

Special Issue

May (Week 4)

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All about Raja Ram Mohan Roy

Context: *One of the most influential social and religious reformers of the 19th century, Ram Mohan Roy, born on May 22, 1772 in what was then Bengal Presidency's Radhanagar in Hooghly district, would have turned 250 years today. As India grapples increasingly with changing social and religious circumstances, Roy's work in the sphere of women's emancipation, modernising education and seeking changes to religious orthodoxy finds new relevance in this time.*

Early Life

- Born into a prosperous upper-caste Brahmin family, Roy grew up within the framework of orthodox caste practices of his time: child-marriage, polygamy and dowry were prevalent among the higher castes and he had himself been married more than once in his childhood.
- The family's affluence had also made the best in education accessible to him.
- A polyglot, Roy knew Bengali and Persian, but also Arabic, Sanskrit, and later, English. His exposure to the literature and culture of each of these languages bred in him a scepticism towards religious dogmas and social strictures.
- In particular, he chafed at practices such as Sati, that compelled widows to be immolated on their husband's funeral pyre. Roy's sister-in-law had been one such victim after his elder brother's death, and it was a wound that stayed with him.
- The waning of the Mughals and the ascendancy of the East India Company in Bengal towards the end of the 18th century was also the time when Roy was slowly coming into his own. His education had whetted his appetite for philosophy and theology, and he spent considerable time studying the Vedas and the Upanishads, but also religious texts of Islam and Christianity.
- He was particularly intrigued by the Unitarian faction of Christianity and was drawn by the precepts of monotheism that, he believed, lay at the core of all religious texts.
- He wrote extensive tracts on various matters of theology, polity and human rights, and translated and made accessible Sanskrit texts into Bengali. "Rammohun did not quite make a distinction between the religious and the secular. He believed religion to be the site of all fundamental changes.
- What he fought was not religion but what he believed to be its perversion... (Rabindranath) Tagore called him a 'Bharatpathik' by which he meant to say that Rammohun combined in his person the underlying spirit of Indic civilisation, its spirit of pluralism, tolerance and a cosmic respect for all forms of life," says historian Amiya P Sen, Sivadasani Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, Oxford, UK, whose Rammohun Roy: A Critical Biography (Penguin, Viking, 2012), remains a definitive work on the man who was a key figure in India's journey into modernism.

Roy, the first among liberals

- Even though British consolidation of power was still at a nascent stage in India at the time, Roy could sense that change was afoot. Confident about the strength of his heritage and open to imbibing from other cultures what he believed were ameliorative practices, Roy was among India's first liberals. In the introduction to his biography of Roy, Sen writes, "...his mind also reveals a wide range of interests, rarely paralleled in the history of Indian thought.
- He was simultaneously interested in religion, politics, law and jurisprudence, commerce and agrarian enterprise, Constitutions and civic rights, the unjust treatment of women and the appalling condition of the Indian poor... And he studied matters not in the abstract or in academic solitude but with the practical objective of securing human happiness and freedom. That made him a modern man."
- In 1814, he started the Atmiya Sabha (Society of Friends), to nurture philosophical discussions on the idea of monotheism in Vedanta and to campaign against idolatry, casteism, child marriage and other social ills. The Atmiya Sabha would make way for the Brahmo Sabha in 1828, set up with Debendranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore's father.



Abolition of Sati, educational and religious reforms

- During the course of his time in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), a period of about 15 years, Roy became a prominent public intellectual. He campaigned for the modernisation of education, in particular the introduction of a Western curriculum, and started several educational institutions in the city.
- In 1817, he collaborated with Scottish philanthropist David Hare to set up the Hindu College (now, Presidency University). He followed it up with the Anglo-Hindu School in 1822 and, in 1830, assisted Alexander Duff to set up the General Assembly's Institution, which later became the Scottish Church College.
- It was his relentless advocacy alongside contemporaries such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar that finally led to the abolition of Sati under the governor generalship of William Bentinck in 1829. Roy argued for the property rights of women, and petitioned the British for freedom of the press (in 1829 and 1830).
- His Brahmo Sabha, that later became the Brahmo Samaj, evolved as a reaction against the upper-caste stranglehold on social customs and rituals. During the Bengal Renaissance, it ushered in sweeping social changes and birthed the Brahmo religion, a reformed spiritual Hinduism that believes in monotheism and the uniformity of all men, irrespective of caste, class or creed.

Perils of non-conformism

- As many modern liberals discover to their peril, non-conformism brings with it its own share of infamy. Roy, who was given the title of Raja by the Mughal emperor Akbar II, was no exception to this.
- Among the first Indians to gain recognition in the UK and in America for his radical thoughts, in his lifetime, Roy was also often attacked by his own countrymen who felt threatened by his reformist agenda, and by British reformers and functionaries, whose views differed from his.
- Would Roy's reformist agenda have met with equal if not more resistance in contemporary India? After all, in 2019, actor Payal Rohatgi had launched an offensive against Roy on Twitter, accusing him of being a British stooge who was used to "defame" Sati.
- Sen says Roy's legacy has not been celebrated enough for many historic reasons, of which partisan reading by the Hindu right is one, but "His life and message stands vastly apart from the spirit of contemporary Hindutva or exclusionary, political Hinduism."

