

# How to Think Universalism from Colonial and Post Colonial Locations: Some Indian Efforts.

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*The paper is in two parts. The first refers to post colonial opinions, in and outside India, which are critical of universalisable moral concepts. Their fear is that, universalism has always been a counterfeit value which tries to ensure western cultural-intellectual domination of the non west in the name of universal norms which, actually, derive from western traditions. There are references also to certain modes of thinking which accept this criticism but still try to clear a space for a more interactive universalism.*

*In the second part, there is a discussion of early colonial times in India when a liberal, Rammohun Roy, challenged Hindu gender practices through legal reform. In the course of his criticism of Hindu domestic norms, he articulated a redescription of gender relations which suggested not just specific changes within a particular cultural tradition, but, rather, invoked broad norms about domestic relationships that could have a general relevance. He also interacted with religious traditions in many different cultures, appropriating their truth claims and rearranging them according to his own understanding. In the process, he took up the stance of an insider-outsider, speaking for each, but criticizing the authorized versions, internal to all religious communities. I suggest, in conclusion, that this critical appropriation of multiple cultures is a peculiar privilege of the colonized who, at times, have offered a more complex form of universalism than either the western contempt for the cultures of the colonized or a western overcompensatory uncritical respect for them.*

## Post Colonial Debate on Universalism and the Indian Self

With a few notable exceptions, South Asian scholars – especially those with a post colonial orientation - have written relatively little that is systematic or substantial on

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matters of universalism in international law and political theory. Instead of identifying areas where South Asian concerns could derive valences from international thinking about universalisable moral norms, they have however, engaged with a very different kind of debate quite vigorously: about whether we should think in universal terms at all. The dominant opinion seems to be a negation of efforts that try to do so. In the first part of this paper, I discuss this debate. In the second, I dwell on an early modern resolution of the problem.

The debate on universalism has, in India, cohered especially around law and culture. The two are related. Durkheim points out that law usually embodies social norms which are, in the final instance, derived from religious values.<sup>1</sup> They represent, therefore, cultural particularities. Post colonial scholars and cultural nationalists exhibit a strong discomfort about implanting abstract, universalisable moral principles in such fields. India, a colony in the near past and a post colony in the present, has long been exposed to dominant western cultural-intellectual values which were represented to her as universally valid ones and as immensely superior to her own traditions. Post colonial theories allege that in the name of a universal moral order, she has been plundered and imperialised by western cultural orientations during the colonial period. Her own cultural traditions were violated, distorted and stigmatized in the process as signs of a backward, inferior particularity which she must abandon to move on to modern times.

There are two aspects to what is alleged about the nature of western cultural domination. First, the west masqueraded as the universal, while foisting her own particular norms on colonized Indians: law was a particularly important field in this respect, for the strongest claim of cultural imperialism related to the rule of law that Britain supposedly brought to India to civilize her. Second, this form of domination led to a loss of cultural authenticity and selfhood in the colonies: to the extent, that modernized Indians could only derive the basic terms of their thinking, about their self image, from what the west said about them. The effort to think universally, then, would only involve a loss of selfhood.<sup>2</sup>

As a post colony, then, India broods on the colonial hurt. That provides a strong ground for a rejection of all thinking that goes beyond political and cultural particularities. An enlargement of digits of thinking threatens to usher in an imitation of conquerors, a surrender to imperial power, a loss of authenticity : especially since such universalisation of concerns would inevitably be a one way process, as the West will never return the compliment and look at the non West to receive new

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1 Durkheim 1961.

2 See Prakash 1992, for an effort to imagine an Indian historiography that would be built on this ineffable difference.

terms for broadening or reforming its own so called universalism which is really another name for western values.

Here, obviously, a quick caveat becomes necessary. When we, in India, say universalism, as opposed to the purely Indian, we really mean a relationship between India and the West. Universalism, in this understanding, becomes a transaction between two particularities. In the immediate aftermath of Independence, in the fifties, Jawaharlal Nehru did enlarge post colonial political solidarities to come close to other Asian and African nations and with the Soviet bloc. That, however, remained largely at the level of political alliances and meetings and did not require much serious reflections, beyond political pragmatism and some routine invocations of the brotherhood of Man.

