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Rambachan's Argument to Fragment Hinduism

Using Shankara to shoot down Vivekananda

Antananand Rambachan is perhaps the foremost exponent of the neo-Hinduism theory today, and his influence extends well beyond the academic circles. He was a student of Ursula King; indeed, it was under her guidance that he came to the University of Leeds to write his Ph.D dissertation. It bears the title 'The Attainment of Moksha according to Shankara and Vivekananda with Special Reference to the Significance of Scripture (Sruti) and Experience (Anubhava)',¹ and this forms the foundation for all his subsequent writings.

Since he is arguably the leading scholar in the myth of neo-Hinduism, it is important that we grasp fully his arguments for de-legitimizing Swami Vivekananda and other leaders of contemporary

Hinduism. A scholar of high reputation, he has devoted much of his life to defending what he takes to be the real and authentic Vedanta tradition, and to lowering the legitimacy of Swami Vivekananda in the process. He is influenced by Halbfass and Hacker, and cites the former approvingly as saying that Vivekananda should be 'demythologized'.² Unlike many who parrot the myth of neo-Hinduism only for political reasons or to be fashionable, Rambachan has a scholarly case to make. It is, however, a case against which I argue forcefully.

Since 1985, Rambachan has been a professor of religion, philosophy and Asian studies at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, which is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. He is the author of several books, all of which develop, in different ways, the thesis under discussion. He is heralded as the official Hindu spokesperson in several powerful international bodies, and for more than twenty five years he has been hoisted as the voice of Hinduism in interreligious dialogue at various national and international gatherings. For example, he is active in the World Council of Churches, a consortium of Christian organizations, where he was considered the 'Hindu expert' in the last four General Assemblies in Canada, Australia, Zimbabwe and Brazil. He is also a regular participant in the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue; the Vatican considers him its Hindu expert.

Rambachan has served on the Advisory Board of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, Victoria University, Canada, and as a member of the Consultation on Population and Ethics. He is currently an advisor to Harvard University's Pluralism Project, a member of the International Advisory Council for the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, and a member of the Theological Education Committee of the American Academy of Religion. In 2008, at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, he delivered the distinguished Lambeth Lecture at Lambeth Palace, London. As well, he has contributed to the joint UNICEF-Global Network of Religions for Children project. In 1989, the government of Trinidad and Tobago awarded him the Chaconia Gold Medal in recognition of his public service. The British Broadcasting Corporation transmitted a series of twenty-five lectures by him around the world.

Hindus look at Rambachan's career and assume that he is their sympathetic voice in prestigious public forums, representing their views and aspirations. In several respects, he is sympathetic. But on closer inspection we can see that, in keeping with Paul Hacker and other leaders of this school of thought, Rambachan characterizes Vivekananda as the architect of an artificial neo-Hinduism that was manufactured under Western influence. He sees Vivekananda as the product of four influences:

1. The Brahmo Samaj project, which sought to Westernize Indians by constructing a contemporary Hinduism that would be scientific, rational, and 'clean' of old embarrassing baggage.
2. The nationalistic movement led by British-educated Indians who valorized Indian history and intellectual traditions, and created a unified Hinduism using primarily European translations and accounts as their source materials.
3. The profound mystical influence of Ramakrishna.
4. The desire to use Sanskrit terms to make Western ideas seem authentically Indian.

Out of these influences was born the new religion which Hacker, Rambachan and others have branded 'neo-Hinduism'. According to Rambachan's thesis, this new religion had little or no basis in tradition and was designed to serve as the backbone of the Indian national movement which later morphed into Hindutva politics. No assessment of Vivekananda by this camp is complete without claiming that India's religious conflicts today may be traced back to Vivekananda's so-called neo-Hinduism.

Rambachan's dissertation repeats statements by Western predecessors that leading Hindu intellectuals of the nineteenth century who influenced Vivekananda had serious doubts about traditional Hinduism (to the point, in some cases, of formally rejecting the authority of the Vedas) and hence they wanted to appropriate Western secular ideas and scientific inquiry.³

While other scholars in this genre focused on social, political or historical arguments to make their case, Rambachan was the first amongst the academia (and is still the foremost) to bring forth powerful philosophical arguments in support of this critique.

His main strategy has been to prove that there is a break between the Vedanta traditions of Shankara and Vivekananda, and that these two thinkers contradict each other in ways that are irreconcilable. His case is built on the purported philosophical incompatibility between their respective paths to moksha.⁴ Rambachan thus deserves to be considered Hacker's heir. What is ignored by them is that there is a period of over a thousand years between Shankara and Vivekananda, and this period saw many new interpretations of Vedanta without any Western influences. They also fail to situate their issues concerning moksha in the much broader context in which Hindus practise their dharma.

In order to exaggerate the 'conflict' between these two prominent streams of Hindu thought, Rambachan seizes on an old and well-documented debate. The central issue here concerns the status of *anubhava* or direct realization and its relation to the study of *Vedas* (*sruti*) in the writings of Shankara. Given the importance of this philosophical point, I shall summarize it next.

Shankara states that because the *atman* (ultimate self) is free from all limitations, there is no real problem, no suffering, and no *samsara* (world as experienced by the senses), and that therefore we are *already liberated*. Our problem is simply that we do not know or experience ourselves as such. This ignorance is the whole reason for all the suffering, and so *brahmavidya* (knowledge of Brahman) is a state of being and not a solution as there is no *real* problem.

There is no problem, as it were, because the *atman* is self-illuminating awareness and self-evident existence and therefore does not require anything *outside of itself* to reveal itself. It is already present as the very substratum of one's being and sense of self, independently of any cause. Therefore, there is no problem to solve, only the need to remove ignorance and obstacles to *brahmavidya*, which is what moksha achieves.

Moksha is brought about by merely a 'cognitive shift', and this cannot be caused by any action, be it devotion or work. (The term 'cognitive shift' here does not refer to ordinary cognition but to a realization that indicates a shift in consciousness. It includes intellect but goes beyond intellect to superconsciousness.) The realm of causation cannot touch Brahman because Brahman is un-caused. It is impossible for any action in the limited realm of *samsara* to touch that which is eternal and un-caused and that which transcends *samsara*. This means that actions such as meditation, bhakti, and so on, are unable to 'cause' liberation.

