

# Rāmbachan and the Limits of Social-constructivist Bias in the Analysis of the Thoughts of Swāmi Vivekānanda

Kundan Singh, Ph.D.  
California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, USA

## Abstract

What is the status of *anubhava* or realization over the scriptures in the writings of Ādi Śāṅkarācharya and Swāmi Vivekānanda? Anantānand Rāmbachan, a Trinidad-born scholar who presently teaches at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, while arguing for the differences between Sri Śāṅkarācharya and Swāmi Vivekānanda contends that *śruti* or the Vedas are the authoritative and unique source of *Brahmajñāna* in terms of their “logicality, adequacy, and fruitfulness” in Śāṅkarācharya whereas in Swāmi Vivekānanda, “the affirmations of *śruti* are presented as subject to and needing the confirmation of direct experience (*anubhava*), which is the final criterion of truth and the ultimate satisfactory proof.” My contention, which the paper in detail will discuss, is that though it is true that the emphasis on *śruti* is definitely stronger in Śāṅkarācharya—since he very categorically enunciated the path of knowledge—as compared to Swāmi Vivekānanda for the attainment of *Brahmajñāna*, *anubhava* or direct experience has ascendancy over the *śruti* in both Śāṅkarācharya and Swāmi Vivekānanda. For both Śāṅkarācharya and for Swāmi Vivekānanda, it is in the direct experience of Brahman that one knows that *śruti* is true. In Śāṅkarācharya, *śruti* is the means for knowing Brahman, whereas in Swāmi Vivekānanda it is one of the means of knowing the Brahman or it may not even be mandatory. However, a direct and experiential knowledge of the Brahman is mandatory both in Śāṅkarācharya and Swāmi Vivekānanda—even if Śāṅkarācharya, as Rāmbachan tells us, may not have suggested *anubhava* as alternative or ultimate *pramāṇa* or proof. If the modern *Advaitins*, whom Rāmbachan critiques and states that

their expositions have been guided by Swāmi Vivekānanda's contentions, underemphasize the role of *śruti* in the graining of *Brahmajñāna*, Rāmbachan, as this paper will discuss, falsely states that *anubhava* is not as important in Śankarācharya as it is in Swāmi Vivekānanda.

There has been a certain trend in Western Academia where there has been an attempt to explain away the spiritual thoughts of Swāmi Vivekānanda by placing them in them only in socio-historical-political context. This paper will further argue that such a methodology leads to a deliberate and a willful distortion of data and suppression of facts where the truth about Indian spiritual figures and their teachings gets severely compromised. This paper, specifically in the context of Swāmi Vivekānanda, will explain why Rāmbachan's contentions with respect to the primacy of realization or *anubhava* in Shankarācharya and Swāmi Vivekānanda are suspect. Swāmi Vivekānanda heralds the revival of spirituality of India, which had been under persistent and brutal attack for about a thousand years. The explaining away of his teachings in order to trivialize them is a continuation of that thousand year legacy of colonization which saw India reduced from a major world-player to one of the poorest nations in the modern times. A reclaiming of his true teachings from the clutches of mainstream Western Academia is a part of that continued decolonization of India and Indic traditions, which may have started with the political liberation of India, but is far from over.

Comparing and contrasting the teachings of Swāmi Vivekānanda and Ādi Sri Śankarācharya (commonly referred to as Śaṅkara), Anantānand Rāmbachan, a Trinidad born scholar who teaches at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, in his eruditely written work “The Limits of Scriptures: Vivekananda’s Reinterpretation of the Vedas” contends that in Śaṅkara, *śruti* is the self-validating source of knowledge which is not ancillary to direct perception or *anubhava* or *pratyakṣa pramāṇa* for the gaining of *Brahmajñāna* or the knowledge of Brahman, and that the knowledge of *śruti* is an end in itself which reveals the already present Brahman that leads to *mokṣa*. In contrast in Swāmi Vivekānanda—Vivekānanda in his writings, for he continues with the tradition of the Western academia where a deliberate and every attempt is made to strip the revered personalities of and from India of all titles and prefixes that can bestow on them any reverence that is collectively held by the masses—the *śruti* or the Vedas have only a provisional status that is subject to verification by an experiential knowledge or *anubhava*. Because of Swāmi Vivekānandas’s unqualified emphasis on *anubhava*, he sees this as a radical departure from the position of Sri Śankarācharya, contending further that the claims of authors like T.M.P. Mahadevan, R. S. Srivastava, and Swāmi Satprakāśhānanda—whom he calls as Hindu apologetics—that there is a continuity between the tradition of Sri Śankarācharya and Swāmi Vivekānanda are deeply flawed and that a critical evaluation of Swāmi Vivekānanda’s writings should be undertaken to unveil a break between the Vedantic traditions of Sri Śankarācharya and Swāmi Vivekānanda. In other words, Rāmbachan is an heir to the legacy of Hacker (1995a) and Halbfass (1988), who have made similar contentions with regards to a break between traditional and neo-Hinduism. The connection of Rāmbachan’s writings with Hacker’s thesis is particularly noteworthy as

Hacker, based on his flawed contentions as I have shown elsewhere (see Appendix A), has written a caustic diatribe against the “Neo-Hindus” explicitly insinuating that modern Hinduism is a construct and a derivative of the colonial contact of India with Europe.

There are many other threads of comparison between Sri Śankarācharya and Swāmi Vivekānanda in Rāmbachan’s thesis, but for brevity and concern for time and space, I will take up only the main thrusts of his contentions: relative and provisional status of scriptures and the position of *anubhava* or direct experience in the writings of Swāmi Vivekānanda and Sri Śankarācharya. Before I offer my critique, I would also want to take the opportunity of congratulating Rāmbachan on the erudition of his work, particularly the way in which he has built, unfolded and systematized the course of his arguments.

