

Orientalism and Neo-Hinduism

Lecture VI

Rammohan Ray and Vedanta

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Summary

- 1772-1833, family of laukika brahman, service in Mughal administration, zamindari, knowledge of Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, Bengali
- 1803-1815 EIC, English language and literature studies, sastric studies as well
- 1803-4 first work, Persian Tohfatu 'l-Muwahhidin - islamic logic, common sense, criticism of religious leadership, natural belief
- Activism
 - Journalism: Bengali weekly *Saübàd Kaumudã* (1821), Persian weekly *Mir'atu 'l-akbar* (1822), *Appeal to the King in Council*.
 - Support of English education – 1822 Anglo-Hindu School, Sanskritik ed. - 1826 Vedanta College
 - Atmiya Sabha (1815), Unitarian Church in Calcutta (1823), Brahma Sabha (1825).
- 1830-1833 England
- Controversies
 - Sankar Sastri (head of the Madras Government College) and S, *A Defence of Hindu Theism* (1817),
 - Joshua Marshman – *Precepts of Jesus* (1822)

Rammohan and Contemporary Vedanta Scholarship

- **William Ward, *View of the History, Literature, and Mythology of the Hindoos* (London 1822): “Four hundred of this thousand [who among hundred thousand learn the grammar of Sanskrit] may read some of the smritees; but not more than ten, any part of the tuntrus, three hundred may study the nayu, but only five or six the meemangsu, the sankhyu, the vedantu, the patunjulu, the voisheshiku shastrus, or the vedu.”**
- **Radhakanta Dev told Macauley: “no one studied Sanskrit profoundly any more without being paid to do so.”**
- **Anyway, Mrtyunjay Vidyalankar, ‘Colossus of Literature’ (Josua Marshman) had 15 students in navya nyaya and smrti-sastra in his house. (Robertson, 58).**
- **Rammohan: Brahmasutras were generally unknown to the public >> translations of Upanishads into vernaculars preferred over general study of sanskrit as orientalist wanted.**
- **Dupperon’s Oupnek’hat – (*Sirr-i Akbar* in Persian, 1656-1657 by Sulñan Mupammad Dàrà Shuk’h (son of Shàh Jahàn) with the help of Benares pandits - unknown to Rammohan and Calcutta pandit**

Rammohan's Vedanta Writings

- **Vedantasara (1815) x Abridgement of the Vedant (1816)**
- **Sanskrit edition of Brahmasutra of Bàdràyaõa (1818)**
- **Bengali version of Atmanatmaviveka (1819)**
- **Upanisad Tikas**
 - *Talavakàra (Kena) Upanisad (English and Bengali, 1816)*
 - *Isa (both 1816)*
 - *Katha (Bengali 1817, English 1819)*
 - *Mandukya (Bengali 1817)*
 - *Mundaka (both 1819)*
- **Bhattacharyya Sahit Bicar (1817) x Second Deffence of the Monotheistical System of the Veds (1817)**

Vedantasara

- Sara = essence, “summary of essential teachings”, first statement of Rammohan’s vedanta.
- Free interpretation of Sankara’s exposition (bhasya) of Brahmasutras arranged as an free essay, complete rearrangement of the subject matter
- “Catechetical instruction”, not controversy, first fruit of Rammohan’s study in the Calcutta matha of Mrtyumjay Vidyalkar or Sivaprasad Sarma
- selection of 35 sutras out of the 558 in the Sutrabhasya. After each Sanskrit sutra brief exposition with further discussion and quotation from the Upanisads and smrtis. Quotations in course of work more and more vague, less accurate, going to number of misquotations.(From 4 quotations from the Rg Veda not even one is from this samhita.) **“Ray had not even the most rudimentary knowledge of the *Rg Veda.*”** (Robertson, 84)
 - **There was not even a copy of this text in Bengal that time and existence and nature of the Rg Veda “was made known to the world by Colebrooke’s essay in 1805; though even then not a one complete copy of all the Vedas was known to exist anywhere in the whole world.”** (K.S. Macdonald: “The Gayatri, The Most Sacred Text in the Hindu Religion”, reprinted from *The Indian Evangelical Review*, 1890.)
- **Upanishads** – were not known to Rammohan this time otherwise than from quotations in Sutrabhasya.

