INDIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Raja Ram Mohan Roy: Liberalism and Social Reforms

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • November 18, 2026 • 13 min read



Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) is widely called the **"Father of Modern India"** and the **"Father of the Indian Renaissance"**. He was the first major Indian thinker to engage seriously with Western liberal ideas — rationalism, individual rights, rule of law, freedom of the press, constitutional government — and to combine them with a reinterpretation of Indian religious traditions. He used these ideas to campaign against **sati**, idolatry, polygamy and caste rigidity, and to demand civil and political rights for Indians under British rule. In political thought, he represents the beginnings of **Indian liberalism**.

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Life and Works

- Born at **Radhanagar** (Hooghly district, Bengal) in a Brahmin family; studied Persian and Arabic at Patna and Sanskrit at Benaras; later learned English, Hebrew, Greek and Latin.
- Worked for the **East India Company** (1803–1814), then settled in **Calcutta** (1814/15) to devote himself to religious and social reform.
- Founded the **Atmiya Sabha** (1815) and the **Brahmo Sabha** (**20 August 1828**), later the **Brahmo Samaj** — a monotheistic, reformist movement.
- Associated with the founding of the **Hindu College** (1817); founded the **Anglo-Hindu School** (1822) and **Vedanta College** (1826).
- Journalism: ***Sambad Kaumudi*** (Bengali weekly, 1821) and ***Mirat-ul-Akhbar*** (Persian weekly, 1822).
- The Mughal emperor **Akbar II** gave him the title **"Raja"** and sent him to England (1830) to plead for an increase in his pension. In England he gave evidence before the **Select Committee** of Parliament on Indian affairs. He died at **Bristol** on **27 September 1833**.

Major writings:

- ***Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhidin*** ("A Gift to Monotheists", in Persian, c. 1803–04) — a rationalist critique of idolatry and superstition;
- Bengali and English translations of the **Upanishads** and the **Vedanta**;
- Tracts on **sati** (1818, 1820);
- ***The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness*** (1820);
- ***Brief Remarks Regarding Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females*** (1822);
- Memorial against the **Press Regulation** (1823); letter to **Lord Amherst** on English education (1823);
- Evidence on the **revenue and judicial systems of India** (1831–32).

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Ram Mohan Roy’s Liberalism

Sources of his liberalism

Roy’s liberalism drew on:

- **Western Enlightenment** thought: Locke, Montesquieu, Bentham (with whom he corresponded), the American and French Revolutions;
- **Christian Unitarianism** and the ethical teachings of Jesus;
- **Islamic rationalism** (the Mutazila) and Sufi thought, through his Persian education;
- the **Upanishads**, which he read as teaching a pure monotheism.

He combined these into a **rational, universalist humanism**: reason and conscience are the tests of truth, and all human beings share a common dignity.

Rationalism and religious reform as the basis of liberty

For Roy, religious reform came first. **Idolatry, superstition and priestly authority** kept people in ignorance and divided them. In the *Tuhfat*, he argued that all religions share belief in one God, but each has accumulated irrational practices invented by priests. Freeing people from these would make them capable of **individual judgement**, the basis of liberty. He also argued that religious reform was needed for **political advantage and social comfort** — a link between religion and political modernity.

Civil liberties

Roy was a strong defender of **civil liberties**, especially:

- **Freedom of the press**: When the acting Governor-General **John Adam** issued a **Press Ordinance (1823)** requiring licences for newspapers, Roy and others submitted a **memorial to the Supreme Court** and then to the King-in-Council. He argued that a free press benefits both rulers and ruled: it informs the government of the people’s grievances, prevents rebellion, and spreads knowledge. The memorial is often called the

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“Areopagitica of Indian journalism” (after Milton). When it failed, Roy stopped publishing *Mirat-ul-Akhbar* in protest.

- **Freedom of thought and religion**: everyone should be free to follow his conscience; he opposed both Hindu orthodoxy and Christian missionaries’ attacks on Indian religions.
- **Right to property**: he defended the right to property, including women’s right to inherit and own property.

Rule of law and the judicial system

- He demanded **separation of the executive and judicial** functions (the Company’s collectors also acted as magistrates).
- He called for **codification** of laws, so that laws would be clear and known to all.
- He protested against the **Jury Act of 1827**, which allowed Christians (including Indian Christians) to sit on juries trying Hindus and Muslims, but not Hindus or Muslims on juries trying Christians — a violation of **equality before the law**.
- He favoured **trial by jury**, appointment of Indian assessors, and the use of Indian languages in courts.