In order to unfold the critique in this paper, I would like to quote Rāmbachan extensively. He writes:

Unlike Vivekananda, who presented the affirmations of *śruti* as having only a hypothetical or provisional validity and needing the verification that only *anubhava* could provide, Śaṅkara argued for *śruti* as the unique and self-valid source of our knowledge of absolute reality (*brahman*). In relation to the gain of this knowledge, all ways of knowing were subordinate to *śruti*. In important contrast to Vivekananda’s argument that the declarations of *śruti* needed further verification to become conclusive was Śaṅkara’s contention that liberation (*mokṣa*) is the immediate result of understanding the words of the *śruti*. For a qualified aspirant, nothing beyond a proper investigation of the meaning of those sentences in the *śruti* revealing *brahman* is required. (Rambachan, 1994, p. 3)

If, as in the case of Vivekananda, the knowledge gained from inquiry into the meaning of the *śruti* lacks certitude and finality and must be confirmed by *anubhava* for *mokṣa* to be achieved, then the attainment of this experience becomes all important since liberation is impossible without it. In Vivekānanda ... it is difficult to find an unconditional rationale for the *śruti*.

If on the other hand, as in case of Śaṅkara, the *śruti* is the valid source of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) 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 Śaṅkara, *mokṣa* is identical with the nature of the self (*ātman*), which is free from all limitations. Through ignorance (*avidyā*), however, this self is erroneously identified with the finite characteristics of mind and body. A valid source of knowledge is needed, not to create or produce the ever-existent self but to remove erroneous knowledge and unfold its true nature. Such a source, for Śaṅkara, can be found in the words of *śruti*.

In this case, therefore, proper comprehension of the meaning of *śruti* sentences teaching about the self is all important since this is sufficient. Such knowledge reveals an existent and liberated self. The knowledge gained from *śruti* does not have to be applied to produce an experience that validates *śruti*. (Rambachan, 1994, p. 9)

In Śaṅkara ... knowledge gained from *śruti* is both means and end. Śaṅkara does not suggest that this knowledge must, in some way or other, be further applied or employed as a means of gaining the same knowledge. In Vivekānanda's case, however, any knowledge derived from *śruti* inquiry is not final knowledge, and this is an important contrast with Sankara. Final, liberating knowledge is derived only through the direct verification afforded by a special experience. (Rambachan, 1994, p. 82)

Thus, to recap, Rāmbachan's contention is that a mere intellectual understanding of the *śruti* is enough and sufficient and no further effort or realization is necessary for the gain of *Brahmajñāna*, and that the understanding itself should reveal the already present Brahman—no mediation or realization is mandated to attain liberation or *mokṣa*. Before proceeding further let us examine if Śaṅkara felt similarly or has the evidence been concocted to manufacture Śaṅkara's thesis and then critically evaluate Swāmi Vivekānanda's contentions in such a background. For the concern for time and space, I will just bring evidence from one of the books authored by Śaṅkara, Vivekacūḍāmaṇi.

Verse 3: *labdhvā kathaṇcinnarajanma durlabhaṃ*

*tatrāpi puṃsatvam śrutipāradarśanam*

*yassvātmamuktyai na yateta mūdhadhiḥ*

*sa hyātmahā svaṃ vinihantyasadgrahāt*

Having somehow obtained the rare human birth and there too, manly qualities and mastery over the Vedas, that man of deluded intellect who would not strive for his freedom is indeed a suicide. By holding on to the unreal he destroys himself.

(Saraswati, 1997, p. 14).

Verse 4: *paṭhantu śāstrāṇi yajantu devān*

*kurvantu karmāṇi bhajantu devatāḥ*

*ātmaikyabodhena vinā vimuktiḥ*

*na sidhyati brahmaśatantare'pi*

Let people study the scriptures; let them propitiate the *devas* through Vedic rituals; let them do altruistic activities; let them worship the gods. Without the knowledge of the oneness of the self, even after a period of the rule of hundreds of Brahmanis *mokṣa* is not accomplished. (Saraswati, 1997, p. 21).

The above two verses at the very beginning of Vivekacūḍāmaṇi establish beyond doubt that the *śruti* and its knowledge has a provisional validity in Śaṅkara—identical to what one finds in Swāmi Vivekānanda—and that experience or realization of Brahman is of central importance for liberation or *mokṣa*, which is not an automatic outcome of an intellectual understanding of the scriptures. The important phrase to be noted in verse 3 is *śrutipāradarśanam* which basically means the gain of mastery over the *śrutis*. If the mere study of the Vedas revealed the already present Brahman in people, then Śaṅkara would not have pronounced the scholars of *śrutis* to have committed suicide—in his conception the individuals who have been born as human beings, who have been endowed with desirable qualities and have the knowledge of the *śrutis* and yet have not striven to realize the Brahman, he calls them as deluded beings who have committed suicide. Continuing in verse 4, he states again that one can read the scriptures and worship the gods, but liberation cannot be attained without having had the experiential knowledge of the Brahman: *ātmaikyabodhena vinā*, which basically means not having experientially

known one's oneness with the One or the non-dual Brahman. Thus, the study of scriptures is extremely important but additional efforts have to be made in order to experientially attain one's oneness with the Brahman—until then, the knowledge of the Vedas and Upanishads is provisional and must be confirmed in one's experience. In other words, what Rāmbachan (1994) has stated about the position of Śaṅkara in that the “knowledge gained from *śruti* does not have to be applied to produce an experience that validates *śruti*” (p. 9) is untrue. The knowledge gained from *śruti* must be applied to produce experiential knowledge that validates *śruti*.

