



**NMML  
OCCASIONAL PAPER**

**HISTORY AND SOCIETY**

**New Series**

**15**

**Swami Vivekananda and Rajarshi Rammohan  
Ray: Two views on sacred authority, two  
visions of Modern India**

**Bruce C. Robertson**



Nehru Memorial Museum and Library  
2013



© Bruce C. Robertson, 2013

All rights reserved. No portion of the contents may be reproduced in any form without the written permission of the author. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect the opinion of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library Society, in whole or part thereof.

*Published by*

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library  
Teen Murti House  
New Delhi-110011

e-mail : [ddnehrumemorial@gmail.com](mailto:ddnehrumemorial@gmail.com)

ISBN : 81-87614-60-9

Price Rs. 100/-; US \$ 10

---

Page setting & Printed by : A.D. Print Studio, 1749 B/6, Govind Puri  
Extn. Kalkaji, New Delhi - 110019. E-mail : [studio.adprint@gmail.com](mailto:studio.adprint@gmail.com)



## **Swami Vivekananda and Rajarshi Rammohan Ray: two views on sacred authority, two visions of Modern India\***

**Bruce C. Robertson**

India and the United States of America have had deep impacts upon each other at critical periods in their evolutions as the global leaders they are today. Our histories are intertwined from our earliest periods as modern nations. But this is a topic for another time.

I borrow from Manilal Parekh when I refer to Rajarshi Rammohan Ray. This would have been a very controversial title during his own life time but one that Debendranath and Rabindranath Tagore would certainly have approved.

Rammohan Ray from afar and Swami Vivekananda from extensive travels in the mid-west and New England were astute observers of American democracy and society. They stirred up already existing divisions in the American religious scene between old-line Calvinist Puritan Protestantism and the liberal Deist religion of the founding fathers of our democracy with outcomes that neither could have predicted.

From both ends of the nineteenth-century Rammohan and Vivekananda viewed America as one model for India. In 1823 Rammohan warned that an American-style revolution resulting in a declaration of independence from England could happen in India if freedom of the press were not restored.<sup>1</sup> Vivekananda credits his

---

\* Paper presented at the International Conference titled 'Swami Vivekananda and the making of Modern India' held at Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 11-12 January 2013.

American reception at the Parliament of Religions in 1895 which helped revitalize modern Vedantism. He rejected the word Hinduism.<sup>2</sup> 'It was reserved for America to proclaim to all quarters of the globe that the Lord is in every religion'.<sup>3</sup> 'Wherever work', he (Vivekananda) went on, 'has been done in America has not been through my power. The people of America have accepted the ideas of Vedanta, because they are so good-hearted'.<sup>4</sup> Vivekananda was less than complimentary of America at other times.

### Perceptions

From the second to the third decades of the nineteenth-century Rammohan was viewed in America and Europe almost as another Thomas Paine. His tracts on Vedanta and *sahamaran*, his *Appeals to the Christian Public* were widely read in America and England. Bengal, like Spain, Portugal, Venezuela, Ireland, and Scotland, was viewed as a hot bed of revolutionary new anti-monarchical movements, in what C. A. Bayly refers to as 'The Age of Liberalism and Empire'.

At the end of the century Vivekananda observed American popular religion first-hand. He was quick to note that American women were more emancipated than Indian women, and certainly more interesting than the male of the species, that they were more receptive to his message than American men who, by comparison were dull and boring, more concerned with making money than searching for the truth.<sup>5</sup> Raja Rammohan Ray had also commented upon the vitality of British women, viewing them as a major social force in England.

Today I come to the defense of my American brothers more than a century after Swami Vivekananda's visit...perhaps a bit of a delayed response to his slanderous opinions...but nonetheless appreciative of the great reformer, I assure you.

### Contexts

As both Rammohan Ray and Vivekananda understood, discourse is specific to particular societies before it is global. Global discourse is a conversation between national discourses. Imported or exported



ideas only resonate or germinate, when there is fertile, receptive soil. Let me illustrate by attempting to sketch the context of early nineteenth-century Kolkata, the locale, time-frame, urban social, economic and political culture in which Rammohan Ray lived. Defining contexts is always controversial. For some it is sometimes the last opportunity to skew the playing field to the advantage of one's point of view.

Raja Rammohan Ray provides an eyewitness perspective but for us to understand him, we who are removed by almost two hundred years from the competing linguistic fields of reference of political, social, economic and religious discourse, must know something about his life and times. Ours is at best a blurry 'key-hole' view into a cavernous past. We do not see into the corners and shadowy recesses. The anthropologist M. N. Srinivas cautions us, the international community of scholars, in 'The Observer and the Observed in the Study of Cultures', and 'The Insider versus the Outsider in the Study of Cultures', that scholar-observers are outsiders even in their own home habitats.<sup>6</sup> Tunnel vision is as bad for scholars as myopia is for sighted people. Jon Levenson, Professor of Jewish studies and a New Testament scholar at Harvard University, cautions that the critical scholar is open to arguing against his or her preferences.<sup>7</sup>

There were other equally valuable key-hole perspectives in early nineteenth-century Calcutta. Raja Radhakanta Deb, Rammohan Ray's nemesis, has been largely edited out of the picture by our predecessors to whom we all are indebted. Other observers include Rammohan's own pandits, the learned sastris Mrtyunjaya Vidyalkara, Sivaprasad Sharma, Ramacandra Vidyabagis, Kasinath Tarkapancanan; Atmiya Sabha members, Tarachand Chakravarty, Kisori Chand and Piyari Chand Mitra, Brajmohan Majumdar, Prasanna Kumar Tagore, Chandrasekhar Deb, Bhavanicaran Bandyopadhyaya, the disaffected former member of the Atmiya Sabha turned co-founder of the Dharma Sabha and editor of the conservative newspaper *Samacar Chandrika*, Henry Louis Derozio (1809-1831), the Hindu College and Young Bengal, and the Serampore missionaries William Ward, Joshua Marshman, just to name a few. In the early nineteenth-century Calcutta was abuzz with revolutionary talk as in late eighteenth-century Philadelphia and Boston and early nineteenth-century London and Paris.

