

BEYOND SATTI: THE FEMINIST LEGACY OF RAJA RAM MOHAN ROY IN
19TH CENTURY INDIAAroosa Alvi^{*1}, Mahnoor Khan², Dr. Kalsoom Hanif³^{*1,2}PhD scholar³Assistant Professor, LCWUDOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15770822>**Keywords***Satti, Feminism, Reforms, Abolition***Article History**

Received on 21 May 2025

Accepted on 21 June 2025

Published on 30 June 2025

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Abstract

Often regarded as the "Father of the Indian Renaissance," Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) is not particularly well-known for his feminist ideas and reformist fervor in promoting women's rights in India during the 19th century. Roy was a pioneering advocate for gender justice during a time when women were routinely suppressed through practices like sati (widow burning), child marriage, the murder of female infants, and deprivation of education. The feminist consciousness of Roy, his motivations, and the tangible impact of his work on Indian society are all examined in this article. Roy's feminism was founded on his active engagement with rationalism, Vedantic philosophy, and Enlightenment ideals in addition to his humanitarian sympathies. Through persistent agitations, public debate, and negotiations with the British government, his campaigns led to the abolition of sati in 1829. Roy's campaign encompassed not only his battle against sati but also the intellectual and social liberation of women. He emphasized that women would be trapped in cycles of ignorance, powerlessness, and subordination if they were not educated. His works in Persian, Bengali, and English typically emphasized women's inherent potential and disapproved of colonial narratives that depicted Indian society as wholly backward. Roy's determination to advance progressive ideas and create a logical, egalitarian social order is demonstrated by his founding of organizations like the Hindu College (1817) and the Brahmo Sabha (1828). From these platforms, he pushed for moral reforms that complied with universal human rights, questioned religious dogma, and encouraged dialogue about women's status.

INTRODUCTION

A brilliant thinker and reformer named Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) emerged in the tumultuous Indian scene of the 19th century, a society torn apart by colonial dominance, rigid caste systems, and ingrained patriarchy. Roy, who is widely regarded as the "Father of the Indian Renaissance," is most renowned for his efforts to promote modern education, challenge superstition, and introduce reason. However, broader nationalist or social reformist narratives usually overshadow his leadership in promoting women's rights and laying the

groundwork for Indian feminism. Roy's advocacy for gender justice is a groundbreaking, progressive intervention during a time when Indian women's lives were restricted by repressive practices like child marriage, purdah (seclusion), sati (the burning of widows), and systematic denial of access to education. However, Roy's satirical abolition although the campaign is frequently brought up in history textbooks, it is rarely discussed in relation to a larger feminist agenda. His rejection of patriarchal orthodoxy was a deeper commitment to women's

intellectual, moral, and religious freedom rather than a single instance of opposing a single practice. Roy recognized the importance of women's agency to the moral foundation of society and believed that empowering the half of the population that had been silenced and subjected to oppression for centuries was the first step toward true change. Roy's feminist stance was neither a Western import nor a coincidental byproduct of his reformism. Instead, it was shaped by a unique combination of factors, including the European Enlightenment values of progress, Islam's rationalist traditions, and the religious equality of the Upanishads. In his writings in Persian, Bengali, and English, Roy consistently defended women's rights to education, respect, and moral agency. Using logic, scripture, and the law to prove that women's subordination was unacceptable in both divine ordinance and enlightened society, he fought against Hindu orthodoxy and colonial powers with equal vigor. His establishments, such as the Hindu College in 1817 and the Brahmo Sabha in 1828, provided ideological platforms to challenge tradition and advance women's empowerment in addition to intellectual spaces for fresh ideas. Roy prefigured later feminist narratives that connected gender justice to national development by being among the first Indian intellectuals to lay out a reform vision based on universal human rights.

