

Upanishads - The beginning of Indian Philosophy

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Abstract: *Upanishads are late Vedic and post Vedic Sanskrit texts that document the transition from the archaic ritualism etc., Etymologically Upanishads means in Sanskrit "Sitting near" (i. e. at the feet of the master) from upa 'near' + ni - sad (sitnear). This no doubt means the pupils sitting near the teacher and implies studying with the spiritual teacher. These contains the central teachings of Hinduism. Nobody has written the Upanishads. It is the eternal philosophy which is ever flowing. It is the intimate part of the Vedas from the beginning. Vedvyas compiled the Vedas) four in number). Brahmanas is the God of Vedas and is exclusively discussed in the early Upanishads.*

Keywords: Rg Veda, Sam Veda, Yajur Veda, Atharva Veda, Chandogya Upanishads, Brhad Aranyaka Upanishad

1. Introduction

The Upanishads are often considered the beginning of Indian Philosophy. Yet despite containing some of the first detailed discussions about philosophical topics such as self and the nature of its existence, there has been considerable disagreement about whether Upanishads themselves constitute philosophy and about their status within the later philosophical tradition in India.

Like the Brahmanas, each Upanishads is attached to one of the four Vedic Samhitas. The Upanishads represent both the final stage in the development of Vedic religious thought and the last phase of Brahmanism. They are thus the end of the Veda (Vedanta) Later philosophical schools of classical Hinduism which base their tenets on the authority of the Upanishads are therefore called Vedanta. The Upanishads may not be regarded as presenting a consistent and homogeneous, or unified philosophical system, though there are certain doctrines held in common. Divergences of the method, opinion and conclusion are everywhere apparent even without a single Upanishads. It is for this reason that the Upanishads are considered speculative treatises. Another significant feature of the Upanishads, particularly the older ones, is that practically every basic idea expounded has its antecedent in earlier Vedic concepts to obtain a more coherent view of the Universe and man.

2. Observation

From the details furnished it would be clear that they contain many passages that explain the significance of ritual actions

or interpret mantras (sacred verses) spoken during the ritual. The Vedanta darsana was the first philosophical school to attempt to present the Upanishads as holding a unified philosophical position Vedanta means 'end of the Vedas' and is often referred specifically to the Upanishads. According to the Vedanta school, the ritual section contains detailed instructions on how to perform the rituals, whereas the Upanishads contain transcendental knowledge for the sake of achieving Moksha or liberation. A recurring argument as to why the Upanishads might not be considered philosophy is that they do not contain a unified and or systematic position.

From the details chart given it would be amply clear how the different types of Upanishads function, the name of the writers and the verses mentioned therein. It is clear that the Rg Veda is the biggest of all the Vedas and contains ancient Indian collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns.

The Upanishads and the Vedas

The Upanishads are the fourth and final section of large group of texts called the Vedas. There are four different collections of Vedas or vedic texts of which we all know only four are the gems – Rg Veda, Yajurveda, Sam Veda and Atharveda with each of the collections containing for different layers of textual material. The Samhitas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and the Upanishads.

Before we proceed further it is necessary to know the details of the four Vedas. I have tried to give everything in a tabular form.

1	Rg Veda – It is an ancient Indian collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns (Suktas) It is one of the four sacred canonical Hindu texts known as the Vedas.	Samnita Vyas	10 Mandalas 85 Anuvakas 1028 Suktas 10552 Mantras
2	Sam Veda - It is the Vedas of melodies and chants an India (ancient) Vedic Sanskrit texts and is one of the sacred scriptures of Hinduism. It is a liturgical text	Vyasa is the compiler of 4 Vedas	1875 verses
3	Yajurveda – It is primarily of 4 mantras for worship of rituals. Worship before the image and concentration leads to getting ĀtkZ	Vyasa	32 chapter 3 Mantras
4	Atharva Veda – It is related to both worldly happiness spiritual known Vedic commentator has praised for fulfilling both ends – this world and the other world.	Sayana Vedic commentator	20 Books 730 hymns 600 Mantras

