

# The Abolition of Sati-Immolation: Rammohan Roy's Pursuit of Modernity and the Death-Centred Paradigm in Colonial Bengal's Social History

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

In the socio-cultural melting pot of colonial Bengal, the eradication of sati-immolation becomes a turning point narrative, woven meticulously with the life and values of Raja Rammohan Roy. This research examines how Rammohan's own bereavement triggered a radical challenge to patriarchal values and social wrongs, redefining the debate around death and dignity. Through the synthesis of compassion and rigorously disciplined reasoning, Rammohan moved beyond simple opposition to superstition, defining a society worthy of human rights and moral inquiry. This work is rooted in ideals of a higher order, not merely showing Rammohan as a reformer but as a visionary who aimed to reconcile ancient scriptures and modern moral principles. What sets this analysis apart is its investigation of the hitherto unmapped philosophical aspects of Rammohan's heritage, which puts him at the forefront of cultural modernization. Through the study of how private lives interacted with and influenced large-scale socio-religious processes, this research provokes modern-day considerations of ethical duties as well as the intricacies of cultural practice. Finally, it pays tribute to Rammohan's abiding legacy, challenging a self-critical scrutiny of our beliefs and practices in the continuous pursuit of a more equitable and humane society.

**Keywords:** Sati-immolation, Rammohan Roy, Philosophical Inquiry, Empathy, Death consciousness

## Introduction

When talking of death in colonial Bengal's social history, sati-immolation appears arguably the most widely recognized practice, providing a fascinating vehicle on which to analyze the complex relationship between the ruler and the ruled. Sati-dah, performed all over India in different forms under different names, indicates different historical contexts and cultural sensibilities. But it is unreasonable to judge the debate over sati-dah on the basis of historicity alone, since this reduces the issue to oversimplifications. While Raja Rammohan Roy, his followers, and the British abolished the practice, now commonly seen as a superstition, this by itself does not represent the full story. Philosophical concepts like death, patriarchal oppression, mourning, desire, and the ending of the body, when analyzed together with sati practice, uncover the deep play of light and dark in words, scriptures, and popular consciousness.

Raja Rammohan Roy, widely hailed as a modern hero, attempted to bring about a new age of social reform in the form of ending sati-immolation. 19th-century great historians perceived sati from a religious, judicial, and cultural perspective, making it a touching tale of death. In doing so, Rammohan went beyond what was scriptural reformation alone; he presented a vocabulary of benevolence, respect, and affection that came from profound emotional comprehension and understanding. His investigation of individual sorrow in the context of abolition of the practice of sati has strongly contributed to 19th- and 20th-century social history. Interpreting this history in terms of death, it is possible to trace indigenous awareness and its resistance against the repressive mechanisms of the colonial regime, which were typically imitated from European modernity. This inquiry, in addition to bringing out Rammohan's philosophical beliefs in life and death and their dignity, locates his reformist efforts in the face of strongly ingrained socio-cultural norms of his time. The philosophical

beliefs of 'personal values' and 'discipline' are most important to get into Rammohan's mind. His own life experiences and the discipline he developed further educated his rational mind, enabling him to tackle and question the practice of sati-dah. Discipline, coupled with Rammohan's awareness of death—what can be termed "death consciousness"—was critical in designing his intuitive knowledge of these complicated matters. At the same time, the rational thinking involved in terms like 'Sahamran', 'Satidaha', and 'Anumarna' requires a degree of profound acknowledgment that transcends beyond surface-level interpretations.

With this holistic perspective, we may better understand the rich philosophical foundations of Rammohan Roy's efforts and its lasting influence on social reform, such that his efforts are an irreplaceable addition to the conversation about life, death, and dignity in colonial Bengal.

### **Rammohan Roy: Catalyst of Cultural Modernization and Social Reform in 19th-Century Bengal**

Rammohan Roy's works started gaining popularity among Western society during the second and third decades of the nineteenth century. His earliest published work, 'Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhiddin' (1803-04), with an Arabic preface, provoked a great commotion and debate in the educated circles of the nation. It was heavily criticized in strong terms by the Zoroastrian community, and Rammohan retorted to this criticism by penning a pamphlet titled 'Jawab-i-Tuhfat- ul-Muwahhiddin'. However, for many years, European scholars were not sure what the subject of the original book was; they were mostly unaware of the existence of this first published work of Rammohan. They could ascertain its contents for sure after the publication of the authentic English translation by Moulavi Obaidullah El Obaide in 1884 AD. On the other hand, with the publication of Rammohan's English books in the second and third decades of the last century, they attracted the attention of the western readership. There were two classes of works, and their appeal was mainly to two groups of readers (Biswas, 1983).

