

Upanishads, the Source of Indian Spiritual Manifestations

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Abstract

"Upanishads"¹, also called "Vedanta"² or "end of Veda", refers to the end of "Vedas"³. According to the classification of Hindu sacred works, Upanishads are supplementary writings attached to "Aranyaka"⁴. Based on Hindu traditions, the wise people and receivers of the Divine Commandments were the creators of Upanishads. These people, who were called "Caviya Satiya Sarvata"⁵, used to live deep in untouched and dark jungles of India where they meditated and studied their own self. They expressed the spiritual experiences inspired to them (by the Divine Source) and flowed within their souls, in the form of Wahdat al-Wujud (Unity of Existence), decorated them with the dressing of mysterious words, and formed them as compressed synthetic ideas. The era of jungle-life was started with the theses of "Aranyaka" and ended with Upanishads, a period which can metaphorically be called the education period in the depth of jungle. According to Max Muller's theory, Upanishads are the oral teachings of masters (morshids) to their close followers. It must be noted that most of the prominent theoretical schools in India and even in Buddhism have originated from Upanishads.

With regard to the main subject in "Upanishads", the present paper tries to establish the specific spirituality, self-purification and the unique truth of the ancient India.

Keywords: Upanishad, Spiritual manifestations, Internal truth, Atman, Brahman, self-knowledge.

Introduction

Upanishad sometimes means knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge and wisdom enables man to know himself better, and is to eradicate ignorance. The root "sad" and prefix "upa" together refer to the humbleness of the followers before their master (Joshi, 2006: 3).

At the present, there are more than 200 Upanishads, but the number of the official members in "Muktika- Upanishads"⁶ is said to be 108 (Naeeni, 2003: 100). During the reign of Shah Jahan (13th century A.H.), his son Darashokuh, assisted by Pandets or clerics of the temples, translated about 50 Upanishads into Persian. These translations were named "Sir-e Akbar".

In fact, Upanishad is a song of the truth which man has been able to recite at old ages. Upanishad says the truth lies within us. The mystic expression "Ahm Brahma Asami"⁷ reminds us of the Sufist saying "Ana al-Haq" uttered by the great Iranian mystic, Mansur Hallaj.

Upanishad, the Philosophy of knowledge of Self and Knowledge of God

Upanishad is a legacy of old days of India; it's an instruction for shunning the transient mundane pleasures. Those trivial interests which, as a result of ignorance and selfishness, prevent man from achieving knowledge and the objective of eternal life, and eventually from theism. These texts include Vedic religious rituals and ceremonies and a caste system. Sacrifice is not blind killing of humans before man-made gods, but it is self-devotion, praying, thinking and reflection about the truth beyond everything, within us.

Upanishad starts with an internal journey, but such journey needs moral preparations, Karam⁸ and virtuous deeds. To reach "Moksha"⁹ or freedom from daily habits and abominations of the transient world, one must direct his thinking toward self-knowledge. The main subject of Upanishad is Brahman, the one who is not influ-

enced by time, place and people at all.

As Hinduism is based on sacrifice and a caste system, Hindus do not care for philosophy and rational issues; they also have no interest in learning Upanishads. The teachings of Upanishads were taught by wise Brahmins and those who had understood the philosophy of self knowledge secretly and after passing hard tests for they feared that unauthorized people might get access to those teachings, which is like giving a sharp sword to a drunken Barbarian. The origin and essence of Upanishad is the absolute truth and noble existence, which is interpreted as "Brahman" or "Brahma"¹⁰. Brahman is the source of existence and the existence itself. Brahman is "existence", and Atman is its "manifestation", and everything will eventually return to it Shankar Acharya Acharj¹¹, the greatest philosopher and teacher of Veda School, says: "Brahman is neither general, nor partial; neither tall, nor short; neither wet, nor dry; neither shadow, nor dark; neither air, nor Akash (sky); it is not concrete; nothing is attached to it; it doesn't have any smell, any eye or any ear..." (Naeeni, 2003, Vol.1: 89). The main subject of Upanishad is unity of Brahman and Atman, that is Atman is Brahman, and Brahman is the unique absolute truth which has no partner and peer; it is existence itself, and except for it everything else is nothing but a fantasy and dream. According to Upanishad, piety is the criterion for human's superiority. Although history of this valuable work dates back to 800 B.C., its thought and reflection attracted all those intellectuals who were suffering from the caste system of their society and wished for pure truth to free them. Upanishad does not consider any position for old clerics. Many of the masters (Morshids) were not from the Brahmins' class, but from the Kashtaria (army) caste. In this religion there is no trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva or any other temple considered the home of God or deities (Fig. 1-3).