In support of my arguments, I also cite the following verses that unfold the suggestions that are being given by a realized knower of Brahman, who also happens to be a teacher in this case, to a student after he has unfolded to his disciple the intellectual knowledge regarding the nature of Brahman, the distinction between the eternal and the time-bound, the qualifications of a guru, the characteristics of a seeker, the difference between Self and no-Self, and so on and so forth:

[Verse 473]: *Samādhinā sādhu viniṣcal'ātmanā*

*paśy'ātma-tattvaṃ sphuṭa-bodha-cakṣuṣā;*

*nissamśayaṃ samyag-avekṣitaś cet*

*śrutaḥ padārtho na punar vikalpyate.* (Turīyānanda, 1991, p. 212)

The above verse can be translated as follows: “Going into *samādhi* by stilling yourself, see the truth of your self (Self) with your clear eyes of knowledge. The matter heard, when realized, does not create any confusion.” Thus, after having given the scriptural instructions, the teacher asks the student to go into *samādhi* by stilling himself and seeing for oneself with his own eyes the truth of the Self: *paśy'ātma-tattvaṃ sphuṭa-bodha-*



*cakṣuṣā*. Thus, the intellectual knowledge gained by the unfolding of the *śruti* in front of



the student does not automatically lead to the knowledge of the Brahman: meditation

leading to *samādhi* is prescribed to gain an experiential knowledge. The knowledge

gained from *śruti* must be applied to produce experiential knowledge that validates *śruti*,

which completely invalidates the claims that Rāmbachan is making with respect to the



lack of need of *anubhava* in Śaṅkara's expositions. It does not seem that Rāmbachan is

even familiar with this verse in Vivekacūḍāmaṇi where the prescription to the student to

attain *samādhi* is quite explicit. In fact, he is of the opinion that Swāmi Vivekānanda

drew the concept of *samādhi* from Patanjali's Raja Yoga and applied it to his own

"reinterpretation" of Vedānta (see Rambachan, 1994, p. 98). He further contends that for

Swāmi Vivekānanda *samādhi* holds the same value as a source of *brahmajñāna* as does

*śabda-pramāṇa* (source of valid knowledge) for Śaṅkara, meaning that whereas Swāmi

Vivekānanda has mandated *samādhi* for the gain of knowledge of Brahman, Śaṅkara has

not. The above verse is a testimony that this contention is categorically incorrect. In

addition he states that *ātman* or Brahman cannot be perceived or directly experienced



because that would mean the objectification of Brahman. The argument is absolutely

justified in that Śaṅkara uses the argument to prove that Brahman cannot be objectified,

and whatever can be perceived is not Brahman—he has specifically used the argument to

show that any identification with the *pañcakoṣas* is false because After having read and re-

read Rāmbachan's contentions and then having cross-checked the facts with regards to

his interpretation of Śaṅkara, it is becoming clearer to me that his knowledge of Śaṅkara

is not thorough and that he has either missed some aspects on Śaṅkara or deliberately

twisted his data to become iconoclastic in order to destroy the established knowledge that

there is a continuity between the traditions of the above two great Vedantins. In the following verse Śaṅkara is contending that *anubhūti* is as important a proof of the knowledge of Brahman as are *śabda-pramāṇa* and the words of the guru:

[Verse 474]: *Svasy'āvidyā-bandha-sambanda-mokṣāt*

*Satya-jñan'ānanda-rūp'ātma-labdḥau;*

*śāstraṃ yuktir deśikoktiḥ pramāṇam*

*c' āntas-siddhā sv'anubhūtiḥ pramāṇam.* (Turīyānanda, 1991, pp. 212-

213)

It can be translated as follows: “After liberation from one’s bondage to ignorance (*avidya*), the knowledge of truth and blissful Self is obtained. Scriptures, reason, and the words of guru are proofs. *And* one’s own inner experience is the proof.” Śaṅkara, however, in the following two verses has left no doubt that the greatest *pramāṇa* or proof is one’s own inner experience. In other words, scriptures—and even the words of guru which, I can tell you from the very fact of having experienced the Indian culture from a very close distance, are rated very highly—are ancillary to *anubhūti* or *anubhava*. They make it absolutely explicit that experience (*anubhūti* in the language of Śaṅkara, which means exactly the same as *anubhava* in Swāmi Vivekānanda’s terminology) is unconditionally the ultimate proof or *pramāṇa*:

[Verse 476]: *Tata-sthitā bodhayanti guravaḥ śrutayo yathā*

*Prajñay'aiva tared vidvān īśvar'anugrḥitayā.* (Turīyānanda, 1991, p. 213)

My translation is as follows: “*Śruti* and the words of the guru can guide from the shore. But only the knowledgeable one having attained the wisdom (a wisdom that comes from experiencing directly) obtained by the grace of the Divine can cross the ocean.”

[Verse 477]: *Sv'ānubhūtyā svayaṃ jñāntva*

*svam'ātmānam akhṇditam;*

*saṃsiddhaḥ sammukhaṃ tiṣṭhen*

*nirvikalp'ātmanā'ātmani.* (Turīyānand, 1991, p. 214)

Translation: “By experiencing and knowing for yourself one’s non-dual Self, realize (come face to face) and be identified with the unchangeable Ātman.” The catch phrase here is *Sv'ānubhūtyā* which means “by experiencing yourself” containing the word *anubhūti*. The above verses are self-explanatory and I do not need to underscore that despite the erudition with which Rāmbachan has developed his premise and his arguments, he is wrong in his assessment of Sri Śāṅkaracharya. Rambachan’s (1994) following thesis about Śāṅkara and his comparison with Swāmi Vivekānanda is incorrect:

From Śāṅkara’s position, the Vedas, in fact, would not fulfill the criterion of valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*) unless they were capable of producing a unique and self-valid knowledge. Any defect free *pramāṇa* can independently generate knowledge, and this knowledge does not have to be authenticated by another *pramāṇa* [*anubhava* gained in *samādhi* in this case as a point of comparison between Śāṅkara and Swāmi Vivekānanda]. Such knowledge is not of provisional nature awaiting confirmation. As a source of valid knowledge in the form of words (*śabda-pramāṇa*), the Vedas, therefore, for Śāṅkara, can generate knowledge of *brahman* independent of any other means. For our knowledge of *brahman*, according to Śāṅkara, nothing beyond the words and sentences of the Upaniṣads is necessary .... Scrutiny of Vivekananda’s statements on the Vedas and scriptural revelation, in general, reveals a point of view that is unqualifiedly

opposed to Śaṅkara's position ... He has argued that the assertions of the Vedas are to be considered only provisionally true and that they become valid knowledge only when verified by direct apprehension. (pp. 117-118)

