

***Rethinking the Role of Rammohun Roy:
Between the Old World and the New
(An Abstract)***

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We are accustomed to think of Rammohun Roy as the Renaissance man, the man who ushered in the new age in India. It is not easy to add something new to that familiar history, full of oft-used clichés. I suggest that in thinking of that well-known narrative of the beginning of the Renaissance, we tend to forget that he was at the same time rooted in eighteenth century India. We forget that his intellectual training was in the literature of the classical Indian languages, Sanskrit and Persian and Arabic; that his initial entry into the cultural discourse of traditional India was through religious scriptures in these languages; that at the late age of twenty-four he began to get acquainted with the English language and European culture; and we forget that he was a citizen of a pre-British India where, till he was thirty years of age, the Peshwa's Maratha territory, Ranjit Singh's Punjab, Hyder Ali and Tipoo Sultan's Mysore, huge tracts of the Deccan and the Carnatic and Malayalam country, the remnants of the Moghul dynasty in the kingdom of Delhi, and a good deal more of India retained their traditional independent identities. We can look upon Rammohun Roy as a bridge between that pre-British India and the new age that dawned first in Bengal and later elsewhere in India. This approach to Rammohun as a bridge-maker between two ages may be fruitfully explored if we study in detail a defining event at the end of his life: the successor of the great Moghuls, reduced to nonentities by the East India Company in the so-called kingdom of Delhi, turned to the predecessor of the Renaissance, Rammohun. It was a sign of mutual recognition that a Bengali babu far away from Delhi was sent by the Moghuls to represent their demand for justice to the higher authorities and the King of England. The symbolic significance of this will be focused upon in this lecture to instantiate the ambivalence of the role of Rammohun Roy standing between two worlds, the old and the new.

Dr Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, formerly Professor of History at Jawaharlal Nehru University (1976–2003), Chairman of the Indian Council of Historical Research (2007–11), and Vice Chancellor, Visva-Bharati University (1991–95), was till recently the Tagore National Fellow, Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India. Away from India, he also held research and teaching positions at St. Antony's College in Oxford University; Department of History in the University of Chicago; and the Mexican University Colegio de Mexico. His recent publications are: *Talking Back: The Idea of Civilization in the Indian Nationalist Discourse* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2011); *Rabindranath Tagore: An Interpretation* (Penguin/Viking, 2011); *The Defining Moments in Bengal: 1920-1947* (Oxford University Press, 2014); *The Colonial State: Theory and Practice* (Primus Books, New Delhi 2016). His earlier publications include *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915–41* (ed., National Book Trust, New Delhi, 5th ed. 2009); *The Financial Foundations of the British Raj: 1858–72* (Orient Longman, revised edition, Delhi, 2008); *Vande Mataram: The Biography of a Song* (Penguin, 2003). Since 2007 he has been the General Editor of the *Towards Freedom* series of ten volumes (published by the Oxford University Press and ICHR) of historical records of the last decade of the Indian freedom movement. Currently Professor Bhattacharya is engaged in organizing, as the General Editor of a project accepted by the Asiatic Society of Calcutta, a three volume *History of Bengal, 1700-1950*, which aims to put together a collection of essays by experts in that subject synthesizing the present state of knowledge about Bengal in the modern period.

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