- **English and Bengali version**

- English version omits much of technical discussion: not mentioned vedic schools, asmas scarcely mentioned, Brahma as antaryamin (inner ruler) is hardly mentioned in English, In English identification of quotations more often simply as “Vedant” and “Ved”, different order of sutras, the English has footnotes in the manner of Colebrooke’s essays.

- **Purpose of composition**

- Unjustifiable idolatry of the present Hindus.
- Rammohan argues a) idol worship cannot be justified otherwise then by reference to the practice of ancestors; b) the impression of Europeans conceiving idolatrous Hindoos to worship just “emblematical representations of the Supreme Divinity” is wrong. Hindoos really worship many gods presiding independently upon their departments.
- Reason: scriptures of the Vedas “extremely voluminous” and metaphorical >> contradictions, confusion >> need to dwell upon “*The Vedanta*” - equal authority as the Vedas themselves.
- But this text “concealed within the dark curtain of Sanskrit language” and Brahmanas' monopoly on touching and interpreting it >> unknown to the public >> Hence Rammohan’s translation and abridgement of it, and now also rendering of *Abridgement* into English to prove “to my European friends, that the superstitious practices which deform the Hindoo religion have nothing to do with the pure spirit of its dictates!”

- **Personal reason:**

- to prove that his own faith mirrors the true meaning of the sacred books and thus the opprobrium thrown upon him is unjust.

- **Evil of Idolatry**

- “Destroys the texture of [Hindu] society” >> for well being of Hindus it is important to “awaken them from their dream of error and [...] [make] them acquainted with their scriptures, enable them to contemplate with true devotion the unity and omnipresence of Nature’s God.”
“Rampant superstition had brought about a rapid decline in the moral and economic condition of Bengali society. [And] [i]dolatrous practices were encouraged by those who gained ‘temporal advantage’ from them.”

- **Language**

- Phrases like “correct reasoning and dictates of common sense induce the belief of a wiser uncreated Being, who is the Supporter and Ruler of the Boundless universe [...] - far surpassing our powers of comprehension or description” were strange to his contemporaries and prove addressing of abridgement to the educated European reader and testing of his developing English language skills (Robertson, 88.)

Doctrines of Vedantasara and Abridgement

- Entire literature of vedanta discusses only:
 - a) Brhmavidya or Atmavidya
 - b) means of upasana, worship of the Unmanifest Sup. Be., known as the Atman, Paramatman or Brahma.
- Brahavidya:
 - No one can know His essential nature.
 - “He is indeed one and has no second” (Chandogya 6.2.1) -according to Rammohan the most important sutra on the brahmatattva.
 - Quotation of Sankara: Atman is Purusa, since “All the Vedas prove nothing but the unity of Supreme Being”, who is svatantra (Ch Up 6.8.7) the “nature’ of all things”.
 - Rejection of pratika upasana - meditation upon the vikaras, ‘transformations’ of Brahma.”

Brahma upasana -

- perpetual duty, a Vedic injunction (viddhi), for householders, i.e., a universal imperative, binding upon everyone, including gods and samnyasins - everyone must become brahmopasak “worshipper of God”.
- Six-fold discipline of true worshiper, moral injunction:
 - Restraint of the mind (sama).
 - Restraint of the outward senses (dama).
 - Not desiring to injure (titiksa).
 - Abstention from worldly enjoyments (uparati).
 - Firm faith in sastra (sraddha).
 - Fixing the mind upon Brahma (samadhi).
- + the need of fulfilling social obligations in comment upon varnasramacara.
- **“The one who seeks holy knowledge from within a asrama acquires that knowledge more quickly than does an anasrama jnani, The mind, furthermore, is purified by good works.”**
- True worship leads to moksa – attending “God-nature”, as well as to desired advantages.

Conclusion

- Rammohan drew only on Sankara's Sutrabhasya. That was not common to subject one's "acharya to such extensive editing" as well as to deviate from the order of sutras, which are "as much a part of *Brahmasutra* as the doctrines, themselves." (Robertson, 95)
- 'The Vs and the Abg are the works of a beginner writing for beginners.' (Robertson, 96)

Upanisad Tikas

- ***Talavakàra (Kena) Upanisad***
- Instead of insisting upon reason (Tohfath), here reason cannot be surer guide because it “serves to generate universal doubt”, the best way is not to rely exclusively upon scripture nor the reason but using light furnished by both we should try to “improve our intellectual and moral faculties, relying on the goodness of the Almighty Power, which alone enables us to attain which we earnestly and diligently seek for.”
- Hence no vision can approach the Supreme being, no description describe, no intellectual power to determine, He is beyond the reach of comprehension and beyond nature: Hence the central theme of the Kena: “He, who believes that he cannot comprehend God, *does* know him, and he who believes that he can comprehend God, *does not* know him...”