Verse after verse Śaṅkara is exhorting us to have a direct experience of Brahman, and Rāmbachan tells us that *anubhava* or *anubhūti* is not important to authenticate the scriptures and that a mere intellectual understanding of the scriptures will reveal the already present Brahman—one need not go into *samādhi* by meditating to know the veracity of the scriptures. As we saw the evidence suggest otherwise, and in their light one would expect Rāmbachan revisits all the important texts of Śaṅkara in order to re-examine his contentions. If *anubhava* confirms *śruti* in Swāmi Vivekānanda's case, *anubhūti*—which means exactly the same as *anubhava*—confirms them in the case of Śaṅkara. *And because they are confirmed in experience, they are provisionally true for both Śaṅkara and Swāmi Vivekānanda.*

The question, now, we must address is why Rāmbachan discounted these evidence and why he fabricated a thesis absolutely contrary to facts. Rāmbachan, it seems, is under the sway of social constructivist bias in the study of religions, particularly Hinduism. Social Constructivism is essentially a non-essentialist paradigm (pun intended) of analysis where ideas are seen and explained to arise in a socio-historical-political context. However, in the context of Hinduism, politics of religion and academic production of knowledge are intricately intertwined. It is not simply the adherence of a particular paradigm and a misinterpretation of facts thereof. It is quite apparent and explicit that Rāmbachan adheres to the wider view of Wilhem Halbfass and Paul Hacker—who hold that Hinduism is a colonial production and derivative of India's

contacts with Europe. Indeed one finds that the words on the cover-page of the “Limits of Scriptures” are almost a verbatim reproduction of Halbfass’s (1988) following thesis:

In contrast, critical assessments and attempts to “demythologize” Vivekananda are much more rare and rarer still are examples of a thorough historical analysis and hermeneutic clarification of Vivekananda’s work. (p. 228)

And let me reproduce what appears on the cover page of Rāmbachan’s (1994) book:

“Despite his [Swāmi Vivekānanda’s] pervasive influence, critical assessments and attempts to “demythologize” Vivekananda have been very rare and rarer still are historical and hermeneutical clarification of his work.” There is no mention on the cover page of the book that this introduction or review was written by Halbfass—Rambachan (1994, p. 7) however quotes Halbfass’s abovementioned sentiments making it unwittingly explicit that the latter made the call and he took it. The big issue here is, as I have shown later (see Appendix B), like his predecessors—Halbfass and Hacker, who also appears to be Halbfass’s mentor in this regard—he too has erred and has distorted evidence to perpetuate a false accord.

Consequently, he was quick to assume and prove that it was the tendency of the Unitarians in Europe and America that induced Swāmi Vivekānanda to give a provisional status to the scriptures and uphold the validity of experiential realization. Rāmbachan in haste forgot to check all the facts, and it seems that University of Hawaii Press did not care either to have all the facts checked by a scholar of contemporary and traditional Vedanta. The unfortunate aspect is that oversights of such kind by major university presses is becoming much more common than not and it makes me wonder if there is a larger agenda bordering on Hinduphobia that is in operation here. It is also becoming

quite apparent that the machinery supporting the anthropological study of Hinduism that began in the imperialistic era is still operational despite the fact that a direct colonial rule over India has ended more than sixty years ago.

Hacker (see Halbfass, 1995) was a Christian Indologist, and it is a well-known fact that the appearance of Swāmi Vivekānanda had arrested the soul-harvesting drive of the Christians—no wonder why some scholars are so eager to “demythologize” him, even if it means fabricating and twisting evidence. From his own accounts, it is quite clear that Swāmi Vivekānanda was troubled to quite an extent by the Christian organizations here in the United States. He was not forgiven then and it seems that he has not been forgiven even now for thwarting the organized Christian agenda, though it happened indirectly: he was here to teach the harmony and unity-in-diversity of religions. He was here for promoting peace and love, wanting to take the human existence to a higher level of consciousness. He was not here to convert people to Hinduism; in fact he was quite opposed to the business of religious conversion. He was here to teach the science or the knowledge behind spirituality. I could go on and on, but this paper is not about the spiritual message of Swāmi Vivekānanda (for details see Kundan, 2008).

Going by his own accounts Rāmbachan is teaching in a Christian College, he was granted a year-long leave and some funds to complete this work (Rambachan, 1994, p. xi), and given the large scale distortion that has happened in his interpretation of Śaṅkara, should we assume that there is a larger agenda at work here? I am not interested whether Rāmbachan is a Hindu or a Christian or from any denomination or religion; I am asking this question because as a critical thinker I am interested in examining the nexus of politics, money and academic production of knowledge. Following the precepts of critical

thinking, I am interested in questions such as the follows: Who is funding the research? Who benefits from this kind of research? What kind of institutions are the writers affiliated with? What is the politics of power behind such a kind of knowledge production, etc? Also, how do neo-imperialism, class, race, and gender affect the production of knowledge about India, its traditions and Hinduism?

Given the misinterpretation, distortion, fabrication and concoction of evidence that is making in-roads into American academia on Swāmi Vivekānanda (see Appendix B for more details) an extensive study spanning the works of many such scholars is required at this hour, for if not taken seriously the spiritual transformation of humankind that many of our sages including Swāmi Vivekānanda have aspired will get defeated and a knowledge of spirituality that includes and transcends the secular will never be able to reach the larger academic and student community, including the Hindu-Americans who for most part as it is are at a loss—because of the entrenched Hinduphobia in academia—with regards to gaining a truer and correct understanding of the traditions of their ancestors.