### Rammhoan Ray's World

The central issues in early nineteenth-century Bengal for Rammohan Ray, a disaffected member of the *abhijat bhadralok*, were first, the poorly regulated *zamindari* system and its exploitation of the *raiyat*, tenant farmer. Second, the degradation of Brahman leadership in public religion and society and the collusion of the *bhadralok* had, according to Rammohan Ray and Ghulam Hussain Khan, the contemporary Mughal historian, set Bengali society back to pre-Mughal times. Rammohan Ray had insider information on both of these. His father Ramakanta, a former temple *pujari* and controversial *khansamani diwan* of the Burdwan Raj and 'spiritual advisor' to the scandalous Rani Bishnukumari, had connections with Nandakumar, Navakrishna and the Warren Hastings scandal.<sup>8</sup> Rammohan remarked that he had 'separated from him (his father) and the rest of the family in consequence of his (Rammohan's) altered habits of life and change of opinions...'<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere he commented upon his father's love for aggrandizement.

Third, Rammohan viewed organized religious institutions both domestic and foreign as in dire need of radical revival in order to provide proper instruction in and models of morally responsible action in the world. Fourth, then there was the continued mismanagement of the Bengal Diwani even in the hands of a 'self-confessed' enlightened foreign *sarkar* whose officials were out of touch with the people, tenant-farmers as well as the rank and file administrative hierarchy, and to make matters worse, were syphoning off revenues and profits to finance operations in their homeland. The Mughals had been transferring revenue from Bengal for centuries to finance operations throughout the empire for generations but this was different in the view of Rammohan Ray because Company Bahadur, with the help of the *bhadralok*, was doubly profiting from the resale in India of the recycled products of Indian labor; not that the Mughals had not also done this but they were at least settlers following standard operation procedure, immemorial custom of every previous *sarkar* throughout the length and breadth of Hindusthan. In the context of the first quarter of the nineteenth-century, where the money was going across the black water, was symbolically more significant than that it was leaving Bengal. Rammohan's remedy

was to encourage British direct return investment, namely, European settlement in India bringing with them their energy, capital, technology and institutions and models of production.

Last, Rammohan read the world newspapers and discovered that these same issues were inciting revolutions the world over, in America, Spain, Venezuela, Ireland, Scotland and France. This was Rammohan Ray's world and he was 'out of synch' with it, to use an Americanism. He was in the eye of the storm of every controversy of his generation. In his adolescence he left home after disputes with his father over the abuses of the Zamindari system and with both of his parents over family religious practices. His early education was typical of upcountry high caste Brahman households. It included a mix of Sanskrit and Arabic-Persian studies, the latter considered essential to 'professional advancement'.<sup>10</sup>

Rammohan tells us his education began in the family home under the tutelage of a learned *sastri*, Nandakumar Vidyalankara, better known as Hariharanandanath Tirthaswami Kulabadhuta, a *Sakta vamacara tantrika sannyasi*.<sup>11</sup>

Moving to Calcutta he read the *Brahmasutrabhasya* and the *Talavakara, Isa, Katha, Mandukya* and *Mundaka Upanisad bhasyas* of Sankaracarya in the *tol* of the eminent Vedanta scholar, Fort William College-Supreme Court pandit Mrtyunjaya Vidyalankara, a pupil of the Sabha Pandit of Nator, Sir William Jones' 'third university', the pre-eminent eighteenth-century '*matha* in Bengal'.<sup>12</sup> Among these other pandits was Sivaprasad Sharma who read Upanisads with Rammohan Ray and became the pandit of the Atmiya Sabha. Rammohan entered Company service but soon developed a reputation as a trouble maker for criticism of the Zamindari and judicial systems and for disturbing the peace by publishing a brief summary of Advaita Vedanta doctrines which incurred the public outrage of the Calcutta orthodox pandits. Calcutta was in an uproar. All the while he was independently working on Bangla language subcommentaries (*tika*) on Sankara's Upanisad commentaries, publishing scathing denunciations of *sahamaran*, arguing that it was in violation of sastric norms of *dharma sanatan*.

He joined the Serampore Baptist missionaries in translating the *Bible* into readable Bangla and soon brought the translation to a halt by rejecting the Christian doctrine of the Trinity on textual grounds. He held the Baptist missionaries to the same standard of scholarly competence as he had in disputations with the Calcutta pandits. Soon after this Rammohan led the public outcry against the revocation of freedom of the press. His *Appeal to the King in Council* to restore freedom of the press is a historic document in world history.

Ramacandra Vidyabagis, Hariharananda's brother, a student of Rammohan Vidyavacaspasi Goswami Bhattacharyya of Santipur, one of the few thriving *mathas* in nineteenth-century Bengal, took over as Rammohan's guru. Ramacandra became a trusted *sastric* authority later serving as *acarya* of the Brahmo Samaj. Rammohan could legitimately claim to be a pedigreed product of the nineteenth-century *matha* system in Bengal. Throughout his life Rammohan sought out the company of learned progressive *sastris*. Publicly he observed orthodox Brahman dietary regulations. J. C. C. Sutherland, a journalist friend who sailed with him to England, reported that a Brahman cook accompanied him to England.<sup>13</sup>

The toast of London, Philadelphia, and Boston he had become a scandal in Calcutta. Rammohan Ray was an international celebrity, a world-class statesman known to President Thomas Jefferson's inner circle, President John Quincy Adams, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Schopenhauer, Jeremy Bentham, and the movers and shakers of Parliament. His portrait would be painted in London by the two greatest painters in America, Gilbert Stuart Newton of Boston and Rembrandt Peale of Baltimore, former court painter to Napoleon Bonaparte. Rammohan Ray's expositions of five Upanisad commentaries of Sankaracarya had catapulted him into the pantheon of nineteenth-century world savants and statesmen, and he became a guiding light for New England and British Unitarians who were in the vanguard of a new global constitutional politics.



