national consciousness of India. As this excellent work delves deep into the sources that had propelled Rammohan along the track of social and religious transformation, it deserves our special attention at a time when some of the movements in vogue echo the concerns and interests of his times. His effective and transformative openness to other religions and peoples, their languages and civilizations, invites us to recognize the richness of every religion and society; his readiness to admit the evils resulting from misunderstanding and misinterpretations of religious scriptures and juridical sources and, consequently, to initiate changes in our approach to such sources challenge us and call for developing a conviction that all human endeavours, including the state and religion, should serve the common good of humanity; if they do not, either they should be abolished or reformed to serve the purpose of their existence. From this point of view, this book offers an incisive analysis of the thought of Rammohan Roy, and captures for posterity the dynamic thought that evolved in his person through constant and sincere interaction with the members of other religions and their sacred scriptures. Instead of being a passive onlooker, Rammohan adopted the position of an involved participant in his sojourn to understand religions from their points of view and tried to imbibe their best in his personal religious life and made his strenuous efforts to translate it also into the life of his fellow religionists.

Being well-versed in the western and eastern philosophical paradigms with his two doctoral degrees from Catholic University, Leuven, and Cambridge University, UK, and having been an excellent professor of philosophy over a period of four decades, Prof. Mampra has carved out for himself an impressive stature of an inspiring academician, effectively

accompanying formator, and forward-looking administrator. As Rammohan himself is a paradigm of the meeting of the East and the West, Prof. Thomas Mampra's academic background serves as the best tool to capture the dynamics of the former's reformist thought in the best manner. Along with Roy, Prof. Mampra holds the conviction that "integration demands both purification from within and assimilation from without" and he has been working all through his life to attain integration in his personal as well as communitarian existence.

I cherish those privileged moments during which I attended his well-articulated and thought-provoking lectures by which he initiated us his students into the world of philosophizing. I still vividly recall Prof. Mampra walking on the stage of our philosophy classroom delivering his lectures by being deeply involved in thought so that he could offer us a taste not only of the content that he was communicating but also, at the same time, drawing us into the art of philosophizing. It is, therefore, not surprising to see the depth of the philosophical reflections offered in this book, which would tell us the story not only of Rammohan and his work in the nineteenth century, but also of the person and life of Prof. Thomas Mampra himself.

I am particularly indebted to Prof. Thomas Mampra for having guided me in the preparation of my first scientific paper which was published in the *Journal of Dharma* (Dharmaram Journal of Philosophies and Religions); a concerned Guru that he is, he not only accompanied me during my research and writing of the paper on S. Radhakrishnan's view on tradition and modernity, but took the initiative to suggest to the publishers about my paper and personally made sure that it was published while I was pursuing my Licentiate in Philosophy. As I write this foreword to the book of my illustrious and revered teacher, I consider this honour bestowed on me as an opportunity to symbolically express the love and respect of all his students (especially along with Rev. Dr. George Kulangara CMI who has taken the initiative to publish it) to the person of Rev. Prof. Dr. Thomas Mampra and to

recognize his innumerable contributions that have opened up the horizons of many a lives for almost half a century.

As the publication of this book coincides with the golden jubilee celebration of his priestly ordination in the Catholic Church, it is an opportune moment to recall and celebrate the openings Prof. Mampra has made in the arena of academics and formation of youngsters in which he had invested most of his life. The dynamic vision and great openness towards other religions, cultures, and systems of thought that are uncovered in this book are also reflected in his person, life, and achievements. In fact, his life merits our attention and appreciation for being a vehicle of this great legacy of openness that India has bequeathed from her forefathers and the catholicity that he has imbibed from his Christian religious convictions and personal commitment to the person of Jesus Christ.

While the pages of *Rammohan Roy and Bengal Renaissance* are read and its message is imbibed by the readers, it is my earnest hope that the epoch-making contributions of Rammohan Roy and the exemplary life of my revered professor Rev. Thomas Mampra would continue to inspire many more to be catalysts in the socio-religious ambience of India and would effect positive changes in the personal lives, which, in turn, would create a ripple effect of lasting transformation, leading to the coexistence of many religions and cultures, mutually enriching and strengthening, so that all would succeed in attaining the best.