Rambachan takes this position of Shankara to the extreme. Vivekananda's paths like raja yoga (emphasizing direct higher experience through meditation) and karma yoga are declared flawed by Rambachan because he feels these paths cannot lead to moksha. In other words, most of the paths advocated by Vivekananda and commonly taught today as aspects of Hinduism are within the realm of causation, and causation cannot touch the atman that is already liberated. Hence, the paths of contemporary Hinduism are incapable of resulting in moksha, the final goal. All contemporary Hindu teachers are, therefore, mere 'apologists' rather than legitimate teachers.

In his book the *Limits of Scriptures: Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of the Vedas*, Rambachan also deals with the ancient distinction between *sruti* and *smriti*, or, respectively, authorless Vedic texts as distinct from mere human constructions or 'remembered knowledge'. He emphasizes Shankara's position that *sruti* is primary and necessary in order to arrive at the self-validating source of knowledge. It reveals the already-present Brahman and yields liberation. Thus, in his view, *sruti* is not ancillary or subordinate but essential to direct experience (*anubhava* or *pratyaksa pramana*) for gaining knowledge of Brahman. Rambachan contrasts this with Vivekananda's view that *sruti*, or the *Vedas*, is subject to verification by experiential knowledge or *anubhava*. Rambachan considers Vivekananda's emphasis on *anubhava* to be a radical departure from the position of Shankara.

Rambachan explains the dichotomy in terms of different attitudes to *anubhava* and *sruti*. He says that unlike Vivekananda, 'who presented

the affirmations of sruti as having only a hypothetical or provisional validity and needing the verification that only anubhava could provide'; Shankara, by contrast, 'argued for sruti as the unique and self-valid source of our knowledge of absolute reality (Brahman)'. As I shall explain further in Chapter 10, Shankara's position is not as rigid as Rambachan would have us believe. Shankara has a great deal of respect for yoga; hence he must by implication also respect the anubhava that results from it.

Rambachan posits that Shankara subordinated all ways of knowing to sruti; he held that for the true seeker, moksha is the immediate result of fully understanding the teachings. Vivekananda held rather that sruti is verified by anubhava.⁵ Rambachan insists that, 'for a qualified aspirant, nothing beyond a proper investigation of the meaning of those sentences in the sruti revealing Brahman is required'. To highlight the mutual contradiction between these two great Hindu thinkers, he goes on to say:

If, as in the case of Vivekananda, the knowledge gained from inquiry into the meaning of the sruti lacks certitude and finality and must be confirmed by anubhava for moksha to be achieved, then the attainment of this experience becomes all important since liberation is impossible without it. In Vivekananda ... it is difficult to find an unconditional rationale for the sruti. If on the other hand, as in case of Sankara, the sruti is the valid source of knowledge (pramana) for brahman, the implications are that such knowledge can be neither derived from any other source nor contradicted by another means of knowledge. This knowledge does not need to be validated or confirmed by another source of knowledge. As understood by Sankara, moksha is identical with the nature of the self (atman), which is free from all limitations.⁶

Rambachan further expounds the view that, for Shankara, sruti is not simply a guide to spiritual practice to get the experiential result; it is an end in itself. For Vivekananda, however, 'any knowledge derived from sruti inquiry is not final knowledge'; instead, 'liberating knowledge

is derived only through the direct verification afforded by a special experience'.⁷

To recap, Rambachan's contention is that, as per Shankara, a mere understanding of the sruti text is sufficient, that no further effort or realization is necessary or possible for attaining *brahmajnana* (knowledge of Brahman), and that the understanding itself should reveal the already-present Brahman; no meditation, practice, realization or action is mandated to attain liberation or moksha. Furthermore, no path based on anubhava alone is capable of bringing liberation.

While it is true that Shankara does not explicitly suggest anubhava as alternative or valid pramana (means of knowing), Rambachan makes Shankara seem dogmatic by insisting that anubhava is outright rejected. Contrary to what Rambachan would have us believe, Shankara does not interpret the Upanishads as merely analytical reasoning but also as intuitional knowledge. Shankara says that things not within ordinary perception are matters of direct experience of the rishis.

Furthermore, Shankara points out the limitations of sruti, indicating that it only reveals what leads to good acts and what leads to harmful acts. The Upanishad tradition is clear that sruti is informative, not mandatory commands. Later sections below and all of Chapter 10 will present a more detailed, nuanced analysis of Shankara to show that the split between sruti and direct experience in his thought is far more qualified than Rambachan admits. Vivekananda's position is also more nuanced than Rambachan acknowledges.

Issues with methodology

Rambachan applies a methodology selectively to Vivekananda that draws on an analysis of contemporary socio-historical-political forces to explain how a system of ideas came about. He does not, however, apply the same reductive method to Shankara. In other words, Vivekananda's ideas are not examined as philosophical truth-claims within the broad spectrum of Hindu philosophy, but are rather seen as mere projections of, and masks for, social and political agendas of nationalism. For example, Rambachan is quick to assume that it was the attempt to

impress Unitarians in the West (for reasons of personal and national pride) that induced Vivekananda to downgrade the scriptures and upgrade experiential realization. But as I shall explain, the experiential approach (*anubhava*) is old and deeply-rooted in Indian traditions.

Long before colonialism, there were numerous Indian thinkers and schools that advocated ideas similar to those of Vivekananda, but Rambachan ignores them all in order to credit European influence alone for giving birth to contemporary Hinduism.

What Vivekananda did was to harmonize various interpretations of Vedanta that had emanated from the Vedic source. His goal was to make the Vedas accessible to commoners without the need for a great deal of sophistication or without having to choose a specific lineage.

Rambachan does not approach Shankara the same way, but makes him an absolute criterion of orthodoxy as if he were independent of similar influences. He does not consider that many of Shankara's writings were in the socio-political context of debating Buddhists and the Samkhya dualists. Hence, the same kind of social influence could also be brought into the examination of Shankara as Rambachan applies to interpret Vivekananda. In short, Rambachan applies a double standard in his treatments of these two Hindu leaders.

