

The Influence and Relevance of Upanishadic Thoughts

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SUMMARY

Upanishads are mainly the collections of the conversations between intimate persons. These persons are closely associated in their relationship as one represents a seeker and the other as a seer. The various themes of the conversations are found to be universal in their relevance. These themes by dealing with the fundamental inquiries have withstood the test of time for their validity. Thus, there is a relevance of Upanishads for all seekers of all times.

In the present times, the different parts of the world are getting closer and interdependent due to the technological advancement. However, the conflicts and unrest are prevailing at all levels. Thus, in addition to the understanding of the world on materialistic basis, it is also necessary to obtain the knowledge of the fundamental values of life and nature governing the world. The comprehensive knowledge of these above aspects will certainly aid to obtain a deeper understanding of the life in the universe. The basic knowledge will also help in attempts preventing human created catastrophes. This paper discusses some of the Upanishadic thoughts on the fundamental inquiries and their influence and relevance to the life.

INTRODUCTION

The word Upanishad is derived from (उपनिषद्) which would mean to sit down closely. This would represent the scene that a group of pupils sat near the teacher to inquire and to understand the nature of truth. The Upanishads form the concluding portions of the Vedas and the basis for the Vedanta philosophy. Historically, the Upanishads are placed at antiquity. However, the themes of inquiries such as

nature of perception, vision of the truth, perfection of knowledge, nature of changing patterns in life, nature of awareness are very relevant in the present times. Max Muller, a well known indologist remarks about Vedanta as a system in which human speculation seems to have reached its very acme⁽¹⁾.

In spite of the fact that the Upanishadic themes have withstood the test of times and various civilizations over these periods, there has been no definite conclusions on the number of Upanishads, the authors of the Upanishads and the dates of the Upanishads. As known, the Upanishads belong to the class of Sruti or the revealed literature where the sages revealed their observations directly based on their illuminated experiences achieved after intense contemplation (६४१५२). Thus, it is speculated that the formal organization of literature was only subsequent. Although, the number of Upanishads is said to be 108, of these fourteen are said to be principal Upanishads. Which are Isa, Kena, Katha, Prasna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Taittiriya, Aitareya, Chandogya, Brihadaranyaka, Svetasvatara, Kausitaki and Mahanarayana. Also, the details of the authors are not definitely known, however, some of the main themes are associated with sages such as Aruni, Yajnavalkya, Balaki, Svetaketu and Sandilya.⁽¹⁾

Thus, it can be said that Upanishads are collective literature resulting from the utterances by the sages who had realized various fundamental and eternal characteristics of life. Upanishads lay great emphasis on intriguing analysis on the various phases of life in general. Thus the metaphysical literature of Upanishads is sustaining itself by the relevance of its themes to various levels and aspects of life through the ages.

THEMES OF INQUIRY

NATURE OF QUESTIONS:

The various themes in Upanishads came out as a result of inquiring questions. It is known that the depth of answers and discussions depend on the depth and nature of questions. The inquiring questions were such as in Kenopanishad (2)

केनेषितं पतति प्रेषितं मनः
केन प्राणः प्रथमः प्रीति युक्तः ।
केनेषितां वाचमिमां वदन्ति
ब्रह्मः श्रोत्रं क उ देवो युनक्ति ॥ १ ॥

Which would mean Impelled and directed by whom does the mind light on its objects? compounded by whom does the first life breath move forward? Prompted by whom do men utter this speech? and what God directs the eye and ear?

In Prasnopanishad, (3)

भगवन् कुत एष
प्राणो जायते कथमायात्यस्मिन्शरीरं आत्मानं वा प्रविमज्य
कथं प्रातिष्ठते केनोत्क्रमते कथं बाह्यमभिधत्ते कथमध्यात्म-
मिति ॥१॥

Venerable sir, whence is this life born? How does it come into the body? and how does it distribute itself and establish itself? In what way does it depart? How does it relate itself to what is external to the body and what is internal and spiritual?

Another inquiring question such as in Mundako-panishad, (3)

कस्मिन्नु भगवो विज्ञाते सर्वमिदं विज्ञातं भवतीति ॥३॥

(3) Sir, what is that which being known, everything else will be known?