Celebrations

- Roy's 250th birth anniversary will see year-long celebrations in different parts of the country. In West Bengal, the unveiling of a statue at Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation, Salt Lake, by GK Reddy, Minister of Culture; Tourism; and Development of North Eastern Region, will mark the inauguration of the Centre's celebration plans. The West Bengal state government has overseen repairs of Roy's ancestral house in Radhanagar, and is set to confer heritage status to it.
- The Sadharan Brahmo Samaj in Kolkata has organised a three-day inaugural programme from May 22 to May 24 that will see musical tributes and talks by Rajya Sabha MP and retired diplomat Jawhar Sircar; eminent academics and historians such as Suranjan Das, vice-chancellor, Jadavpur University; Rudrangshu Mukherjee, chancellor, Ashoka University; professor Arun Bandyopadhyay of Calcutta University, among others.
- A philatelic exhibition on the Bengali Renaissance has been organised by the Rammohun Library and Free Reading Room, set up in 1904. The organisation will also publish a commemorative volume.



All about Prithviraj Chauhan

Context: *There is controversy around a new Akshay Kumar film called 'Prithviraj', with both the Gujjar and Rajput communities of Rajasthan laying claim over the 12th century king. On Friday (May 20), the Akhil Bhartiya Veer Gurjar Mahasabha claimed that Prithviraj Chauhan belonged to the Gujjar community, and demanded that the film depict him as such.*

Details:

- The Shri Rashtriya Rajput Karni Sena, who rose to infamy in 2017 after their protests against the film 'Padmavat', countered that Prithviraj was a Rajput, and also announced they would oppose the film unless the word 'Samrat' was prefixed to his name in the title.
- To a vocal section of the Hindu right, Prithviraj Chauhan appears as "the last Hindu emperor" of India who made a valiant attempt to stop the Islamic invaders who would go on to rule over much of the country until the arrival of the Europeans.
- In the popular imagination, he is the heroic figure who symbolises the exalted ideals of patriotism and national pride — even if the historical evidence demonstrates rather different ways in which Prithviraj has been seen over the ages.

Prithviraj of legend

- The image of Prithviraj as a fearless and skilled warrior that is now etched in the folk imagination can be traced back to his depiction in 'Prithviraj Raso', a poem in Brajbhasha attributed to Chand Bardai, which is thought to have been composed in the 16th century.
- In the finale of the poem, after losing the Second Battle of Tarain (1192 AD) against Muhammad of Ghor, Prithviraj is captured and taken to Ghazni in modern-day Afghanistan, where he is blinded and imprisoned.
- Here, the Ghurid king challenges Prithviraj to demonstrate his proficiency in archery by piercing seven metal gongs with an arrow. But the blinded king instead aims the arrow at Muhammad, placing his location by using his voice, and kills him before dying himself.
- Most other historical sources indicate that the victorious Muhammad executed Prithviraj at the end of the Second Battle of Tarain.

Prithviraj of history

- Despite being such a celebrated figure, not much is known about the historical Prithviraj.
- Information about him is available only in a handful of contemporary inscriptions, and historians have to rely on literary sources such as the 'mahakavya' genre, a kind of ornate and formulaic poetry that had limited concern with accuracy.
- Many of the textual sources, often dating to much later periods, contradict one another.
- What we do know is that Prithviraj belonged to the Chauhan or Chahaman dynasty of Ajmer which emerged after the decline of the Pratihara empire in the 11th century AD.
- He ascended the throne in 1177 or 1178, and very quickly expanded his kingdom, defeating many of the smaller Rajput states. However, he struggled against the Chalukyas of Gujarat, and was forced to look towards the Ganga valley instead.
- While Prithviraj's army was able to decisively defeat the invading Ghurids in the First Battle of Tarain (present-day Haryana) in 1191, he was defeated in the Second Battle of Tarain in the following year.
- The battle marked a watershed moment in the history of medieval India, paving the way for the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate and the beginning of Muslim rule.

The "Hindu Emperor"



- James Mill's 'The History of British India' (1817) categorized Indian history into the Hindu, Muhammadan and British periods, using the religious affiliation of the dominant political power to define each period. In this formulation, Prithviraj Chauhan would be the last ruler of 'Hindu' India.
- The description of Prithviraj as "the last Hindu emperor" can be traced to the British colonial official James Tod's 'Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan' (1829).
- However, the historical Prithviraj had several equally powerful Hindu contemporaries, and many Hindu kings continued to rule in southern India well after his time.
- How do medieval texts describe the reign of Prithviraj? The 'Prithviraja Vijaya' (1191/1192), the earliest Sanskrit 'mahakavya', and the Persian 'Taj al- Ma'asir' (1217) see Prithviraj Chauhan and Muhammad of Ghor as rivals who could never come to terms with one another.
- The 'Prithviraja Vijaya' describes the Ghurid king as a wicked eater of cows, and his ambassador as an extremely ugly character. The Muslims are labelled "turuska" (Turk) and "Yavana" (westerner), but also "raksasa" (ogre) and "asura" (demon).
- However, as the historian Cynthia Talbot ('The Last Hindu Emperor: Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past 1200-2000', 2016) points out, the 'Prithviraja Vijaya' also dehumanised other rivals of Prithviraj such as the Hindu Chalukya rulers of Gujarat.

Version of 'Prithviraj Raso'

- The 'Prithviraj Raso', which was probably composed at a time when Muslim rule was well entrenched in North India, does not use dehumanising expressions for Prithviraj's rivals.
- Talbot argues that the poem does not depict a simple Hindu-Muslim opposition. Muhammad Ghori is in fact joined by two other Hindu kings in his battle against Prithviraj Chauhan.
- Also, instead of the conflicts with the Ghurid armies, Prithviraj Chauhan's war with Jaychand of Kannauj is the central episode of the text. It is not only the longest, but also the most pivotal moment, as he loses many of his soldiers in this battle.
- Evidently, the history of Prithviraj Chauhan is complex and multilayered. To read just a Hindu-Muslim binary in this fascinating and compelling tale of valour and romance would be simplistic.