Economic and administrative ideas

- In his evidence to Parliament, he described the condition of the **ryots** (peasants) under the **Permanent Settlement**: zamindars had gained, while the ryots suffered from rack-renting. He demanded that the **rent payable by ryots** also be fixed permanently and that the government reduce its demand.
- He favoured **Indianisation** of the higher services and the appointment of Indians to positions of responsibility.
- He criticised the **drain** of wealth to England through the Company’s tribute and the salaries and pensions of British officials — an early form of the economic critique later developed by Naoroji.

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- He supported **free trade** and the settlement of Europeans with capital to develop industry, which some later nationalists criticised.

Political views and attitude to British rule

- Roy regarded British rule as **providential** for India at that stage, because it brought modern knowledge, rule of law and contact with the liberal West. He hoped British rule would gradually prepare Indians for self-government.
- He did not demand independence, but he demanded **civil rights, legal equality and a share in administration** — the classic programme of early Indian liberalism.
- He was an **internationalist**: he celebrated the establishment of constitutional government in Spain and Spanish America, mourned the suppression of the Neapolitan revolution (1821), and welcomed the French July Revolution (1830). He saw liberty as a universal value.

Education

- In his **letter to Lord Amherst (1823)**, Roy opposed the government's plan to establish a Sanskrit college and urged it to promote **Western scientific education** — mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry and anatomy — through English. He believed modern science would liberate Indians from superstition.
- At the same time, he wrote extensively in **Bengali**, helping to create modern Bengali prose.

Social Reforms

Abolition of sati

Roy's best-known campaign was against **sati** (the burning of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres). He was moved, according to tradition, by the sati of his own sister-in-law.

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- From 1818 he published tracts, including *A Conference between an Advocate for, and an Opponent of, the Practice of Burning Widows Alive* (1818, 1820), arguing from the **shastras** that sati was **not obligatory**; the highest texts recommended an ascetic life for widows rather than self-immolation.
- He also argued on grounds of **reason and humanity**: forcing women to die was murder; the practice was motivated by property interests of relatives.
- He organised petitions and public meetings, and supported Governor-General **Lord William Bentinck**, who passed **Regulation XVII of 4 December 1829**, declaring sati illegal and punishable as culpable homicide in Bengal.
- When orthodox Hindus organised the **Dharma Sabha** (1830) and appealed to the Privy Council against the ban, Roy presented a counter-petition in England; the appeal was dismissed in 1832.

Rights of women

- In *Brief Remarks Regarding Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females* (1822), Roy argued that ancient Hindu law (Yajnavalkya, Narada, etc.) gave women a share in their husbands' and fathers' property, but later commentators and practices had taken these rights away, leaving widows helpless and dependent — one cause of sati.
- He opposed **polygamy**, especially among **Kulin Brahmins**, and demanded that a man should be allowed a second wife only under conditions laid down by the shastras and with the approval of a magistrate.
- He favoured **education of women** and **widow remarriage** (later championed by Vidyasagar), and criticised child marriage.
- He insisted that women were not inferior in intellect; if they appeared so, it was because they were denied education.

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Caste and idolatry

- Roy criticised **caste divisions** as a source of disunity, which had deprived Indians of "political feeling" and made them unfit for collective action. He believed a common monotheism would help overcome caste.
- He attacked **idolatry**, ritualism and the authority of priests, and promoted the worship of the one formless God through the **Brahmo Samaj**.

The Brahmo Samaj

The Brahmo Samaj (1828) was based on:

- belief in **one formless God** (monotheism), the creator and preserver of the universe;
- worship through **prayer and meditation**, not image worship;
- **no priesthood** and no sacrifices;
- respect for the truths of all religions;
- a commitment to social reform and morality.

After his death, the Samaj was led by **Debendranath Tagore** (Tattvabodhini Sabha) and **Keshab Chandra Sen**, and inspired many later reform movements.

Religious universalism

Roy studied Hinduism, Islam and Christianity deeply. He rejected the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, which brought him into conflict with missionaries (the **Serampore** Baptists), but accepted the **moral teachings of Jesus**. His vision was a **universal religion** of reason, monotheism and ethics, compatible with all traditions.

Critical Assessment

Significance:

- The **first modern Indian liberal**: championed civil liberties, rule of law, press freedom, property rights and equality before law.

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- A pioneer of **social reform**, especially women's rights; the abolition of sati is one of the first great victories of Indian reform.
- Founder of **modern Indian journalism** and an early **constitutional agitator** (memorials, petitions, evidence to Parliament) — methods later used by the Moderates.
- Early critic of the **economic drain** and of the condition of the peasantry.
- A bridge between **Indian tradition and Western modernity**, and a rational, universalist humanist.

