



UPANISHADIC CULTURE

N V C. SWAMY

Introduction

There are two forces at play in the shaping of an individual's personality. The first one is the external world, which starts impinging upon his consciousness from the moment of his birth and continues to do so till his last breath. The second one is life itself which commences its influence on the individual as soon as he becomes aware of questions like 'Who am I? Why am I born? What is it that sustains me? What is my relation with the external world and my place in the world?' It is questions like these which distinguish the homo-sapiens from the rest of creation.

This interaction between oneself and the external world and the consciousness within is the foundation of one's individuality or personality. When a group of people living together experiences this interaction not only at an individual level but also at a collective level, a philosophy of life, ethics and values arises which is called the culture of the people.

Aryan Culture

It needs no special intelligence to realise that culture is an ever changing aspect of life. Such cultural changes in recent times are more easily comprehensible, because of accessible historical records. The same cannot, however, be said of ancient civilizations. One has to take recourse to means like archaeology, scriptures, oral and written records etc. for reconstructing the culture of an ancient people.


In this respect, the ancient Aryan culture of India, also called Vedic or Indic, is remarkable because it has left behind a tradition whose origins are now being traced almost up to the seventh millennium of the pre-Christian era. This tradition, which was originally oral in nature, later came to be written down in the form of the Vedas whose cultural aspects are being understood only recently.

The Upanishads form a part of the Vedas and as such are a product of the same culture. However, the time span of this period is so vast, viz., between 7000 BCE and 1500 BCE that it is not surprising that one finds many differences between the cultures of what have come to be known as the Vedic period and the Upanishadic period. This article confines its scope to the latter period and is based upon an analysis of the major Upanishads.

Upanishadic Literature

The Upanishadic literature is vast and spans over more than two millennia. However of the 200 and odd names of Upanishads now known, only 108 are considered authentic. Even among them only about 14 are considered as the most reliable and it is on these that many *acharyas* down the ages have written their commentaries. We will also confine our cultural study only to these Upanishads.

The periods during which the individual Upanishads were written are matters of dispute. However based upon a study of the cross-refer-

 Prof N V C Swamy, B E ,M Sc ,Ph D , is a former Director of the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras. He has travelled widely in India and abroad. Consistently rated as an inspiring teacher, he had given his engineering students classes on Indian spiritual heritage with special focus on Swami Vivekananda's life and works. Prof Swamy regularly reviews books for *The Vedanta Kesari* □

encing of major Upanishads, Deussen¹ has identified four successive periods of time. These are: (i) The ancient prose Upanishads viz., the *Brihadaranyaka*, the *Chhandogya*, the *Taittiriya*, the *Aitareya*, the *Kausitaki* and the *Kena*. (ii) The metrical Upanishads viz., the *Kathaka*, the *Isha*, the *Shvetashvaratara*, the *Mundaka* and the *Mahanarayana*. (iii) The later prose Upanishads viz., the *Prashna*, the *Maitrayaniya* and the *Mandukya*. (iv) And lastly the later Atharva Upanishads, which are considered to be more recent.

Not all the Upanishads mentioned above can be used for extracting information about the cultural life of that period. Only those which contain stories or Akhyayikas help us do so, because they reflect the value system of that era. In this context, the *Brihadaranyaka*, the *Chhandogya*, the *Taittiriya*, the *Prashna* and the *Kathaka* are rich sources, which have been used in this article.

Varnashramas

An important aspect of the Vedic way of life was the division of the life of a human being into four ashramas - *Brahmacharya*, *Garhasthya*, *Vanaprastya* and *Sannyasa*. The Upanishads also reflect this classification. Interestingly enough, there is hardly any mention about any of the *Rishis* who had taken *sannyasa*. This could be because such *Vanaprasthins* who would take *sannyasa* would retreat deep into the forest and be out of touch with humans. Most of the times, we find the *Gurukula* being run by a *Vanaprasthin* or a householder. *Gurukulas* were not the conventional educational institutions of later times like the Buddhist universities as described by the reports of the Chinese travellers. They appeared to be more like small households with individualized instruction.