### Swami Vivekananda

Narendranath Datta's (pre-monastic name) formal education reads like that of an upwardly mobile young man born to privilege with high parental expectations. Biswanath, his father, followed in his own father's footsteps, becoming a prosperous Calcutta lawyer. The family lifestyle was of the Indo-Mughal of the *Bhadralok*. Between Calcutta and Lucknow, Biswanath had developed a taste for Mughal poetry. His mother, Bhubaneswari Devi, learned English at the European Zenana Mission.<sup>14</sup> In an upper-class Calcutta *bhadralok* family context it is surprising that there is scant information about Naren's early years, no oral or memoir accounts of his schooling, childhood preferences other than anecdotes, for example, his love for the game of 'King in Court', always insisting on being king, adolescent conflicts, private epiphanies, anomalies, anything that might help us understand a great life or be fair game for armchair psychiatry.<sup>15</sup> We know much more about the life of Rammohan Ray two generations earlier.

In 1879, Narendranath entered Presidency College. He left after a year and entered the General Assembly's Institution founded in 1830 by Alexander Duff, a Scottish Presbyterian missionary friend of Rammohan Ray. He received a BA in 1884. Up to this point in his life Naren's formation was predominantly an upper class secular fusion of Calcutta *bhadralok* and British colonial.

Narendranath did not have access to the Brahmanical Sanskrit *matha* system, 'the books', as he would later refer to it scornfully. That he was the anointed disciple of a high-caste Kulin Brahman, Gadadhar Chattopadhyaya, 'a poor, illiterate Brahmin mystic', was for Vivekananda a suitable irony.<sup>16</sup> *Sannyasa* is an accredited simulation of a *sastric* Brahmanical lifestyle open to *dvija*, twice-born Vedic *varnas*.

Narendranath Datta was sensitive about his Kayastha identity. This may be reflected in his qualified rejection of the *varna-jati* system. The topic comes up repeatedly in his writings. 'I am a Shudra, a Mlechchha.... It is in the books written by priests that madness like that of caste are to be found, and not in books revealed from God.'<sup>17</sup>

Later he dismissed orthodox Brahman *sastris*' rejection of his *sannyasa* because he is a Sudra.<sup>18</sup> 'Shankaracarya, and others, were the great caste-makers.'<sup>19</sup> In 'The Vedanta in All its Phases' he declares that the four *varna* system of antiquity is extinct, only Brahmans and Sudras remain.<sup>20</sup> Then in 'My Plan of Campaign', he traces his Kayastha descent to the ancient 'purest Kshatriyas', adding that as Aryans 'the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, and Vaishya have equal right to be Sannyasins...in the Vedas'.<sup>21</sup>

After the death of his father Naren turned for solace to his *Saiva* family roots. He encountered a charismatic *pujari* at the Kali temple in Daksineswar, the family *tirtha*. He later poignantly recalled the turning point in his, at this moment of unexceptional life. 'I had a great misfortune at that time, my father died and so on. She (goddess Kali at Daksineswar) saw the opportunity to make a slave of me.'<sup>22</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth-century Swami Vivekananda appealed to the same American constituency as had Rammohan Ray earlier. He followed in the footsteps of Alexis de Tocqueville, the French traveler, a little over a generation earlier, echoing some of the observations on American society in de Tocqueville's celebrated 'Democracy in America' (1835). While the Chicago Parliament of World Religions was soon forgotten, Vivekananda's idea of Vedanta as a universal religion, a perennial philosophy, entered the discourse stream of theological dissent in America but with an unexpected twist. It is remarkable that few if any Boston Unitarians connected Vivekananda with Raja Rammohan Ray who within the life time of some in the audience had been their guiding light.

In America the age of the already gathering Protestant Evangelical 'revival' crusade movement to evangelize, i.e., bring America 'back to the Bible' and back to God, was dawning. Christian conservatism was on the march. It would take off in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, largely as a response to the growth of liberal, anti-Calvinist, Unitarian and Congregational denomination religion.<sup>23</sup> Revival was in the air. Revival meetings sprang up everywhere. They were also great entertainment, and they were free. America desperately needed religious revival. Not only 'true religion' was at stake but the clean-up of a

degenerate society, and it started with Prohibition. Liberal religion retreated to select institutions of higher learning and to the fashionable New England parlors of socialites and salons of the literati.

A second wave of the second new awakening was sweeping across America. It was the age of Aimee Semple McPherson, Dwight L. Moody, Billy Sunday, but also of Al Capone and 'moon shine'. This is the backdrop of Billy Graham and the TV Evangelists in our own times. The redemption of American society, in turn, stimulated a sense of greater urgency for evangelizing the world. The response was a bumper crop of new foreign mission societies fanning out around the world. The twentieth-century American Protestant Evangelical foreign missionary movement was launched with much enthusiasm.

### **Two Views on Sacred Authority**

Both Rammohan Ray and Vivekananda connected national revitalization with religious revival. This was a universal proposition, true for every society. They witnessed how this worked in America. Swami Vivekananda and Rajarshi Rammohan Ray represent two distinct levels of the modern Vaidika tradition, what is sometimes referred as 'high Hinduism' and 'popular Hinduism'. Rammohan Ray was a neo-*sastri* from the fringes of the declining brahmanical *matha* system of late-eighteenth, early nineteenth-century Bengal. Swami Vivekananda was a globe-trotting neo-*sannyasi* from the non-Brahman forward caste syncretistic popular mofussil culture of mid-nineteenth-century Bengal.