The discussion about Brahman (ब्रह्म) is led by a question such as in Taittiriyanishad, (3)

अधीहि भगवो ब्रह्मेति ।

Sir, please teach me (about) Brahman.

It is to be noted that the above listed questions are only a few out of innumerable number of questions throughout the complex network of Upanishadic literature. It is the purpose of this paper only to illustrate the nature and depth of questions encountered by earnest seekers of knowledge and truth.

3.2 NATURE OF ANSWERS DISCUSSIONS:

It is known that an earnest answer to a question demands the person (who is answering) an experience related to the theme of the question. This requirement of experience to fully answer a question refers to all levels of themes such as gross (शुद्ध), Subtle (सूक्ष्म) and causal (कारण). The nature of questions in Upanishads comprises of all the above levels. It is true that as the questions tend to causal theme, the answers and discussions would equally demand the earnestness and effort by the seeker. In many contexts in Upanishads, it can be seen that the answers are given in steps so that the seeker experiences the answer and goes on further inquiry. It is important to note that the Upanishadic literature of questions and answers is a process of inquiry by the seeker to know the fundamental nature. However, the discussions offered by the teachers in Upanishads call for an enormous effort in attempt to understand these discussions. The discussions of the answer usually deals with the qualities and qualifications of the entity. As an illustration, it is seen from the discussions on the question as in Kenopanishad cited above (2), one has,

यन्मनसा न मनते येनाहुर्मनो मतम् ।
तदेव ब्रह्म त्वं विद्धि नैदं यदिदमुपासते ॥ ६ ॥

That which is not thought by the mind, but that by which they say, The mind is made to think, — know that as Brahman, and not what people worship here.

It is seen that the answers and discussions include various forms of explanations to indicate the complexity of the subject matter. However, it is as the state of experience by the seeker, when probably the answers and discussions would get revealed.

3.3 CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION:

The Upanishadic literature has yielded many concepts on basic aspects of life. The concept of Brahman and the five Sheaths is only considered presently for discussion. In Taittiriyanishad, the question is asked on the nature of Brahman, by Bhrgu to his father Varuna. The discussion on this question has indicated both breadth and depth of the themes in Upanishadic literature.

Varuna said to Bhrgu,

अन्न प्राण चक्षुः

श्रोत्रं मनो वाचमिति । तद्वद्दीर्घाय । यतो वा इमानि
भूतानि जायन्ते । येन जातानि जीवन्ति । यत्प्रयन्त्यभि-
वर्तिवन्ति । तद्विजिज्ञासस्व । तद् ब्रह्मेति ।

Matter, breath, sight, hearing, mind and speech are the means, he said further, that from which beings are born, that by which when born, they live, and that into which they enter on passing away-try to know that. That is Brahman.⁽²⁾

It is seen with that the answer given to the seeker from which a finding is obtained by the seeker then, it has to be qualified by the nature of the answer described above. This discussion process is summarised below.

After this initial directive by Varuna, the seeker Bhrigu conducts penance and comes back with a finding that although, it is matter (food) which conforms to this quality of Brahman, he is not satisfied. Then, Varuna, indicates that through penance an answer which satisfies this quality without leading to any further dissatisfaction or questions could be found. Then Bhrigu observes through his course of penance that next to matter, breathing satisfies the quality of Brahman, next to breathing, mind would satisfy, next to mind the activity of reasoning, next to this, the bliss of Self satisfies the quality of Brahman. At this state of finding, Bhrigu does not encounter any further questions or dissatisfactions. Then, the nature of the person attaining such a state of experience of bliss is described.

It is seen that the five step findings are matter, breathing, mind, reasoning, and bliss of the Self. These findings give the encompassing nature of Brahman, It can also be said that in the gross level, matter is a part of Brahman but not Brahman itself. Thus, it is intended in this paper to only indicate the magnitude and depth of the Upanishadic literature.

There are innumerable such conceptual discussions and findings on the various fundamental aspects of life.

4.1 INFLUENCE:

It is seen from the above discussions on the themes for inquiry in Upanishads that the objectives and process of inquiry is free of any bondage to external classifications. In this regard, the thoughts

evolved from such process can be said to be of a fundamental nature concerning life. It is said that a notion runs through the Upanishads is that the universe which takes aeons upon aeons to unfold itself completely will nevertheless return to its source by an inverse process and be again absorbed in Atman⁽⁴⁾.