### *Appendix A*

The terms “revival” and “renaissance” have been used by many authors (see Chaudhary, 1981; McDermott & Naravane, 1974; and Rao, 1970 for a detailed discussion on the topic). An exception is Hacker (1995a), a Christian Indologist, who avoids these terms and describes the ones involved in reviving the postcolonial Hindu spirituality in India as “Neo-Hindus” contending that there is a significant difference between the Neo-Hindus and the traditional and the orthodox ones in terms of appealing to Hinduism. He holds that whereas traditional Hinduism maintains continuity with the past, “Neo-Hinduism” does not. Although a critical review of Hacker’s work is not possible here, I should at least say that at many places in his writing, he strikes me as an uninformed and a biased researcher, and many of his arguments do not stand the light of evidence; I leave it for some other time to engage his work in totality. However, I will cite just one example to show that the continuity between the “traditional” and “Neo-Hindus” is not broken as Hacker depicts it. Before I offer my comments, I will quote Hacker in some length in order to elucidate the context of his arguments. The people being mentioned here, apart from Sri Aurobindo, are Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, the scholar and the second president of Republic of India. Bankim Chandra, who lived in the nineteenth century, was a Bengali essayist, journalist, novelist, and poet—the author of *Bande Mātaram*, the national song of India. Hacker (1995a) writes:

I do not know whether Bankim Candra’s theological works, which are written in Benagali, have exercised a direct influence on other Hindu writers. The fact is, however, that *dharma* concept very similar to his appears in the works of many



Neo-Hindus who came after him. Possibly the works of Aurobindo Ghose, whose mother tongue was Bengali but who wrote in English, are the connecting link between Bankim Candra and later authors. In any event, Aurobindo, in his *Essays on the Gītā*, sets forth a concept of *dharma* very similar to that enunciated by Bankim Candra. Individualism, included already in Bankim's concept is intensified in Aurobindo's work. He emphasizes that each individual should freely develop the particular way of self-expression that flows from his 'inner law of nature.' ... As for Radhakrishnan's concept of *dharma*, it is little more than an echo of that of Aurobindo. Commenting on, or rather misinterpreting the Sanskrit term *svadharma*, Radhakrishnan says 'each one must try to understand his psychological make-up and function in accordance with it.' Traditional Hindus, however, even today know very well that *svadharma* as such is not constituted by a man's psychic disposition or his personality but is determined by the caste in which he is born and the stage of life in which he finds himself, all this, including his psychic 'make-up,' being a consequence of his deeds in his previous existences. It is not surprising that precisely in the conception of *dharma* the divergence of modernistic from traditionalistic Hinduism is widest. For the practices of *dharma* are the very core of traditional Hinduism, and Neo-Hindus ordinarily have no active or living connection with these practices. (pp. 238-239)

Hacker shows a poor understanding of traditional Hinduism in this context. The concept of caste is based on the *guṇa* theory present in the *Sāṅkhya* philosophy. According to this philosophy, the psychological make up of individuals is based on the interaction of Purusha and Prakriti. The Purusha essentially is a witness consciousness that supports

and gives assent to the workings of the Prakriti. However, in the ordinary human existence the Purusha becomes subject to the workings of Prakriti and loses its witness capacity. The Prakriti has three modes of operation, the three *guṇas* or qualities—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. *Sattva* essentially is a force of equilibrium that translates in the human qualities like seeking harmony, happiness and light. *Rajas* is a force of kinesis that translates into qualities like passion, action and effort. *Tamas* is a force that translates in qualities like sloth, laziness, inertia and inaction. These three *guṇas* of Prakriti are in a flux; however the predominance of one over the others determines the *varṇa* or the caste of the individual. The person who has the predominance of *sattva* is someone who will seek knowledge, who will seek to understand the secrets of existence, who will seek to know Brahman (*Brahma*); consequently, he or she belongs to the *varṇa* of Brahmin (*Brahmaṇ*). People who have the predominance of *rajas* will be driven by will-to-power, desire and action—they form the *Kṣatriya* clan who by their very disposition will be rulers, politicians and statesmen or stateswomen. The person with the mixture of *rajas* and *tamas* belongs to the *Vaiśya* class, who by his or her orientation will be driven towards making money. The person with the predominance of *tamas* is *Śūdra*, and such a person by his or her nature will be guided by inertia, lack of effort, laziness, inaction and sloth. A person who goes beyond the three *guṇas* is called *triguṇātita*, and he or she is essentially a yogi—therefore a yogi has no caste. “Traditional” India does not inquire about the caste of a yogi.

Growing up in India—and I do have a close connection with traditional India in that I have spent considerable time in an Indian village with my extended family—I have heard from my ancestors that during the *satya yuga* (the age when humanity was guided

by higher truth), when yogis lived among the people, it was they who determined the caste of an individual with the power of *trikāladṛṣṭi* or by a vision that includes and transcends present, past and future. Since this can be dismissed as hearsay, any student of Vedic astrology will know that whenever a chart is made, among other things, the caste of an individual is determined as well. How *varṇa* or caste became hereditary, I do not know—it requires research which lies beyond the scope of this paper—but to say that there is no connection between psychological make-up and caste is betraying a stark ignorance about the complexities and knowledge of Indian traditions. Therefore, Hacker’s thesis that there is no continuity between the “traditional” and “neo” Hindu thoughts is not true. Indeed, his relationship to Indian philosophy and culture was guided by his strong Christian roots—first as a Lutheran Protestant and later as a Catholic (see Halbfass, 1995). Therefore, I contend that the Neo-Hindu/Traditional Hindu divide is a myth created by Hacker, and that the thoughts and insights of Swāmi Vivekānanda, Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Aurobindo are fundamentally an extension of a diverse and long lineage of seeking the spirit and truth through spiritual means. In that process they may have incorporated some of the insights of the West, such as democracy and humanitarianism, but putting predominant and prominent epithets and adjectives to their endeavor is a gross exaggeration.