Raja Rammohan Ray and Swami Vivekananda each claimed to represent the *siddhanta* interpretation of *dharma sanatan*. Both looked forward to a new independent India founded upon the principles of Vedanta as each understood them. Rammohan Ray and Swami Vivekananda both rejected the label 'reformer' yet they shared a vision that India needed a revival of the old-time religion of the Vedic Upanisads, Vedanta, before there could be a throwing off the yoke of foreign rule.

The similarities between the two 'reformers' end at this point as we have noted. First, they differed on what was meant by Vedanta.

Rammohan Ray understood Vedanta to mean the core doctrines of the Vedic Upanisads doctrines as set forth in the *Vedantasutrabhasya* of Sankaracarya, and in the Vedic Upanisads, the *Talavakara*, *Isa*, *Katha*, *Mandukya*, and *Mundaka*, as expounded by Sankaracarya, and encapsulated in the *mahavakya*, sacred dicta. He laid out those core doctrines, as he understood them, in his first publication in 1815, *Vedantasara*. It came out simultaneously with his own English version, *The Abridgement of the Vedant*. *Abridgement* was not a word-for-word translation of *Vedantasara*.

The Bangla language *Vedantasara*'s purpose was *lokasiksa*, public instruction. It was a beginner's primer for his friends and Young Bengal. *Abridgement* was very likely a response to H. T. Colebrooke's and the Serampore missionaries' essays on Vedanta. *Vedantasara* and *Abridgement* consisted of his own selection of 35 sutras out of 555 sutras presented as containing the core doctrines of the Vedantasutras. *Vedantasara* and *Abridgement* confused the Indologists who mistook it for Sadananda's famous sixteenth-century treatise.<sup>24</sup> The outrage of the Calcutta pandits was ostensibly over his interpretation of Sankaracarya's doctrines but the real *cause celebre* was his rejection of *pratima puja*, worship of *murtis*, and representations of deities.<sup>25</sup> He was publicly censured by the Calcutta orthodox pandits in *Vedantacandrika*, a tract circulated around north Calcutta, 'babu town'. Rammohan fired back charging the authors with ignorance of the Vedantasastras. Their minimalist understanding of the Upanisads was evident from their lack of quotations of them. How could they claim the authority of the sacred texts when they could not even quote them, he railed? They were, by Manu's standard that a Brahman is honored in proportion to his *sastric* learning, frauds. He had worse to say about them later.

Image, *murti* worship, Rammohan wrote, violated the dictates of Vedantasastra. He used the provocative word 'idol' in his English translation, *Abridgement of the Vedant*. Without using the word in *Vedantasara*, Rammohan rejected *adhikarabheda*, the individual choice of *sadhana*, method of spiritual exercise, as *abhava* (*anubhava*), an empirical 'common sense' exercise within the *vyavahara*, everyday worldly, 'common sense', standpoint. Following



Sankaracarya, Rammohan advocated abandoning the self-centered everyday common sense, empirical (*vyavahara*) standpoint and to seek the higher transcendental (*paramarthika*), spiritual selfdenying perspective necessary for contemplation of the Supreme Being.<sup>26</sup> In his *Mandukya tika* he quoted Brahmasutra 3.4.39 which declared that the Vedic ideal is the *varnasramacar upasak*, one who worships the Lord from within society, the world affirmer seeking liberation, *moksa*, from the entanglements of society.<sup>27</sup> This contradicted Sankara's view. *Saunaka*, the *mahagrhashta*, great householder, pillar of society, of the *Mundaka Upanisad* is the universal model. Withdrawal from society, world renouncing, was a self-centered copping out. 'Transcendental' became a catch word for New England Unitarians and other intellectuals in their sway.

It is significant to note here that Rammohan's conflict with the pandits was an internal disputation exclusively within the seclusion of the orthodox Calcutta pandit community until of course they went public. Not once was Rammohan accused by the Calcutta orthodox Hindu community of being influenced by the missionaries and other English reformers or of being a westernizer. Viewed from within the long intellectual history of India, this was just the latest round in a running debate over millennia dating back to the Vedic Upanisads, the *Bhradaranyaka*, *Kena*, and *Chandogya* 6.2.1's (and elsewhere) *ekam evadityam*, 'one only without a second'.

Vedantasara's message was straightforward. There is an unmanifest Supreme Being who is the Ground of Being. The desire to know the unmanifest Supreme Being expressed in the hearing and meditating upon the *mahavakyas* is the duty of every human being, irrespective of social class, gender, or station in life. That desire to know the Supreme Being constitutes worship of the Supreme Being and impels the worshipper, *sadhaka*, to fulfill the four aims of human striving, *purushartha*, not only for him/herself but for everyone in society, as an active member of society renouncing selfish aims for the good of others. Lastly, the sole condition of eligibility, *adhikara*, for the gratuitous gift of knowledge of the Supreme Being by the Supreme Being is the desire for that knowledge, *brahmajijnasa*, alone. Everyone, irrespective of social standing, gender, and age may become a

*brahmajijnasin* as the natural cycle of personal spiritual development takes one beyond the *vyavaharika*, common sense pragmatic viewpoint to the *paramarthika* transcendental standpoint. *Brahmajijnasa* is not attained by human effort, *kriya*. Rammohan implicitly rejected *adhikarabheda*, individual choice of *sadhana*, as we have noted, as an accommodation to human individual frailty because human effort is of no avail. In this he was in line with Sankaracarya.