Post colonial skepticism about any project of universalism derives from three sources, all of them primarily concerned about the cultural implications of such efforts for a post colonial society. First, many would deny the possibility of mutual accommodation and compatibility among Indian and western cultures. Indian culture, it is often assumed, is so very fundamentally different from the western one, that interchange of opinion and ideas would be a dialogue between deaf people. The difference, moreover, is one between modernity and tradition, the west embodying a modern rationalism and India living in its pre modern traditionalism. There is something curious in the way the argument is posed: modernity is seen as a western privilege, as cultural traditionalism is India's. We have, in these terms, a relegation of spaces to temporalities. Any universalist project would, therefore, need to negotiate not only cultures but times.

Second, not only are cultures different, but India represents a superior form of human existence, which is threatened by its exposure to the modern west. Imperialism and Fascism were no mere aberrations, they are the basic stuff of western civilization which is irredemiably destructive to its Others: Nature, other cultures, different peoples. Ashis Nandy, the first, really, of the post colonial Indian scholars to generalize this view, set up a term by term contrast between the West and the non West, in their very modes of being.<sup>3</sup> What is interesting about such Indian convictions about mutual incompatibility is that the imperial west, too, had alleged precisely that kind of an absolute difference between the East and the West, with the values around each switched around : the west standing in for a better human possibility, in its case.

Third, since the two first touched each other only through the imperial connection, the very nature of the relationship is doomed, it is bound to represent cultural engulfment, obliteration of the ways of the colonized by the colonizer. Partha

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3 Nandy 1983.

Chatterjee described all modern Indian enterprise – even those that opposed colonialism – as inevitably derivative. Oppositional nationalism, too, received the keywords of its politics from western thinking.<sup>4</sup> The colonial encounter has been described by Spivak as one which dislocated the colonial subject from his own past self, his authentic moorings.<sup>5</sup> Ronald Inden extends the image of the colonized, unmoored subject: after the colonial connection, the only history that can be written of India is one of western misreadings. Indians have lost the habit of thinking or describing themselves in their own authentic terms.<sup>6</sup>

Some other post colonial scholars qualify this stark characterization. Homi Bhabha reconfigures the encounter in more complex ways: as something that developed interstitially between cultures, representing hybridity, in betweenness.<sup>7</sup> I find this characterization far more nuanced than that of most other post colonial theorists. However, it still takes the solid monolithicity of the two cultures - western and Indian - as given, even as it identifies some hybrid cultural growth in between them. Also, within his reconfigured terms, the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized is not a question of simple power relations, the gaze of the colonizer being returned by the colonized in a disconcerting way that unsettles the simplicities of pure power. At the same time, the gaze is frozen in time, one without histories and processes. It is a function, almost, of a metaphoricalised situation, beyond conscious thinking.

Seyla Benhabib finds it possible to retrieve a reformed version of moral-political universalism even as she acknowledges the full force of post colonial objections. In her version, universalism can develop as interactive, not legislative, sensitive to the particularities of contexts, especially of marginalized peoples and cultures. It can be a universalism that does not proceed from the axiom of a pre defined universal subject which is usually the hidden western one: but a universalism that is woven out of the concrete particulars of many different lifeworlds.<sup>8</sup> I strongly affirm this hopeful recuperation. At the same time, I find a difficulty with the project. She allows for no faultlines in the lifeworlds of western or non western peoples that may be significant. There is an assumption of singularities, from each of which positive elements can be braided together. In actual experience, however, as Sumit Sarkar has argued, internal divergences, contradictions, asymmetries and power lines running inside each culture can be the decisive social and cultural experience, most

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4 Chatterjee 1987.

5 Spivak 1988.

6 Inden 1990.

7 Bhabha 1994.

8 Benhabib 1992.

of the time, for many.<sup>9</sup> India, a colonized country herself, had, after all, invented caste and untouchability.

Post colonialists, reflecting on other post colonies, carry on a similar debate among themselves. Henry Louis Gates warns of the risks of imagining a universal literary canon that may unify writings across racial power lines.<sup>10</sup> Paul Gilroy, on the other hand, has retorted against the privileging of cultural particularism that post colonial scholarship upholds. He suggests that what may look like derivative political theory among colonized people can actually be a transformation and transvaluation of western meanings by their non western appropriations. Tani Barlow says that the perpetual effort to go beyond the colonial by the post colonial scholar ends up reiterating precisely that which it tries to repudiate. These are serious problematisations of more conventional post colonial positions.<sup>11</sup> It would be interesting at this point to substantiate them with a historical instance from early colonial India where a highly innovative universalism came to be articulated by a liberal reformer.