The Sacrificial Horse

The most elaborate and stupendous sacrifice described in the Brahmanas is the horse sacrifice (asvamedha). It is the ancient rite which a king might under take to increase his realm. In the following selection from perhaps the oldest of

the Upanishads, the Brhad Aranyaka (great forest text) the horse sacrifice is given cosmological significance by equating various parts of the sacrificial horse with corresponding elements of the cosmos. To Upanishads thinkers the real meaning of the horse sacrifice was gained through a realization of the identity of the parts of this

sacrifice and the universe. This type of mystical or transcendent knowledge is based on equations stressed by the word “verily” and is characteristic of the early Upanishads in particular. It should be noted that dawn, the sun the wind etc besides being elements of the cosmos, were also deified naturalistic forces in Vedic mythology and still retain their identity as such in the following passage. (From Brhad Aranyaka Upanishads).¹

Dawn is the head of the sacrificial horse. The sun is his eye, the wind, his breath, the universal sacrificial fire (agni - vairvanara), has open mirth, the year of the body (atman) of the sacrificial horse. The sky is his back the atmosphere, his belly the earth his underbelly (?) the directions his flanks the intermediate directions, his ribs, the seasons his limbs, the months and half months, his joints days and nights, his feet the stars, his bones, the clouds, his flesh. Sand is the food in his stomach, rivers, his entrails, mountains, his liver and lungs, plants and trees his hair, the rising sun, his fore part and the setting sun his hinder part. When it yowes, then it heightening, when he shakes himself, then it thunders when he urinates, then it rains speech (vae) is actually his neighing. (The whole description of the sacrificial horse may have a good reading but the author does not accept its description and it seems to be meaningless)

The teacher of the Mundaka Upanishad concludes that sacrifice is ineffectual as a means to the knowledge of the highest reality and to spiritual emancipation. On the other hand it is suggested by the passage cited above, some earlier Upanishads teachers substituted a kind of “spiritual” or “inner” sacrifice for the material or external sacrifice.

(From Mundaka Upanishad).²

The real self is neither body nor mind nor a complete negation of consciousness. The self is certainly conscious, but of nothing else but itself. It is pure self consciousness as such and it is in this condition that it is identical with the highest reality.³

The self (atman) who is free from evil, free from old age, free from death, free from grief, free from hunger, free from thirst, whose desire is the real (satya or truth) whose intention is the real he should be desired to be comprehended. He obtains all worlds, and all desires, who having found out that self knows him. Prajapati, the God indeed speak “Verily, the gods and the demons both heard this. They said among themselves: “Aha! Let us seek after that self the self, having sought after whom one obtains all worlds and all desires”.

The Essential Reality underlying the World

Looking ‘outwards’, the Upanishads thinker comes to the realization that this world is merely a humble of fleeting names and forms, that there is only one permanent reality underlying this manifold phenomenal world, and that, in the ultimate analysis, that reality (every where called Brahmanas, but here sat, i. e. being essence) is identical with the essential reality in human personality, namely, the self (atman).⁴

The self in the Upanishads

One of the most widely discussed topics throughout both the

early and late Upanishads is the self (atman). In its earliest textual appearances, atman is used as a reflexive pronoun much like ‘self’ in English, but by the time of the late Brahmanas and early Upanishads, the word was associated with a wide range of meanings, sometimes referring to the material body, but often designating something like an essence, a life - force, consciousness, or even ultimate reality.

One of the best known teachings of the self appears in the Chandogya Upanishads (6.1 – 16) as the instruction of Uddalaka Arane to his son Svetketu, Uddalaka begins by explaining that one can know the universal of a material substance from a particular object made of that substance: by means of something made of clay, one can know clay, by means of an ornament made of copper, one cannot know copper, by means of a nail cutter, one can know iron. Uddalaka uses these examples to explain that objects are not created from nothing, but rather that creation is a process of transformation from the original being (sat) which emerges into the multiplicity that characterizes our everyday experiences. Uddalaka’s explanation of creation is often assumed to have influenced the sakaryavada theory the theory that the effect exists within the cause which was accepted by Samkhya, Yoga and Vedanta Darshanas.