### *Appendix B*

Practical Vedanta forms the basis of Swāmi Vivekānanda's ethics—according to him, by knowing that we are all One, caring and looking after each other, helping and loving one another becomes natural and spontaneous. In loving and renouncing for others, we expand our being and make the communion with our higher Self possible—with that Self that is everything in the universe and beyond the universe. Since unconsciously we know this reality we are impelled to love and care for others, being helped with every moral and ethical act in order to realize that this limited individualized ego-conscious self is but a delusion. Whenever there is feeling of not-me-but-you, whenever we uphold the interests of others over ourselves, we are seeking our higher Self, for just as we take care of our individual self, by caring for others we are tending to our larger Self—unselfishness, self-abnegation and altruism remove the impediments towards realization of the higher Self whereas selfishness, hatred, anger, fanaticism, and desire to hurt take us further away from the goal of self-realization. In his view, Practical Vedanta also forms the basis for unity-in-diversity, for it is the same Self that is the many—it is one Self that is manifesting itself in myriad forms. Consequently, for the betterment of humanity sameness and homogeneity are not something that should be aspired for but variation—variation in ways of being, variation in ways of thought, variation in ways of spiritual practice with an essential knowledge that all these various manifestations are supported by an underlying oneness. His aforementioned exposition, as a result, provides the scope for the existence of relative morality and ethics with respect to different individuals since one standard of morality and ethics cannot be applicable to all and sundry, and that everybody cannot be subjected to just one set of

ethical and moral principles. Ethics and morality vary according to one's inner constitution and the society in which one is born forming one's *svadharma*; this needs to be respected, recognized and encouraged.

Halbfass (1988), however, quoting Paul Hacker, tells us that the ethical and social application of Practical Vedanta of Swāmi Vivekānanda has been appropriated from Paul Deussen, a student of Schopenhauer. In a typical confrontational and provocative stance that Hacker has taken towards “Neo-Hindus”—an overarching category under which he clubs Swāmi Vivekānanda among many others—his contentions are controversial, misleading, distorted, and consequently worth examining with regards to the Swāmi's thoughts. In order to examine the problematic stance of Hacker—that has been supported by Halbfass—let me first introduce their ideas. Halbfass (1988) writes:

P. Hacker's views concerning the systematic and historical implications of this specifically Neo-Hindu program are both penetrating and provocative. His thesis is that the doctrine of an ethical and social applicability of the Vedanta philosophy of identity was not only inspired in more general sense by the encounter with the West, but that the Western starting point can be precisely identified and date provided for the beginning of its influence upon modern Indian thought: The first who attached the idea of ethical applicability to the Indian doctrine of identity and its formulation as *tat twam asi* was A. Schopenhauer, who was working within the context of system of ethics. In turn, Schopenhauer's follower P. Deussen adopted this idea and introduced it into modern Indian thought on February 25, 1893 through a speech in Bombay and on September 9, 1896 during a personal conversation with Vivekananda. (p. 239)

As we saw before, Hacker once again is misleading with respect to his problematic and polemical thesis. The ethical and social application of the Vedantic doctrine of identity is very much present in the Gita, though Hacker selectively uses chapters Six, Thirteen, and Sixteen of the Gita to give a theological spin stating that, “there was in early medieval Hinduism a metaphysical, or rather theological, basis for ethics, but this was characteristically different from the *tat twam asi* ethic. It is stated concisely in *Gītā* 6, 31-32, not in 13, 27-28; it is expressed negatively in 16, 18” (Hacker, 1995b, p. 286).

Hacker has conveniently omitted the fifth chapter of the Gita which specifically speaks about Brahman or the impersonal Self. Indeed, the Gita contains references to both the personal and the impersonal aspect of the Divine—the reason why it has been commented upon by seers and pundits of many different Vedantic orientations. A few examples will substantiate this contention. In support, I cite the following verses from the fifth chapter of the Gita, and their translations with my comments as and when felt appropriate:

Verse 6: *sannyāsas tu mahābaho*

*duḥkham āptum ayogataḥ*

*yogayukto minir brahma*

*naccireṇā’dhigacchati* (Radhakrishnan, 1948, p. 176)

But renunciation, O mighty-armed is difficult to attain without Yoga; the sage who has Yoga attains soon to the Brahman. (Roy, 1977, p. 91)

Verse 7: *yogayukto viśuddhātmā*

*vijitātmā jitendriyaḥ*

*sarvabhūtātmabhūtmā*

*kurvan api na lipyate* (Radhakrishnan, 1948, p. 177)

He who is in Yoga, the pure soul, master of his self, who has conquered the senses, whose self becomes the self of all existences (of all things that have become), even though he does work, he is not involved in them. (Roy, 1977, p. 92)

The phrase to be noted here is *sarvabhūtātmabhūtmā* which means *one who has attained identity with all the selves of the world*. The Gita, in this context, thus, speaks not only about a transcendental liberation obtained with identification in Brahman (verse 6) but also about identification with all the selves of the cosmic Self. Hacker (1995b), thus, is wrong about his thesis that the Gita does not refer to the Vedantic doctrine of identification, which has been captured by the *tat twam asi* aphorism in Chhandayoga Upanishad. Before I go ahead and show that the ethical and social applicability of identification with Brahman is present in the Gita in a substantial manner, let me quote a few more verses from the fifth chapter to show that the union that is being referred to in this chapter is not with any personal Lord or God but with an impersonal Brahman.