Later in the *Mandukya tika* he argued that intoning the *pranava*, the sacred syllable *aum*, was *pratika upasana*, contemplation of the consubstantial presence of the Supreme Being in sound, but by extension an *alambana*, a support in the spiritual quest for *brahmajnana*. This was a softening of his earlier stand that *alambanas* are inferior worshipers, *gauna upasana*, for the one at the *vyavahara* level not yet capable of contemplation of the unmanifest Supreme Being.<sup>28</sup> It was reported that on his deathbed Rammohan repeated the sacred syllable over and over.<sup>29</sup> The conflict between Rammohan and his critics was over his view that everyone irrespective of gender, station in life, and social standing may by the grace of the Supreme Being 'cast off the crutches and walk,' and take the fast track of the *paramarthika* standpoint where ever he or she is in life. Rammohan based this on his reading of *Katha Upanisad* 1.2.23 and the identical Sanskrit text in *Mundaka Upanisad* 3.2.3. Sankara's reading of the texts, *atma vrnute*, 'atman chooses' is *vidvan vrnute*, the 'seeker of knowledge chooses'.<sup>30</sup> Rammohan rejected this. The Atma in these two texts denotes *Paramatma* not *jivanatma* was a radical departure from his *acarya*. In his English language versions he distinguished between Atman and Parmatma. According to many Vedas the knower is not the atma (*ei atma anek veder dvara jneya hayen na*). It is the *Paramatman* who chooses and by whose grace *atmajnana* (*brahmajnana*) is bestowed. The ideal is *brahmanishta grhastha*, the station of the householder established in the unmanifest Supreme Being, not *sannyasa*, withdrawal from the world selfishly seeking his own emancipation from *samsara*, rebirth to the exclusion of all everyone else. The householder established in Brahman lives for others as a morally, socially responsible, good citizen in his or her community.

Rammohan otherwise rested his case on the authority of Sankara's commentaries on these Vedic Upanisads, the books. Vivekananda rejected the books.

Vedanta, for Swami Vivekananda, was the name for the *Vaidika* tradition, the foundation of which was the teachings of the Vedic Upanisads as distilled through the teachings of Kapila. Vivekananda explains, '...the philosophy of Vyasa is a development out of an older one, the Sankhya, and every philosophy and every system in India—I mean throughout the world—owes much to Kapila, perhaps the greatest name in the history of India in psychological and philosophical lines. The influence of Kapila is everywhere seen throughout the world.'<sup>31</sup> The source of Vivekananda's knowledge of *Sankhya* is unclear since he cites no *Sankhya* texts. Parenthetically it is relevant or at least interesting here to note Sankara's rejection of the *Sankhya pradhana* doctrine in *Sutrabhasya* I.1.54, 'It is impossible to find room in the Vedanta texts for the non-intelligent pradhana, the fiction of the *Sankhyas*; because it is not founded on Scripture.'<sup>32</sup> Mysore Hiriyana notes Sankara's rejection of *Sankhya* doctrines as not in line with the teaching of the Upanisads.<sup>33</sup> But tradition is not static. It is a living organic process vivified in every age by interpretation, so one rejection is cancelled out by another affirmation.

According to Vivekananda the *Sankhya* system was interpreted by the five orthodox schools, transmitted by Patanjali, and the Vedantasutra of Badarayana through the great interpreters Ramanuja and Sankara (in order of importance), and further in the orthopraxy of the Puranas, Tantras, down to Chaitanya and finally, ultimately through the grace of the guru, Ramakrishna.<sup>34</sup>

I, through the grace of God, had the great good fortune to sit at the feet of one whose whole life was such an interpretation, whose life, a thousand fold more than whose teaching, was a living commentary on the texts of the Upanishads, was in fact the spirit of the Upanishads living in a human form.<sup>35</sup>

Again, the source of Vivekananda's knowledge of Patanjali's *Yogasutra* and Ramanuja's *Sribhasya* is unknown. Vivekananda

readily admits that he had not read any of the *Samhitas*, Brahmanas, Upanisads. He writes 'I have sought all over India for it (*Brahmasutra*) and never yet have been able to see it', and again 'I myself never had an opportunity of seeing this commentary of Bodhayana.'<sup>36</sup> He was unaware of the writings of Rammohan Ray and of the early Indologists.

The books were not the final court of appeal. Vivekananda looked elsewhere to the oral tradition for the ultimate authority and he traced this to the person of Ramakrishna.

All the teachings of the books, Vedas, Upanisads, Brahmasutras, Bhagavadgita, Puranas, Tantras, are transmitted to the *sadhak*, spiritual seeker, through the agency of the personal direct experience, *anubhuti*, realization of the Guru. Guru *parabhakti* is the highest *marga*, spiritual path. The authority of the Guru is equal to the authority of the eternal Vedas. This made the books superfluous. 'The whole world reads Bibles, Vedas, and Korans; but they are all only words, syntax, etymology, philology, the dry bones of religion.'<sup>37</sup> 'To be religious, you have first to throw books over board. The less you read of books, the better for you; do one thing at a time.'<sup>38</sup> The emphasis upon personal religious experience as distinct from institutionally correct practice echoes throughout all the great world religious traditions.

We need not go into text- torturing, we need not go into any sort of grammatical twaddle, we need not go about trying to put our own ideas into texts which were never meant for them, but the work is plain and becomes easier, once you understand the marvelous doctrine of Adhikarabheda.<sup>39</sup>

Both Rammohan and Vivekananda, however, believed that there was *samanvaya*, concordance, continuity of Vaidika tradition down through the ages, though they differed on what were the core doctrines transmitted and what was included in the chain of transmission. By contrast with Vivekananda, Rammohan held that the core Vedanta doctrines were transmitted through the teachings of the rishis, saints in every age, especially Sankaracarya, even Ramanuja, the medieval saints Guru Nanak, Dadu, Caitanya, Kabir, Sadananda, and others.





The Vedantasutrabhāṣya and the Upaniṣad *bhāṣyas* of Sankara was, however, the final authoritative systematization of the Upaniṣadic tradition.

Rammohan Ray thus claimed for his doctrines the ultimate authority of *śabdapramāna*, sanction of the eternal word, the Vedic Upaniṣads, Veda, but also of *śiṣṭacarapramāna* the practice of the rishis, holy sages. Rammohan ignored the other five schools of philosophy. His model was *Saunaka*, the *brahmanistha* grhastha of the *Mundaka* as we have noted. By contrast Vivekananda's final authority was the living guru-disciple relationship modeled after Narada and Prahlada. Vivekananda saw himself as a modern day Prahlada.