Yojnavalkya, the most prominent teacher in the Brhadaranaka Upanishad explains that the self is the inner controller present within all sensing and cognizing, yet at the same time distinct. He is the seer that cannot be seen, the hearer that cannot be heard the thinker that cannot be thought, the known that cannot be known.⁵

Sandilya begins his teaching by stating that brahmana is the entire world. He then explains what happens to people at the time of death as in accordance with their resolve in this world. After explaining atman in various ways Sandilya equates atman with Brahmana: The self (atman) of mine within the heart is brahmana. On departing from here, I will enter into him.⁶ This teaching clearly implies that if one understands brahmana as the entire world, and one understands that the self is brahmana, then one becomes the entire world at the time of death.

The Upanishads and the Vedanta

The oldest surviving systematic interpretation of the Upanishads is the Brahma Sutra (200 BCE – 200 CE) attributed to Badarayana. Although not technically a commentary (i. e. it is a sutra rather than a bhasya) the Brahma Sutra an explanation of the philosophy of Upanishads, treating the texts as the source for knowledge about Brahman. Despite being considered a Vedanta text, the Brahma Sutra (Aka Vedanta Sutra) was composed centuries before the establishment of Vedanta as a philosophical school.

The philosophy of Ancient India, in spite of its vast and varied developments suffered a long situation owing chiefly to political vicissitudes. But in recent times with an all - round re - awakening, there has been a revival of philosophic thought as well. The new philosophy of India, is not, however, a mere revival of ancient speculation. The cultural contact India had with the West through British Rule and

introduction of English education, made such simple revival possible. In the Universities western philosophy alone used to be taught until very recently, and even where Indian Philosophy has been introduced, insecurely forms more than a fourth part of the course. The result is that the average Indian student learns a little of Indian philosophy, while he acquires an elaborate knowledge of western philosophy, Greek, Medieval and modern. But though his knowledge of Indian philosophy is generally very meager he cannot altogether free himself from indigenous idea ingrained in his inherited culture and tradition.⁷ The philosophical mind of modern India is thus confronted by the double task of assimilating western as well as Indian ideas before it can attempt to create anything new. Interpretation of ancient Indian philosophy in the light of the western has, therefore, occupied the Indian mind for a long time and fresh thinking has been comparatively rare.

The ancient Indian systems were not all monistic, idealistic, mystical or nihilistic, as most ill - informed western writers even today seem to believe. There were realistic, materialistic, dualistic, atheistic and many other varieties of schools, some with vast literature.⁸ But idealistic thought specially of the type of the monistic system of Vedanta, become more popular than any of the rest. Idealism in some form or the other dominates, therefore even contemporary philosophy. This will be evident from personal statements in the recent work edited by Moorhead and Radhakrishnan Prof. K. C. Bhattacharya (1875 - 1949), Prof. S. Radhakrishna (1888 -) and Sri Aurobindo (1872 - 1950), the great yogin whose writings have been influencing modern thought. Bhattacharya and Radhakrishnan are the foremost among modern Indian academic thinkers who have attempted to construct any comprehensive philosophies of their own - out of the assimilated elements of Indian and European systems of thought. Though there has scarcely been any mutual influence both have utilized their extensive knowledge of western philosophy to uphold, in different forms absolute idealism resembling that of the Vedanta some western writers, like France's young husband have placed him, as the philosopher of India along with Tagore, the poet Bose the scientist, Gandhi the political leader, among usherers of a renaissance in modern India. There is no doubt that he is the oldest advocate of all that is good in Indian culture. His credit has in his ability to keep his vision clear even in the densest fog of conflicting ideas of the modern world, and his ability to clear the mist by lucid presentation of issues and reconciliation of apparent conflicts. A notable characteristic of most contemporary philosophers, and especially of these three thinkers, is that the circumstance under which they philosophy has made their outlook for wider than their western colleagues. For they have to acquaint themselves with both western and Indian schools of thought and have to keep both in mind in forming their own conclusions.

Science and Philosophy

Of the four contents of theoretical consciousness the first namely the object of empirical thought or fact, is the subject matter of science. The last three contents of non - empirical thought or fact, is the subject matter of science. The last three contents of non - empirical thought form the subject matter of philosophy proper. The distinction between the

provinces of science and metaphysics is fundamental in Bhattacharya's thought, while it has some resemblance to the logical positivists view, it is perhaps an indirect product of Kantian principle. The domain of Science is fact. "By fact is meant what is perceivable or has necessary reference to the perceivable is speakable in the form of literal judgement and is believed without reference to the speaking of it".⁹ "Fact is always a fact related to facts". It is always expressible as a judgement of the form 'A is related to B'