Rambachan argues that the upper strata Indians were increasingly influenced by the Unitarian form of Christianity, a liberal denomination that does not affirm the Trinity and purports to be based more on reason than historical revelation. Westernized Indians found this denomination to be amenable to their views and admired the compatibility of Unitarian thought with science, including their acceptance of unmediated individual exploration. Rambachan writes that Vivekananda got his ideas of *anubhava* from such Western sources:

The idea of intuitive experience as an immediate source of spiritual knowledge, which rose to prominence at this time, became a leading idea of the period, and has become a dominant motif in the rhetoric of modern Hinduism. In Vivekananda, it became associated with the idea of a scientific method of arriving at religious verification.⁸

And again:

In particular, they seized upon the concepts of intuition and nature as such sources and sought, with very little success, to construct a theology on the basis of what could be known through these means.⁹

This is how, according to Rambachan, Vivekananda incorporated the principle of direct experience and intuition into his newly invented Hinduism when it allegedly had no real precedent in classical dharmic thought.

But Rambachan must then deal with an obvious contradiction, for Vivekananda's guru was Ramakrishna, a very traditional guru operating almost entirely without Western influence. Ramakrishna's quintessential teaching emphasized a strong, even dramatic, emphasis on direct experience. Rambachan admits that Ramakrishna had a profound scepticism for, and mistrust of, scriptural texts: 'Ramakrishna was derogatory and cynical about the value of scriptural study, and negative in his views about their overall importance. He maintained the primacy of direct personal experience. Vivekananda, of course, as a direct disciple of Ramakrishna, was the heir to this legacy.'¹⁰ So it is a rash conclusion that Vivekananda got his ideas from the Unitarians or other Western sources. Rambachan, a little too conveniently, does not bother to examine Ramakrishna's legacy and rushes to credit the Unitarians instead.

Another crack in the edifice constructed by Rambachan is that he assumes Shankara to be the only legitimate Hindu thinker, and that any deviation from his thinking qualifies as inauthentic. But why is it bad to study and learn from other thinkers in the light of new knowledge and circumstances? After all, the Hindu tradition has evolved numerous times in its long history. Rambachan depicts Shankara as a sort of messiah figure in the Abrahamic sense, as if his is the final word, not to be questioned, challenged, superseded or even adapted based on subsequent discoveries. The fact is there have been numerous challenges to Shankara, even from well-known Vedantins right from his own lineage.

It is also important to remember that Shankara and Vivekananda were addressing different audiences, at different times, and in different cultural contexts and circumstances. Rambachan would seem to prefer a Hinduism that is frozen in time, unable to move or develop in response to an ever-changing world.

Rambachan tends to deny the existence of Hinduism as a coherent entity and applies Western reductionism to make his case. Because of the Western influence of normative thinking, and its limited view of what a 'religion' is, there is often triple-reduction at work among such scholars:

1. **Hinduism → Vedanta:** This conflates Hinduism with Vedanta and ignores numerous other approaches to Hinduism, such as Kashmir Shaivism and Tantra, to name just two major ones.
2. **Vedanta → Advaita Vedanta:** This reductionism ignores the other schools of Vedanta that are different from Advaita Vedanta, such as *Vishishta-advaita Vedanta*, *Bhedabheda Vedanta*, *Dvaita Vedanta*, and various sub-schools of these.
3. **Advaita Vedanta → Shankara:** This reductionism assumes that there has been no further development in Advaita Vedanta after Shankara. The fact is that the *mathas* (centers of Vedanta learning) established by Shankara have themselves evolved Shankara's thoughts further and reinterpreted many of his works.

One needs to put the different interpretations of Vedanta in their proper contexts. Shankara emphasizes *jnana* (knowledge) as the means to liberation, whereas Ramanuja and Madhava emphasize *bhakti* (devotion). The difference here is one of priority: whether *bhakti* prepares one for *jnana* or vice versa. But all the interpretations agree that *jnana* and *bhakti* are both important, regardless of priority, and all of them accept that *karma yoga* is also important for preparing the individual for liberation. As long as an individual takes care of all three (and he is required to do so by all the lineages), he is on the path to liberation.

Thus, for a practitioner, the theoretical disputes are not so important because he is asked to engage in all these practices regardless of the particular theoretical model he follows. Shankara does not consider these methods to be in conflict, because purity—via any method, textual, bhakti, meditation, or any combination of these—opens the door to jnana and moksha.¹¹

Although Vedanta is important to Hinduism, and the Advaita school is perhaps its most widespread interpretation, and although Shankara was undoubtedly a great figure, the Hindu tradition is much vaster than any one thinker, yogi, rishi or founder of a specific lineage. This is because it is not history centric in the way the Abrahamic religions are. It is even larger than any individual avatar, be it Rama, Krishna, or any specific deity. Hinduism has been vibrant and alive, changing many times, before Shankara, during his lifespan, and after him.

Vivekananda was indeed critical of Shankara at times, as well as of other prior thinkers. But this does not disqualify him as a legitimate interpreter of Hinduism for his times. Shankara's own writings are not pramana or sruti. They are open to criticism like any other interpretation. Hence, Shankara's interpretation cannot be seen as the only one within Advaita Vedanta; nor can Advaita Vedanta be seen as the only legitimate interpretation of Vedanta; nor, for that matter, can Vedanta be seen as the only authentic version of Hinduism.

Furthermore, Rambachan incorrectly assumes that: Hinduism → political Hindutva. This reduction collapses millennia-old Hinduism into mere modern politics. These political forces are important to study as separate phenomena, but one cannot take one's conclusions about modern Indian politics and project them back on to Hinduism in order to make sweeping dismissive conclusions. For one thing, Hinduism has never been limited to the political boundaries of modern India. And it has had a long history of change.

In summary, Rambachan skips the entire history of Hinduism before and after Shankara and jumps straight from Shankara to colonial times, ignoring the numerous adaptations, offshoots and innovations that have occurred in the thousand years between Shankara and colonialism.