Mandukya Up

- Discourse on pranava >> only in Bengali
- Vs - pratika upasana, worship of representation equal to devata upasana, in Katha worship through pranava - form of nirguna upasana, here **Om** – tangible form (saksatrup or spastarup) of brahmasvarup (Brahma nature) – only perceptible trace of Brahma in this world = vikara, “the ‘consubstantial’ presence of parabrahma. Others – Vaisvanara, Isvara, hiranyagarbha – not vikaras, but only prakaras - “modes of Supreme Being”.
- **The Highest Lord cannot be known. “The person unable to search for the invisible parabrahma by listening to vedanta alone needs an abalambana, a ‘support’. Using om, the best abalambana, (*Katha 1.2.17*), he becomes a worshipper of parabrahma. Pranava is the bow, Atman the arrow and Brahma the target. Om is indestructible (*Manu 2.84*).”**
- As reported by his Unitarian friends, om “was frequently upon his lips in the final hours. The pranava came to be an essential personal devotional exercise for Rammohan Ray.” (Robertson, 132)

- Varnasramacar: Vs - "prerequisite for seeking knowledge of the unmanifest Brahma." Here, some of great vedic rsis gained knowledge of the unmanifest Supreme Being being outside varnasrama >> "Scripture provides examples of the norm as well as exceptions to the norm."
- Finally, knowledge "is a gift, unearned by human effort."

Tika

- Hence he does not write for western public, his exposition **resembles more the matha style, he comments upon each word of the text** (Robertson, 137). Many of Sankara's synonyms for words in the pada text appear in his comment with little or no explanation. There is no evidence that Rammohan knew the *Karika* of Gaudapada, nor is him almost entirely unknown the Sankara's sub-commentator on this text Anandagiri (Robertson, 138). What means that Rammohan did not know more than Sankara's text.

Mundaka Upanisad

- for the first time the transliterated Bengali text is separated from the commentary. No srutis and smrtis are cited in Bengali tika.
- Again Sankara provides most of the technical vocabulary (142).
- “The English commentary distinguished by a new, modern vocabulary not found in Rammohan's earlier English commentaries.” (143) – rsi = saints, akasa = vacuum (in Abg - “void space”), anu = atom (in Katha “small”), vidya = science.

The doctrine -issue of the two path to liberation mentioned in **Brhadaranyaka** and **Chandogya**

- The northern path (uttarapatha) - for the samnyasis, vanprasthas as well as for “the householder established in holy knowledge (jnananistha grhasth)”
- Rammohan forced in this Upanishad to “to admit worship of the lower, manifest Brahma, known as hiranyagarbha, as a means to knowing the 'eternal Supreme Being'.
- “The 'pious votary of God (nirmmalantahkarana atmajnani) obtains whatever division of the world, and desirable objects he may wish to acquire for himself or for another'.” - only householder, not mendicant, who renounced all worldly desires.
- The knowledge of Brahma is not attained through study of the Vedas, retentive memory, nor by hearing of spiritual instruction, “he who seeks to obtain a *knowledge* [Rammohan's italics] of God is **gifted** with it.”

Vedantacandrika versus Bhattacharyya Sahit Bicar

- Vc - Radhakanta, non-brahman and Brahman pandit collaborator Mrtyumjay Vidyalankar, English translation - William Hay Macnaghten.

Vedantacandrika and Apology

- to “expound the siddhanta, 'established' interpretation of vedanta in a fallen age of the Kali Yuga.”, to refute the doctrines of **“inventors and self-interest modernisers”** or **“moderns blinded by passion (idanintan ragandha), whose minds are intoxicated by the possession of worldly wealth”**. These were “exponents of new doctrines” (nutan sampradayakari), “atheists” (anisvaravadi, avalidikera), “dissenters” (bhedavadi, dvaitavadi), preaching “modernism” (adhunikatva), who spread the false doctrines (asadupadesa) on “marketplace theology” (tattvajnanirader hater madhye) from the love of the world, riches, children and luxuries