Even though he made significant contributions, in historical accounts of Roy have frequently ignored his radical views on women's rights in favor of highlighting his political, religious, or educational roles. Even though his feminism was complex and flawed—it mostly targeted Hindu women from higher castes and took place in affluent, male-dominated reform circles—it was groundbreaking for its day. We run the risk of deleting an important part of Roy's ideological legacy if we only consider him from a nationalist or liberal perspective. This is an effort to revisit Raja Ram Mohan Roy as a pioneering feminist whose works offer important insights into the beginnings of gender reform in India. By applying a gendered perspective to his writings, campaigns, and institutional endeavors, this study aims to establish Roy as not just a social reformer but also among the first Indian feminists. By doing this, it

also reworks the way feminist histories are written and remembered on a larger scale.

Literature review:

Raja Ram Mohan Numerous historical, sociological and philosophical works have been written about Roy; however, most of these works emphasize him as a political moderate, religious reformer, or Indian modernist, with little attention paid to his contributions to early feminist thought. This review of the literature places this article within new research on Roy's feminist legacy and critically assesses the scholarship that has surfaced thus far, highlighting knowledge gaps about his work on women's rights. Amiya P. Sen's (2002) scholarly analysis of Roy is arguably the most often cited one. It portrays Roy as a complex person who is caught between tradition and modernity. Sen draws attention to Roy's opposition to religious dogma and his demands for a logical reading of the Bible, but he pays scant attention to the gender implications of these modifications. Similarly, Subrata Dasgupta (2007) analyzes Roy's intellectual growth, particularly his exposure to Enlightenment ideals, but she does not expand the analysis to feminist awareness, allowing women's issues to be outside of Roy's primary socio-political sphere. Roy's efforts to outlaw sati are frequently highlighted in historical accounts, with historians like Roshen Dalal (2014) acknowledging the reform movement's social and legal dimensions. However, these explanations frequently ignore sati abolition as a singular act of moral intervention and fail to place it within a longer-term feminist framework. Dalal never challenges Roy's broader vision for women's agency, education, and autonomy, even though she acknowledges his moral outrage against sati. Investigating the connections between women's rights and Indian reform movements has become easier thanks to feminist scholars like Tanika Sarkar (2001) and Geraldine Forbes (1996). The patriarchal undertones of male-led reforms in the 19th century are particularly evident in Sarkar's work, which notes that even liberal men tended to uphold gender hierarchies in the name of in favor of protectionism. This critique is fundamental to Roy's positionality because, despite his advocacy for women's rights, his reform efforts mostly catered to upper-caste, elite women and

operated within patriarchal structures. Roy's own work's primary source analyses also provide additional insight into the subtleties of his feminism. His writings *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhiddin* (1804) and *The Precepts of Jesus* (1820) show a steadfast philosophical commitment to social justice, ethical correction, and rationalism. These pieces convey Roy's early belief in human dignity and reason as tools for societal advancement, even though they do not specifically address women's rights. These beliefs later influenced his attempts to educate women and end sati.

Roy's contacts with British politicians and peers, such as his appeals to Lord William Bentinck during the sati abolition campaign, also demonstrate his strategic use of both legal and humanitarian arguments in support of women's rights. These political aspects have been examined by scholars like S. N. Mukherjee (1995), but they usually place Roy's activism within colonial-modernist frameworks without acknowledging how his work influenced indigenous feminist discourse.

Even though Roy's language and frameworks were based on the patriarchal constraints of his era, recent works by academics like Shobna Nijhawan (2012) have started to close this gap by arguing that Roy's reformism laid crucial groundwork for the development of Indian feminist thought. Nijhawan highlights how male reformers in the early 19th century helped shape public discussions about women's status, implying that despite their inconsistencies, individuals such as Roy played a significant role in changing gender expectations.