Essentializing Shankara

Most Indologists focus only on Shankara's philosophical arguments. The topic of yoga (a term which covers a wide range of spiritual practices, including meditation) is dismissed quickly on the grounds that Shankara did not believe realization to be the product of any action or activity and that he has often pointed out limits to the efficacy of action. According to these thinkers, Shankara regards knowledge as the only valid means for achieving moksha; yoga is downgraded as a form of ritualistic mental action that cannot lead to liberation.

But when Shankara's relationship with yoga is examined closely, it turns out to be more complex than any 'for' or 'against' stance would imply. Neil Akshay Dalal is a young scholar whose recent Ph.D dissertation at the University of Texas was on the topic of *sruti* and *anubhava* as paths to moksha.¹² Dalal nuances this controversy nicely by noting that Advaita Vedantins have had a long debate among themselves over whether texts are the ultimate authority and primary method for liberation, or whether *sadhana* (which could include meditation and/or *bhakti*) can lead to the experience of liberation. He explains that this type of debate also exists in other religions:

The tension between the external dependence on texts, tradition, and culture versus an internal dependence on self-inquiry, insight, and religious experience is found in some form within many traditions, such as Christian official doctrine and Christian mysticism or the Koran traditionalist and the Sufi mystic or between the Buddhist focused on interpreting the Buddha's word and the Zen Buddhist meditator. The difference between the specialist in textual study and specialist in practice alludes to a number of other dichotomies, such as the tension between knowledge and action, theory and practice, conceptual knowledge and direct experience, intellectualism and anti-intellectualism, and externalism and internalism.¹³

Clearly, the debate is an important one in the case of Hinduism where the paths of experience (i.e., *yoga*, meditation) have achieved great

maturity as compared to Abrahamic religions; hence, to exclude yoga from Hinduism would be a mistake. What is at stake in this debate is the relative importance between the text expert (pandit or shastri) on one side, and the experiential guru (yogi, mystic or bhakta) on the other. Some of the most noteworthy teachers of Advaita Vedanta, post-Sankara, have been both at the same time.¹⁴

Those in the camp of emphasizing experience point out that textual study is inherently limited to theorizing and intellectualizing and that such objectification cannot grasp non-duality or Brahman, which is beyond concepts. Indeed, the *Mundaka Upanishad* proclaims that a guru must have both knowledge of shastra (texts) and experience of enlightenment.¹⁵ Sankara himself confirms this principle in his commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gita* (4.34), describing the teachers as wise ones 'who have realized the truth' which they will impart.

On the other hand, those like Rambachan who insist that the proper study of *sruti* is a necessary and sufficient means for moksha, rely on selective textual references to claim that the path of experience is not valid. Dalal is much more balanced than Rambachan. He admits that Shankara did not dismiss *samadhi* (the highest state of consciousness in Patanjali's system) and that he sought a harmonious interaction between texts and meditation.

A related point is that not everyone is ready to attain moksha. Many people are simply not interested in moksha, because they have mundane needs and interests. What is the Hindu teaching for them? Should Hinduism abandon them and limit itself only to a select few who are pursuing moksha? Vivekananda's appeal is to humanity at large; it is not limited to the minuscule minority that seriously pursues attaining moksha. Therefore, his methods cannot be evaluated against the narrower paths recommended for those who are focused only on moksha.

Rambachan often translates moksha as salvation (incorrectly in my opinion), and therefore unconsciously assumes the Christian tenet that without salvation one will go to hell. But in Hinduism's case there are other legitimate pursuits besides moksha; those who do not attain moksha in this life get reborn rather than going to hell. Hence, the

notion that 'getting saved' is the sole criterion for being a Christian cannot be applied to Hinduism by considering moksha as the sole criterion for being a Hindu.

In this regard, I wish to quote a passage from one of Advaita Vedanta's core texts (Shankara's commentary on the *Brahmasutra*), that says that Brahman possesses 'a double nature' depending upon whether it is the object of ultimate knowledge or not. Those who are ignorant of ultimate knowledge (i.e., the vast majority of the population) experience Brahman by seeing themselves as devotees and Brahman as the object of their devotion. The text then explains the various grades of experience applicable depending upon the condition of a given person:

The different modes of devotion lead to different results, some to exaltation, some to gradual emancipation, some to success in works; those modes are distinct on account of the distinction of the different qualities and limiting conditions. And although the one highest Self only, i.e., the Lord distinguished by those different qualities, constitutes the object of devotion, still the fruits (of devotion) are distinct, according as the devotion refers to different qualities. Thus Scripture says, 'According as man worships him, that he becomes;' and, 'according to what his thought is in this world, so will he be when he has departed this life.'¹⁶

Shankara goes on to clarify the grades of conditioning and corresponding experiences:

Although one and the same Self is hidden in all beings movable as well as immovable, yet owing to the gradual rise of excellence of the minds which form the limiting conditions (of the Self), Scripture declares that the Self, although eternally unchanging and uniform, reveals itself in a graduated series of beings, and so appears in forms of various dignity and power.¹⁷

The point here is that for the vast majority of humanity, meditation and devotion as espoused by Vivekananda are beneficial. It is inappropriate

to use criteria that are applicable only to those who have attained or are pursuing the attainment of ultimate knowledge.¹⁸

Further clarification of Shankara's intentions is provided by his direct disciple and one of his most important followers, Sureshvara, who writes:

The performance of daily obligatory rites leads to the acquisition of virtue; this leads to the destruction of sin, which in turn results in the purification of the mind. The purification of the mind leads to comprehension of the true nature of Samsara or relative existence; from this results Vairagya (renunciation), which arouses a desire for liberation; from this desire results a search for its means; from it come renunciation of all actions thence the practice of Yoga, which leads to a habitual tendency of the mind to settle in the Self, and this results in the knowledge of the meaning of such Shruti passages as 'Thou Art That' (Tat Tvam Asi) which destroys ignorance, thus leading to the establishment in one's own Self.¹⁹

Thus, Shankara and his direct followers embrace a natural continuum that includes both yoga and sruti. There is no rejection of yoga, contrary to what Rambachan asserts.

