

# **CHAPTER II**

## **THE UPANISHADS, THEIR IDEAS, AGE AND SOCIETY**

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This work aims to read the Upanishads from a feminist viewpoint. As a precursor to the study, a brief background of the Upanishads, its content, subject matter, epoch, geographical location, the society that is represented in the Upanishads and other related aspects are being glanced through very briefly.

#### **III.1. Meaning of the word ‘Upanishad’**

The word ‘Upanishad’ has been variously understood. The attributed meanings include ‘sitting down near a teacher to learn’, ‘that knowledge which dispels ignorance’, ‘secret’ etc<sup>1</sup>. Though Sankara adhered to the second interpretation, of late, there seems to be a consensus on the first interpretation. Upanishads are a collection of philosophical texts which form the theoretical basis for the Hindu Religion. It also states that Upanishads define the ultimate reality (Brahman) and describe the character and form of human salvation (Moksa).

#### **III.2. Number of Upanishads**

The number of Upanishads cannot be determined precisely owing to the fact that there is no universally accepted criterion to decide what an Upanishad is. Many books titled ‘Upanishad’ have been written and could still be written. In the introduction to The Principal Upanishads, Radhakrishnan writes that the Upanishads form a literature which has been growing from early times and that their number exceeds two hundred. However, he states that the Indian tradition puts it at one hundred and eight

based on a list enumerated in the Muktika Upanishad, of which the 108<sup>th</sup> is Muktika itself. Sukumar Azhikode <sup>2</sup> states that more than 200 Upanishads have been traced and gives a reference about 1180 Upanishads, but states that most of the later Upanishads are imitations.

### **III.3 Authorship of Upanishads**

The Upanishads form a part of ‘Sruti’ literature. Sruti means ‘heard’. Thus it opines that the Upanishads were not written by humans but were revealed to the seers (by gods). Upanishads do not mention their author. However Radhakrishnan says that some of the chief doctrines of the Upanishads are associated with names of renowned sages such as Aruni, Yajnavalkya, Balaki, Svetakatu, Sandilya etc as visible from the Upanishadic text. He further adds that they were, perhaps, the early exponents of the doctrines attributed to them and that the teachings were developed in Parishads or spiritual retreats where teachers and pupils discussed and defined the different views <sup>3</sup>. However, it remains a fact that none of the Upanishads are identified with any particular author. Further, it cannot be ascertained whether they were ever authored or whether they developed over a period of time by incorporating the contributions of different people. The same verses and stories can be found to repeat in the same Upanishads on different occasions and in different Upanishads as well. Slightly differing versions of the same story can also be found to be repeating in different places.

### **III.4. Epoch of the Upanishads**

The age of the Upanishads is also not dispute free. After evaluating various views in this regard, Sukumar Azhikode concludes that ,

There seems to be a consensus among those who thought about the age of the Upanishads. All the prominent Upanishads were written between BC 1000 and BC 500, which is prior to Buddha. According to Radhakrishnan, it

can be firmly asserted that *Chandogya*, *Brihadaranyaka*, *Taittiriya*, *Aitareya*, *Kaushitaki*, *Kena*, *Isa* and *Mandukya* were pre Buddha. The account is that they were written in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. This chronology depending on the ideas of Max Muller and Deussen is acceptable to Radhakrishnan and Das Gupta.<sup>4</sup>

However, the above conclusion is not foolproof. Both *Brihadaranyaka* and *Chandogya* refer to Purana and Itihasa<sup>5</sup> which are of a comparatively later origin. It is possible that the Upanishads developed over a long period or that parts of it were interpolated.

### **III.5 Geographical Location of the Upanishads**

The Upanishads refer to many locations and places in India. However, it is by and large confined to north India, the location between the Himalayas and Vindhya range in the north and south. West is geographically limited by Indus and east is marked by Bengal or Brahmaputra. Sukumar Azhikode writes in *Tatvamasi* that the location in its largest extent covers ‘Himavad vindhyachalam adhyadesham’<sup>6</sup>. The countries mentioned in the Upanishads include Gandhara, Kosala, Kuru Desha, Matsya Desha, Videha, Kashi, Naimisharanya, VidarbhaMadra, Kashmir, Panchala, Vatsadesha, Brahmavartha, Paundradesha etc. However, references to the last five is rare and is mostly available in later Upanishads.

### **III.6. Classification of Upanishads**

Each Upanishad is traditionally associated with one Veda or the other. For example, *Aitareya* Upanishad belongs to Rig Veda, *Taittiriya* to Yajur Veda, *Chandogya* to Sama Veda and *Prasna* to Atharva Veda. Apart from this classification based on association with the Vedas, they have also been classified as Principal Upanishads and other (less important) Upanishads. The criterion for such a division is not objective or dispute free. However, one

criterion used for such a division is the estimated age of the Upanishad. The Principal Upanishads are generally of an earlier date when compared to the other Upanishads. Another criterion is whether they were commented upon by scholars such as Sankara. The classification done by *Muktikopanishad* is also significant for estimating the 'Principal' status of the Upanishads.

### **III.7.Principal Upanishads**

Out of these 108 Upanishads, there are ten Upanishads which have a prime status owing to the fact that they were commented upon by Sankara. They are *Brihadaranyaka*, *Chandogya*, *Aitareya*, *Taittiriya*, *Isa*, *Kena*, *Katah*, *Prasna*, *Mundaka* and *Mandukya*. In the introduction to The Principal Upanishads, Radhakrishnan says Sankara commented on eleven Upanishads including *Swetaswetara*, but that is under cloud of doubt as expressed by Sukumar Azhikode <sup>7</sup>. In The Principal Upanishads, apart from these eleven, Radhakrishnan includes seven other Upanishads. They are *Kausitaki*, *Maitrayani*, *Subala*, *Jabala*, *Paingala*, *Kaivalya* and *Vajrasuchika*. Out of these Upanishads, it is undoubtedly *Mandukya* that most clearly upholds the advaitic notions later codified by Sankara. Apart from commentary by Sankara, there is a commentary (karika) of Gaudapada on *Mandukya*. According to Radhakrishnan, *Mandukya* Upanishad contains the fundamental approach to reality. The concept of 'Aum' which has later become a catch syllable of Hinduism is also explained in detail in *Mandukya*. Further, this Upanishad explains the different stages of sleep in relation to the understanding the ultimate reality which gives it an aura of mysticism. Referring to the significance of *Mandukya*, *Muktikopanishad* says,

But by what means is the Kaivalya kind of Moksha got ? The *Mandukya* is enough; if knowledge is not got from it, then study the Ten Upanishads. Getting knowledge very soon, you will reach my abode. If

certainty is not got even then, study the 32 Upanishads and stop. If desiring Moksha without the body, read the 108 Upanishads.<sup>8</sup>

### **III.8.The Lesser Upanishads**

The 108 Upanishads enlisted in the Muktikopanishad is given in *Annexure I* to this study. Out of these 108, except in the case of the Principal Upanishads, we generally find independent gods taking up the role of the Ultimate. For example, in *Narayanatharvasiropanishad*, Narayana is the ultimate and thus could be linked to Vaishnavait movement. *Kalisantharanopanishad* says that the way to release is praying the incarnations of Vishnu (Rama and Krishna). In *GanapatyUpanishad*, Ganapathi is the ultimate and in *Skandopanishad*, Skandan (SuBrahmanyam) is the supreme. Yet in *Krishnopanishad*, Krishna is the ultimate and the ultimate soul in *Muktikopanishad* is Sri Rama. *Hamsopanishad* is akin to Tantric cults. In *Swetaswetara*, *Narada Parivrajaka* Upanishad etc, Rudra is equivalent to the Ultimate and in *Devi Upanishad*, Devi or Goddess is the ultimate. One crucial difference between the ten Upanishads commented by Sankara and the others is that individuals gods mentioned above seldom appear in the ten Upanishads as Ultimate though they are often find a place as subordinate to Brahman and Prajapathi and often as created by Prajapathi. The ten Upanishad provides a better ground to logically conclude in oneness of the Ultimate which is either Brahman or Atman though the conclusion is far from a foolproof one. Chronologically, it is believed that the lesser Upanishads are of later origin and were created to satisfy the spiritual requirements of newly evolved sects. Upanishads such as *Allopanishad* and *Akbaropanishad* were written down during the days of Akbar. Upanishads, a critical Study by Joseph Idamaruku<sup>9</sup> gives reference about *Aurobindopanishad* published by Pondichery Aurobindo Asram and *Christopanishad* published by Christian groups. Though *Christopanishad* is

referred in works such as *Tatvamasi*<sup>10</sup> also, the first one was not seen referred in any other source. However, this study is confined to the Principal Upanishads studied by Radhakrishnan.