Fig 1. Brahma, Lord of creation. Source: www.lotussculpture.com



Fig 3. Shiva, Lord of Destruction. Source: www.lotussculpture.com



Fig 2. Vishnu, Lord of conservation. Source: www.lotussculpture.com

Upanishad is a quest for truth, and seeks it from the path of logic and rationality. It does not ban anyone from following this path because of his/her religion, color or caste. In fact, this blessing is not something allocated to certain peoples. Self knowledge and understanding of the truth is the due right of every human (Ibid: 306).

In Hinduism, regarding research issues and priority in reading the holy texts, Upanishads usually come last. As a general norm, Hindus start the reading with the four Vedas. Then in order to enter the scientific world of religion they go for Brahmana (some theses about the meanings and interpretation of sacrifice ritual and other religious ceremonies and traditions including explanations of Vedas actions) to use their instructions for conducting their own religious ceremonies. Finally they read Upanishads. Despite Brahmanas which are to be read during the youth, Upanishads' reading starts when a person approaches his/her death time, and takes refuge

in the depth of jungles in order to reflect on the meaning of life and the secret of existence. Upanishads eradicate ignorance, helps man get closer to God, and create links between man and the teacher. Such teachings and readings are exclusive to the elite (not from the caste view) who have moved up the hierarchy ladder. Mystics and Sufis pass the same road.

Now the question is how the Hindus, who believe in dualism, have accepted unity of the creator of the universe. What is the main challenge and problem regarding the nature of the relation between the self (Jira) and God (Brahman)? Some people like Madhova¹² believe in dualism (Dvaita) which means the self and God are two separate things.

Some others like Shankara¹³, believe that these two are absolutely similar and the same; the self is God and God is the self. This view is called Monism. Others like Ramanuja¹⁴ believe that the relation between self and God is the relation between parts to the whole. This viewpoint is called Qualified Monism (Visistadvaita).

Although Hindus have a long history of worshipping various gods and goddesses, like Agni (the goddess of fire) and Indra (the goddess of lightening), it has been mentioned in Rigveda that these deities are the different manifestations of one single truth.

The various types of Indian monism since the Vedic period up to the present believe in various manifestations of God, and the unity of all of the manifestations in God. Therefore Indian theism or monism has a special quality which distinguishes it from monism in Christianity or Islam. Neither Islam nor Christianity presents any symbol for God's anger and rage, while Hindus believe that God's anger and rage manifests in the form of Shiva's dance (Tandava)¹⁵ and opening of its third eye. The power and force comes with the appearance of Goddess Shakti¹⁶ in the form of a statue in temples (Fig. 4).

Although it is stipulated in the Constitution of

India that the government of the country is a secular one, religion has ever been alive and very active in India to the extent that the teachings and morality of Upanishads led to a religious awakening and reformation in the 19th century. The leaders of the reformist movements, who were proud of religious legacy and advanced philosophy of Upanishads and Vedas, founded the reformist movement of "Brahmo Samaj" in 1828 led by Ram Mohan Roy. Ram Mohan Roy was from the Bengali Brahman class. Having thoroughly studied the philosophy of east and west successfully and being influenced by the



Fig 4. Shakti, the Goddess of Power. Source: www.lotussculpture.com

philosophy of Upanishads, he believed in one god independent of all religions and beliefs, the omnipotent God who is unidentifiable for His indescribable nature.

Ram Mohan rejected wrong habits and traditions like underage marriage and Seti (the burning of widows after the death of their husbands), none of which mentioned in Upanishads. He fought

such wrong traditions strictly, and condemned “Puranaha”¹⁷ and “Tantara”¹⁸ rituals, especially worship of a statue. He had no interest in the common religion, and believed in the Upanishad implication of God as an impersonal absolute power. He used Upanishad teachings to fight the bigot Hindus, who believed in a personal god as a significant part of their religious experiences. After Ram Mohan Roy, Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) founded the second reformist movement called “Arya Samaj” in 1875. This movement fought with the Indian caste system on the basis of self knowledge and understanding of the truth, and propagated equality of classes not according to race, but according to Karam or virtuous deeds (Shattuck, 2002: 149).