Challenging the direct experience of the rishi-yogi

Rambachan opposes the idea that adhyatma-vidya or inner science is supported by Advaita Vedanta (or any aspects of Hinduism for that matter). To demonstrate the error of this approach, Chapter 11 includes a section describing adhyatma-vidya as an established method of scientific inquiry in Indian traditions.

He notes correctly that Western science 'was enjoying considerable prestige among the Bengali intelligentsia in the nineteenth century. It was widely felt that all systems of human thought, including religion, had to be validated by the scrutiny of science and reason.'²⁰ But he is incorrect to insist that Vivekananda reformulated his views of sruti and anubhava, based exclusively on the prestige accorded to the Western scientific method.

Rambachan is critical of Vivekananda's view of the empirical nature of the rishis' discoveries and therefore their verifiability. Rambachan uses his own understanding of the conventional scientific method as the basis for his critique. (He seems to be uninformed of the post-modern philosophies of science that are proliferating in the West; ironically, these are inspired by Hindu and Buddhist ideas.) He writes that Vivekananda portrays the rishis as only discoverers of spiritual laws, which can be verified by any serious investigator, and which bypass the need for faith and belief:

Vivekananda portrays the aptas or rishis as only the 'discoverers' of spiritual laws. Like a scientific manual then, the Vedas, as books, are just the written records of these spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times. The representation of the Vedas as records or reports of spiritual findings and the rishis as discoverers provide the foundation for the deepening and development of the scientific paradigm. One is not obliged, according to Vivekananda, to accept scientific propositions as valid because of faith in the individual scientist. As a method of gaining knowledge, he sees science as being distinguished by the fact that it offers the possibility of verification.²¹

Vivekananda had indeed been clear in his emphasis on direct experiential realization, but this emphasis was based on rishis who had had such experiences; it was not based on Western scientific methods. The proponents of Mimamsa, even before Shankara, had argued for a similar view of the rishis of the Vedas, namely, that they were the discoverers and not the authors of the Vedas. Even the exact word order of a hymn in the Veda was 'seen', not authored, by the rishi. Shankara would seem to suggest that the *mantra-drashtas* ('seers' of mantras) were drashtas because of their yogic insight into reality.²² Also, Shankara regarded Krishna's statements in the Gita as a key component of shastra, and the Gita is known as a means to liberation. Since the Gita is considered to be smriti, clearly *sruti* is not the only means.

But Rambachan provides a sharp critique of Vivekananda's application of the scientific paradigm, writing:

In an age when science, in the enthusiasm and arrogance of its youth, seemed ready to subject all the areas of human knowledge to its criterion and methods, Vivekananda felt that faith in the sruti as the source of brahmajnana was irrational. He sought to posit a process of attaining brahmajnana which he felt had satisfied the demands of science. It not only fails to do this, but, in a much wider perspective, his analysis is unsatisfactory and unconvincing. It is true that faith (*sradha*) in the sruti as a *pramana* is indispensable for Shankara, but this is not a faith which proscribes all use of human reason.²³

Vivekananda had written that the state of a rishi is the ideal for Hindus and everything else is a means for preparation, including the Vedas, grammar, astronomy, etc. Vivekananda translates the Sanskrit word 'rishi' as a seer of mantras, one who has realized certain truths available to the superconsciousness, and recorded them. He explains that:

Rishi is the name of a type, of a class, which every one of us, as true Hindus, is expected to become at some period of our life, and becoming which, to the Hindu, means salvation. Not belief in doctrines, not going to thousands of temples, nor bathing in all the rivers in the world, but becoming the Rishi, the Mantra-drashta—that is freedom, that is salvation.²⁴

It is important to note that Vivekananda combines *anubhava* and *sruti* rather than rejecting one or the other, the way Rambachan wants us to do. Vivekananda equates *sruti* with a map that can create curiosity and guidance for first-hand knowledge but can communicate only an approximate idea of reality for most persons because they lack the purity of consciousness. *Sruti* consists of records of the *anubhava* or spiritual discoveries of others and the methods by which such discoveries have been made. Each person must purify his mind to be able to rediscover the reality for himself, i.e., have his own *anubhava*.

The truth of sruti is in the availability of the direct knowledge, not as a disembodied propositional text.

Therefore, everyone should become a rishi, which means someone capable of such a direct apprehension of truth. Sruti was not meant for the ordinary intellect; it is not concerned with any process of rational inquiry. Sruti becomes meaningful only when one has advanced to the same heights of consciousness as the rishis.

Rambachan is wrong in saying that Vivekananda disrespects sruti. As Rambachan acknowledges, Vivekananda honors and respects the rishis as the discoverers or seers of the Vedas. It follows that if discoverers are considered so great that all of us must aspire to be like them, if they are put on a pedestal as the ultimate role models, then we must certainly respect what they have discovered. Hence, it would be a contradiction for him to have such high regard for the rishis while having a low regard for the Vedic mantras they brought to us.

When Vivekananda says we must eventually transcend the Vedas and certify their claims by our own experience, he is, of course, speaking to his contemporary society, which presumably had fallen to a much lower level of consciousness than what prevailed in Shankara's time. Yoga and sadhana, as preliminary practices on the path of jnana, may therefore be more important today than was the case in Shankara's time.

Is Rambachan fixated on Christian assumptions?

Rambachan's position implies that all higher states of consciousness (i.e., adhyatma-vidya, or inner sciences) are inauthentic. In taking this view, he is asserting that the experience-based systems of Patanjali, Kashmir Shaivism and Tantra (to name only a few) are all irrelevant. He offers cover to Westerners like Ken Wilber who are busy appropriating and digesting these Indian sources into their own concoctions, because Rambachan makes such Hindu practices look like artificial constructions.

The possibility of becoming a rishi—indeed, the requirement that every individual become one—is what differentiates Hinduism from

Abrahamic religions. In the latter traditions the ultimate truth is limited to a few select prophets, through whom, in turn, truth is made available to the many. Vivekananda writes:

Truth came to Jesus of Nazareth, and we must all obey him. But the truth came to the rsis of India—the mantra-drastas—the seers of thought—and will come to all rsis in the future, not to talkers, not to book-swallowers, not to scholars, not to philologists, but to seers of thought.²⁵

This is an important distinction, which I have turned into my thesis on the history centric character of the Abrahamic religions. While the prophet Mohammad had a certain experience that is documented in the Qur'an, no other Muslim who is considered credible has claimed a similar experience, and nor is it ever possible to have that experience, according to Islam. In fact, it is considered blasphemy to claim that such an experience is possible for anyone other than the prophet Mohammad.

Likewise, Jesus is claimed to have had a direct and complete experience of God, amounting to an identity, as both Father and Son. But Christians today do not aspire to have this complete experience. Such a claim is often regarded as the worst kind of idolatry. We must be allowed to ask: Is Rambachan unconsciously projecting a Christian bias, namely a bias against the path of anubhava which gives humans the rishi experience?

Since nothing akin to complete superconscious perception is available in Christianity and since not even partial knowledge of God can be attained by 'natural' means alone, the only way to attain religious truth in the full sense is through revelation given to a small number of prophets and inherently unavailable to the rest of us by any direct means. Rambachan wants to reduce the Vedas to the same status as Biblical revelation by denying that every human is endowed with the rishi potential. He therefore exaggerates the difference between *sruti* and *anubhava* in order to make them seem contradictory.

Let us examine Rambachan's writings to further uncover the Christian biases that might unconsciously be limiting him. About Vivekananda he writes:

It is clear that, for him, the Vedas do not possess any intrinsic validity. Consistent with his views on their origin and the personal foundations of their authority, he envisages them as simply recording the spiritual discoveries of others, and the methods by which such discoveries have been made. These findings, however, must be personally rediscovered by every individual before they are valid for him or her ... A scriptural text is represented by him as a second-hand religion. As a record of the experiences of others, it may stimulate our own desires, but even as one person's eating is of little value to another, so also is the record of another person's experiences until we attain to the same end. The imperative therefore, for Vivekananda, is that everyone should become a rishi.²⁶

Rambachan is accurate in claiming that for Vivekananda, genuine knowledge, including religious knowledge, is based on experience. Claims based on faith and belief trouble Vivekananda, especially those which are not repeatable and are considered unique to certain people only. What Rambachan fails to emphasize sufficiently is that Vivekananda identifies direct knowing with superconscious perception, and Rambachan argues against the possibility of higher states of consciousness through direct experience. He offers the following logic:

Brahman cannot be known through sense perception because it is nirguna (quality-less). It is free from all the qualities (form, taste, smell, touch and sound) through which the various sense organs apprehend their respective objects. In addition, the sense organs can only know the nature of things by objectifying them. Brahman, being the Knower, the Awareness in the sense organs, can never become the object of their knowledge. It can never be the object of any organ or kind of perception. This is one of the major inconsistencies of Vivekananda's use of the analogy of perception

to describe the gain of brahmajnana in samadhi. Even if it is superconscious rather than ordinary perception, Vivekananda still posits the mind as the organ of knowledge and ends up postulating brahman as an object. To claim any kind of experience as the means through which the knowledge of brahman can be gained requires proof that this is possible without presupposing brahman as an object. Vivekananda has failed to offer any such proof.²⁷ [Emphasis mine]

Vivekananda's stance is based firmly on the Vedic sutra '*manasaivam drashtavyam*' (it is to be seen by the mind alone), which Shankara cites frequently. Rambachan does not appreciate that in higher states of consciousness the knower, the knowing and the known are unified and there is no separate 'object of knowledge'. Hence his issue with Vivekananda in the above passage is based on a flawed assumption. Rambachan frequently refers to the rishi state as 'ordinary perception'. Here and elsewhere Rambachan is confusing perception in the ordinary sense with the rishi-state in which they 'see' sruti.

Rambachan seems to be superimposing the Abrahamic idea of prophecy onto the rishis and thereby treating sruti as another 'revelation' that came via the rishis. The superconscious cognition is better referred to as the indescribable rishi-state. One cannot apply ordinary logic about cognition to examine it. Hence Rambachan cannot assume that in the rishi-state there are the same limitations of objectified knowledge and separation of knower from known.

Rambachan simply avoids the important question: Who are rishis? How do they differ from prophets? What is meant by their 'knowing' or 'seeing' the sruti?

Furthermore, Rambachan's artificial and unnecessary dichotomy between anubhava and shruti pramana is an example of slipping into the Aristotelian binary logic of the 'excluded middle' which is different from the Indian logic of 'this as well as that'. It is a reductionist understanding of anubhava to see it as third-person cognition only, i.e., external perception. Such reductionism isolates us from our own true nature and our interconnections as symbolized by Indra's Net.

Allegation that yoga makes people less rational and intelligent

In a strange twist, Rambachan attributes the lack of intellectual depth in contemporary Hindu scholarship to the popularity of views on the primacy of yogic experience. He feels that Vivekananda's characterization of shruti as 'second-hand religion' contributes to a low estimation of the value of scriptural scholarship. It makes the study of shruti and right interpretation less important. The upholding of the samadhi experience as a source of brahmajnana has led to intellectual decline, he claims.

The championing in contemporary Hinduism of personal experience over the authority of scripture ... has contributed to the divorce of scholarship from spirituality. Examples of scholarship without religious commitment and religious commitment lacking the self-critical insights of scholarship abound. [...] The decline of the significance of the Vedas as a pramana and its characterisation as secondhand religion have contributed to the devaluing of scriptural scholarship. Its study, exegesis and interpretation are not of utmost significance. Vivekananda contemptuously dismisses scriptural scholarship as an activity at the theoretical and intellectual level. With an emphasis in contemporary Hinduism on the gain of knowledge through the transcendence of reason and not on its mediation, reason, argument and intellectual activity, all important qualities of interreligious dialogue assume more of an obstructive character.²⁸

Rambachan has his argument backwards: yoga is not weakening intellectual power of the Indian tradition; rather, it is the loss of yoga that is dulling the intellect. Far from discounting reason, Vivekananda held many successful discussions with scientifically minded Westerners and, in turn, influenced some of the greatest Western minds of his time.²⁹

The alleged lack of intellectual creativity among modern Indians is not limited to Hindus but is characteristic of secularized intellectuals as

well, such as those pursuing post-colonial and subaltern studies. These persons are mainly engaged in regurgitating Western theories and forcing their validation in Indian contexts. Rambachan himself often comes across like a product of Christian training averse to embodied knowing.

