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Universal Religion in the Life and Thought of Rammohun Roy (1772/4–1833)

I

Raja Rammohun Roy (1772/4–1833) has not only been hailed as the father of modern India and as the first great modern Hindu, but is also said to have been ‘so much ahead of his time that he seriously contemplated a universal religion which would some day be accepted by the whole of mankind’. It is with the last aspect of his life and thought that we are particularly concerned here.

II

It will be useful to begin with a survey of the Roy’s contacts with the major religious traditions of humanity, for there seems to be little doubt that ‘he had been brought by his pioneer studies in Comparative Religion to Universalism’. One may begin first with his background. In an autobiographical letter to a friend, he described his ancestry and his early life until the age of sixteen as follows:

My ancestors were Brahmins of a high order, and, from time immemorial, were devoted to the religious duties of their race, down to my fifth progenitor, who about one hundred and forty years ago gave up spiritual exercises for worldly pursuits and aggrandisement. His descendants ever since have followed his example, and according to the usual fate of courtiers, with various success, sometimes rising to honour and sometimes falling; sometimes rich and
sometimes poor; sometimes excelling in success, sometimes miserable through disappointment. But my maternal ancestors, being of the sacerdotal order by profession as well as by birth, and of a family than which none holds a higher rank in that profession, have up to the present day uniformly adhered to a life of religious observances and devotion, preferring peace and tranquillity of mind to the excitements of ambition, and all the allurements of worldly grandeur. In conformity with the usage of my paternal race, and the wish of my father, I studied the Persian and Arabic languages – these being indispensable to those who attached themselves to the courts of the Mohammedan princes, and agreeably to the use of my maternal relations, I devoted myself to the study of the Sanscrit and the theological works written in it, which contain the body of Hindoo literature, law and religion.\(^5\)

In considering the contribution of his background towards the growth of universalism in his outlook, one meets with two apparently opposing tendencies. On the one hand, his Hindu background may have predisposed him towards universalism to a certain extent, for he wrote in 1821:

> It is well-known to the whole world, that no people on earth are more tolerant than the Hinduos, who believe all men to be equally within the reach of Divine beneficence, which embraces the good of every religious sect and denomination.\(^6\)

On the other hand, however, Roy in his own eyes, never ceased to be a Brahmin. Sir Brajendranath Seal has pointed out that ‘he was a Brahmin of Brahmins, always claiming to be within the Brahmin fold and keeping his Upavita as an external mark of that communion’. But Seal goes on to refer to his ‘boldly taking heterodox food and drink, adopting a Mohammedan child and calling him Rajaram, associating with the missionaries, crossing the seas, fighting Suttee, caste, and all manner of degenerate customs of the day that weighed down women and Sudras.’\(^7\)

We have established one characteristic of Roy’s profile – his Hindu ancestry in the form of his Brahmanical heritage. It however, was not as limiting in his case as it could have been. We also discover from an account of his friend, William Adam, that he was independent-minded, and had arguments with his father. William Adam wrote: