

May 25, 2021

Rammohun Roy's 'Gift'

His first published piece

By: Rudrangshu Mukherjee

On the eve of the 250th birth anniversary of Rammohun Roy, a discussion of his 'Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhiddin', a tract written in Persian on the One Universal Truth.

In the 1820s, Rammohun Roy had become a well-known figure in Calcutta. He had a select group of admirers who shared his views on reforming Hinduism and on education. But he also had a large number of detractors who vilified him because of his unorthodox religious views. He was possibly the first Indian to acquire an international reputation in his own lifetime (Sen 2012, 6).

In the context of his fame and reputation, it is somewhat strange that hardly anything is known about his early life. Even his year of birth is not known for certain: according to one view he was born in 1772 and according to another, in 1774. What is established, however, is that he was born in an affluent Brahmin family of Radhanagar in the district of Hugli in Bengal (Sen 2012, 34). Little is known of his early education. One version of his life story says that at the age of 15 he was introduced to a local Brahmin, Nanda Kumar Vidyalkar, from whom the young Rammohun took his first lessons in Sanskrit and the Hindu scriptures (Sen 2021, 36). Rammohun was later to travel to Patna to study Persian, Arabic, and Islamic philosophy (Chatterjee 2012,137)

On the basis of this sketchy information, it is difficult to explain why and how Rammohun, around 1804, came to compose an erudite tract in Persian with an introduction in Arabic. There is no available information to answer the question: what prompted Rammohun to write this book called *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhiddin*?

Deism

But much can be said about the book. The first striking aspect of it is that though informed by remarkable clarity and rationality, its English title has ironically been plagued by confusion. *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhiddin* — “a small pamphlet in Persian”, in the words of its translator Obaidullah El Obaide — was translated into English in 1883. Its translator rendered the title as *A Gift to Deists*. Its publication in English with this title under the auspices of the Adi Brahma Samaj in 1889 carried a preface by the Dacca-based translator, dated 1 September 1883. A subsequent edition published by S.K. Lahiri under the auspices of the Rammohun Mission carried the same preface as well as the same date and location. But the title now appeared in the preface as *The Gift to the Believers in one God*, while the title page had it as *A Gift to Monotheists*. The Lahiri reprint is not dated, but the time of its appearance can be roughly inferred from a note in the translator’s preface: “The translation has been thoroughly revised and partly rewritten by Professor Jadunath Sarkar, April 1920.” The revisions made by Jadunath Sarkar do not seem to have included changing “Deists” to “Believers in one God” because the 1906 publication of *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, edited by Jogendra Chunder Ghose, shows this change had already been made.

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It would be an injustice to Obaide to argue that his original gloss on *muwahhid* as 'deist' was entirely unwarranted. There is enough evidence in the text to suggest that Rammohun was indeed arguing like a deist. For example, in his Arabic introduction to the *Tuhfat*, he noted that in his travels “in the remotest parts of the world, in plains as well in hilly lands,” he had discovered that people agreed generally “in believing in the existence of one Being, who is the source of creation and the governor of it.” He added that from this “by induction” he had come to know that belief in the One Eternal Being “is like a natural tendency in human beings and is common to all individuals of mankind equally” (*Tuhfat*, iii). He reiterated this at many points in the main text of his disquisition, which argued against revelation, miracles, prophets, and other beliefs engendered by custom or tradition that were not amenable to reason. Rammohun allows his argument to yield space to an appeal: “O God, give me strength of mind for making distinction between custom and nature” (*Tuhfat*, 8). In brief, he asserts that belief in one supreme Eternal Being is “natural”, whereas belief in revelation and miracles is a product of tradition and hearsay.

Moreover, to be fair to Obaide, it should be noted that in his translation he was faced with the unenviable task of finding in English — and therefore within Western and Christian philosophical and theological traditions — terms and concepts which would be similar to ideas and movements within Islam. It was obvious to Obaide that Rammohun’s ideas in the *Tuhfat* regarding the impossibility of miracles and prophecies had similarities with the deist position that having created the world by design, the Creator dropped out of the process. Hence, according to deists in the West, natural laws are immutable, determined forever, and are comprehensible through the exercise of human reason.

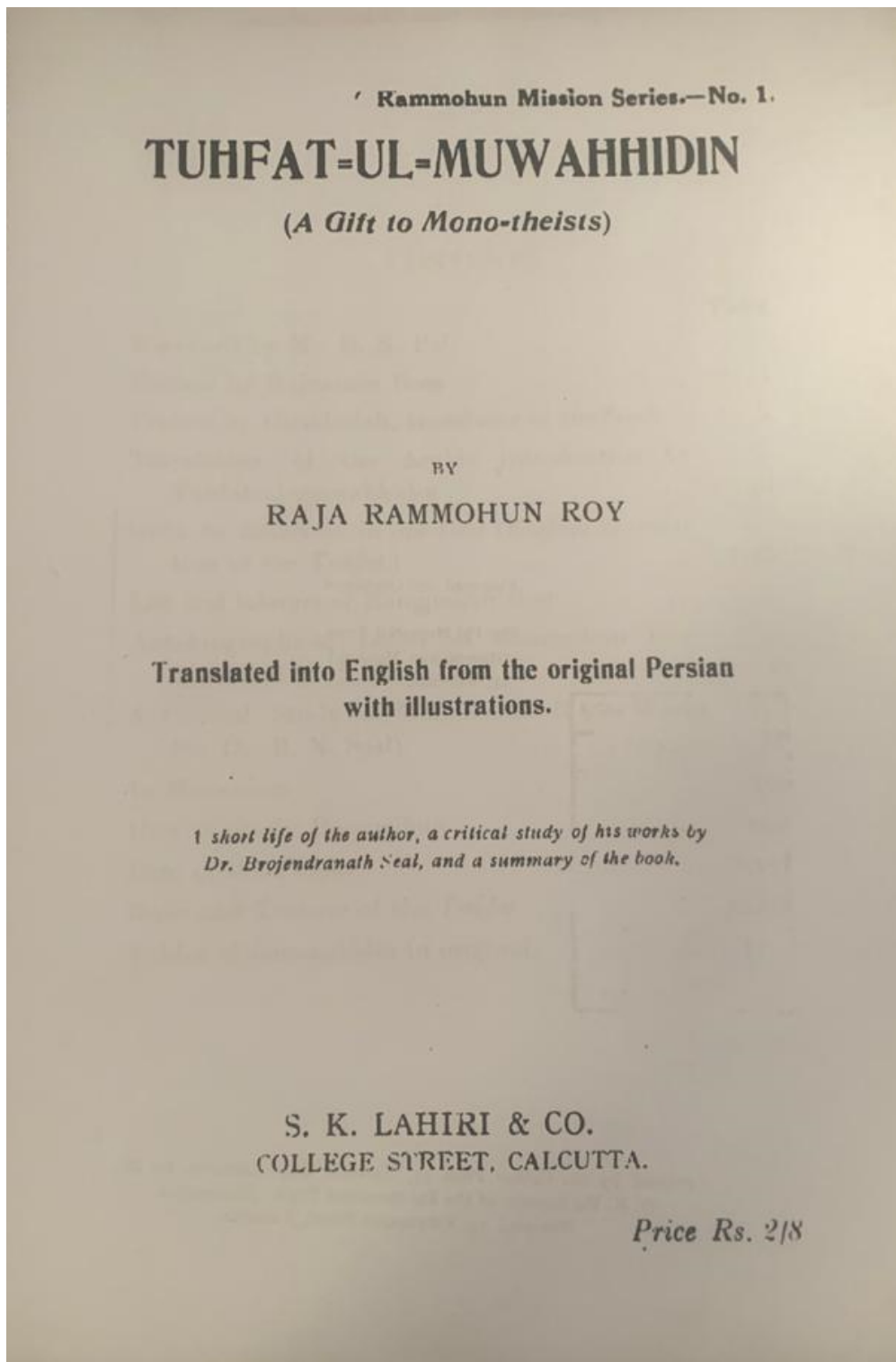
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Even so, from these arguments it would be simplistic to conclude that Rammohun was aware of deism in the western philosophical sense of the term. In 1804, when he first published the *Tuhfat* from Murshidabad, he was not familiar with the philosophical premises of deism that had developed in Europe from the late-17th century. The scholar Brajendranath Seal, in an essay on the date of the *Tuhfat* (included in the Lahiri reprint), argued that Rammohun had composed the text around 1810 and was at that point familiar with the writings of Bacon, Locke, Hume, Helvétius, and Voltaire. Seal’s dating is no longer accepted by scholars and it is entirely possible that he was seeing intellectual influence where there was in fact coincidental intellectual convergence. Lant Carpenter, who knew Rammohun in England and was the first to compile a biographical sketch of Rammohun after the latter’s death in 1833, noted that when Rammohun had as a young man gone to Patna to learn Arabic and Persian, his teachers had made him study Arabic translations of some of the writings of Euclid and Aristotle (Chatterjee 2012,137). This was probably Rammohun’s first exposure to western learning, but it could not have been the basis for the rationalism, articulated in the *Tuhfat*, which made him conclude in his Arabic introduction that “falsehood is common to all religions without distinction” (*Tuhfat*, iv).

Rationality in *Tuhfat*

The question where Rammohun derived his rationalism remains tantalising. Lant Carpenter observed that “the knowledge he [Rammohun] acquired of the Mahomedan religion from Musselmen whom he esteemed, contributed to cause that searching examination of the faith in which he was educated” (quoted in Chatterjee: 137). This would suggest that the rationality of *Tuhfat* was derived from the Arabic and Persianate culture that prevailed in North India in the late-18th century and the early years of the 19th century. It is necessary to add, however, that even these influences can only be traced in very general terms. The evidence is fragmentary and much of it circumstantial.

Recent research has revealed that, at the beginning of the 19th century, Calcutta was a centre of scholarship and discussion among a group of Muslim intellectuals who had not only been exposed to Europe and European learning but were also translating into Arabic the works of Isaac Newton and other scientific treatises. We do not know for certain if Rammohun was acquainted with this group, but he certainly knew the Persian scholars in Fort William College and the Qazis of the Sadar Diwani Adalat (Chatterjee 2012, 137-38). It was through these associations that he became “learned”, in the words of Brajendranath Seal, “in Mohamman Law and Jurisprudence and versed in the polemics of all the 63 schools of Mohamman Theology.”



A different title: 'Mono-theists in the title page of the SK Lahiri edition

Seal's view was that "the free thought and universalistic outlook of the Mohammadan rationalists (Mu'tazilas of the 8th century), and Mohammadan Unitarians (the Muwahhidin) were among the most formative influence of the Raja's mental growth" (quoted in Chatterjee 2012,138). Rammohun's learning in Persian, Arabic, and Islam was so deep that Islamic scholars in Calcutta at that time called him a "zeburdast Maulavi" (Sen 2012, 41). It would be neither an exaggeration nor a flight of fancy to conclude that the arguments of the *Tuhfat* were derived from such debates within Islamic logic and theology.

Persianate culture

In this context another point is worth noting. Towards the end of the *Tuhfat*, Rammohun referred to “another work of mine entitled *Manazaratul Adyan*, ‘Discussion of Various Religions’.” The translator of the *Tuhfat* added in a note: “*Manazara* is a work in the form of dialogue in which two or more persons are introduced to discuss a given special subject.” It would seem that Rammohun composed *Manazaratul Adyan* in the dialogic mode. Unfortunately, there is no extant copy, but one piece of evidence suggests it was the subject of some debate in Rammohun’s lifetime. A small book, entitled *Jawab-i tuhfatul muwahhiddin*, was printed in Calcutta circa 1820 and it was possibly written by a Muslim admirer of Rammohun, who might have been “a member of the staff either of the Sadar Diwani Adalat, or of the Persian department of the Fort William College in Calcutta” (Chatterjee 2012, 38 and 364n21). It has even been suggested that the writer could have been Rammohun himself (Sen 2012, 180-81). In this book the anonymous author answered and refuted all charges that had been levelled against Rammohun by a group of Zoroastrians (this tract has not yet been located). Since the *Tuhfat* had no reference to Zoroastrianism, it would not be unreasonable to surmise that the target of the polemic by the Parsi scholars was *Manazaratul Adyan*, a text that discussed various religions.

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All this would suggest that, in the first two decades after the appearance of the *Tuhfat*, there existed in Calcutta certainly, but perhaps elsewhere too, a discursive space and a cultural ambience that nurtured intellectual discussion and debate among scholars who were not products of colonial education. According to the historian C.A. Bayly, the monotheism and the rationalism of the *Tuhfat* was “inspired” by a strand of north Indian thinking: the *Tuhfat* used arguments “very similar to those of Sheikh Abdul Rahman Chishti (1600-80)”, who was a “liberal” rationalist believing that a learned believer could be catholic or “drink from any source” (Bayly 2012, 37). Rammohun’s Persian writings were part of this space and ambience.

Rammohun himself suggested so when he wrote at the very end of his introduction (in Arabic) to the *Tuhfat*: “I have explained this in (my opinion) in Persian, as it is more intelligible to the people of Ajam (Non-Arabians)” (*Tuhfat*, iv). The very last sentence of the *Tuhfat* reads: “Let it be known that the pronouncing of words of benediction on prophets, as has been done in this book, is merely an imitation of the custom of the authors of Arabia and Ajam” (*Tuhfat*, 25). By such sentences Rammohun was declaring his own sense of belonging to the special intellectual world of Persianate learning and culture. His audience and readership were all part of this scholarly ethos. Perhaps this is the reason that Rammohun never translated his early Persian works into English or Bengali. In fact, according to Kissory Chand Mitter (a very early biographer of Rammohun), before departing for England, Rammohun left instructions that the *Tuhfat* not be translated in his lifetime (Sen 2012, 63).

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In the 1820s, by when he had become famous, this Persianate world was, certainly in Calcutta, on the verge of vanishing. It is worth noting that except for the *Tuhfat*, nothing of Rammohun’s writings in Persian survive. In other words, they were not preserved. Not a single copy of his newspaper *Mirat-ul-akhbar* exists anywhere. This is a mystery. The *Tuhfat* escaped this oblivion possibly only because when he wrote it in 1804, Rammohun considered it important enough to be printed. In its concluding paragraph he wrote, “In order to avoid any future change in this book by copyists, I have got these few pages printed just after composition” (*Tuhfat*, 25).

In this work he also says: “the foundation of the permanence of (all) religions is based on belief in the existence of the soul (which is defined to be a substance governing the body) and on the existence of the next world (which is held to be the place for receiving compensation for the good and evil deeds done in this world, after the separation of the soul from the body)” (*Tuhfat*, 5). He went on to add that

they (mankind) are to be excused for admitting and teaching the doctrine of the existence of the soul and the next world (although the real existence of the soul and the next world is hidden and mysterious) for the sake of the welfare of the people (society), as they simply, for fear of punishment in the next world, and the penalties inflicted by the worldly authorities, refrain from the commission of illegal deeds. (*Tuhfat*, 5)

Rammohun was thus willing to overlook and justify two pervasively prevalent religious beliefs — even though they were “hidden and mysterious” and thus beyond rational argument — on the grounds of welfare and utility (Sarkar 1985, 3). But belief in these two

doctrines had been the source of harm to human beings and society. In Rammohun's words: "But to belief in these two indispensable doctrines, hundreds of useless hardships and privations regarding eating and drinking, purity and impurity, auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, &c., have been added, and thus they have become causes of injury and detrimental to social life and sources of trouble and bewilderment to the people, instead of tending to the amelioration of the condition of society" (*Tuhfat*, 5). The justification on the basis of welfare was thus undermined by the impact these two beliefs had had on society.

It is significant that in the *Tuhfat* Rammohun made only a passing reference to his ancestral religion. He says:

the Brahmins have a tradition that they have strict orders from God to observe certain ceremonies and hold their faith forever. There are many injunctions about this from the Divine Authority in the Sanskrit language and I, the humblest creature of God, having been born amongst them, have learnt the language and got those injunctions by heart, and this sect (the Brahmins) having confidence in such Divine injunctions cannot give them up, although they have been subject to many troubles and persecutions and were threatened with death by the followers of Islam.

He followed up this passage by stating that:

The followers of Islam . . . according to the purport of the holy verse of the Quran i.e., kill the idolators wherever you find them and then tie the bonds, i.e., capture the unbelievers in holy war, then either set them free by way of obligation to them or by taking ransom (Quran, ch. 9 verse 5, ch. 47 verse 4) quote authority from God that killing idolators and persecuting them in every sense, are obligatory by Divine command . . . Therefore the followers of Islam always being excited by religious zeal and desirous of carrying out the orders of God, have not failed to do their utmost to kill and persecute the polytheists and unbelievers in the prophetic mission of the Seal of Prophets. (*Tuhfat*, 17-18)

Through these statements Rammohun was trying to demonstrate that "custom and training make the individuals of mankind blind and deaf notwithstanding their having eyes and ears" (*Tuhfat*, 20).

One universal truth

The *Tuhfat* was not a tract designed to denounce the practices and beliefs of any specific religion. Its remit and intention were much wider. Though Rammohun pushed his argument to the point of disavowing any form of organised religion (Sarkar 1985, 3), he was not atheist. He wanted to present the one Universal Truth that was common to mankind and contrast it with the various practices, rituals, ceremonies, and beliefs that had developed within every religious faith — those that had caused animosity and hostility between members of the different religious communities. These practices, rituals, *et al.* were not the products of reason but of traditions that had been made to seem hallowed by priests and others who had appointed themselves as intermediaries between the Sole Creator and human beings. The Universal Truth that Rammohun wanted to uphold was "the existence of the Source of Creation, which is an indispensable characteristic of man" (*Tuhfat*, 8). The belief in one Supreme Being, because it was "an indispensable characteristic" of human beings, he considered to be "natural". All the other practices and conventions of the various religious faiths were of "excrement quality grown (in mankind) by custom and training" (*Tuhfat*, iii) and were therefore false, unreliable, and not open to rational argument.

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Further, it was Rammohun's conviction that God had endowed "each individual of mankind with intellectual faculties and senses", and each individual "should exercise his own intellectual power with the help of acquired knowledge, to discriminate between the good and bad, so that this valuable Divine gift should not be left unused" (*Tuhfat*, 22).

For Rammohun there was one supreme and undeniable good, and this he stated by quoting a couple of lines from Hafiz: "Be not after doing injury to any being, but do whatever you please. For in our way there is no sin except it (viz. injuring others)" (*Tuhfat*, 24). These lines — in my view the overriding message of the *Tuhfat* — carry deep contemporary resonances.

I am grateful to Rukun Advani, Partha Chatterjee, Gopalkrishna Gandhi and Tanika Sarkar for their comments on an earlier draft. They are in no way implicated in the errors and shortcomings of the essay.

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