Rambachan would find it hard to refute that the monks of Ramakrishna Math combine scholarship and religious commitment with great rigor and go to great lengths to inculcate this combination in their students. Although Rambachan relies on Shankara, he fails to note that many of the best available translations of Shankara into English are those produced by the Ramakrishna Mission monks, and that many scholars studying Shankara would have first encountered Advaita Vedanta through these translations and commentaries.

In essence, he fails to appreciate the difference between first-person and third-person approaches to *sruti*, thereby limiting his approach to *sruti* in the third-person. This prevents him from seeing *sruti* in the context of the huge amount of research into non-dualism that has been going on in Western neuroscience, cognitive science, philosophy and religion. The irony is that while Westerners at the cutting edge of such research are frantically appropriating Hindu and Buddhist ideas and practices for their first-person research, Rambachan is fighting the fact that Hinduism ascribes great honor and legitimacy to first-person empiricism.³⁰

Political allegations

Rambachan contrasts the statements Vivekananda made in the West with those he made in India, and sees the differences as a problem. But it is common in Hindu teaching to create balance in a given student by emphasizing an aspect that is deficient. And so Vivekananda emphasizes spirituality to Westerners because he finds them to be too materialistic in their outlook, whereas he feels that Indians had abrogated their material and social affairs to the British rulers and hence, to Indians, he emphasizes social and economic responsibility.

Rambachan is also troubled that Vivekananda wants to reconcile various schools of Vedanta. But many prior thinkers also integrated multiple schools of Hindu thought, such as Vijnananabhikshu. This pre-colonial unity of Hinduism will be discussed in Chapter 8.

Another serious issue Rambachan picked up from Hacker is that 'Vivekananda adopted the position that there was no bar of sex, race or caste to realization.'³¹ Rambachan here seems to be blaming Vivekananda for advocating the liberal view that everyone has the right to study the Vedas! Yet it must be remembered that the neo-Hinduism school sees Hinduism as the source of several social ills of India. Rather than appreciating the social adaptations as a valid undertaking, he sadly chooses to attack these improvements.³²

Rambachan criticizes those who defend Vivekananda, accusing them of being products of political circumstances. For instance, he criticizes Radhakrishnan for supporting Vivekananda on the issue of textual analysis and anubhava.³³

Western scholars' support for Rambachan

As might be expected, Rambachan is well-supported by Western scholars of Hinduism. For instance, the well-known American academic Harold Coward praises Rambachan precisely for developing the philosophical arguments to undermine Vivekananda. In his review of Rambachan's work, he positions him as the successor to Halbfass in continuing this genre of work, writing that, 'While others have highlighted Vivekananda's influence on Indian nationalism and the impact of the Ramakrishna mission, this is the first critical assessment of his thought and its influence on contemporary Hinduism'.³⁴ Coward applauds Rambachan for exposing Vivekananda as the man who fabricated 'the direct supersensuous *samadhi* experience of *brahman* as a parallel to the perceptual verification of knowledge offered by modern science', and he accuses Vivekananda of wanting to make Hinduism 'seem compatible with modern science'. Citing Rambachan as his expert on the matter, he concludes that Vivekananda has left Hinduism

a 'flawed legacy' which needs to be refuted and that 'Rambachan's book is a first and most important step in this direction'.³⁵ Coward shares Rambachan's complaint that 'in spite of its radical inconsistency with Shankara, Vivekananda's thought has been uncritically adopted by Hindus of this century and is not serving them well'. He also praises Rambachan for endeavoring to answer the question as to why Hindu scholarship in this century has become so flabby. The implication is that contemporary Hinduism's own exemplars have been producing 'flabby' scholarship and that Rambachan is the competent scholar who has arrived to set things right.

The list of scholars who support Rambachan's ideas is extensive. Clearly, given his power and visibility, Rambachan has gone a long way in shaping opinions, not only amongst a significant section of academics but more widely, in the media and the public sphere as well.

Many scholars disagree with Rambachan

But several other scholars are troubled by the neo-Hinduism thesis. Jonathan Bader, for instance, asserts: 'It is difficult to see how Hacker can claim that Sankara has rejected the practice of constant meditation. Neither does it appear that Sankara has "discarded remnants of yoga".'³⁶ Bader summarizes Shankara's position on meditation and yoga as follows:

The yoga element in Sankara's work must be accepted as an integral component of his thought. The significance of yoga is recognized in the Bhagavadgita, the Brahmasutra, and even in the older Upanishads. If these authoritative texts accord a place to yoga, then it is little wonder that Sankara follows suit.³⁷

Bader is critical of scholars who force Shankara into their own limited concept of what a philosopher is. One must separate out Shankara's teaching on moksha from his concern to defeat opponents in arguments. The former project is about attaining the 'lived experience' called '*jivanmukti*', as expressed in the *mahavakyas*. This was meant for

the practitioner, not the academic. Unlike his *Upadesasahasri* (which is a 'how to' guide for the practitioner), Shankara's *Brahmasutra-bhasya* discusses meditation as exegesis. Although he does list the meditation steps involved in *Brahmasutra-bhasya*, his central concern is to show a coherent metaphysical view across the Upanishadic texts.³⁸ In his various commentaries, he is concerned with philosophical argumentation against opponents and does not give extensive treatment to meditation practices. This should not be seen as indicative of a lack of interest in meditation, and certainly not as evidence of opposition to it.

Bader feels that the neo-Hinduism line of thinking superimposes European idealism onto Shankara and that this leads to a wrong interpretation that he is an 'illusionist'. Such scholars see yoga and Advaita as mutually exclusive camps, and hence want to place Shankara in one camp or the other, but they fail to see the unity of Advaita-Yoga that Shankara propounded.