Vivekananda claimed *śiṣṭacarapramāna* with Ramakrishna being the supreme *śiṣṭa*, the one who in his person embodies the totality of sacred tradition. *Anubhūti*, direct (*vyavahara*) experience, attuned awareness, mindfulness perhaps in the Buddhist sense, of the person of the living Guru, 'that is the true religious realization'.<sup>40</sup> 'The one who has the power of transmitting this current is called a Guru.'<sup>41</sup> 'The real Guru is he who leads you beyond this Maya of endless birth and death—who graciously destroys all the griefs and maladies of the soul.'<sup>42</sup> 'We must rouse India and the whole world. No cowardice, I will take no nay.... Be true unto death!...The secret of this is Guru-Bhakti – faith in the Guru unto death.'<sup>43</sup> '...the teacher must be able to know the spirit of the scriptures.'<sup>44</sup> 'Mind you, the Guru- Bhakta will conquer the world—this is the one evidence of history...'<sup>45</sup> 'The Rishi as he is called in the Upanishads is not an ordinary man, but a Mantra-drashta. He is a man who sees religion, to whom religion is not merely book-learning, not argumentation, nor speculation, nor much talking, but actual realization...'<sup>46</sup> '...it was that Shri bhagavan Ramakrishna incarnated himself in India, to demonstrate what the true religion of the Aryan races is...'<sup>47</sup>

For Vivekananda the ultimate authority was Shri Ramakrishna Paramhansa who initiated him, *guruparampara*, through spiritual discipleship into *anubhūti*, realization of the Guru, a modern day version of the Narada-Prahlada *gurusisyasamvad*. Vivekananda sums it up in these words, '...my teacher, my master, my hero, my ideal, my God in life—Shri Ramakrishna Paramamsa.'<sup>48</sup>

Rammohan Ray's Calcutta pandit adversaries rejected his view of *samanvaya*, *sabda pramana* and his version of *sistacarapramana*, but they also would have differed with Vivekananda's view of *samanvaya* and *sistacarapramana*. Radhakanta Deva and Mrtyunjaya Vidyalankara, the authors of *Vedantacandrika*, claimed the authority of *sabda pramana*, scripture, *lingakanumanapramana*, 'inference from the method of forming various images, their names and characteristics having been pointed out in the *Shilpu Shastrus*,' *pratyaksa pramana*, 'ocular demonstration, from witnessing the various images of deities, erected at various holy places', and *sistacara pramana*, 'the proof of approved custom'.<sup>49</sup> Their doctrines were thus validated by the entire sweep of customary practices in India down through the ages.

In *Bhattacharyya Sahit Bicar*, his reply to *Vedantacandrika*, Rammohan denied his opponents' *sabda pramana*, scriptural authority, on the grounds that those who could not quote scripture may not claim its authority for their doctrines. Their *sista pramana*, authority of the practice of the holy sage, was to be denied on the grounds that it did not mean prior usage in the sense of popular social habits but only to 'saintly practice' of a 'righteous man', a *sannyasi*, a world renouncer.<sup>50</sup> Rammohan was clearly satirizing the secular public life-styles of the Calcutta pandits, themselves. He scoffed that if the standard was whatever is practiced in Hindosthan then it is a case of anything goes.<sup>51</sup> Nothing is off limits.

Vivekananda's dismissal of 'the books' and his central focus upon guru bhakti where the living guru is the *sista*, *par excellence*, of old, one who embodies in his own person the entire the *ipsissima verba* and spirit of sacred tradition, would have been rejected by Rammohan's adversaries, as another dangerous, subversive form of *adhunikatva*, 'modernism', because of its presumption of a *sastric* Brahman tone by a non-Brahman posing as a *sannyasi*. Radhakanta Deb, the thirteenth *goshtipati* of the Maulika Kayastha community, to which a generation later Vivekananda belonged, was granted a special dispensation by the Calcutta orthodox pandits.<sup>52</sup> Had Vivekananda read *Vedantacandrika* and Bhattacharyya's *Sahit Bicar* he would likely have sided with Rammohan Ray in this disputation and might have also



labeled the religion of the *Vedantacandrika* as ‘pauranika’, post-Buddhist in origin.<sup>53</sup>

Rammohan constructed an Ur religion of antiquity from which the great world traditions developed. The Unitarians embraced this as confirmation of their own view of their own doctrines. Vivekananda argued that Vedanta was that universal religion. ‘...I think that it is Vedanta, and Vedanta alone that can become the universal religion of man, and that no other is fitted for the role’, India’s gift to the world.<sup>54</sup>

### **Two Visions of Modern India**

Rammohan Ray laid out of his vision for India most clearly in the *Appeal to the King In Council* protesting the Press Regulation of 1823 which imposed government censorship of the Calcutta press. Rammohan addressed the public grievance directly to His Majesty King George the IV. Rammohan sketched two scenarios that Indians might consider. The first was to follow the example of the American Revolutionaries and revolt against the unjust taxation of the British occupiers and declare their independence. The second option was to follow the example of Canada which refused to join the American revolutionaries because they were granted full rights and chose dominion status within the British Empire.<sup>55</sup> Rammohan weighed both options, revolution leading to independence or dominion status within the British Empire. The respectful, conciliatory tone of his remonstrance might suggest that he favored at the moment of writing, the second option. Later however Rammohan wrote that if the Reform Bill were to be defeated ‘I would renounce my connection with this country’.<sup>56</sup>

Rammohan’s message was that his generation in Bengal was at the same place as the Americans were in 1776, politically aware and mature enough to take matters into their own hands, in other words to revolt. Bengal was as ripe for revolution as the French, Spanish, Gautemalan revolutionaries and the dissenting movements in Scotland and Ireland. The mysterious dedication of the Spanish Constitution of 1812 to ‘Al Liberalismo Del Noble, Sabio, Y Virtuoso Brama Ram-Mohun- Roy’ by the La Compania de Filipinas ‘documents’ that Rammohan Ray’s reputation as a dissenter was known to other revolutionaries around the world.<sup>57</sup>