### **III.9.Content of the Upanishads.**

This is not easy to enumerate. However, it contains many stories of creation, discussions on Superiority of the Self over body, means to win the ultimate knowledge, the character of the world, discussions on the nature of the Absolute Self, Sacrifice and its rewards, bondage and liberation, Brahman as the ground of everything, Sleep and its stages, relation between gods and Brahman, Worship of different gods such as Mitra, Varuna, Aryaman, Indra, Brihaspati, Visnu<sup>11</sup> Different states of the self, different states of the mind, the list of teachers and pupil, the importance of 'Aum', the oneness of the Self and the Ultimate, life and beyond, death and overcoming death, progressive definition of Brahman, the two ways of living and many other topics that can be bracketed with the above.

While some of the verses are in the form of Mantras or chants, the Upanishads also includes anecdotes, dialogues between teacher and pupil, between father and son, between supernatural characters and human beings and between animals and human beings also. Most of the dialogues are aimed to bring forth the true nature of Brahman so as to help the ignorant students or the less knowledgeable to understand it or to divulge how silly the world of material pleasures is before the Ultimate.

Among the variety of ideas expounded in the Upanishads, those akin to materialism are also available in plenty. *Taittiriya*<sup>12</sup> says 'From food, verily, are produced whatsoever creatures dwell on the earth. Moreover, by food alone they live. And then also into it they pass at the end. Food, verily, is the eldest born of things'. But in the next line, it slips back to Brahman and says

that food is Brahman. In *Taittiriya*<sup>13</sup> it is said that ‘Non-existent, verily, was this (world) in the beginning. An example available in *Prasna*<sup>14</sup> Upanishad is ‘Matter is, verily, all this, whatever is formed and formless’.

Another teaching found is that ‘knowing the ultimate Self’ is much greater than ‘prospering on this vast earth’. *Katha*<sup>15</sup> says ‘what lies beyond shines not to the simple-minded, careless, (who is) deluded by the glamour of wealth’. In many of the dialogues, the teaching ultimately point to the worthlessness of mundane life and the virtues of knowing the Ultimate for which mundane life is an obstacle.

Upanishads also contain many contradictory doctrines within itself. At one stage, *Brihadaranyaka* Upanishad<sup>16</sup> declares that Brahman is mortal and inferior to gods. This is explained in detail in chapter 6. Whereas there is a characterization of Brahman by which it is denoted as devoid of qualities, there are also several qualities ascribed to it. With regard to sacrificial ceremonies also such dichotomy of views can be seen.

However, this is not the full story about Upanishads. There are many books titled Upanishads and many of them have not cared to bother about ‘Absolute’. For example, there is the *Kali Santarana* Upanishad which traces its link with Krishna Yajur Veda which states that mundane existence can be crossed by reciting the names of lord Narayana which is ‘hare Rama hare Rama Rama Rama hare hare, hare Krishna hare Krishna Krishna Krishna hare hare’. Many of such later Upanishads do not mention about Brahman or they treat relatively new concepts as Brahman. In *Devi* Upanishad, the goddess declares that ‘I am essentially Brahman. From Me (has proceeded) the world comprising Prakriti and Purusha, the void and the Plenum’. Thus in later Upanishads, Brahman is identified with deities such as Krishna, Rama, Ganapathi, Skanda or Devi. It is very likely that many of the later works used



the title ‘Upanishads’ to make use of the reverence that the word commanded within the dominant class of the society.

### **III.10.Characters of the Upanishads**

Like the topics, the characters are also beyond possible enumeration. Scholar Yajnavalkya and his friend, Emperor Janaka of Videha are prominent characters. Others, human and non-human, include Prajapati, Manu, Uddalaka Aruni, Svetaketu, Nachiketa, Yama, Satyakama, Raikva and a huge number of other references. However, among humans, the most represented are Brahmin scholars followed by Kshatriya scholars/rulers. Out of the multitude of characters that appear in the ten Principal Upanishads, there are only five women referred by name.

### **III.11.Society as reflected in the Upanishads.**

The society of the Upanishads indicates the presence of established private property (*Isa* Upanishad says, ‘do not covet what belong to others’). Property included land, gold, houses, cows, horses, elephants, women (wives) and slaves <sup>17</sup> Caste hierarchy was established and the order of precedence ran from Brahmana to Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra<sup>18</sup> There are also indications of outcastes, viz. Chandalas <sup>19</sup> (outcastes) who are grouped along with dogs and hogs <sup>20</sup> A patriarchal social order is clear in the Upanishads and women were, by and large, not a part of the discourse system (details are covered in the following chapters). There is little reference to any means of livelihood except that of learning and teaching the Vedas and sacrificial rites. Though there are references to Kings, there is little information about Kingship. The agricultural class and their produces are also conspicuously absent like women, though they ought to have been present in such a vast literature.