Verses 8 & 9: *nai' va kiñcit karomī'ti*

*yukto manyeta tattvavit*

*paśyañ śṛṇvan sprśaṇ jighrann*

*aśnan gacchan svapañ śvasan*

*pralapan visṛjan grhṇann*

*unmiṣan nemiṣann api*

*indriyāṇi ndriyārtheṣu*

*varanta iti dhārayan* (Radhakrishnan, 1948, p. 177)

The man who knows the principles of things thinks, his mind in Yoga (with the inactive impersonal), “I am doing nothing”; when he sees, hears, tastes, smells, eats, moves, sleeps, breathes, speaks, takes, ejects, opens his eyes or closes them, he holds that it is only the senses acting upon the objects of the senses. (Roy, 1977, p. 92)

The phrase to be noticed here is *tattvavit*, which means, “one who knows the impersonal or the *tattva*.” The knowledge of the Brahman is also called *tattvajñana* or the knowledge of the *tattva*.

Verse 10: *brahmaṇy ādhāya karmāṇi*

*saṅgam tyaktvā karoti yah*

*lipyate na sa pāpena*

*padmapatram ivā ’mbhasā* (Radhakrishnan, 1948, p. 178)

He who, having abandoned attachment, acts reposing (or founding) his works on the Brahman, is not stained by sin even as water clings not to the lotus leaf. (Roy, 1977, p. 92)

Verse 19: *ihai ’va tair jitaḥ sargo*

*yeṣāṃ sāmye sthitaṃ manaḥ*

*nirdoṣaṃ hi samaṃ brahma*

*tasmād brahmaṇi te sthitāḥ* (Radhakrishnan, 1948, p. 182)



Even here on earth they have conquered the creation whose mind is established in equality: the equal Brahman is faultless, therefore they live in the Brahman. (Roy, 1977, p. 95)

The above verses, their translations and commentaries were meant to establish that the Divine being described in this chapter is an impersonal one. The last verse is also the link between the ethical and social application of one's identity with Brahman. Verses 18-20 tell us that the one who is established in Brahman is flawless and is equal to all just as Brahman is. His intelligence is stable, and he "neither rejoices on obtaining what is pleasant nor sorrows on obtaining what is unpleasant" (Roy, 1977, pp. 95-96). He sees the learned and the humble Brahmin, the cow, the elephant, the dog and the outcaste with an equal eye—he has become *samandarśitā*. And *having attained* Brahmanirvaṇa, *he is involved in doing good to the world* as the following verse suggests:

Verse 25: *labhante brahmanirvāṇam*

*rṣayaḥ kṣīṇakalmāṣaḥ*

*chinnadvaidhā yatātmānaḥ*

*sarvabhūtahite ratāḥ* (Radhakrishnan, 1948, p. 184)

Sages win Nirvana in the Brahman, they in whom the stains of sin are effaced and the knot of doubt is cut asunder, masters of their selves, who are occupied in doing good to all creatures. (Roy, 1977, p. 97)

The phrase to note here is *sarvabhūtahite ratāḥ*—one who is involved and takes delight in bringing goodness to all creatures. This chapter of the Gita, thus, can be summed up as follows: One who has attained the oneness with Brahman, who sees all the selves of the world in his self remains involved in working for the benefit of all.

This exactly is the conclusion that Schopenhauer had drawn from the study of the Upanishads, the Gita and the Vedanta philosophy, which Hacker tells us was a faulty one. However, this faulty inference of Schopenhauer, according to him, was hijacked by the “Neo-Hindus” and dished out to the world. He writes:

Schopenhauer, who knew no Sanskrit and read Indian texts in translation that were quite faulty in places, did not clearly recognize or fully estimate the fundamental difference between his monism of will and the Vedantic monism of cognition or consciousness. If his thesis, that the essence of the world is will, were correct, the ethical use of *tat twam asi* would indeed be a logically tenable consequence: “that,” which is the other, namely the metaphysical will, is also “thou.” For ethics are concerned with volition, and if my volition is identical with that of another, it is perhaps understandable that, by intuitively equating my own self with that of the other, I should act in his interest exactly as in my own. My love of the neighbor would, however, be really love of self, so it would be questionable whether we could continue to talk about ethics.

Vedāntic monism, however, has explicitly banished all volition and all action to the realm of the unreal. Sympathetic identification with another, which according to Schopenhauer is the essential attitude of a good person, would be seen by the Vedāntins of all schools as straying from the path of salvation. The universal one is to be reached not by ethical identification, but by intellectual abstraction. (Hacker, 1995b, p. 277)

The pertinent question that we now should face is why Hacker went wrong in his conclusions. This is because, in my understanding, he was a Christian Indologist and an

astute student of Advaita Vedanta of Śaṅkara (Halbfass, 1995), and both of these factors are intricately intertwined. In order to convert the Hindus, the Christian missionaries had conveniently picked up the Advaita Vedanta of Śaṅkara and had made it the alpha and omega of the Hindu thought in order to show the social and ethical deficiency in his thought so they could appeal to the Hindu masses to choose Christianity over Hinduism by appealing to the principle of utility. To be sure, Advaita Vedanta is a monastic discipline which concerns itself only with transcendental liberation in Brahman using intellectual process of discrimination. However, Advaita of Śaṅkara is not the only Vedanta which was given to the Indians. All the other systems that focus on liberation in Brahman owing allegiance in one way or the other to the Upanishads are Vedanta, and the Gita is certainly one of them. The fifth chapter of the Gita had been preached to Arjuna when the latter was not able to reconcile the path of action (Yoga, as Krishna calls it in that context) with the path of liberation and intellectual abstraction (*Saṅkhya*), which explains why we find an integration and union of volition with liberation in Brahman. The Gita has preceded Advaita of Śaṅkara, and if Hacker had sympathetically tried to understand Vedanta in a multi-dimensional, nuanced and complex manner, his conclusions would not have been so off the mark. Arguably, Swāmi Vivekānanda's preaching of the Practical Vedanta had arrested the soul-harvesting drive of the Christian missionaries. According to his own accounts (Vivekananda, 1970c), he was rather aghast and surprised by the unchristian ways of a few of the Christians. The polemical, provocative, rude and confrontational approach of Hacker is very much rooted in his context of Christian Indology, which in all possibility has led him to put a slanted twist to his scholarship that he consequently uses to launch his diatribe against the "Neo-Hindus."