Criticisms:

- **Pro-British stance**: he saw British rule as a blessing and did not challenge colonialism as such; nationalist historians later criticised this.
- **Elitism**: his liberalism represented the interests of the new Bengali **bhadralok** and zamindars; it did not reach the masses.
- **Limited economic critique**: his support for European settlement and free trade was later seen as harmful to Indian industry.
- Marxist and subaltern historians (e.g. **Sumit Sarkar**, *Rammohun Roy and the Break with the Past*, 1975) argue that his "break" with tradition was **limited and ambiguous**, and that he relied on scriptural arguments rather than pure reason.
- Feminist scholars (Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions*, 1998) show that the sati debate treated women as **sites of tradition** rather than as agents; both reformers and orthodox argued mainly about scriptures.

Main features of modern Indian political thought

- **Product of the colonial encounter**: Western education, Christianity, science and liberalism provoked a response — Roy is the first major example.
- **Reform as politics**: religious and social reform (sati, caste, women's education) came before and alongside political demands.

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- **Liberalism**: rights, rule of law, freedom of the press, constitutional methods (Roy, the Moderates).
- **Nationalism**: liberal, spiritual (Vivekananda, Aurobindo), mass and ethical (Gandhi), cultural (Savarkar), composite (Nehru).
- **Social justice**: anti-caste thought (Phule, Periyar, Ambedkar) and gender justice (Ramabai).
- **Socialism adapted to India**: Nehru, Lohia, JP, M. N. Roy.
- **Ethics in politics**: Gandhi's ends and means.
- **Synthesis rather than imitation**: Indian thinkers combined Western ideas with Indian traditions — Roy's mix of Upanishadic monotheism and Benthamite liberalism is the first such synthesis.

Roy and the CC-301 debate

Roy is often called a 'derivative' liberal because he admired British institutions and Western education. A better reading: he used Western liberalism and Indian scripture together — he argued against sati from the shastras themselves and from reason. This makes him the first example of critical engagement and innovative synthesis in modern Indian thought.

Conclusion

Ram Mohan Roy opened the modern age in Indian political and social thought. He brought reason, individual liberty, rule of law and human dignity into Indian public life, and used them to fight sati, polygamy, superstition and the denial of civil rights. Though his liberalism was limited by its acceptance of colonial rule and its elite social base, it laid the foundations on which the Moderates, the social reform movements and, ultimately, the Indian Constitution would build. Tagore called him the "inaugurator of the modern age in India".

Quick Revision

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Item	Key point
Dates	1772–1833; born Radhanagar; died Bristol
Titles	Father of Modern India; Father of Indian Renaissance
Organisations	Atmiya Sabha (1815); Brahmo Sabha (1828)
Newspapers	Sambad Kaumudi (1821); Mirat-ul-Akhbar (1822)
Key works	Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhidin; Precepts of Jesus (1820); Brief Remarks (1822)
Press freedom	Memorial against Adam’s Press Ordinance, 1823
Education	Letter to Lord Amherst, 1823
Sati	Regulation XVII, 4 Dec 1829 (Bentinck)
Law	Separation of judiciary, codification, protest against Jury Act 1827
Economy	Fixed rents for ryots; critique of drain

Memory aid: Roy’s liberalism = **“P-R-E-S-S”** — **P**ress freedom, **R**ule of law, **E**ducation (English/scientific), **S**ati abolition, **S**eparation of powers.

Exam Practice

Long-answer questions

- Discuss the main features of Raja Ram Mohan Roy’s liberalism.
- “Ram Mohan Roy was the father of Indian liberalism.” Examine.
- Explain Roy’s contribution to social reform, with special reference to the abolition of sati and women’s rights.
- Assess Roy’s views on freedom of the press and the rule of law.
- Critically evaluate Roy’s attitude towards British rule.

Short-answer questions

- What is Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhidin?

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- When and by whom was the Brahmo Sabha founded?
- What was the significance of Roy’s memorial against the Press Ordinance of 1823?
- What were Roy’s arguments against sati?
- What did Roy say in his letter to Lord Amherst?
- Why did Roy oppose the Jury Act of 1827?
- What were Roy’s views on the Permanent Settlement?
- Name the two newspapers started by Roy.
- Who gave Roy the title “Raja”?
- What were the main principles of the Brahmo Samaj?

