



Lynn Zastoupil. *Rammohun Roy and the Making of Victorian Britain.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 276 S. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-61680-6.



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L. Zastoupil: Rammohun Roy and the Making of Victorian Britain

Rammohun Roy is a much-written-about figure. Often called India's first modern man, and undoubtedly the subcontinent's first major (and arguably, the most influential ever) socio-religious reformer, Rammohun provides the human symbol of the profoundly moving as well as tortured aspects of the subcontinent's colonial modernization. A reading of Rammohun almost invariably becomes a metonym, a self-reflexive location-marker, of a scholar's own position about the discursive contours of South Asian history and culture. And so, from the 19th and early 20th century eulogization of Rammohun by Indians as well as Europeans, to the rising criticism about the reformer in the last three decades of the 20th century in the wake of ultra-left, feminist and postcolonial upsurges, to the reconstruction, in the early years of the 21st century, of Rammohun as a globalized intellectual, this enigmatic reformer has indeed remained the barometer of Indian intellectual history, a man for all seasons who can become everything to everyone. Quite naturally, a substantial body of scholarly literature has been produced on him.

Yet he remains elusive. One of the most important

reasons behind this relates to the notorious difficulty in locating adequate source materials on late 18th and early 19th century Bengal. Many of the significant journals and polemical pamphlets produced in that period, for instance, can no longer be found. Compounding this problem is the multi-lingual and enormously transcultural nature of Rammohun's reformist activities. A man who simultaneously participated in a Persophone Mughal-Islamic oecumene, a Sanskritic-Brahmanical one, a Bengali public sphere as well as an Anglophone one, and had engagements also with Arabic, Hebrew and Greek exegetical traditions, Rammohun demands from historiographers a mastery of all these different traditions of public culture, and the shifts that they underwent at least between the 15th and early 19th centuries. Such a project obviously cannot be the work of any single scholar.

Dilipkumar Biswas's masterly volume on the reformer had until now provided the most comprehensive empirical coverage of Rammohun's involvement with different intellectual traditions, but the volume is best when it focuses on the Sanskritic genealogies of Rammohun; the Perso-Islamic, vernacular-Bengali and European

genealogies remain less completely discovered. Dilipkumar Biswas, *Rammohun-Samiksha*, Calcutta 1994. This lacuna is partially filled by the present volume, for Lynn Zastoupil's work constitutes a pioneering effort in the discovery of Rammohun's engagement with European-Christian public culture. It provides a most comprehensive and empirically detailed history of the encounter between Rammohun and the European public sphere (and most specifically with British social history). For this alone, I think this book will remain an indispensable resource for scholars in the coming years.

Going beyond this overall empirical contribution, Zastoupil's text also raises deep conceptual questions about the origins of our contemporary world. In spite of recent postcolonial critiques, and to some extent due to them, Indian intellectual history of the 19th and 20th centuries continues to be largely written according to an impact-response model. European discourses (where the very notion of Europe is constructed as a homogeneous category) are said to influence Indians, and the reactions of Indians, primarily through social reform and nationalist movements, are said to constitute the most important narratives of subsequent cultural transformation in South Asia. Contrastively, the volume under review provides a much more nuanced methodology of conceptualizing intellectual interaction. European and Indian societies are both presented as undergoing similar intellectual transformations in the early 19th century: for instance, in both colonial India and Britain, religious orthodoxy, state control of the press, and customary deprivation of the liberties of women, start coming under increasing critique by reformers who want to re-order society according to a-priori models of rationality.

In an important article on Rammohun, C. A. Bayly had earlier spoken about a global conjuncture of liberalism in the 1800-1830 period. C. A. Bayly, *Rammohan Roy and the Advent of Constitutional Liberalism in India, 1800-30*, in: *Modern Intellectual History* 4 (2007), pp. 25-41. Zastoupil elucidates this by linking, for instance, Indian reformist critiques of Hindu and Islamic orthodoxy to dissenting Christian critiques of the confessional state in Britain, the movement for representation of non-Christian Indians in the British parliament to representation of Jews there, the project for abolition of suttee in India to the abolition of slavery in the West, as well as the global linkages in the construction of early feminist discourse and demands for a free press. Rammohun's wide network of politico-ideological connections in Europe — with Whig leaders in the British Parliament and radical members of the British royal fam-

ily, with political philosophers like Bentham and Robert Owen — are sketched out in the process. His emergence as a celebrity in Europe and in the Americas is also explained clearly in the context of the emergence of a, self-consciously internationalist, republican oecumene of political activists. The epistemological grounding of this activist radicalism in a vision of globality clarifies the rationale behind the Euro-American enthusiasm about Rammohun. At the same time, Zastoupil underlines the tensions generated between this globality and more Eurocentric narratives about the changing world order in the early 19th century, and the way Rammohun gets caught up in the stormy debates produced by these contestations.