### **Rammohun Roy and Widow Immolation: An Early Modern Indian Approach**

From the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, colonial India, especially Bengal, was rocked by heated public debates on the Hindu ritual of widow immolation or Sati.<sup>12</sup> Begun by missionaries and some European administrative officials, the debate came to encompass the entire officialdom, occasionally the British Parliament, European Indologists and Hindu Brahman pandits, from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the initiative shifted into the hands of Indian liberals and orthodoxy who began to organize themselves into associations and to argue with one another in the emergent public sphere of print culture : Bengali tracts, newspapers, translations of Sanskrit sacred texts. The colonial state proved remarkably nervous and shy about taking any decisive stand on the matter, even when it proclaimed its moral revulsion about the burning alive of Hindu widows. Eventually, however, a state legislation – “Regulation 18 of 1829: A regulation Declaring the Practice of Burning/Burying Alive of Hindoo Widows Illegal and Punishable by Criminal Courts” – outlawed the sacred ritual.

We have already referred to Durkheim’s view that laws usually derive from social norms which, in turn, are conjugated from religious values. Criminalising a sacred ritual of colonized Hindus through a legal act by an alien state seems to bear out a

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9 Sarkar 2004.

10 Gates, Jr, 1985.

11 For a recent and excellent argument, see Cooper 2005. Also Barlow 2004.

12 For a very comprehensive study of the history of the ritual, see Datta 1988.

classic case of cultural imperialism, when law detaches itself from the moral values and lifeworld practices of an entire people, and comes to embody the coercive will and an alien value system of conquerors. My argument, however, is precisely the opposite. It was a particular Indian value system that persuaded the state that the ban would have an anchorage in the moral world of good Hindus. State law and a new but authentically Indian initiative thus coalesced, providing a brief, tentative example of a new instance of universalist resolution.

It is important to recognize the self imposed limits that framed colonial judicial practice in the domain of belief, ritual, custom and domesticity. From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, it had been proclaimed that the new state would abide by Hindu and Muslim scripture and custom in the entire realm of belief, caste, marriage, divorce, dower, adoption, inheritance, succession. Pandits and Maulavis would advise the courts on disputes that arose on these matters, basing themselves on scriptural directions.<sup>13</sup> The state would initiate alterations in established practices only if it could be proved that present practice violated more authentic sacred prescription.<sup>14</sup> Widow immolation had, from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, been demarcated as an area that was governed firmly by scriptural sanction. The state had, therefore, no jurisdiction over it. Even though many European magistrates, police officials and missionaries – desperate to stop the practice – cited chapter and verse from various Hindu scripture to suggest that it was by no means a sacred obligation, the state stood firm on its decision. Widow immolation, therefore, enjoyed a surprisingly long life in colonial India: for nearly a third of the total life span of colonial rule in Bengal, the custom remained legally valid.

In fact, the decision to allow it was not, perhaps, entirely a product of political expediency or religious tolerance. We may find the makings of yet another kind of cultural fusion, a universalist ethic at work. Mixed with the rhetoric of Christian revulsion against this form of suicide, there sometimes sounded a note of real admiration and respect for the self immolating woman. She was compared to Christian martyrs, her resolve was saluted as a sign of moral steadfastness and an amazing show of love, a demonstration of conjugal fidelity and chastity that was unparalleled.<sup>15</sup> A patriarchal consensus or compact thus secured the persistence of the ritual which, though profoundly unchristian, did, nevertheless, kindle a covert solidarity among European husbands with their Hindu counterparts.

When eventually Lord Bentinck decided on a legal abolition of immolation, he took care to justify his action not on the grounds of a new utilitarian perspective,

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13 Derrett 1964.

14 *Ibid.*

15 See, for instance, Sir W.H. Sleeman 1844, Karachi reprint 1980.

nor by an appeal to a superior European morality, humanitarianism or rationality that must override brahmanical and Hindu superstition and savagery. He referred to a new corpus of Hindu interpretation of scripture which seemed persuasive to him because it was articulated by a Hindu of impeccable Brahman origins and of widely acknowledged mastery over Sanskrit and scripture.<sup>16</sup> His justification was on grounds of a better Hindu judgement. He was encouraged, above all, by what Rammohun Roy had been writing about the practice for a decade.<sup>17</sup>

Rammohun Roy, a liberal reformer, had gathered around him a group of upper caste Hindus who wrote tracts and petitions, questioning the scriptural sanction behind the practice and alleging a purely customary basis for it. The group included traditional pandits and religious savants, as well as men of Calcutta, largely self taught in western and modern texts along with their deep understanding of Indian scripture. It was not Roy's modern, liberal persona that made him acceptable to the state lawmaking process: it was his brahmanical claim to sacred knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

But Rammohun was much else besides, wherever his usability to the state might lie. A lot of very interesting work comes out now about population flows and intersections that the new needs of global imperial capital unleashed. We need also to know more about the intellectual and political exchanges that the advances in modes of communication and transport enabled: a world of interactive religious discussions, philosophical and political debates and arguments, carried out through newspapers, the postal system and occasional transcontinental travels, cheap printed books and tracts. These brought distant peoples, interested in similar themes, in close and continuous touch and, in the case of Rammohun certainly, on an equal footing. Rammohun was already a well known figure in the West when he went there in 1830, for the first and last time in his life.<sup>19</sup> His lectures were much sought after and very well attended, and his western hosts were eager to offer hospitality. His intellectual world was one that encompassed continuous exchanges with orthodox pandits and religious figures, Hindu and Muslim, Christian missionaries, European officials and Indologists at home: Unitarians and anti slavery activists in Europe and the US: members of Parliament and commissions of enquiry in the UK. The public sphere that he inhabited was a global one where he moved with a confident cultural multilingualism that was almost entirely self taught. As a polymath he had taught himself a variety of languages, classical and modern, Indian and western: Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Hebrew, English, Bengali and Urdu being some of them. He read theological

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16 On such hesitations and vacillations among colonial statesmen, see Dalmia-Luderitz 1992.

17 Philips 1977.

18 On Roy's life, see Biswas 1994.

19 Harriet Martineau, in her autobiography, spoke of the eagerness with which she and a large number of others went to attend his lectures. Martineau 1983.

and philosophical texts in all these languages and he engaged in debates with the authorized interpreters of such texts. His primary intention was to develop a strikingly individual argument for monotheism, culling from resources that these multiple traditions offered, a monotheism that he hoped would unify the world with universalisable moral principles and norms of social interactions.

He drew different kinds of satisfactions from different resources. He plundered the Upanishadic texts for their philosophical depth, Islamic scripture for an uncompromising commitment to monotheism, Christianity, for Christ's life, which, for him, offered the highest instance of moral ideals, Confucianism for its stern rationalism and a code of civil conduct and Unitarianism for a more rational version of Christianity. Each religion at different points expected him to be a potential convert and their practitioners held hopeful dialogues with him. At the same time, his gaze was always fixed on higher realms of accredited intellectuals and theologians. It has been said, and with truth, that he never looked beyond the high classical traditions of cultures.<sup>20</sup> He ignored the popular cults and sects that had developed in 18<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. They, too, had formulated a strong criticism of social and religious differences that institutionalized religion enforces. They thought that such irrelevant distances and acrimonies could be transcended through mysticism, simple faith or with esoteric practices that could be made available to the faithful, irrespective of gender, caste and community.

So far what we have is a bland syncretism, not unknown in older Indian histories which are replete with similar efforts to eliminate religious conflicts with a new, universally shared religion that embodies the most tolerant and beautiful elements from all. Where Rammohun offers something strikingly different and interesting is what I would call an argumentative universalism, putting a spin on Amartya Sen's discourse on argumentative Indians. He threw down a challenge at the authorized interpreters of all the traditions that he mastered so very carefully and with such respect: he said that they all went awry at some place, that what they upheld as their most valuable offering to the world was actually their weakest point, that they remained ignorant about their actual truth which, he said, he understood and could elucidate. He, moreover, offered a strange argument for the fundamental unity of all religions: not that they were all true in the same way, but because they all lied. "Falsehood is common to all religions without distinction", he had written in an early Persian tract when he elaborated a radical version of monotheism that was practically the vanishing point of faith itself. It was strikingly similar in its arguments with Enlightenment Deism, but it was written at a time before he had come into any contact at all with western languages and texts.<sup>21</sup> Although

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20 Sarkar 1985.

21 Sarkar 1985.



he would moderate his monotheism later, his criticism of institutionalized faith remained undimmed and he continued to plague priests, philosophers, religious authorities and missionaries with relentless criticism.