Thus, it was not Schopenhauer and it was not the contact with the West where lay the genesis of the social and ethical application of the Vedantic doctrine of identity. Schopenhauer and later Paul Deussen only recycled what was already known to the Indians. And what about Swāmi Vivekānanda and Paul Deussen? Hacker, as he himself reports, could not find any evidence that the Swāmi could have been aware of Deussen's ideas when the latter was in India. Halbfass, later modified Hacker's claim stating that it was very well possible that Swāmi Vivekānanda may have got this idea from *Aṣṭāvakra-gītā* or *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, but continued to assert Hacker's other claim that it was *specifically* in a meeting with Paul Deussen in Kiel on September 9, 1896 that the latter told the Swāmi about the practical applications of Vedānta. He writes:

Apart from Western sources, such Indian texts as the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* and the *Aṣṭāvakra-gītā* had prepared him for the possibility of combining ethics and metaphysics. Deussen's ideas, and specifically the conversation of 1896, provided additional support and further encouragement not only for his practical program, but also for his Hindu self-assertion against the West. (Halbfass, 1988, p. 240)

This particular quote in itself feels benign, and it may seem that Halbfass is situating the thoughts of Swāmi Vivekānanda in a milieu of a well-rounded East-West interaction and exchange, which personally speaking would have had my vote and ratification despite contrary evidence. However, that is not the case if one reads the entire chapter titled, "Neo-Hinduism, Modern Indian Traditionalism, and the Presence of Europe." It is an extension and refinement of Hacker's primary thesis that

"Neo-Hinduism ... always implies reinterpretation." The link which the "Neo-Hindus" find to their tradition is, one may say, an after thought; for they first

adopt Western Values and means of orientation and then attempt to find the foreign in the indigenous: "... afterwards they connect these values with and claim that as part of the Hindu tradition." (Halbfass, 1988, p. 220, quotation marks in original)

Hacker's almost explicit contention that Swāmi Vivekānanda appropriated Paul Deussen's ideas and used it for his Hindu self-assertion is wrong too. Before he met Paul Deussen, the practical applications of Vedanta had already been fully developed by the Swāmi, as is evident from his lecture titled "The Vedanta Philosophy" that he delivered at Harvard University on March 25, 1896:

According to the Advaita philosophy, then, this differentiation of matter, these phenomena, are, as it were, for a time, hiding the real nature of man; but the latter really has not been changed at all. In the lowest worm, as well as in the highest human being, the same divine nature is present. The worm form is the lower form in which the divinity has been more overshadowed by Maya; that is the highest form in which it has been least overshadowed. Behind everything the same divinity is existing, and out of this comes the basis of morality. Do not injure another. Love everyone as your own self, because the whole universe is one. In injuring another, I am injuring myself; in loving another, I am loving myself. From this also springs that principle of Advaita morality which has been summed up in one word — self-abnegation. The Advaitist says, this little personalised self is the cause of all my misery. This individualised self, which makes me different from all other beings, brings hatred and jealousy and misery, struggle and all other evils. And when this idea has been got rid of, all struggle will cease, all

misery vanish. So this is to be given up. We must always hold ourselves ready, even to give up our lives for the lowest beings. When a man has become ready even to give up his life for a little insect, he has reached the perfection which the Advaitist wants to attain; and at that moment when he has become thus ready, the veil of ignorance falls away from him, and he will feel his own nature. Even in this life, he will feel that he is one with the universe. (Vivekananda, 1970a, pp. 364-365)

The *tat twam asi* ethic and the let me add for further explication the *aham brahmāsmi* ethic—*tat twam asi* and *aham brahmāsmi* meaning “I am Brahman” are two *mahāvākyas*, (literally translated as great sentences) of Advaita Vedanta—the Swāmi implicitly uses in the aforementioned lecture.

In addition, before he left the shores of the United States for India via Europe in April 1896—the journey which allowed him to meet Paul Deussen—he explicitly states the connection between *tat twam asi* and ethics. This proves beyond doubt that the plan of Practical Vedanta had completely been developed by Swāmi Vivekānanda as is evident from his following words in Boston:

Before going into the subject of this afternoon, will you allow me to say a few words of thanks, now that I have the opportunity? I have lived three years amongst you. I have travelled over nearly the whole of America, and as I am going back from here to my own country, it is meet that I should take this opportunity of expressing my gratitude in this Athens of America.... There are moments when every man feels that he is one with the universe, and he rushes forth to express it, whether he knows it or not. This expression of oneness is what

we call love and sympathy, and it is the basis of all our ethics and morality. This is summed up in the Vedanta philosophy by the celebrated aphorism, Tat Tvam Asi, "Thou art That". (Vivekananda, 1970a, p. 389)

Having stated the above, I do not intend to give the impression that Swāmi Vivekānanda's thoughts are not situated in the socio-cultural-political-historical context of the *zeitgeist*. They certainly are as is evident from how he has engaged his audience in the West with respect to the use of his positivist language and to the activities of the Christian missionaries among many other issues. However, that is just a part of the story. They are also situated in the rich heritage of India's history and myriad spiritual traditions: Advaita Vedanta, Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Tantras, Gita, Bhakti traditions, Buddhism, Jainism, epics, tales, etc. An effort to situate his thoughts *only* in terms of Western impact will be bound to fail, for an Indian scholar well versed in Indian traditions will find it very easy to refute them. Besides, making claims based on distorted, misleading, and half-facts make scholars like Hacker and Halbfass look ignorant, racist, and imperialist who would go to any extent to "demythologize" (Halbfass, 1988, p. 228) him for his self-assertion against the West.

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