When examining these scholarly arguments, a recurring theme emerges: Roy is a religious reformer, a nationalist forebear, and a modernist thinker, but his legacy is rarely united under a feminist lens. In addition to being sites of gendered conflict, the historical construction of 19th-century reform movements as precursors of anti-colonial nationalism and the androcentric bias of much historical research have contributed to this erasure. Not to be overlooked are critical postcolonial and subaltern studies voices that raise concerns about the exclusion of lower-caste, rural, and non-Hindu women from elite reform movements like Roy's. Academics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) caution against romanticized depictions of reforms spearheaded by

men, arguing that these narratives often "speak for" women in a manner that denies them agency or direct involvement. It would be a qualified assessment to apply this critique to Roy's work because, despite being groundbreaking, his feminism was filtered through caste, class, and his position within colonial hierarchies. In order to recover and reinterpret Raja Ram Mohan Roy's legacy in Indian feminist history, this paper places itself within a newly emerging field of scholarship. This study highlights Roy's contributions as a social reformer and a founder of fundamental feminist concepts in India by critically analyzing the literature and concentrating on his complex interaction of reason, spirituality, and gender justice.

By doing so, this literature review draws attention to the need for intersectional, historically nuanced analyses that situate early reformers within the complex, contested development of gender discourse in colonial India rather than mythologizing or discounting them.

Research methodology:

This article reexamines Raja Ram Mohan Roy's work from a feminist standpoint using a qualitative, historical-analytical method. In addition to closely examining Roy's own writings, letters, petitions, and speeches, the study makes extensive use of secondary sources such as feminist readings, historical analyses, and biographies by Indian and international academics.

The important thing is to follow Roy's ideas on social reform, education, and women's rights within the broader sociopolitical context of colonial India in the 19th century. The study looks at how his exposure to Enlightenment philosophy, Vedantic philosophy, and rationalist traditions in general influenced his understanding of gender justice rather than concentrating solely on his feminist leanings.

The study uses a variety of textual sources to achieve this. Among these are Roy's works that have been published in Bengali, English, and Persian, such as his essays on women's status, *The Precepts of Jesus* (1820), and documented petitions, like his appeals to British authorities against sati. These sources provide direct access to his campaigning strategies and help to reveal his intellectual motivations. Books, journal

articles, and critical essays about Roy's social, political, and religious reforms are examples of secondary sources. Scholarly works by feminist historians and postcolonial theorists who have examined how gender, colonial power dynamics, and social reform movements have intersected in India are given particular attention.

This method is interpretive rather than statistical. The goal is to analyze the deeper ideational undercurrents and cultural tensions that are present in Roy's work rather than to numerically measure his influence. This article will better understand how his feminist ideals evolved, where they were progressive, and where they remained constrained by the patriarchal demands of his time through his discourse, language, and reformative efforts.

Lastly, this study admits its limitations. A large portion of Roy's work, as significant as it tends to silence the voices of marginalized women and is based on the experiences and worries of upper-caste, urban, Hindu society. Thus, this article is critical and reflective, attempting to present a fair, historically informed interpretation of Roy's feminist contribution while keeping in mind his pioneering position.

Research Questions:

- To close the gaps in earlier research, this article examines Raja Ram Mohan Roy's contribution to gender reform and women's rights in 19th-century India from a feminist standpoint. Given the sociopolitical limitations of his time, the main goal is to critically analyze whether and how Roy's reformist actions can be interpreted as early expressions of Indian feminist ideas. In order to achieve this, the following research questions inform the article:
- In the context of Indian society in the 19th century, how much can Raja Ram Mohan Roy be considered a trailblazing feminist? This query questions Roy's status as a social reformer by posing the question of how much his advocacy for women's education, the cessation of sati, and opposition to patriarchal institutions represents an early example of feminist consciousness, or if they

were politically, religiously, or morally driven interventions that did not fit into a broader framework for gender equality.

- How was Roy's perspective on women's rights and social reform influenced by his intellectual background in Islamic rationalism, Vedantic philosophy, and Enlightenment values? This question explores how Roy's diverse intellectual background shaped his beliefs about women's autonomy, education, and dignity by tracing the philosophical and cultural foundations of his ideas
- In what ways were Roy's feminist principles novel for their time, and in what ways were they still constrained by caste, class, or patriarchal institutions? With a focus on marginalized women outside of upper-caste, elite Hindu society, this question critically analyzes the contradictions of Roy's reform initiatives while acknowledging both the radical nature of his work and its limitations.