There may be an interesting possible subtext to this debate in ‘Brief Remarks Regarding Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females’ (1822), composed a year before the *Appeal to the King in Council*. Rammohan briefly relates an *akhyayika*, narrative, from the *Bhagavad Purana*, about a Brahman revolt against Ksatriya tyranny in the ancient world. ‘...the second tribe (Ksatriyas) who were appointed to defend and rule the country, having adopted arbitrary and despotic practices, the others revolted against them; and under the personal command of the celebrated Purusooram, defeated the royalists in several battles, and put cruelly to death almost all the males of that tribe. It was at last resolved that the legislative authority should be confined to the first class (Brahmans) who could have no share in the actual government of the state, or in managing the revenue of the country under any pretence; while the second tribe (Ksatriyas) should exercise the executive authority. The consequence was, that India enjoyed peace and harmony for a great many centuries.’<sup>58</sup>

This footnote is worthy of remark for two reasons. First, he cites an *akhyayika*, a myth, as though it were *itihasa*, historical. In the introduction to his *Kena Upanisad* subcommentary (*tika*) he dismisses the first half of the Upanisad as merely a narrative and goes straight to the doctrinal section.<sup>59</sup> Second, he tells this story as though it is a time-honored Vedic model for the way to deal with oppression in India and restore peace and harmony. Brahmins lead the revolt, assume full legislative authority then hand over actual governance to the ruling class and go back to their legitimate business of being spiritual leaders. Did he have this model in mind when he wrote the *Appeal to the King in Council* a year later? As a Brahman, was he playing a modern day Purusarama role as an activist for political change?

Vivekananda lays out broad guidelines for a vision of modern India in ‘The Future of India’ but returns to the topic throughout his writings.<sup>60</sup> ‘Children of India, I am here to speak to you today about some practical things, and my object in reminding you about the glories of the past is simply this. Many times have I been told that looking into the past only degenerates and leads to nothing, and that we should look to the future. That is true. But out of the past is built the future. Look back, therefore, as far as you can, drink deep of the eternal fountains that are behind, and after that, look forward, march forward



and make India brighter, greater, much higher than she ever was.’<sup>61</sup> ‘That is the national mind, that is the national life-current. Follow it and it leads to glory.’<sup>62</sup> The Indian mind is first religious, then anything else.<sup>63</sup> He goes on, ‘The problems in India are more complicated, more momentous, than the problems in any other country. Race, religion, language, government—all these together make a nation.’<sup>64</sup> In the history of the temples of the south and of Gujarat lies the ancient wisdom not in the books. Their sustainability in the face of ‘a hundred attacks,’ their resilience, regenerative powers are the model for modern India. ‘That is the national mind, that is the national life-current.’

Some of his prescriptions such as turning India into a nation of ‘good Sanskrit scholars,’ that is, making learning Sanskrit compulsory for everyone, and indoctrinating everyone with the idea of Aryan identity, are controversial today. His view that public education, spiritual and secular, must be ‘along national lines’ would have been anathema to Rammohan Ray. Vivekananda’s vision of an egalitarian society where women’s rights are fully protected and religious freedom is guaranteed for all, resonate today. Caste ‘...led to one of the great causes that led to the downfall of the Indian nation’.<sup>65</sup> He blamed Sankara among others for the current caste system.

Reconciling his view of religious freedom with his repeating theme that ‘The unity in religion, therefore, is absolutely necessary as the first condition of the future of India’ presents a challenge today.<sup>66</sup> ‘The one common ground that we have is our sacred tradition, our religion. That is the only common ground, and upon that we shall have to build.’<sup>67</sup> ‘National union in India must be a gathering up of its scattered spiritual forces. A nation in India must be a union of those whose hearts beat to the same spiritual tune.’<sup>68</sup> Yet he says, ‘For unless a man chooses for himself, the very spirit of Hinduism is destroyed. The essence of our Faith consists simply in this freedom of the Ishta.’<sup>69</sup> Then ‘...if you succeed in the attempt to throw off your religion and take up either politics, or society, or any other things as your centre, as the vitality of your national life, the result will be that you will become extinct.’<sup>70</sup>

After all this Vivekananda says that his vision for India was that of combination of an American/European-style rajas driven society

and Indian *tamas* driven society energized by *sattvic* Vedantist principles.<sup>71</sup> The ideal combination would be a European society with Indian religion.<sup>72</sup> ‘Can you make a European society with India’s religion? I believe it is possible, and must be.’<sup>73</sup>

To realize his vision, however, Vivekananda believed his contemporaries had to get back to basics, to regroup. ‘So every improvement in India requires first of all an upheaval in religion. Before flooding India with socialistic or political ideas, first deluge the land with spiritual ideas.’<sup>74</sup> ‘In India there are two great evils. Trampling on the women, and grinding the poor through caste restrictions.’<sup>75</sup>

At times Vivekananda in India comes off as an American-style ‘self-help guru’ at a pep rally with more than a touch of jingoism. ‘If there is any land on this earth that can lay claim to be the blessed *Punya Bhumi*, to be the land to which all souls on this earth must come to account for Karma, the land to which every soul that is wending its way Godward must come to attain its last home; the land where humanity has attained its highest towards gentleness, towards, generosity, towards purity, towards calmness, above all, the land of introspection and of spirituality—it is India.’<sup>76</sup> Vivekananda told his own disciples to realize the divine within them.