In fact, in the 19th century, there was a renewed interest among Bengalis in the study of scriptures. Rammohan, therefore, not only had to write Vedanta Granth and Vedantasara (1815), but he also had to translate several Upanishads into Bengali and English. Behind this translation was, on the one hand, a desire to introduce Bengali as well as Christian missionaries to some ancient and not easily accessible scriptures and, on the other hand, an attempt to modernize the ancient scriptures. Studying the ancient scriptures is necessary, but not all scriptures are to be taken literally. Rammohan emphasized 'Correct reasoning and the dictates of common sense' in Shastravichar. He knew that the highest truth cannot be grasped with the help of worldly reasoning - 'The reasoning that leads men to certainty in things within its reach produces no effect on questions beyond its comprehension.' We have to remember that just as Rammohan had to fight with the socialist eventful Hindus, he also had to contend with the English missionaries who practiced 'strike violence and mockery. (Roy, 2022, p. 15)

At the entrance of Raja Rammohan Roy's residence in Raghunathpur, the Sati-daha Bedi will give a thorn to anyone who stands there. In the midst of unknown excitement, the writing on the altar is visible - 'In 1811 AD, King Ram Mohan took the decision to eradicate the practice of sati-immolation here for the first time.' Rammohan was emotionally broken by the death of his beloved 'Boudimani' Alakmanjari. His state of mind is comparable to that of Gautama Buddha in front of dead bodies or Abraham Lincoln in front of oppressed slaves, as recorded by Nalin Ganguly in his book 'Raja Rammohan Roy' in English- *"In 1811 Alakmanjari, the widow of his elder brother, Jagamohun, followed her husband to the funeral Pyre. She was much esteemed and loved by Rammohan Roy, and tried his utmost to save her, but was unsuccessful. He saw with his own eyes the whole heart rending affair. The flames leaped up ferociously, the drums were beaten madly, so that the cries of the unfortunate woman could not be heard, her effort to rise up were suppressed by long bamboo poles held across her and she was smothered to death. The heart of the future reformer was stirred to its depth at the sight of this inhuman orgy, and like Gautama before the dead bodies or Lincoln before the driven slaves, he (Rammohan) vowed to put a stop to this shocking wickedness as far as it should lie in his power to do so"*. By 1818 AD, the number of 'Sati's had almost exceeded the increase. The most significant aspect of Rammohan's movement is that he presented the dialectical relationship between liberalism, experience, and feeling to society not through classical logic but through general logic. (Das, 2020, p. 78)

Starting in 1818, the missionary magazine 'Friend of India' began publishing, featuring passionate anti-Sati statements by Mrityunjay and Rammohan. These publications sparked protests against Sati in Indian newspapers, leading to a division in educated and well-established Indian society. Missionaries denounced Sati as a long-standing social practice entrenched in Hinduism, while conservative Indians defended it as an ancient tradition, viewing attempts to abolish it as interference in their culture and religion. Conversely, liberal Indians, inspired by Rammohan's progressive movement, saw Sati as an outdated lawlessness unconnected to true Hinduism and envisioned a purified society free from such practices. The revised Government Act of 1817 further inflamed conservative sentiments, prompting Radhakanta Dev and his followers to appeal to the government to repeal the law. In response, the progressive faction, led by Ram Mohan, staunchly opposed this appeal, advocating for reform and the eradication of Sati (Ghosh, 1949, p. 11).

Reginald Heber, the second Protestant bishop of Calcutta, took an interest in the practice of Sati and sought the views of Joshua Marshman, a missionary in Srirampur. Marshman noted that Brahmin priests no longer held the same societal prestige. Many educated individuals, led by Raja Rammohan Roy, who advocated for the abolition of Sati, were aware that Sati was not mandated by any Hindu sacred texts, thereby reducing the threat of significant resistance - 'Which is how well known to be not commanded by any of the Hindoo Sacred books'.

Marshman believed this widespread understanding meant there was little to fear in abolishing the practice (Heber, 1829, p. 73).

Some government officials Heber consulted argued that widows now needed to obtain permission from magistrates to apply for voluntary celibacy. They suggested that if Sati could be stopped by law, public adherence to chastity would persist without government oversight. Additionally, they noted that if missionaries aimed to convert Hindus to Christianity, it would be advantageous for the government to remain uninvolved. Instead, they recommended establishing Christian schools to provide education to the natives. By proliferating Christian schools, they believed the practice of chastity would naturally fade away- 'When Christian Schools have been became universal the Suttee will fall may itself' (Heber, 1829, p. 74).