His polemical styles were diverse. What stands out is that, instead of a dialogue between two traditions, one of which would triumph as the higher truth, or instead of a close reading of a tradition to identify its weak arguments, Rammohun chose to slide away from proclaiming a final truth or choosing a particular faith, either from established ones, or one formulated by himself. He made the resources of multiple faiths confront and contradict one another. The splendour of Hindu Upanishadic philosophy was confronted with Hindu brahmanical custom and ritualism, with Vaisnavite myths and polytheistic worship which he considered false, immoral and demeaning of the idea of divinity, with Shankar's monistic philosophy which he thought led to an asocial and amoral arrogance. Islam's doctrine of absolute monotheism inspired him as a profound truth, better articulated than anywhere else, but he warned that the Islamic worship of the scriptural texts mitigated the thrust. He mocked the miracle tales in the Bible which obscured its true message which, he said, lay in the life of Christ, the most perfect moral exemplar. He wrote *The Precepts of Jesus* to underline this. He preferred the monotheism of Unitarians who rejected Christian trinitarianism, but he departed from their identification of a single divinity with Christ. In his own being, then, he cleared a space where all religions, met, conversed and argued, and all were proved true and all were also proved false. All of them had claimed him but none finally possessed him.<sup>22</sup>

The resources of the print culture, newly arrived in Bengal in his lifetime, enabled him to inhabit multiple and contradictory spaces, to speak in many, mutually arguing voices. He often published under a pseudonym, and answered himself with another pseudonym. Or he imagined dialogues among different votaries: in a tract, Confucianists gently laugh at, and underline the incoherence of the idea of Trinitarian divinity which a missionary teacher desperately tries to teach them. Writing anonymously to present very different arguments, he played upon half self disclosures and half self concealments that print made available to him. The public sphere thus allowed a universalism that was playful and mischievous, deconstructive of grand narratives and truth claims, rather than appearing as the repository of an absolute truth.

It was not, however, pure play or an insistence on moral relativism, a disavowal of values or principles. Rammohun was a purposeful and energetic social reformer as well, adapting to the new politics of petitions, war of pamphlets to manipulate public opinion at home and abroad, associations and publications. His reformism encompassed many areas: a modern education with a plea for a strong scientific

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<sup>22</sup> Roy 1945.

content, property rights for widows, reform of Bengali prose, better tenancy rights for peasants, individual inheritance entitlements, civil rights. The reform with which his name is most powerfully associated, however, is the abolition of widow immolation. This happened through a law, and hence, in a manner of speaking, can be seen as an accomplishment of the colonial state. But we have seen that the state was encumbered with a constraint of its own making. It would not outlaw any practice that was sanctified by Indian religious prescription. At the most, from 1813 onwards, it began to impose a few restrictions on the scope of the ritual, guided at every step, by the opinion of Brahman pandits.<sup>23</sup> But although the pandits had advised that the ritual must be based on the widow's declared consent, and could not be allowed to a widow who was drugged, intoxicated, pregnant, mother of infants without guardians or was below sixteen, no one had so far argued that the ritual violated scripture. Rammohun, with his legendary reputation for scriptural knowledge, did just that.

So we now come to a new form of interactivity among cultures – of the colonizer and the colonized, both of them to be seen as pluralized entities – in the realm of law. We have seen an instance of this in the consensus that earlier guaranteed the legal life of the ritual in the early colonial era: a moral consensus, that Indians should be allowed cultural-religious self determination, and a political consensus, that in the area of personal relations and belief of colonized people, the state should abridge its own sovereignty. We now find a new kind of consensus building in law, a domain where the state has the final and decisive word. Since the state, however, here represented not just power, but the power of an alien culture, was such legal interactivity that now abolished the practice a counterfeit one? Did Rammohun represent a modern Indian opinion that was ineffably shaped by western influence and therefore denoted a derivative, mimic discourse, an appropriation of his master's voice? For this was a law that criminalized a sacred norm of Hindus. Would the moral norm that underpinned this violation signify the triumph of borrowed values?

This is an important question, linked as it is with the entire question of modernity in India which was chronologically coterminous with colonial domination. Could any change that happened in these times result from a genuine and actual Indian agency or initiative? Could there be an Indian modernity at whose making Indians were present?