### **III.12.Upanishads and Rituals**

Though it is often proclaimed that Upanishads are against sacrificial rites and stand against the ritual ridden culture of Vedas and Brahmanas, such a claim does not seem to be true. *Mundaka* says,

This is the Truth. The works which the sages saw in the hymns are variously spread forth in the three Vedas. Perform them constantly, ye lovers of Truth. This is your path to the world of good deeds.<sup>21</sup>

*Mundaka* and *Brihadaranyaka* Upanishads speaks of sacrificial rites and its rewards and similar references<sup>22</sup> can be seen in other Upanishads such as *Chandogya* etc<sup>23</sup>. However, there is a current of strong anti-ritualistic stance too<sup>24</sup> where it is said that those who delight in ceremonial religion fall again to old age and death. The svana Udgita or chanting of the dogs<sup>25</sup> is also interpreted as anti-ritualistic though there is counter interpretation that it aims to portray those who ridicule the rituals as dogs. Hence with regard to rituals, Upanishads does not indicate a break from Brahmanas, but indicate a tapering continuity.

### **III.13.Upanishads referred as Vedanta**

The Upanishads are also called Vedanta, i.e. ‘the end portion of the Vedas’. The Upanishadic text is not monolithic. It contains, among various books and within one book itself, contradictions and differences. Many paragraphs repeat within one Upanishad itself and also find place in more than one Upanishad. Part of it is sacrificial rites, part of it is philosophy. Part of it is reason, part of it is faith. Part of it is materialism, part of it is idealism. Part of it is mysticism, part of it is story telling. Part of it is rebellion, part of it is submission. Part of it is reformation, part of it is orthodoxy. Part of it is poetry, part of it rigidity. Part of it is question; part of it is attempts to answer. Part of it is doubt, part of it is certainty. Part of it rejects the existing social

order and part of it upholds the order. It is a collection of literature that developed over a thousand years and involved by innumerable authors, hence it has to be all these.

## Reference

1. Sukumar Azhikode, *Tatvamasi*, pp 27- 34
2. Ibid. -p 63
3. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads*, p .22
4. Sukumar Azhikode, *Tatvamasi* p-61
5. Radhakrishnan.S.*Principal Upanishads, Brihadaranyaka* II-4-10,p.199  
IV-1-2, p.246.*Chandogya* VII-1-2.p.468.
6. Sukumar Azhikode ,*Tatvamasi* –p. 69
7. Ibid. p. 62
8. Venganoor Balakrishnan,*108 Upanishads(Mal.)Muktika Upanishad-I-*  
1-26-29. P.629.
9. Joseph Idamaruku ,*Upanishads, oru vimarshana padanam*, Vol I-p 38
10. Sukumar Azhikode,*Tatvamasi* -p .69
11. Radhakrishnan.S.*Principal Upanishads , Taittiriya Upanishad* I-1-1  
p.527.
12. Ibid. *Taittiriya Upanishad* II-2-1.p.543
13. Ibid. *Taittiriya Upanishad* II-7.1.p.549.
14. Ibid,*Prasna Upanishad* I-5.pp.651-652
15. Ibid.*Katah Upanishad* I-2-6 .p.609.
16. Ibid .*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* I-4-6 .p.165.
17. Ibid .*Katah Upanishad* I-i-23-25.pp,604-605
18. Ibid. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* .I-4-11 - 13.pp.169-170.
19. Ibid. *Vajrasuchika Upanishad* -4- pp.935-936
20. Ibid. *Chandogya Upanishad* V-10-7.p.433.

21. Ibid. *Mundaka* Upanishad I-2-1.p.674.
22. Ibid. *Mundaka* Upanishad I-2-1 to 6,pp,674-676. *Brihadaranyaka* Upanishad III -1 .p.211.
23. Ibid.*Chandogya* Upanishad I-10-3, p.353. II-24-1 -16, pp.376-378.
24. Ibid. *Mundaka* Upanishad I-2-7 .p.676.
25. Ibid.*Chandogya* Upanishad I-12 -1. P.357.