Even though the admission of a young boy to these *Gurukulas* appeared to be automatic, we find in the Upanishads certain procedures, which were being followed. For example, in the *Prashnopanisad*² when six disciples appear be-

fore Pippalada and desire instruction, the guru does not immediately start a discourse. He asks them to stay with him for a year. The reason probably was to ascertain how sincere the disciples were and whether they deserved to acquire the highest knowledge, which was sacred. Only when the guru was assured on these points did he invite questions. In the *Chhandogya*³ Indra and Virochana have to spend initially a period of thirty-two years with Prajapathi before the latter begins to ask them what brought them to him. Virochana like a true impatient disciple is easily satisfied with the first instruction of the Guru, but Indra has to come back again and again for further instruction and each time he has to spend thirty-two years with the Guru. This may sound to modern ears like an exaggeration, but it has two lessons for us. The first is that unlike secular knowledge spiritual knowledge needs a lot of patience. Secondly the Guru's responsibility did not end with mere instructions, but consisted in leading the disciple from stage to stage or a voyage of self-discovery. This can also be seen in the famous Bhrguvalli of *Taittiriya*⁴ where the Guru (who is this time also the father) gives a hint to the disciple and encourages him to discover Brahman for himself.

There is one very interesting feature of the Upanishads, which has led to all kinds of speculations about who were the repositories of *Brahmavidya*, the Kshatriyas or the Brahmanas. There are several instances of Kshatriyas advising Brahmanas on several aspects of Brahmanajana. In the *Chhandogya*⁵ there is a conversation between three young people, Silaka, Dalbhya and Pravahana. From the context, one can make out that the last one was not a Brahmana and by inference he appears to be a Kshatriya. It is Pravahana who has the last word in this debate when the other two have to submit to him. There are people like Janaka, Aswapati and others to whom even Brahmanas used to go for instructions.

A popular interpretation of this is that the Brahmanas were so completely engrossed in the performance of Vedic *yajnas* that their minds

could hardly be devoted to higher purposes and that it was largely left to the Kshatriyas to use their leisure time to contemplate on the Purusha behind the *yajnas*. A faint echo of this can be heard in the beginning of the fourth chapter of the *Gita*,⁶ where Krishna tells Arjuna that the art of Yoga had been in the custody of the Kshatriyas and had been forgotten due to passage of time and that he, a Kshatriya is now teaching it to Arjuna, another Kshatriya.

How rigid was the caste system at the time of the Upanishads? It had not yet become the fossilized institution, which it later became during the age of the Puranas. For example, when Satyakama goes to Guru Haridrumata Gautama⁷ the latter asks him to which clan (*Gotra*) he belongs. Satyakama confesses to the Guru that he does not know and that even his mother cannot recollect who his father was. Puritans tend to put constructions on this incidence by interpreting

that Satyakama's father was no more. But the Upanishad itself indicates what could have been the reason. Be that as it may, Gautama's reponse is surprising, judging from modern standards. The Guru accepts Satyakama as a disciple, because he has unhesitatingly told the truth, even though it might have brought on his head social opprobrium! Contrast this with the story in *Mahabharata* of Karna and Parasurama. It is obvious that by the time of the Epics, the caste system had become rigid.

Women's Role

One question, which is debated again and again in modern times, is the place of women in the Vedic society. We can discuss it here only briefly, but more details can be found in books like the '*Great Women of India*'⁸. Ruma Chaudhuri in her article '*Women's education in ancient*

O Ye Compassionate Ones

O ye Compassionate Ones, ye possess the wisdom of understanding, the love of compassion, the power of (doing) divine deeds and of protecting, in incomprehensible measure. Ye Compassionate Ones, (such-and-such a person) is passing from this world to the world beyond. He is leaving this world. He is taking a great leap. No friends (hath he). Misery is great. (He is without) defenders, without protectors, without forces and kinsmen. The light of this world hath set. He goeth to another place. He entereth thick darkness. He falleth down a steep precipice. He entereth into a jungle solitude. He is pursued by *Karmic* forces. He goeth into the Vast Silence. He is borne away by the Great Ocean. He is wafted on the Wind of *Karma*. He goeth in the direction where stability existeth not. He is caught by the Great Conflict. He is obsessed by the Great Afflicting Spirit. He is awed and terrified by the Messengers of the Lord of Death. Existing *Karma* putteth him into repeated existence. No strength hath he. He hath come upon a time when he hath to go alone.