In 1820, Courtney Smith, the second judge of the Nizam's Court, strongly advocated for the abolition of Sati. In his report, he asserted that it was disgraceful for the government to tolerate such a practice and insisted that it should be eradicated immediately, without any room for dispute – 'My Opinion is that the toleration of the practice of Suttee is reproach to our government and that the entire and immediate abolition of it would be attended with no sort of danger' (Sen, p. 170).

In 1818, Baptist missionary William Ward travelled to England, where he strongly affirmed the reality of Sati in his book, "A View of the History," published in 1810. Upon his return to India in 1821, he released a series of poignant "Farewell Letters" addressed to his friends in America and England. These letters vividly described the horrific incidents of unwilling and terrified widows being burned to death, and the heart-wrenching cries of orphans who lost both parents in a single day. Ward's intention was not to criticize the British government but to evoke compassion and interest, particularly within the Christian community, towards these tragic events. The booklets by Mrityunjay Vidyalkar and Raja Rammohan Roy offered detailed critiques of Sati, arguing that it was nothing more than a motivated act of killing by Sati's relatives, with no scriptural basis. According to Friend of India, there was no need for a new law to ban Sati; the existing laws against murder were sufficient to end the practice. In England, Friend of India played a crucial role in shaping public opinion against Sati by sharing the harrowing stories of the practice and stirring the compassion of many generous individuals (1822, p. 273).

In 1823, Thomas Fowell Buxton, Wilberforce's successor from the Social Reformist party in Weymouth, addressed the House of Commons with a petition signed by 2,400 Belfield residents, strongly advocating for the abolition of Sati. In response to various protests, the Court of Directors issued a letter stating that government laws and interventions had actually increased the incidence of Sati, emphasizing that it was not a universal religious practice. The Court of Directors urged the Government of India to seriously consider this issue and invited their sincere cooperation in addressing it (Calp. 240).

Nagendra Nath Chattopadhyay, biographer of Raja Rammohan Roy, detailed the steps taken by the British Government regarding Sati before Roy's involvement. The first attempt to suppress Sati occurred during Lord Wellesley's tenure as ruler from 1798 to 1805. On February 5, 1805, Dowdeswell, following Wellesley's order, wrote to Registrar Good to abolish Sati. The essence of the order was:

"Upon receiving instructions from the Honourable Governor General in Cabinet, I inform you to provide each magistrate of Bihar with a copy of this letter for the Judge of the Nizamat Court. The letter indicates that if a widow attempts to immolate herself with her husband's body, the court must consider the religion, customs, and reforms of the people, in line with British Government's principles of prudence and benevolence. The court should first consult the Pandits to determine if the practice is permissible in Hinduism. If not sanctioned, the Governor General may order the gradual abolition of Sati, ensuring women are not coerced through drugs or medication. Measures should be taken to protect those who, due to age or other reasons, cannot exercise self-control."

This early intervention laid the groundwork for the eventual prohibition of Sati (Das, 2020, p. 110).

The controversy surrounding Raja Rammohan Roy is mainly two-fold: his religious identity and his stance on modernity. The question of how authentically Hindu he was troubled him significantly during his lifetime. His command of the Vedas, Upanishads, and Tantras, as well as his learning in the primary scripture of Islam, Jainism, Buddhism, and Christianity, brought him to some compelling conclusions. First, he felt that all religions are fundamentally monotheistic and so must be in harmony, not combat. Second, he believed that religious practice tends to cause fissures between religions. Applying this reasoning, he initiated a jihad against Hindu paganism.

Rammohan's stance for eliminating Sati only added to the complexity. The Sanatan Hindu Samaj representatives were understandably suspect of his intentions, while opponents of the newly formed Brahmo Samaj received his forceful initiative as a welcome addition. His attempts to end Sati and establish religious concord made him a divisive leader, suspended between traditionalist and modernist sections.

In her book *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (2009), Wendy Doniger illustrates that many British rulers believed Sati was a moral component of Hinduism, and thus felt it inappropriate to interfere. They were guided by the principle of moral relativism, aiming to respect Hindu identity and establish the notion that the British did not interfere with other religions, portraying themselves as liberal. Conversely, figures like William Bentinck viewed the abolition of Sati as an expression of true liberalism (Dasgupta, 2022, p. 23).