In what ways have historical and how might reexamining Roy's work through a gendered lens reframe our understanding of Indian feminist history, and how were his feminist contributions constructed or marginalized in accounts? By posing the question of how Roy's feminist heritage has been remembered, lost, or diminished within nationalist, liberal, or androcentric versions of history, this final query connects the historical investigation to ongoing scholarly discussion.

The article aims to provide a fair and historically accurate reevaluation of Raja Ram Mohan Roy's role in the early discussion of women's rights in India by posing these framing questions.

Research Objectives:

This article's primary objective is to critically reassess Raja Ram Mohan Roy's contributions to women's rights within the broader intellectual, social, and historical context of 19th-century India. Despite being regarded as a reformer, rationalist, and a leading figure in the Indian Renaissance, Roy's work as a champion of gender justice has received little

attention from traditional academics. This study aims to close that gap.

This article specifically aims to:

Examine Raja Ram Mohan Roy's social reform program from a feminist standpoint and determine whether his opposition to patriarchal practices, education of women, and ban on sati are examples of early feminist concepts in India.

Consider how Roy's exposure to Islamic rationalism, Vedantic humanism, and Enlightenment ideals affected his outlook of gender equality, and how his reformist program was shaped by these influences.

Examine critically the limitations and inconsistencies of Roy's feminist contributions, acknowledging that while his work was groundbreaking, it primarily focused on upper-caste, urban Hindu women and took place in male-dominated reform arenas.

Put Roy in his proper place as a founding figure whose work, despite its flaws, laid the groundwork for later gender reforms in India and rewrite the history of Indian feminism.

By achieving these objectives, the article hopes to foster a more critical comprehension of how feminist consciousness developed in colonial India and how early reformers like Roy influenced that complex process. By doing this, this article also hopes to add to the ongoing discussions about how gender, colonialism, and social reform intersect in India. The study examines how broader historical forces influenced and constrained early feminist movements in addition to evaluating Roy's own work by situating him within these overlapping contexts.

Additionally, it aims to show how approaching reformists like Roy requires an intersectional, historically contextualized understanding. The research aims to unravel the complexity of his work, taking into account both the structural limitations that his time permitted and his visionary ideals, rather than reducing him to a simple progressive/patriarchal dichotomy.

Lastly, this article aims to start a larger critical conversation about how the legacies of male the course of India's women's rights movements has been influenced, made more difficult, or made easier by reformers.

Discussion:

Mohan Raja Ram although historical scholarship has firmly established Roy as a social reformer, his feminist awareness is still debatable. The degree to which Roy's ideas, activism, and institutional involvement articulated a groundbreaking—albeit complex—vision of gender justice throughout India's sociopolitical landscape in the 19th century is examined critically in this conversation. First and foremost, it is important to recognize the extraordinary circumstances surrounding Roy's actions during a time when patriarchal traditions were deeply ingrained. In both religious and social discourse, the norms were sati, child marriage, female seclusion, and the general exclusion of women from education. Perhaps Roy's most notable feminist legacy is his public opposition to sati, which reached its zenith with the practice's historic abolition in 1829. However, as this article argues, his activism cannot be viewed as a singular instance; rather it needs to be acknowledged as a component of a larger ethical and philosophical framework that supported women's social and intellectual liberation. Roy's belief in women's education is particularly significant. He repeatedly emphasized that women would remain weak, reliant, and restricted to the home if they did not have access to knowledge. In his writings and public speeches, he argued that denying women an education not only harmed them personally but also weakened society as a whole. Roy demonstrated an understanding of gender equality as a foundation for national progress at this point, a view later echoed by feminist writings that linked the advancement of society as a whole to the empowerment of women. But there were some contradictions in Roy's feminism. His reform initiatives primarily targeted Hindu women in urban areas, the upper caste. Therefore, underrepresented groups—such as tribal, lower-caste, or rural women—were left out of his vision. This raises some important concerns about the inclusivity of early reform movements, even though it is a result of the structural limitations of his era. Such male-dominated reform, according to intellectuals like Tanika Sarkar and Gayatri Spivak, tended to "speak for" women rather than granting them agency and their own voices. Despite being liberal, Roy's work falls somewhat under this critique. Roy's gender justice,