O ye Compassionate Ones, defend (so-and-so) who is defenceless. Protect him who is unprotected. Be his forces and his kinsmen. Protect (him) from the great gloom of the *Bardo* (the intermediate state between death and judgement). Turn him from the red (or storm) wind of *Karma*. Turn him from the great awe and terror of the Lords of Death. —THE TIBETAN BOOK OF THE DEAD (INVOCATION FOR THE DEAD)

India' has referred to several passages in the *Atharva Veda*, *Aswalyana Grihyasutras*, *Shukla Yajurveda*, *Katyayana Shrutisutras*, etc., where there is mention of the eligibility of women to undergo the ceremony of Upanayana, to study the Vedas, recite Mantras and to perform *yajnas* independent of men. Such women were generally called *Brahmavadinis*.

In the *Brihadaranyaka*,⁹ we find mention of two such women—Gargi, the daughter of Vachaknu who had the boldness to cross swords with a great scholar like Yajnavalkya, and the latter's own wife Maitreyi who spurned material wealth in order to acquire Brahmanvidya. The *Kena*¹⁰ talks of Uma Haimavati discoursing on Brahman with Indra. More details can be found in the article cited.

Secular Aspects

Since the Upanishads essentially deal with *Brahmanvidya*, there is no scope in them for discussion on polity, economics, warfare etc., which are found in later texts like the *Dharmashastra*. However it is quite obvious that society at that time was still pastoral, with cattle as an indicator of wealth. Gold was also in use, but appeared to play a subsidiary role. The *Kathaka*¹¹ talks of the Viswajit sacrifice, where the sacrificer had to gift away his entire wealth for the sake of future benefits. There is a mention of only cows being brought into the sacrificial hall, whose poor quality sets off the thinking of Naciketa as to how best to help his father. In the *Brihadaranyaka*¹² Janaka promises to the winners of a contest the prize of one thousand cows, with gilded horns strung with gold coins. In the *Chhandogya*¹³ the guru sends Satyakama to the forest with four hundred weak and emaciated cows. Satyakama vows to return only when their number has increased to one thousand.

Upasana

Upanishads also go by the name of Vedanta. In popular imagination Vedanta gets equated with

Advaita. This has given rise to a general impression that the Upanishads talk only of *Jnana* and nothing else. But is this really so? The Upanishads in some places, especially in the *Isha*, *Chhandogya*, *Taittiriya* and *Brihadarnyaka* mark a transition from the Vedic *Karmakanda* to the Vedantic *Jnana* through the process of the various *Upasanas* and *Vidyas*. These practices were mostly a form of mental worship, which in later times was to lead to the concept of *Bhakti*. According to Swami Vivekananda,¹⁴ 'There is not one full-grown Indian ideal that cannot be traced back to the same source, the Upanishads.' According to Bloomfield,¹⁵ "There is no important form of Hindu thought, heterodox Buddhism included, which is not rooted in the Upanishads.'

What is the picture of Indian society that emerges out of a study of the Upanishadic literature? It was basically a pastoral society, the cow was the indicator of wealth and was sacred because most of the ingredients used in the *Yajnas* were dairy products. Even though ritual *Yajna* was still being practised, an alternative in the form of *Upasana* or mental worship had also been developed. There was freedom of thought and expression, as witnessed by the questions, counter questions and the debates. The ultimate aim of human life was Self-realization and every activity was supposed to lead to it. *Bhakti* in its modern connotation had not yet developed but its seeds had already been planted. Karma yoga as a practical philosophy of life as enunciated by Krishna in the *Gita* has been briefly referred to in the *Chhandogya*¹⁶ according to which Krishna Vasudeva, a disciple of Ghora Angirasa, has given a new meaning to the concept of *Yajna*.