## Rammohan Roy's Philosophical Approach to Social Reform: Beyond Superstition and Historical Causality

The abolition of Sati sparked a new consciousness regarding the dignity of deceased bodies and broader social politics. It compelled a re-evaluation of the colonial regime's so-called enlightenment, which was marked by the burning of women's bodies. Rammohan Roy's thoughts on death and death consciousness can be explained in separate categories. Practices like Satidaha Pratha and Sahamaran are socio-religious, but they also reflect the horrors associated with death. While social and religious thought is often explained through the cause-and-effect theory of history in relation to Satidaha, Rammohan's philosophy does not conform to historicism. After his death in the 19th century, his contributions to social history and some of his religious positions faced criticism. However, the rationale (not causal theory) he developed behind the abolition of Satidaha and his opposition to various social reforms can be said to be multi-dimensional.

The abolition of Satidaha Pratha was not just the eradication of a superstitious practice but a quest for a deeper self-awareness in which the conditions of sociality can be observed in the "Ownself." In India's social history, there is a profound connection between death and numbers, a connection Rammohan Roy sought to break. Ranjit Guha, in his book *Daya Rammohan Roy O Amader Adhunikota*, offers an unprecedented philosophical discussion on this subject.

In Mary Carpenter's book *The Last Days in England of the Raja Rammohan Roy* (Calcutta: The Rammohan Library), published in 1915, we catch a glimpse of Rammohan's final days. This discussion article will explore how, in his last days, Rammohan discovered the infinite spirit of limited reason in his reform efforts—a concept rare in contemporary history. Remarkably, Rammohan's philosophy has not been adequately evaluated to date. The only historian to philosophically delve into Rammohan's convictions is Ranjit Guha, in his book *Daya Rammohan Roy O Amader Adhunikota*. Guha not only explains the level of conviction behind Rammohan's phenomenal philosophy but also explores the waveless consciousness and imagination that great philosophers possess (Guha, 2010).

Rammohan Roy employed various strategies to bring about the abolition of practices like Sati-daha and cohabitation, alongside broader social reforms. This article examines a key aspect of Rammohan's religious thought. The abolition of Sati-daha was not achieved overnight. His actions were reactions to deeply entrenched social structures. Before Rammohan, no one had critically examined the foundations and roots of Indian society. He recognized that the problem, and its solution, required more than conventional ideas—it demanded a deeper understanding, especially where religious consciousness was concerned. Rammohan believed that only by fully grasping the issue could he devise a solution. Labeling Sati-daha as mere superstition and crediting Rammohan solely with opposing and abolishing it oversimplifies both the practice and his role. The complexities surrounding Sati-daha bring forth terms such as 'death,' 'murder,' 'body,' 'immolation,' 'suicide,' 'mourning,' and 'transcendence.' These concepts inevitably surface when discussing the practice, reflecting a deeper connection between death and its cultural and social context.

Importantly, Rammohan did not rely solely on Sastriyo reasoning to oppose Sati-daha. As Ranjit Guha explores in *Daya Rammohan O Amader Adhunikota*, Rammohan transcended classical logic through emotions like love, compassion, and empathy. He addressed problems by drawing on direct experience and intuitive understanding rather than constructing solutions from detached logical memory. This unique approach allowed him to engage with social issues in ways that traditional discourse could not.

In summary, Raja Rammohan Roy's opposition to the practice of sati was shaped not merely by rational argument but by a deeply personal experience of grief and a broader understanding of social injustice. The loss of his sister-in-law, whose tragic immolation he witnessed, stirred in him a lasting moral unease. What followed was not a campaign driven solely by reformist zeal, but a careful and often painful engagement with the religious, emotional, and cultural underpinnings of the custom. Rather than relying only on legal or theological rebuttals, Rammohan combined direct emotional insight with philosophical reflection. He did not simply challenge the logic of sati; he questioned the very assumptions around death, duty, and the meaning of sacrifice in a society dominated by patriarchal codes. His writings and public actions point toward a reform grounded in empathy and reason—not as opposing forces but as intertwined elements of a more humane vision. This study has attempted to place Rammohan's interventions in a wider framework, where individual pain intersects with public discourse, and where mourning itself becomes a ground for critique. The discussion goes beyond the historical abolition of a custom to highlight a rarely acknowledged intellectual depth in Rammohan's thought—a death-consciousness that helped shape a new moral language in colonial Bengal. Rather than simply casting him as a social reformer inspired by Western liberalism, this analysis reclaims Rammohan as a thinker working through indigenous categories of discipline, compassion, and spiritual reason. His efforts to challenge the ritualized violence of sati continue to resonate today as a reminder of how ethical clarity can emerge from deeply human responses to suffering.

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