The concepts evolved in Upanishadic literature being fundamental are not mere speculations and thought. In fact, a careful study reveals that the evolutions of these philosophical concepts were based on solid spiritual practices leading to experiences⁽⁴⁾. Also, the various thoughts and concepts have spread into the fundamentals of various other forms such as art, sculptures and music⁽⁴⁾. This could also be observed in the integral nature of various themes at the roots of classical Indian music, dance, sculptures, temples, and approach to life in general.

As Upanishadic thoughts have pondered over the fundamental aspects of life, their outcome have relevance to various aspects of life and living. The Upanishadic thoughts offer various methodologies to approach a task or an enquiry. Also, these approaches have implications on psychology, ethics and morality⁽⁴⁾. So, it can be said that in general Upanishadic thoughts offer various approaches to seek knowledge about various aspects of life.

4.2 CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE:

The process of inquiry utilised in Upanishads can be observed to conform with the scientific (contemporary) basis. In the process of inquiry, the state of experiencing is regarded as the ultimate verification. In the modern times, it can be seen that the Upanishadic thoughts have profound relevance. As described earlier, in Taittiriya Upanishad, the ascending order of stages in the inquiry of nature of brahman are matter, breathing, mind, reasoning and bliss. Even in the present time an aspiring mind of seeker would possibly identify the nature of brahman in the same order of inquiry. The relevance of Upanishads is possibly due to the fact that the subject of inquiry is so fundamental that it is devoid of any constraints influencing the subject itself. The Upanishadic thoughts put the aspiring mind into the ocean of thoughts. It can be said that a study by itself would help the mind to expand and deepen its domain of thinking process. It can also be that observed Upanishads do not constrain the utility of the macrocosmic or materialist aspects. They only infer that the nature of Brahman is not limited to the materialistic aspects. However, the materialistic aspects are gross aspects of the Brahman.

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Please make corrections in March - April issue - the article of Sound and Symbolism in Grivana Bhasa page - 11:- Figure - 3: instead of - The periodic chart of Vowels Please read - The periodic chart of Consonants
Page - 12:- Figure - 4: instead of - The periodic chart of Consonants Please read - The periodic chart of Vowels.

Similarly over emphasis of technology and its role, and ignoring the spiritualistic aspects of life would possibly constrain the process of inquiry about the totality of life. It is said that the Upanishadic thoughts have corresponded to the observations based in the modern scientific cosmology. Particularly, the idea that cosmos itself undergoes an immense, indeed an infinite, number of deaths and rebirths, and also the correspondence of time scales to modern cosmological observations, (10) additionally affirms the contemporary scientific relevance of Upanishadic thoughts. Thus, it can be said that Upanishadic thoughts have influence on the human aspiration and approach in search of an objective reality. The Upanishadic thoughts have relevance at any given time and space, as the process of inquiry attempts to seek the objective reality in a non-constrained approach.

Another aspect of relevance is that the study of Upanishadic theme would suggest the mind an extended view of the life. This influence on the human mind could become very useful in situation of conflict and controversy at various levels. This extended suggestion on totality of life influences both individually as well as collectively. The study could help individual in his inward probe of human mind. On the other hand, the evolution of Upanishadic thoughts on the totality of life, integral nature of life could help in collective thinking of human society. This view could again be helpful in times of man-made crisis. Thus, it can be said that Upanishadic thoughts have relevance to both individual and collective aspects of human thinking. The study of these Upanishadic thoughts could influence both individual and collective human effort in restoring peace and tranquility in situations of conflicts.

CONCLUDING REAMRKS

In this paper an attempt has been made to discuss the integral aspects of Upanishadic literature. It is to be noted that the intention of this paper is only to indicate the magnitude and depth of the Upanishadic thoughts and their influence on various aspects. It is also attempted to indicate the contemporary relevance of the Upanishadic thoughts. It is the purpose of this discussion to share some of the Upanishadic thoughts and to remind ourselves about the profound literature available to any seeker in his process of inquiry to enrich the knowledge about both internal and external life.