To come back to the abolition of widow immolation. In 1818, the Bengali Hindu orthodoxy presented a petition to the government, urging it to withdraw the restrictions that it had imposed on the free practice of immolation. Rammohun retorted against it with a tract in a dialogue form, where he marshalled all the arguments of proponents of immolation and replied to them, largely with scriptural

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<sup>23</sup> Parliamentary Papers 1821.

counter arguments. Next, an orthodox Brahman pandit, Kashinath Tarkabagish, published a reply to Rammohun. Rammohun then published a second tract, refuting Kashinath's points, but stretching his discourse on immolation now beyond the region of scripture, entering the troubled ground of Hindu domesticity and gender relations. This tract eventuated into an argument for moral symmetry between men and women which would require a questioning of all social disparities and restrictions which ensured the subordination of women. A new moral value is articulated which transcends the particularities of scripture and which can assume the shape of a universalisable norm.<sup>24</sup>

Scholars have argued that Rammohun was primarily concerned with reform of tradition and nation, for which gender provided a mere site.<sup>25</sup> All his arguments are drawn from religious texts which he tried to redefine in a more liberal direction. I strongly feel that there are two major problems with this opinion. First, it overlooks the colonial legal framework on personal laws which made it obligatory for all reformers to refer to scriptural citations in defence of social change. Second, it fails completely to reckon with the moral tone and discursive strategies of the second tract which go beyond quibblings over scriptural verses and inaugurate a new moral counter norm which is unmoored from the particularities of a religio-cultural tradition. It is now made compatible with a universal human condition and its moral resolution.

The theological and exegetical niceties that the two combatants brought up are very interesting in themselves as they throw up contending representations of Hinduism: Rammohun trying to align his very individual reading of scripture to ethical imperatives, and Kashinath enjoining a blind reliance on ancestral custom that should require no ethical evaluation or justification. What concerns us here is what each has to say about woman's nature, worth and mode of existence in a Hindu lifeworld. Let me cite a few arguments from both. Kashinath says that for her family and lineage honour, it was better to let the widow die on her husband's pyre. Being inherently immoral and fickle by nature, she would, after her husband's death, sully the good name of the family with her conduct. Rammohun accepts the premise that the widow should be chaste but he also says that any possible immorality could be controlled with knowledge of sacred texts. Kashinath replies that her mind is naturally incapable of receiving knowledge : moreover, custom forbids her education. Rammohun retorts: "As to their inferiority in understanding, when did you ever afford them a fair opportunity of exhibiting their natural capacity? How then, can you accuse them of a want of understanding?" Sharing of knowledge on the ground that women did possess an equal intelligence repressed by social norms was a scandalous suggestion for its times.

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<sup>24</sup> Roy 1818; Tarkabagish 1819; Roy, 1820 and 1830; in 1973 and 1945 editions.

<sup>25</sup> Mani 1998.

In the Second Tract, Rammohun engages a new terrain altogether. The Sati gradually disappears from the discourse which now moves into the lifeworld of the Hindu woman and to a discussion of gender relations which are portrayed as asymmetrical and unjust. "At marriage, the wife is regarded as half of her husband, but in afterconduct, they are treated as worse than animals. For the woman is employed to do the work of a slave in the house". Then follows a remarkable and entirely new genre of writing: a detailed, thick ethnography of the woman's everyday life, labour, punishments, sufferings, encompassing the situation of the upper caste and the lower caste, the rich and the poor woman. It includes their meager diet, their incessant cooking for others, their incarceration within a dark kitchen, the relentless labour and penal regime that provides little or no nurture for themselves, the absence of a wider world and of education in their lives, the burden of moral stigma that allows them no self esteem. Sati, then, appears as the culminating point of an entire order of gender, uncompromisingly unfair and exploitative. It is prized loose from a sacred obligation and is transvalued as an extreme form of social injustice. We are now in the domain of social power.

Martha Nussbaum argues that laws are capable of affirming as well as of disturbing notions of reasonableness that are in currency in any society.<sup>26</sup> Laws would include in such cases the entire process of debates and discussions in the public sphere that eventually decide its form. Rammohun disturbed commonly acclaimed notions of reasonableness among Hindus by devaluing hierarchies and asymmetries. That, in turn, suggested a horizon of new gender values beyond the Hindu moral universe or ethical concerns. At the same time, he does not derive them from any other existing gender system: the western model, for instance, is not invoked as something superior and worthy of emulation. Rather, he deduces a frame of just behavior towards women in order to discuss the gross injustice that he considered immolation to be.