In a similar vein, Madeleine Biardeau writes: 'There is, perhaps, a danger in wishing to over-systematize the thought of an author and to perceive relationships between different aspects of his work which appear as being independent because they respond to different problems.'³⁹ Vidyasankar Sundaresan suggests that in order to appreciate Shankara's coherence, we must see his various writings as linked to each other, just like web pages, and then follow these links in ways which printed books cannot allow. This is better than counting how many times certain words appear and other mechanical methods often used by philologists.

Sundaresan clarifies the difference between Shankara and those who, like Vivekananda, hold that *sruti* as *pramana* is bolstered by yogic experience, or who see yogic experience as its own *pramana*. He feels that Rambachan belongs to the group that is anxious to save *sruti pramana* from the idea that *nirvikalpa samadhi* verifies liberation, and they wish to purge Advaita Vedanta of developments from the post-Sankara schools of Vivarana and Bhamati. Vidyasankar Sundaresan's overall assessment of Rambachan is clear and explicit:

With all due respect to Anantanand Rambachan ... the difference between one who does an academic study of Sankara's works and one who lives and breathes Advaita Vedanta is the following. The former thinks that Sankara was like a university professor of philosophy and thinks that both the traditional and neo-Vedantins have deviated from Sankara. The latter uses yoga as an upaya, in line with what Sankara describes as 'upakurvantu'.⁴⁰

Douglas Skoog also refutes Rambachan, saying he 'has apparently confused the content of sruti statements with the experience that sruti can occasionally engender'.⁴¹ His paper opens by saying that its specific purpose is to critique Rambachan's views on sruti versus anubhava.

There is a key Advaita philosophical distinction between higher and lower levels of truth/reality which Rambachan has omitted. According to Advaita, on the level of paramarthika (ultimate reality and awareness), there is only knowledge of brahman, a state of awareness devoid of all mental and perceptual distinctions, in which even the usual distinction of knower and object of knowledge fall aside. This state of awareness or knowledge is referred to as moksa (liberation) or anubhava (direct awareness) or brahmajnana (knowledge of brahman). In contrast, on the level of vyavahara (practical reality and knowledge), there exists multiplicity, cogitation, duality. One knows an object (conceptually) as apart from oneself, possessing distinct qualities.⁴²

T.S. Rukmani states her position as follows, which is very much in line with my thinking:

One can conclude by saying that Sankaracarya was very much a yogin at heart, incorporating wherever possible the vocabulary of Yoga in his Advaita Vedanta, and speaking approvingly of even the siddhis or supernormal powers that are described in the Yoga tradition. His conviction of the reality of Brahman to the exclusion of everything else forces him to interpret nididhyasana-dhyana in

a manner commensurate with his metaphysics and epistemology. He, in no way, admits the dual principles of purusa and prakrti as the ultimate realities and remains a staunch opposer of the dualistic metaphysical stand of both Samkhya and Yoga.⁴³

Arvind Sharma writes that Rambachan should not essentialize the term 'pramana' as it is used by Shankara. He notes that it is used at least three different ways and that Rambachan himself is inconsistent in the way he refers to Shankara's position.⁴⁴ While agreeing with Rambachan that Shankara considered sruti to be the primary authority, he disagrees that sruti represents the only authority.⁴⁵

Furthermore, Sharma disapproves of the fact that Rambachan has replaced the term 'shastra' (texts) in Shankara's writings with the term 'sruti' (Vedas). He shows that Shankara's notion of shastra includes not only the four Vedas, but also *Itihasa* (major narratives of the past), Purana (folk narratives), *vidya* (science), Upanishad, *sloka* (verses), *sutra* (aphorisms), *anuvyakhyan* (explanations), and *vyakhyan* (commentaries).⁴⁶ Rambachan's mistranslation was used to boost his case for the exclusivity of sruti and thereby undermine Vivekananda's use of a wider range of texts.

Sharma also demonstrates that Shankara declares Brahman to be knowable, but not as an object of sense-perception. Here, Shankara implies that *indriyas* (senses) and *pratyaksha* (direct perception) are limited and he does not use the word 'anubhava' to denote this limitation.⁴⁷ In other words, it is an incorrect understanding by Rambachan to limit anubhava as sensory perception and fail to appreciate anubhava at higher states of consciousness.

I disagree with Rambachan on the issue of the primacy of a narrowly conceived Advaita Vedanta. I also disagree with his interpretation of Shankara, who is far more open to, and embracing of, anubhava and the utility of yoga and sadhana than Rambachan allows. Furthermore, he takes Shankara out of his historical context and makes him into the kind of absolute authority of the kind one sees in Western religions. Rambachan displays a limited understanding of the historical evolution

of Hindu thought. Had he read the books that compare various yoga systems in the classical period, he would not be so prone to essentialize yoga and pigeon-hole it the way he does.⁴⁸

For instance, a prominent Jain scholar named Haribhadra (dated sometime between the fifth and seventh centuries) wrote extensive comparisons of various Indian systems, including Vedanta, Tantra, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, as well as Buddhism and Jainism. He organized them as somewhat equivalent and generally complementary approaches leading to the same goal. In doing so, he liberally interpreted traditional texts his own way, often refuting older interpretations, and in this manner reconciled them into a coherent spectrum. Yet the coherence and compatibility across multiple systems do not negate their distinctiveness. 'The wisdom gained from discipline is singular in essence', he writes, 'though heard of in different ways.'⁴⁹ Such harmonizing across various Indian systems has been frequent since early times.

Rambachan underestimates the degree to which Vivekananda is rooted in traditional Hinduism, and fails to see how contemporary Hinduism is a reasonable adaptation of this tradition. Vivekananda's contribution to changing national self-consciousness involved re-aligning and reinterpreting the cultural, metaphysical, political and spiritual heritage of India. His important contributions include lifting the prominence given to adhyatma-vidya, or systematic inner exploration, and his emphasis on karma yoga. Not only is Vivekananda perfectly respectful of the textual tradition as an important dimension of spiritual realization, but Shankara himself validates direct experience and the active practices of meditation, Tantra and karma yoga more than might at first appear.

I wrote an extensive response to Rambachan in a recent issue of the *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, and I elaborate my arguments further in Chapter 10 to this book.