The projected picture complicates our received wisdom about modernization. Contrary to much of 19th and 20th century historiography about the transfer of ideas from Europe to India (and to other non-European societies), Zastoupil presents an astonishingly dense reticulation of transcultural exchange between Indians and Europeans, whereby Indians like Rammohun contributed to the critique (and eventual dismantling) of political exclusions and social hierarchies in Europe, whilst simultaneously European radicals participated in movements in South Asia against the early colonial state as well as against Indian power hierarchies sustained (and sometimes created or intensified) by the colonial regime. A pre-built European modernity was not transferred in modular form to India; rather, India was quite as much involved in the making of modern Europe, as Europe in the formation of modern India. This does not, however, imply an unproblematic eulogy of an emerging global modernity. Rammohun's connections with European free trade advocates, at a time when free trade could only imply further penetration of European capital into India, leading to the marginalization of Indian manufacturing and commerce, should warn us of this. Zastoupil, by uncovering the ideological dimensions of economic interaction at an important moment of globalization in the early 19th century, alerts us to these problems which continue to remain with us in the early 21st century.

This book, in providing an important narrative of the global origins of our world, provokes a significant question. If indeed Rammohun (and other Indians like him) were interacting transculturally with European radicals, utilizing more or less similar tools of political critique, scriptural exegesis, and so on, what made this transcultural dialogue possible? Zastoupil brilliantly traces the history of Rammohun's Unitarian engagements to the early history of the European Reformation. He has how-

ever probably underemphasized the related issue of Rammohunâs links to the intellectual and social metamorphoses which characterized South Asian discourse in the late precolonial period. These discursive shifts (for instance, as pertaining to changes in political theology) were as socially significant in bringing about changes in the texture of power in India as were the Reformation discourses which transformed techniques of governmentality in early modern Europe. They were also perhaps no less transcultural or global (linking particularly India with Central and West Asia) than the colonial-era reticulations with which we are more familiar.

With this in view, future works could be directed towards making forays into tracing Rammohunâs Sanskritic, Bengali and Persian dialogues to the intellectual ferment that characterized India (and also the Safavid-Iranian and Ottoman worlds with which Mughal India was in close cultural encounter) in the 15th-18th century period. A group of historians has started writing in recent years about the genesis of a precolonial early modernity in Asia. Without necessarily subscribing to the epistemological framework of modernity, one can engage with these historians on the social ascendancy of intermediate and marginal groups in late precolonial South Asia, and the religious-political ideologies articulated by them to frame their rising power.

A strange hiatus however remains with respect to bridging this precolonial history to the history of the 19th century reform movements which once used to be collectively referred to as the Indian Renaissance. Disciplinary as well as ideological divides still create schisms between historians of precolonial and colonial South Asia. I have elsewhere briefly presented a preliminary response to this hiatus by locating the genealogies of Rammohun in the intellectual trends and angst which characterized both India and Europe in the 15th-18th century period during a long global conjuncture. Milinda Banerjee, Rammohun Roy. *A Pilgrim's Progress. Intellectual Strands and Premises in Rammohun Roy's Pursuit of Reason, God, and Common Sense in Early Modern India*, Calcutta 2009. But much more work obviously still remains to be done. Zastoupil highlights the deep cultural interconnectivities that criss-crossed Eurasia in the early 19th century. If similar work is done for the pre-19th century period (not only at the level of intellectual interaction narrowly conceived, but at the level, for instance, of economic linkages, which might have different or similar political and cultural ramifications in different parts of Eurasia), then a proper intellectual history of Rammohun, and of his world, can be written. The author of this volume needs to be congratulated for providing a first step in that direction.

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