

Creation of the Rammohun Library - Down the Memory Lane (1904 – 2021)

Rabindranath Tagore's Obituary on Karl Erik Hammargren
(1858, Gidea, Sweden - 1894, Calcutta, India) –
The Founder of the Rammohun Library and Free Reading Room
(Excerpted)

[Tagore, Rabindranath, "East and West" in: *Creative Unity*, Part III, pp. 532-534, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol.2, New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 2001.]

Tagore visited Sweden (May 24-28, 1921) to receive the Nobel Prize and gave the customary acceptance speech at the Swedish Academy on 26th May. During his stay he read out "East and West", the article cited above, on 25th before a very enthusiastic audience in the largest auditorium of Stockholm. The impact was unprecedented, and also so overwhelming that he promised to deliver the lecture again on 27th.

When I was young a stranger from Europe came to Bengal. He chose his lodging among the people of the country, shared with them their frugal diet, and freely offered them his service. He found employment in the houses of the rich, teaching them French and German, and the money thus earned he spent to help poor students in buying books. This meant for him hours of walking in the mid-day heat of a tropical summer; for, intent upon exercising the utmost economy, he refused to hire conveyances.

Let me confess to you that this man lives as one of those immortals in the paradise of my individual life.

He came from Sweden, his name was Hammargren. What was most remarkable in the event of his coming to us in Bengal was the fact that in his own country he had chanced to read some works of my great countryman, Ram Mohan Roy, and felt an immense veneration for his genius and his character. Ram Mohan Roy lived in the beginning of the last century, and it is no exaggeration when I describe him as one of the immortal personalities of modern time. This young Swede had the unusual gift of a farsighted intellect and sympathy, which enabled him even from his distance of space and time, and in spite of racial differences, to realize the greatness of Ram Mohan Roy. It moved him so deeply that he resolved to go to the country which produced this great man, and offer her his service. He was poor, and he had to wait some time in England before he could earn his passage money to India. There he came at last, and in reckless generosity of love utterly spent himself to the last breath of his life, away from home and kindred and all the inheritances of his motherland. His stay among us was too short to produce any outward result. He failed even to achieve during his life what he had in his mind, which was to found by the help of his scanty earnings a library as a memorial to Ram Mohan Roy, and thus to leave behind him a visible symbol of his devotion.

With this indelible tribute that Tagore paid to the dreamer-founder of the Rammohun Library, the motto of this seat of learning was mandated since 1904. Shri Gobardhan Das, Damoder Das of Bombay donated Rs 5000/- through Satyendra Nath Tagore and wished that the Library should be accessible to anyone irrespective of caste and religion; no fees should be charged for this purpose. His wish was honoured and on 09.06.1909 the library was renamed as 'Rammohun Library and Free Reading Room', and soon on 05.08.1909, registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860.

The noble journey of catering service to the readers (poor students in particular) began under the guidance of leading literatis of the then Bengal: Jagadish Chandra Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, Prafulla Chandra Ray, Dwijendralal Ray, Satyendranath Bose, Shibnath Shastri, Brajendranath Seal and with them many a torchbearer of the Renaissance in Bengal. The beacon continues to enlighten the generations after wading through the vicissitudes of times' decrees.

Now, on 22nd May 2021, Raja Rammohun Roy, the Renaissance polymath and a polyglot, shall step into his 250th birthday and quarter millennial anniversary year. The Library is all set to celebrate 'Rammohun 250' during 22nd May 2021 – 22nd May 2022 through seminars, webinars, interactions with students (Quiz, Essay Competitions), collaborations with Little Magazines towards publishing special issues, shows of films, documentaries as well as publication of a commemorative volume on Rammohun Roy and so on.