The self – realization of the absolute

All determinate contents of thought are the determinations of the indeterminate, the absolute. How the indefinite becomes definite, the indeterminate breaks for the determinate, is more than that we can ascertain. We can at least say that the Absolute reveals itself in determinate forms. Its most important determinate, is more than we can ascertain. We can at least say that the absolute reveals itself in determinate forms. Its most important determination is the spirit of the self. "The absolute is transcending the enjoyed reality of religion is positive being (truth) or positive non - being (freedom) or their positive in determination (value). The Absolute is conceived rigorously as truth in (Advaita Vedanta). What is loosely called nihilistic Buddhism apparently understands the absolute as freedom. The Hegelian absolute may be taken to represent the indetermination, miscalled indentify, of truth and freedom which is value".¹⁰

"All philosophy is systematic symbolism and symbolism necessarily admits of alternatives". There are naturally different schools. If the absolute or truth itself is manifold, and if difference regarding the conception of the absolute are necessarily reflected in the conception of the spirit and the object, it is an idle dream to think of "philosophy progressing towards a single unanimously acceptable solution".¹¹

3. Summary

While summarizing the details as finished above we can say that the important idea which emerges out of a ritual context is Karma (Karman) which literally means 'action'. In earlier Vedic material Karma refers to any ritual action, which if performed correctly yields beneficial results, but if performed incorrectly, brings about negative consequences. The Upanishads do not offer any explicit theory of Karma but do contain a number of teachings that seem to extend the notion of Karma beyond the ritual context to amore general understanding of moral retribution. Yajnavalkya for example when asked by Artabhaga about what happen to a person after death, responds that a person becomes good by good action and bad by bad action (B U 3.25). In the Chandogya Upanishads Pravahana (5 - 10, 7 - 8) elaborates stating that one's actions in his life time affects one; s birth status in the next. Pravahana further teaches that knowledge of the teaching of the five fires will affect the conditions of one's future births. In the Brhadaran Yake Upanishad (6.2.16) he warns that those who do not know will become worms, insects or snakes, while in the Chandogya (5.10.10) he suggests that knowledge can lead one to be free of Karmic consequences. The self (atman) in the Upanishad is the most widely accepted and discussed throughout both the early and

later ones. One of the best-known teachings of the self appears in the Chandogya Upanishad (6.1 - 16) as the instruction of Uddalaka Aruni to his son Svetaketu. Uddalaka begins by explaining that one can know the universal of a material substance from a particular object made of that substance by means of something made of clay, one can know clay, by means of an ornament made of copper, by means of a trial cutter made of iron, one can know iron.

4. Conclusion

In view of the details furnished above it is clear that we have to say only one thing which is of utmost importance i. e. about the self (atman) and the teachings of Yojna, Uddalaka, Prajapati etc who fully support the aforesaid view. The Upanishads and the Vedanta Darshan headed by Samkara have influenced and undeniably contributed to the Indian Philosophical tradition though there may be some disagreement about it.

As Purushottama (Billimoria (P/126) has stated that 'five of the so called Hindu Darshanas officially recognize the Upanishads as a source of philosophy in so far as they recognize sabda as a valid means of attaining knowledge. 'Sabda' literally means 'word', but in philosophical discourse refers to verbal testimony or reliable authority, and is sometimes taken to refer specifically to sruti. Despite the normal acceptance, of sabda as a pramana, however, the Upanishads are only cited occasionally in the surviving texts, and rarely as a source to validate fundamental arguments, before the emergence of the Vedanta school in the seventh century. " ¹²

References

- [1] Brhad Aranyaka Upanishad
- [2] Mundaka Upanishad (1 - 2, 27 - 13)
- [3] Chandogya Upanishad (8 - 7 - 12) passim
- [4] Chandogya Upanishad (01 - 3, 12 - 14) passim
- [5] Brhad Aranyaka Upanishad (3.7.23) (Adapted from Brian Black P/125)
- [6] Chandogya Upanishad (3.14.14)
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- [10] Contemporary Indian Philosophy 2nd Edition P/124.
- [11] Contemporary Indian Philosophy 2nd Edition P/120.
- [12] Brian Black P/126 Adapted from Purushottam Billimoria P/126.