This philosophy of monism and avoiding dualism and its teachings turned the first non-Muslim Persian speaking poet “Mirza Manuher Tusni” into a poet believing in Wahdat al- Wujud. He says:

For one glimpse of her look
The idol, idol house and idol worshiper are all drunken.

It must be mentioned that the 800 year influence of Persian language and Islamic thought paved the way for interaction of religions and Muslim Sufis with Hindus at the time of Akbar Shah (9th century A.H.), and inspired Brahmans like Biragi¹⁹ to say Persian poems regarding the unity of man and God. As Brahmans were the only people responsible for the religious aspects, it was hard for them to follow a philosophy other than Hinduism, but Biragi reports an event involving a radical Brahman named Shankar Acharya:

When Shankar was taking a bath in the river, a street-sweeper from a low caste of the society put his clothes next to his. It made Shankar so angry that he immediately put his clothes in the water to wash them. The man also does so at the same time. The Brahman becomes more angry, but regardless of their caste the river had cleaned

their clothes both! Biragi, who was aware of the teachings of Upanishad and Islamic Sufism, and knew Persian language and Iranian mystic poets, says from the street-sweeper's tongue:

Pagan and believer, foreigner and Jew,
Armenian and Gheber, Christian and Hebrew,
Are different manifestations of my nature, oh young man;

Other than me, who has the whole universe?

And in return speaks about himself:

I came to know myself;

I raised my head to the pinnacle of knowledge;

Before this I just saw the wave,

But now for my faith I see the sea.

Biragi, using "Bi Gham" (without a sorrow) as his pen-name, links Islamic Sufism to Vedanta and the general principle of Wahdat al-Wujud (unity of existence) in his Masnavi:

O Bi Gham, do not talk about love with anyone except your love;

It's a secret, do not talk about it just everywhere.

If the whole world ask you about the truth,

Beware! Speak only in confession, not rejection.

Oh man! If you see the face of that sweetheart,
You'll see the whole universe beautiful.

Look at the mirror less, lest you may become selfish;

You become a mirror yourself to see Him (Abdullah, 1992: 1341)

A more interesting matter in ancient Indian traditions is that, how human mind in the preliminary steps of his culture has reached to a degree of intellectual growth to find self-knowledge and knowledge of God?!

There are examples of the old texts of Upanishads found in the 17th stanza of Yajurveda²⁰ (Naeeni, 2003. Vol.1: 425).

And you the owner of plants, Namaskar²¹ (thank you), Namaskar.

And you the owner of all benefits and interests, Namaskar, Namaskar.

And you the owner of land and sea, Namaskar,

Namaskar.

And you the extender of earth, Namaskar, Namaskar.

And you the giver of authority, Namaskar, Namaskar.

And you who are present everywhere and there's nowhere you can't reach, Namashkar, Namashkar.

And...

In this stanza, more than 500 times the unique soul, who is the owner of everything and independent of everything, has been praised. This is the most beautiful manifestation of the elevated thinking of man in ancient India.

The sixth stanza of Apankhata Tij Bindu²² reads: and it has three eyes and three characteristics; and it is the place of everything and the owner of the three worlds; and it has no face, no movement and no doubt; It is self-existent (formless) and is not in need of anything (Ibid: 421).

The seventh stanza reads: And no characteristic or color affects Him, and He has all of the characteristics and colors. The tenth stanza reads: Ignorant people consider Him inexistent; in-existency does not reach Him, and He is ever-existent.

The first stanza of Apankhata Nrisingha²³ by Atharvaveda Khand I reads:

All of the angles told Parjapat²⁴: "Atma who is more delicate than any delicate thing, and is like Aum²⁵, tell us about it." Parjapat accepted and said: "This universe is Aum, whatever happened, is happening and will happen are all Aum. And whatever higher than these three times is Aum. And all of these are Brahm, and Jivatma is also Brahm. Aum, which is Brahm, becomes unified with Jivatma, and then that becomes unified with Brahm, which is Aum, and this one has no oldness and is immortal and eternal."

The eight Priyata of Khand XII says, "Parjapat reads: "This body is mortal and death has confined it; Atma is immortal and the place of Atma

is the body. When Atma is given to the body, it feels pleasure and pain. As long as Atma belongs to the body, there is no escape from pleasure or pain, and as it leaves the body then there will be no pleasure or pain. This Atma is named Jivatma because of its attachment to the body." The 18th stanza of Apankhata Isha Bas²⁶ from Yajurveda reads: "Oh! AGNI , Oh! You who are in the form of light, guide us to the path of goodness, and give us wealth, greatness and salvation. Oh! You who are aware of our bad deeds, forgive our sins, to you we express our humbleness."