however, had an unusual ideological foundation thanks to his fusion of Islamic reformist ideas, Vedantic spirituality, and Enlightenment rationalism. His deep knowledge of Indian philosophy combined with his exposure to European thinkers and literature enabled him to create an indigenous vision for women's rights, and reflecting global humanist sentiments while having a local foundation. Roy's feminist consciousness emerged from a shared or hybrid cultural space, which makes it both contextually specific and appealing to a global audience, unlike Western liberal models that are solely derived. His interest in challenging orthodoxies and offering platforms for moral and intellectual advancement is also demonstrated by his founding of organizations like Hindu College (1817) and Brahma Sabha (1828). Despite their emphasis on male elites, these forums offered a basis for questioning restrictive traditions, such as those pertaining to women's status. Moreover, Roy's activism went beyond theory. His legal appeals demonstrate his astute use of colonial administrative structures to advance women's rights, particularly those addressed to British officials such as Lord William Bentinck. Even so, some critics use this as an example of reliance on colonial action, others note that Roy successfully used the power structures at his disposal to enact tangible changes, most notably the outlawing of sati. Importantly, Roy's broader conception of societal progress included elements of his feminist philosophy. He felt that moral, logical, and spiritual growth could not coexist with the dissolution of women. His writings therefore foreshadowed later feminist assertions that women's liberation is essential to the intellectual, moral, and spiritual development of society as a whole. The discussion must acknowledge the patriarchal boundaries that are a part of Roy's reforming vision, though. Despite being liberal, his focus on protecting women from harmful customs tended to portray women as passive recipients of reform rather than active participants in defining their own their own fates. As much as it sought to lessen harm, the discourse of protection that was common among reformers in the 19th century threatened to strengthen gender hierarchies. Despite all of these complications, Roy's contribution to feminism cannot be denied when taken into account

within the historical context of his time. He paved the way for later reformers and women's movements with his agitations, writings, and philosophical interventions, which are among the first manifestations of gender justice in India.

Conclusion:

In Indian history, Raja Ram Mohan Roy's contributions as a rationalist, social reformer, and the "Father of the Indian Renaissance" are widely recognized. However, more critical analysis is needed, especially in feminist scholarship, to fully appreciate his significant contribution to the early women's rights discourse. Since Roy was exposed to Enlightenment ideals, Vedantic spirituality, and Islamic rationalist traditions, this paper has argued that his efforts to end sati, support women's education, and oppose patriarchal traditions were not isolated moralist interventions but rather components of a broader, evolving feminist consciousness. It is important to situate Roy's work within the Indian socio-cultural context of the 19th century, despite acknowledging the limitations of his approach, particularly his upper-caste, elite bias and male-dominated reform arenas. His belief in women's intellectual, moral, and social empowerment was groundbreaking.

Deviation from rigid patriarchal norms. Roy understood that real social progress was impossible unless systemic oppression of women was addressed. Furthermore, his ability to integrate indigenous ideas with global humanist principles gave his work on women's rights both cultural legitimacy and broad applicability. Although later criticisms show that more inclusive, intersectional approaches to gender justice are required, his writing served as a crucial foundation for the growth of Indian feminism. The feminist legacy of Raja Ram Mohan Roy must be recognized as an early and significant step in India's protracted and continuous fight for women's rights, despite its complexity and flaws. Reexamining his contributions from a gendered perspective broadens our understanding of his reform efforts and adds to the body of knowledge about feminist intellectualism in India.

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