Multiple-choice questions

- **Sati was abolished by Regulation XVII of:** (a) 1818 (b) 1829 (c) 1833 (d) 1856. *Answer: (b)*
- **The Brahmo Sabha was founded in:** (a) 1815 (b) 1828 (c) 1843 (d) 1866. *Answer: (b)*
- **Mirat-ul-Akhbar was published in:** (a) Bengali (b) English (c) Persian (d) Urdu. *Answer: (c)*
- **Ram Mohan Roy’s letter on English education was addressed to:** (a) Lord Bentinck (b) Lord Amherst (c) Lord Macaulay (d) Lord Hastings. *Answer: (b)*
- **Ram Mohan Roy died at:** (a) Calcutta (b) London (c) Bristol (d) Edinburgh. *Answer: (c)*
- **Match the following:** (A) Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhidin – (B) Precepts of Jesus – (C) Brief Remarks – (D) Sambad Kaumudi. (1) Women’s property rights (2) Bengali weekly (3) Persian work on monotheism (4) Ethical teachings of Christ. Correct code: (a) A-3, B-4, C-1, D-2 (b) A-4, B-3, C-1, D-2 (c) A-3, B-1, C-4, D-2 (d) A-2, B-4, C-1, D-3. *Answer: (a)*
- **Assertion (A):** Roy opposed the Jury Act of 1827. **Reason (R):** The Act discriminated against Hindus and Muslims in jury service. (a) Both true, R explains A (b) Both true, R does not explain A (c) A true, R false (d) A false, R true. *Answer: (a)*

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- **The orthodox organisation formed to oppose the ban on sati was:** (a) Atmiya Sabha (b) Dharma Sabha (c) Tattvabodhini Sabha (d) Prarthana Samaj. *Answer: (b)*
- **Roy's memorial against press restrictions has been called the:** (a) Magna Carta of India (b) Areopagitica of Indian journalism (c) Charter of Rights (d) Indian Bill of Rights. *Answer: (b)*
- **The title "Raja" was conferred on Roy by:** (a) Lord Bentinck (b) Akbar II (c) Queen Victoria (d) Bahadur Shah II. *Answer: (b)*

Previous Years' Questions

These questions were actually set in university examinations. Ram Mohan Roy is a regular long-answer topic in B.A. (Hons.) and M.A. papers on modern Indian political thought, and is also in the UGC-NET syllabus (through the reform movements).

University examinations

- Do you agree that Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the father of Indian Renaissance? Explain. (University of Delhi, B.A. (Hons.) Political Science, Indian Political Thought–II, 2018–19)
- Do you agree that Raja Ram Mohan Roy is the father of modern India? (University of Delhi, B.A. (Hons.), Indian Political Thought–II, 2021–22)
- "Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the father of Indian Renaissance." In the light of this statement, critically examine his contributions. (University of Delhi, B.A. (Hons.), Indian Political Thought–II, 2023–24)
- Discuss the main features of Modern Indian Political Thought. (University of Delhi, B.A. (Hons.), Indian Political Thought–II, 2021–22 and 2023–24)
- MCQ: Who is known as the father of Modern India? *Answer: Raja Ram Mohan Roy.* (B.A. Semester V, Indian Political Thought, 2025)

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Answer pointers: “Father of Indian Renaissance / modern India”

- Define the Renaissance as a rebirth of reason, humanism and reform; in India it meant religious and social reform under the impact of Western education and colonial rule.
- **Religious reform**: Upanishadic monotheism, rejection of idolatry and priestly ritualism, Brahmo Sabha (1828) — reason applied to religion.
- **Social reform**: campaign against sati (abolished 1829), support for women’s property rights and widow remarriage, opposition to polygamy and caste rigidity.
- **Liberal political ideas**: freedom of the press (protest against the Press Ordinance of 1823), rule of law, separation of powers, jury trial, rights of peasants against zamindars, Indianisation of services.
- **Education**: support for English and scientific education (letter to Lord Amherst, 1823).
- Critical view: limited to elites, accepted British rule as beneficial; Rabindranath Tagore called him the inaugurator of the modern age, but some historians call his reform ‘elitist’. Conclude that he began the dialogue between Indian tradition and Western liberalism — the starting point of modern Indian political thought.

Suggested Readings

- Sophia Dobson Collet, *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy* (1900; ed. D. K. Biswas and P. C. Ganguli, 1962).
- V. C. Joshi (ed.), *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization in India* (Vikas, 1975), incl. Sumit Sarkar’s essay.
- Thomas Pantham and Kenneth Deutsch (eds.), *Political Thought in Modern India* (Sage, 1986).
- V. P. Varma, *Modern Indian Political Thought* (Lakshmi Narain Agarwal).
- Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform* (Sage, 1989).
- Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (University of California Press, 1998).

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- C. A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge, 2012).

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