Anybody who attain Makt (freedom and release) and salvation, after death, all his delicate external and internal sensations vanish in hira-nyagarbh²⁷, and his Jivatma becomes unified with Atma. His dirty body turns into soil. The Gianian (wise men) and mystics ask their own deeds: Oh our deeds! will you remember us after death, and oh consequences of our deeds! Will you remember us? For we have never noticed the deeds and outcomes of them. And they tell the light of Nature that oh jyotisvarupa²⁸, that is oh you the nature who are in the form of light, direct us to the right path and give us wealth and greatness, for you are aware of our deeds, and forgive our sins. Thank you very much (Namaskar).

Conclusion

Upanishads with their advisory instructions and teachings have been the source of spiritual manifestations of India from ancient times. As there is a saying in Rigveda which stipulates that various deities are manifestations of a single truth; Tat Tvam Asi (Thou art thou), the natural identity, the firm base and foundation of all metaphysical issues of Upanishads. Despite diversity of goals and differences in the resource, in all Upanishads there is a tendency toward originality of unity (monism).

All various forms of Indian monism since the Vedic period to the present believe in various manifestations of God and their unity in the single unique God. Therefore, Indian monism has a unique feature which differentiates it from that of Christianity or Islam.

Philosophy of Upanishad answers all of the questions that intellectuals and scholars used to have in mind in ancient periods.

These questions include: What is the truth? What does the universe symbolize? Does the existence have any truth by itself, or is it just a mental manifestation or fantasy? Are human's behaviors and deeds based on truth or fantasy? What is the meaning of human's life?

Generally speaking, Upanishads are persistent in one main premise: all things either material or spiritual including human, animal and plant, spatial things, intangible spirits and gods, are all floating in the sea of the truth of unity. That world is beyond tangibility; it is end of the material and the natural world; it is unlimited and self-existent; it is God and God only.

Endnotes

1. Upanishad: It is composed of the Sanskrit words “upa” (close), “ni” (down) and “sad”(to sit) which in fact refers to pupils sitting in a lower level before their teacher (master) to learn secret wisdom. Max Muller believes that this school has elevated human thought to its pinnacle.
2. Vedanta: End of Veda. Vedanta, in fact, is the only representative of Wahdat al-wujud religion in India at the present time. The founder of this school of thought is Vyasa, also called Badarayana. The great teacher of this philosophy was Shankar Acharya from Malabar (Naeeni, 1381: 609).
3. Veda: These books are the first source of Hindi philosophy. The word Veda in Sanskrit comes from the root of knowing and its expression meaning is the divine knowledge or wisdom. Veda is also called “Śruti”, which refers to the “auditory science” as opposed to “Smriti” or “memorized science”, the former means direct science that has an origin apart from man, therefore, it is not achieved through thinking. The latter refers to the knowledge which has been transferred from generation to generation, and in fact it is the legacy of ancient teachers and leaders. For most of the Hindus, Vedas are divine revelations, eternal books, and the most sacred religious texts with comprehensive and understandable teachings. These teaching cover all aspects of individual's life, and define one's duties and responsibilities in all situations of life, from childhood, youth, education period, marriage and death. They are the reference for all individual and social regulations. All judicial and social rules must be based on Vedas. Religious ceremonies and rituals, prayers and sacrifices must follow Vedic instructions. And finally, they are the base of all schools of philosophical and ideological principles. Vedas consists of four books each containing lots of philosophic texts and theses or interpretations, which are divided into four groups:

1. Samhita, 2. Brahmana, 3. Aranyaka, 4. Upanishad.

The four Vedic books are:

a. Rig-Veda: It is composed of 1028 poetic pieces of worship. These pieces are songs for praising and worshipping gods. In fact, Rigveda is the poetic Veda.

b. Sama-Veda: It is mostly the repetition of the same poems of Rigveda, but consists of 75 more principal pieces which are specific for sacrificial ceremonies. Sama-Veda is the Veda of rhythms.

c. Yajur-Veda: composed of poems and prose for various sacrificial ceremonies. It is the Veda of sacrifice.

Atharva-Veda: It is historically older than the other three books, and aims at satisfaction of demons and vicious ghosts.