How did Sati get loosened from a Hindu commonsense which had long considered the ritual as beyond ethical review? I think that Michelle Moody Adam's concept of the "insider-outsider" is of some relevance here : a figure who can initiate moral change more effectively than the fully immersed insider or the total outsider. We have already seen that Rammohun had deliberately occupied that position, not simply in relation to his own inherited faith, but also vis a vis all others that he knew. He was a Brahman, he knew the scriptures very well, he did not disavow his faith or community. This made him an authorized interpreter of community norms, at least in colonial eyes. At the same time, as a cultural exile and social critic, he had become estranged from his lifeworld and acquired the distance necessary for it to become an object of critical reflection, rather than a given, a sacred norm. That distance came from his habitation in many worlds, as much as from his exile from all.

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<sup>26</sup> Nussbaum 2004.

That begs a second question. What produces such a figure who accomplishes this moral shift? Moody Adams argues that all cultures possess alternative moral traditions and the insider-outsider simply changes the balance between the dominant and the latent.<sup>27</sup> I find that, however, too much of a static resource, common in equal measure in all ages and in all societies. She does not explain what causes the activation of latent, alternative values at certain historical conjunctures. She attaches to it no history or process.

In the case of Rammohun, located in the whirl of early colonial power and modern forms of knowledge, and carrying with him a developed and advanced core of Hindu and Islamic knowledge forms, the experience of modern times was neither cultural defensiveness, nor cultural surrender. It was one of disturbances, dissonances, dislocations. The inherited commonsense about the social world and its laws which would render the experience of power relations natural - which Rammohun always described as the problem of “familiarity” which forecloses questioning – could appear in a time of rapid change, as in want of explanation, ethical grounding, justification. What was crucial here was not merely the presence of another culture but of a triumphant one whose difference from the culture of the colonized was marked and strong. That produced ethical vulnerability, disorientation, estrangement from both the new and the old, the foreign and the inherited. It opened up a space for seeing the familiar with strange eyes, even as it created a potential for familiarizing oneself with the foreign. Dormant moral impulses were thereby reactivated and dominant values lost their absolute certainties. This, however, is very different from saying that the colonial west did this to Indians. Faced with the strange new times, Indians created a modern knowledge about themselves and about the west.

What, however, makes us believe that Rammohun did not implant borrowed values, that he activated latencies in Indian society? That the modernity that coincided with his era was not mimicry but was an Indian activity, albeit under constraints and possibilities that were not always of their own making? I will cite one reason that is relevant to this particular discussion. Despite the overwhelming ritual merits and benefits in all future lives to the Sati, her husband and their families, most Hindus did not encourage their women to immolate themselves. Nor did most widows insist upon it. This was as true of the propertied classes who were required to grant the widow certain usufruct rights to the husband’s share of the family holdings, as it was of widows of the poor whose families had to maintain them out of very meager resources. So while the custom was widely practiced, there existed, simultaneously, two contrary strands : an exemplary normative ideality was bestowed on the practice but there was also a large scale abstention from that option. This shows that an actual will against immolation did exist, albeit silently,

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27 M. Moody-Adams 1997.

perhaps shamefacedly, even while the ritual enjoyed normative glory. The will existed as a negative option. Rammohun could build on that will.

Let me conclude with a large claim. It was, perhaps, possible only for the colonized to realize a more perfect form of interactive universalism, a rounded understanding of many cultures, in their conceptualization and articulation. This, perhaps, was a compensation for the crime of colonialism that was inflicted upon them. It was the West's loss that their imperialist destiny blinded them to the resources of the civilizations that they conquered and demeaned. But colonies lived more fully and consciously in a larger world. Those of the west who abjured the imperialist destiny and who tried to attain an interactive and equal relationship with the non west, approached their others with respect and humility. But there was, most of the time, an overplentitude of compensatory respect, an abdication of the critical, argumentative bent that completes the circle of understanding. They ascribed an innocence to the marginalized and the victimized that was the other face of the patronizing and contemptuous affection of the colonial Sahib.

The colonized, in contrast, could, on occasion, possess a more confident and measured criticality about their own culture as well as about that of the colonial powers. Rammohun's enterprises reveal an Indian modernity, self made and world-aware, in ways that the west did not always have at its command.

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