

Session I. India. Early 1800s. Ram Mohan Roy, Hindu Humanism against both Indian tradition and English domination. The origin of Brahmo Samaj (Indian Unitarianism).

While still a teenager Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) developed a passion to fight polytheism and abolish sati (suttee), the Hindu practice of burning to death widows. This involved continuous intellectual and political struggle against both traditional Hindu authorities and the British officials who ruled India during his life. He succeeded both in convincing the British authorities to outlaw sati and in establishing a new religion, Brahmo Samaj, a Unitarian form of Hinduism, which has had an enormous influence on Indian culture. Roy was in regular contact with US Unitarian ministers, including William Ellery Channing, who had similar religious ideas at the same time.



Ram Mohan Roy

Roy had a deep knowledge of Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali, English, Greek and Hebrew. He engaged in hair-splitting theological arguments in several languages and three religions. For example he argued against sati claiming:

"all those passages you have quoted are indeed sacred law, and it is clear from those authorities that if women perform Concremation or Postcremation, they will enjoy heaven for a considerable time " (previously estimated at thirty-five millions of years). But he calmly points out that all this brings Suttee under the category of acts *" performed for the sake of gratifications in this world or the next "* ; which are declared by the highest Hindu authorities to be only of an inferior order of merit.

Roy didn't really believe in the 35 million years of heaven, he was just making a point based on his opponents' argument. But sometimes he was completely sincere.

For example, a supporter of sati flatly denied that women are capable of true faith or permanent virtue, and avowed that they are burned in order to prevent them from going astray after the husband's death. Roy responded:

"Women are in general inferior to men in bodily strength and energy ; consequently the male part of the community, taking advantage of their corporeal weakness, have denied to them those excellent merits that they are entitled to by nature, and afterwards they are apt to say that women are naturally incapable of acquiring those merits. But if we give the subject consideration, we may easily ascertain whether or not your accusation against them is consistent with justice. As to their inferiority in point of understanding, when did you ever afford them a fair opportunity of exhibiting, their natural capacity? How then can you accuse them of want of understanding? If, after instruction in knowledge and wisdom, a person cannot comprehend or retain what has been taught him, we may consider him as deficient; but as you keep women generally void of education and acquirements, you cannot, therefore, in justice pronounce on their inferiority. On the contrary, Lilavati, Bhanumati, the wife of the prince of Karnat, and that of Kalidas, are celebrated for their thorough knowledge of all the Shastras: moreover in the Vrihadaranyak*

Upanishad of the Yayur Veda it is clearly stated, that Yagnavalkya imparted divine knowledge of the most difficult nature to his wife Maitreyi, who was able to follow and completely attain it! Secondly, You charge them with want of resolution, at which I feel exceedingly surprised: for we constantly perceive, in a country where the name of death makes the male shudder, that the female, from her firmness of mind, offers to burn with the corpse of her deceased husband; and yet you accuse those women of deficiency of resolution."

Roy's combination of hair-splitting theological arguments and sincerity kept his opponents off balance. Muslims, Hindus and Christians all thought he was one of them, albeit a heretic.

Sati was defended as a Hindu tradition under attack by Christians. Publicly fighting Christian Trinitarianism gave Roy political cover with Hindu nationalists. In the next quote, Roy sarcastically attacks Hinduism and Christianity together by adopting the fictional persona of Hindu traditionalist Ram Doss appealing for Hindus and Christians to unite against Unitarians.

"Ram Doss," replies, first clarifying that Hindus and Trinitarians do in fact share a common theology, stating, *"you must admit that the same omnipotence, which can make three ONE and one THREE, can equally reconcile the unity and plurality of three hundred and thirty millions, both being supported by a sublime mystery which far transcends all human comprehension."* Because of this, *"Ram Doss,"* then goes on to call for a unified front against Unitarianism, writing, *"it must be evident to you that this deluded sect of Unitarianism can lay no stress on the human form and feelings of Jesus Christ as disproving his divinity,"* and therefore [all traditionalists] should, *"cordially join and go hand in hand, in opposing, and, if possible, extirpating the abominable notion of a single God, which strikes equally at the root of Hindooism and Christianity."*

Of course, dogmatic Hindus and dogmatic Christians would both be offended by the idea that their religions were the same.

Roy's insistence that true Hinduism was really Unitarian made Roy and Hinduism fascinating to New England Unitarians. Indeed, Boston Unitarians were so interested in Hinduism that people teasingly called them "Boston Brahmins". From Thoreau's *Walden*: [Discussing the amazing fact that in Thoreau's time at Walden Pond (1845-47) workers collected ice from the pond for shipment to consumers in the US South and India who used the ice to cool their drinks.]

Thus it appears that the sweltering inhabitants of Charleston and New Orleans, of Madras and Bombay and Calcutta, drink at my well. In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Bramin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well.

The Brahmo Samaj tradition has continued to the present, directly shaping the lives of prominent Bengalis such as the filmmaker Satyajit Ray and the economist Amartya Sen. A particularly influential follower of Roy was the Indian national poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941).

Like Roy, Tagore was both a rationalist and a nationalist. A famous poem (from 1912, when opposition to British rule was widespread):

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls
Where words come out from the depth of truth
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit
Where the mind is led forward by thee
Into ever-widening thought and action
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake*

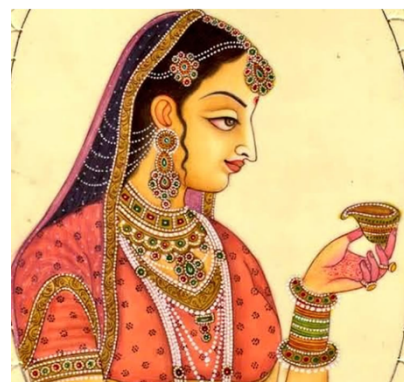


Rabindranath Tagore.

In the early twentieth century Tagore was very popular with US Unitarians. The Gray Hymnal includes seven Tagore works, four readings and three hymns, including two he apparently wrote specifically for the use of US Unitarians during a visit to the US. Like Emerson, Tagore combined a romantic nationalism with a universalist ethic. Does this work today?

*Who is Lilavati? Lilavati was a woman mathematician who lived in Ujjain in western India around 1150 CE. During her life, Ujjain was the world's foremost center for mathematics and astronomy. Mathematicians in Ujjain were in close contact with the Arab mathematicians of the Abbasid Caliphate. Ujjain and Abbasid culture were largely destroyed by Mongol invasions of the 1200s, but not before key Arabic texts had brought the Indo-Arab tradition to Europe. Lilavati wrote in Sanskrit verse and often used colorful examples for math problems. For example, one of the easier problems she set reads::

*What a charming problem we have here!
Whilst making love a necklace broke
A row of pearls mislaid
One sixth fell to the floor
One fifth upon the bed
The young woman saved one third of them
One tenth were caught by her lover
If six pearls remained upon the string
How many pearls were there altogether?*



Artist's Conception of Lilavati