4. Aranyaka: related to jungle, dwelling in jungle. It is the name of some of the religious and philosophic texts that expressed the meaning of religious ceremonies, and discuss the nature and characteristics of God. These writings are attachments to Brahmana, and refer to the fact that Brahmas retired to jungles. Some of Aranyakas were gradually destroyed, but there are still four Aranyakas:

- Brihad Aranyaka
- Taittiriya Aranyaka
- Aitareya Aranyaka
- Kaushitaki Aranyaka

Aranyakas are closely related to Upanishads, and sometimes the names Upanishad and Aranyaka are used interchangeably. Aranyaka texts were compiled for those classes of people who have devoted themselves to thinking and reflecting about philosophic and spiritual aspects. Historically, Aranyakas are the dawn of thinking (Naeeni, 2003, V. 2: 494)

5. Caviya Satiya Sarvata Upanishads: Referring to the poems memorized through hearing.

6. Muktika-Upanishads: One of the names of Upanishads which consists of 108 Upanishads itself. The date of compilation or writing of Muktika Upanishad is not exactly known (Ibid: 100).

7. Ahm Brahma Asami: I am Brahma: Ahm=I, Brahma= God, Asami= am.

8. Karam: Also referred to as Karman, means performance, behavior, deeds. According to Hinduism karam means the consequences of man's behaviors and good or bad deeds, which are transferred from one's present life to the next life, and its influence is apparent in the next life (Badiee, 1382: 48).

9. Moksha: Freedom, release. According to Hinduism (and most of native religions in India) when one dies and his/her spirit leaves the body, shortly after it comes back in a different body which is in accordance with what he/she has done. All of the sins he/she has committed in the former life affects the next life. Everybody gets the reward for his/her own behavior (karam). As long as the influence of one's good or bad behavior exists, one must pass through the life cycle, the birth and death cycle, and face the consequence of one's behaviors by these repeated comings and leavings. According to the beliefs of some people, life and death do not equal existence and mortality, but changing clothes or frame. As long as, through piety, diligence, chastity, and self-discipline, a person has not reached eternal salvation, he/she will not be released from the pain of repeated birth and death (Ibid: 581).

10. Brahman or Brahma: God of creation, the first of the three Hindu gods, and the elevated spirit who has appeared in the form of the creator of the Universe. He was created by the seed of universe which was the reason for all reasons. He is the same Parjapat, who is the father and creator of all creatures, especially the father other parjapats. According to Hindu mythology, when Brahma created the universe, it remained untouched for one Brahman day which is equal to 2160000000 years. Then when Brahma was asleep, the universe and whatever in it were set on fire. But the scientist (Rishis) and gods and elements endured, and Brahma created the world again after waking up. And this process repeats for 100 Brahman years. For more information look

at: Azamlotfi, 1390: 36; Wilkins, 2003: 43; Dowson, 2005: 58.

11. Shankar Acharya: The greatest teacher of the Vedant school.

12. Madhva: The Vedic philosopher of 14th Century.

13. A Vedic philosopher.

14. A Vedic philosopher.

15. Tandava-Tandu: one of siva's attendants he was killed in music, and invented the dance called by Tandava.

16. Shakti: The goddess of power.

17. Puranai: old hencean ancient legend or tale of olden time.

18. Tantra: Role, ritual; the title of a numerous class of religious and magical works, generally of later date than the puranas and representing a later development of religion although the worship of the female energy had its origine at an earlier period.

19. Biragi: A non-Muslim Persian speaking poet who said mystic poems about Wadat al-Wujud. His pen name was Bi Gham.

20. refer to endnote 3.

21. Appreciation with respect, greeting.

22. It means "a piece of light from Atharvaveda."

23. Apankhat nirsingha: The last Upanishad, from Atharvaveda, translated by Dara Shokuh.

24. Parjapat: The god of creation, who is supervising all creatures and protector of life. The first god created with the absolute nature, (in Vedas) this name applied to refer to the elevated position of divinity, but later it was also used for Shiva.

25. Om (Aum): The great name. It is the holy name that is used at the beginning and end of prayers. The word Om has been written at the beginning of the Holy Book. It is like the Arabic word Hu. It is believed that this word is composed of three letters, each of which taken from one prayer (Ibid: 649).

26. Apankhat isha bas: It means the wisdom of the great creator.

27. Hiran garbh: The god of the whole creation and the keeper of earth and the sky, who gives everybody life and self (Ibid, 649).

28. The entity which is in the form of light; absolute light (Ibid: 519).

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