Rationality of Upanishads

How was it possible for this tradition to be maintained for such a long period of time, in spite of several alien influences? Wherein lies the strength of the Upanishads? It is in its rational non-dogmatic approach to the problems of life. It is said in '*The Message of the Upanishads*',¹⁷ 'To the Upanishads India owes almost all the

brighter sides of her life and culture. To them she owes her impressive record of active toleration within her borders and the uniformly peaceful and benevolent nature of her foreign relations in the field of religion. To them she gives the singular absence of aggressive political and military policies and programmes on her part towards other nations. To them she also owes the absence of the heavy hand of an all-powerful church and the tentacles of an inescapable dogma on the national life and mind...'

Upanishads in the Modern Age

How relevant is the Upanishadic culture to the modern world, especially to India? This is the age of Science and Rationalism. If there is one scripture, which is highly rational and challenges the human being to experiment upon himself, it is the Upanishads! Throughout its pages, one finds this theme running like a thread—*Tad Vijijnasasva*—find out for yourself. No wonder the rational minds of western philosophers brought up on the thought processes of the Age of Reason have found the Upanishads a gold mine of spirituality. When Swami Vivekananda was once asked why one should study the Vedas and the Upanishads, he said, 'To get rid of superstitions'. This is precisely what appeals to the modern mind. It is not only philosophers of the East and the West who have experienced it. Scientists too are discovering in the Upanishads a way out of the predicament which quantum physics finds itself in as to the role of Consciousness in natural phenomena. A trend set off by Erwin Schrodinger in the 1930's and 40's has now gained momentum and is now engrossing the minds of scientists, as evidenced by the large number of seminars and conferences in India and around the world on the comparison of Scientific and Upanishadic principles. The fearless uncompromising pursuit of truth is, after all, what binds these two disciplines together so strongly.

What is the message of the Upanishads to the modern mind? One cannot do better than to quote Swami Vivekananda,¹⁸ "Let me tell you

that we want strength, strength and every time strength. And the Upanishads are the great mine of strength. Therein lies strength enough to invigorate the whole world; the whole world can be vivified, made strong, energised through them. They will call with trumpet voice upon the weak, the miserable and the downtrodden of all races, all creeds, and all sects, to stand on their own feet and be free. Freedom, physical freedom, mental freedom and spiritual freedom are the watchwords of the Upanishads.'

The modern world is in the throes of a cultural crisis. We do not know whether we are steadily progressing towards a better tomorrow or tumbling helplessly to an inevitable destruction. No wonder, many thinkers have started paying attention to the eternal values of ancient cultures. The Upanishadic culture and philosophy of life stand out like a beacon light beckoning us to make a better world for ourselves. The message is there. All that is needed is the will.

References

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3. Cf. The *Chhandogyapanishad*, Chapter 8, section 7 to 15
4. Cf. The *Taittiriyanishad*, Bhriguvali, Anuvak 1
5. Cf. The *Chhandogyapanishad*, Chapter 1, section 8, and 9
6. Cf. The *Bhagavadgita*, Chapter 4, slokas 1 to 3
7. Cf. The *Chhandogyapanishad*, Chapter 4, section 4
8. Choudhuri Ruma 'Women's education in ancient India', *Great Women of India The Holy Mother Centenary Memorial*, Advaita Ashrama, 1993, pp 87- 111
9. Cf. The *Brihadaranyakopanishad*, Chapter 2, section 4 and chapter 3, sections 1 to 8
10. Cf. The *Kenopanisad*, Chapter 4
11. Cf. The *Kathopanishad*, Chapter 1, Valli 1
12. Cf. The *Brihadaranyakopanishad*, Chapter 3, Brahmana 1
13. Cf. The *Chhandogyapanishad*, Chapter 4, section 4
14. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, volume 3, pp 31, 1984, Advaita Ashrama
15. Ranganathanada, Swami. *The Message of the Upanishads*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1985, p 18
16. Cf. The *Chhandogyapanishad*, Chapter 3, section 17, mantra 6
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18. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, volume 3, p 38, 1984, Advaita Ashrama