### Conclusion

Both Rammohan Ray and Swami Vivekananda looked back to Vedanta but did not, as we have seen, agree on what it was. Rammohan meant specifically the Vedic Upanisads as interpreted by Badarayana and expounded by Sankaracarya. Vivekananda understood Vedanta to encompass the entire Vaidika oral tradition beginning with Kapila, the greatest expositor, and ending with Sri Ramakrishna, the living guru. Both held that spiritual renewal comes before personal and national self-discovery. They also disagreed on *samanvaya*, how all this comes together into one tradition. Rammohan identified Advaita Vedanta as the core of Vaidika tradition. Vivekananda held that *Sankhya-Yoga* was the medium of transmission of the core message of Vedanta passed down through the ages in personal realization of the living guru.

Rammohan Ray's view was that by hearing, meditating upon and silently repetition of the *mahavakyas* the *sadhaka* is prepared for an active role in society working for the fulfillment of the *purusharthas* not merely for himself or herself but for all. To this end the Upanisadic model was that of the *brahmanisthagrhashta*, the *mahasala Saunaka* of the *Mundaka Upanisad*.

For Vivekananda, however, the books, Vedantasastra, were a distraction from the direct personal *sui generis* relationship with his living guru, Sri Bhagavan Ramakrishna Paramhansa, the latter-day Narada. Vivekananda was Prahlada the God intoxicated *sadhaka*. The natural outflowing of this spiritual relationship is *karseva*, active service to society, not in the sense of a Hindu version of a *mujahidin*, holy warrior, an idea associated with some members of the Sangh Parivar, but in the meaning of anonymous selfless service to humanity.

Both Rammohan Ray and Swami Vivekananda held service to society to reach its fulfillment in service to one's own country. Taking a cue from Rosinka Chaudhuri's *The Religion of Patriotism: The Figure of the Sannyasi and the Politics of Poetry*, may I close with a recital of the beginning and closing lines of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* by Rammohan's contemporary Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) an expression of the vibrant early nineteenth-century Scottish nationalism he supported. This is, perhaps, also a fitting epitaph for these two world travelers, Rammohan and Vivekananda.

Breathes there the man with soul so dead, who never to  
himself hath said,  
'This is my own, my native land.' Whose heart hath ne'er  
within him burn'd  
as home his footsteps he has turned, from wandering on a  
foreign strand,  
If such there breathe, go, mark him well, For him no Minstrel  
raptures swell...  
The wretch concentrated all in Self, Living, shall forfeit fair  
renown,  
And doubly dying, shall go down, To the file dust from  
whence he sprung, Unwept, unhonour'd, and unsung.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Carlisle Robertson (ed.), *Essential Writings of Raja Rammohan Ray* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 250.

<sup>2</sup> Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 8 Vols.* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2012), Vol. 3, p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 447.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 248; Vol. 7, p. 125.

<sup>6</sup> Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas, *The Cohesive Forces of Sanskritization, and Other Essays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 172, 160.

<sup>7</sup> Jon Douglas Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> John R. McLane, *Land and Local Kingship in Eighteenth-Century Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 256, 233.

<sup>9</sup> Sophia Dobson Collet, Dilip Kumar Biswas, and Prabhat Chandra Ganguli (eds.), *The Life and Letters of Rammohan Roy* (Calcutta: General Books, 1962), p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> McLane, *Op. Cit.*, p. 134.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Carlisle Robertson, *Raja Rammohan Ray, the Father of Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 13, note 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Collet, et. al. (eds.), *Op. Cit.*, p. 307.

<sup>14</sup> Amiya Sen, *Swami Vivekananda* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Vivekananda, *Op. Cit.*, Vol.6, p. 394.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 7, p. 318.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 296.





- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, pp. 339-340.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 211.
- <sup>22</sup> Sen, Op. Cit., p. 23.
- <sup>23</sup> Louis Menard, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), p. 250.
- <sup>24</sup> Robertson, Op. Cit., p. 81.
- <sup>25</sup> Robertson, Loc. Cit.
- <sup>26</sup> Elion Deutsch, *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1969), p. 26.
- <sup>27</sup> Robertson, Op. Cit., p. 135.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 133, 171.
- <sup>29</sup> Collet, et. al. (eds.), Op. Cit., p. 361.
- <sup>30</sup> B. N. Bandyopadhyaya, S. K. Das (eds.) *Ramamohana Granthabali* (kalikata: Bangiya Sahiya Parishat, 1959), p. 124; Robertson, Op. Cit., p. 129.
- <sup>31</sup> Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 3, p. 327.
- <sup>32</sup> George Thibaut (trans.), *The Vedanta Sutra of Badarayana with the Commentary by Sankara, Part I* (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), p. 47.
- <sup>33</sup> Srinivas, Op. Cit., p. 268.
- <sup>34</sup> Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 3, p. 329.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, pp. 323-34.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 326.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 48.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 48.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 397.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 283.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 141.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 471.



<sup>43</sup> Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 62.

<sup>44</sup> Vivekananda, Op. Cit. Vol. 4, p.15.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 99.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 183.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 312.

<sup>49</sup> Robertson, Op. Cit., p. 157.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>51</sup> Bandyopadhyaya, Op. Cit., p. 176.

<sup>52</sup> Syamalendu Sengupta, *A Conservative Hindu of Colonial India: Raja Radhakanta Deb and his Milieu, 1784-1867* (New Delhi: Navrang Publication, 1990), p. 18.

<sup>53</sup> Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 5, p. 229.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 182.

<sup>55</sup> Robertson (ed.), Op. Cit., p. 252.

<sup>56</sup> Collet, et. al. (eds.), Op. Cit., p. 334.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>58</sup> Robertson (ed.), Op. Cit., p. 147.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-7.

<sup>60</sup> Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 3, p. 285.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 286.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 289.

<sup>63</sup> Vivekananda, Loc. Cit.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 286.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 535.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 287.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 286.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 371.



<sup>69</sup> Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 235.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 220.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., Vol. 7, p. 181; Vol. 6, p. 447.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 368.

<sup>73</sup> Vivekananda, Loc. Cit.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 221.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 335.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 105.