

THE UPANIṢADS AS THE AUTHORITY OF VEDANTA – A STUDY IN VIVEKANANDA’S PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Nishad T.S.

Asst.Professor ,

Department of Vedanta,

Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady,
Kerala,India

Abstract

This study explores Swami Vivekananda’s interpretation of the Upaniṣads as the supreme authority of Vedanta philosophy and the spiritual foundation of Indian thought. It examines how Vivekananda regarded the Vedas, particularly the Upaniṣads, as eternal revelations—self-existent and independent of any personal authorship. For Vivekananda, the Upaniṣads embodied the essence of universal spiritual knowledge and served as the unifying source of all Hindu philosophical schools, including Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Dvaita. The paper discusses Vivekananda’s dynamic and modern understanding of revelation as a continuous process and his belief in the progressive evolution of religious and philosophical ideas within the Vedic corpus. It highlights his emphasis on harmonizing tradition with rationality, spirituality with ethics, and diversity with unity—culminating in his vision of a universal religion grounded in the Upaniṣadic ideal of oneness. The study concludes that for Vivekananda, the Upaniṣads are not merely ancient texts but living sources of moral, spiritual, and intellectual regeneration for humanity.

Keywords

Vivekananda; Upaniṣads; Vedanta; Vedas; Brahmasūtra; Bhagavad Gītā; Revelation; Universal Religion; Advaita; Indian Philosophy; Spiritual Evolution; Authority of Scriptures; Unity; Eternal Knowledge.

Introduction

The Vedas are the primary source of Vedanta philosophy. They are the most ancient philosophical literature of India. About Vedas Vivekananda says, “Most of the religions in the world owe allegiance to certain books which they believed are the words of God, or some other supernatural beings, and which are the basis of their religion. Now, of all these books, according to the modern saints of the west, the oldest are the Vedas of the Hindus!”¹

The mass of writings called the Veda is not the utterance of persons. Its date has been never fixed, can never be fixed. Vivekananda accepts the traditional concept that the Vedas are eternal. All the other religions of the *world* claim their authority as being delivered by a personal God or a number of personal beings, angels, or special messengers of God, to certain persons. Vivekananda revealed the idea that the Vedas do not owe their authority to anybody; they are themselves the authority, being eternal, the knowledge of God.² They were never written, never created, they have existed throughout time, just as creation is infinite and eternal, without beginning and without end. And this knowledge is what is meant by the Vedas. According to Vivekananda, “The mass of knowledge called Vedanta was discoursed by personages called Rsis and the Rsi is defined as Mantradrsta, a seer of thought, not that the thought was his own. When it says a certain passage of the Vedas came from a certain Rsi, never does it mean he write it or created it out of his mind. He was the seer of the thought, which already existed; it existed in the universe eternally. This sage was the discoverer; the Rsis were spiritual discoverers.”³

The Vedas are divided principally in to two parts, the *Karmakanda* and the *Jnanakanda*, the work portion and the knowledge portion, the ceremonial and the spiritual. Vivekananda writes, “The work portion consists of various sacrifices, most of them have later been given up as not practicable under present circumstances, but others remain to the present day in some shape or the other. The main ideas of *Karmakanda*, which consists of the duties of man, the duties of the student, of the householder, of the recluse and the various duties of different states of life, are followed more or less down to the present day. But the spiritual portion of the Hindu religion is in the second part, the *Jnanakanda*, the Vedanta, the end of the Vedas, the gist, the goal of the Vedas. The essence of the Vedas, Knowledge was called by the name of Vedanta, which comprises the

¹ Complete works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.III, P-118

² Ibid,P-119

³ CWSV, Vol.-III, P-119

Upanisads"⁴. Vivekananda had the opinion that all the sects of India, the different streams of faith, were influenced by the theory of Vedanta. He says, "All the sects of India, Dualists, Qualified monists, Monists, or the Saivites, Vaisnavaites, Sauras, Ganapatyas, each one that dares to come in this fold of Hinduism - must acknowledge the Upanisads of the Vedas"⁵. He explains: "They can have their own interpretations and can interpret them in their own way. But they must obey the authority. That is why we want to use the word Vedantist instead of Hindu. All the philosophers of India who are orthodox have to acknowledge the authority of the Vedanta. And all our present day religions, however crude some of them may appear to be, however inexplicable some of their purposes may seem, one who understands them and studies them can trace them back to the ideas of Upanisads. So deeply the Upanisads have sunk into our race that those of you who study the symbology of the crudest religion of the Hindus will be astonished to find sometimes figurative expressions of the Upanisads. The Upanisads become symbolized after a time into figures and so forth. Great spiritual and philosophical ideas in the Upanisads are today with us, converted into household worship in the form of symbols. Thus the various symbols used by us all come from the Vedanta, they are used as figures, and their idea spread among the nation permeated it throughout with they become part of their everyday life as symbols."⁶

In Jnanakanda, there is altogether a different procedure. The first was a search in external nature for the truths of the universe. It was an attempt to get the solutions of the deep problems of life. From the material world, the Indian mind had to fall back, and the research took a different direction altogether, from the external the research came to the internal form, from matter to mind.. Vivekananda explains the method of enquiry thus; "There arose the cry, 'when a man dies, what becomes of him' - some say that he exists, others that he is gone, Say O, King of death, what is the truth?"⁷ An entirely different procedure we find here. The Indian mind got all that could be had from the external world, but it did not feel satisfied with that. It wanted to search further, to dive into its own soul and the final answer came"⁸

Vivekananda on the Prasthanatraya

Swami Vivekananda was a man of harmony. Taking the different systems of Indian philosophy as authoritative, he directs that they are not contradictory. There is the mistaken notion in modern India that the word 'Vedanta' had references only to the Advaita system, But Vivekananda says, "It must always be remembered that in modern India, the three prasthanas are considered srutiprasthana, smrtiprasthana, and sutraprasthana – equally important in the study of all the systems of religion. First of all, there are the revelations, the srutis, the Upanisads; secondly, the philosophies, the sutras of Vyasa have the greatest prominence on account of their being the consummations of all the proceeding systems of philosophy. These systems are not contradictory to one another but one is based on another, and there is a gradual unfolding of the theme which culminates in the sutras of Vyasa, which are the systematizing of the marvellous truths of the Vedanta, comes in the Gita, the divine commentary of the Vedanta"⁹

For Vivekananda, the Upanisads, the *Brahmasutras*, and the *Gita* have been taken up by every sect in India, that wants to claim authority for orthodoxy, whether dualist, or qualified monist, or monist. The authorities of each of these are the three prasthanas. On the different interpretations or commentaries of these three institutions, he says: "We find that a Sankaracharya, or a Ramanuja, or a Madhavacharya or a Vallabhacharya, or a Chaitanya, anyone who wanted to propound a new sect, had to take up these three systems and write only a new commentary on them. Therefore, it would be wrong to confine the word Vedanta only to one system which has arisen out of the Upanisads. All here are concerned with the word 'Vedanta'. The Visistadvaitist has as much right to be called a Vedantist as the Advaitist. In fact, I will go a little farther and say that what we really mean by the word 'Hindu' is really the same as Vedantist'. I want you to note that these three systems have been current in India almost from time immemorial. For, you must not believe that Sankara was the inventor of Advaita systems; it existed ages before Sankara was born, he was one of its great representatives. So with the Visistadvaita system, which had existed ages before Ramanuja appeared before the world. So with the dualistic system that have existed side by side with the others and with my little knowledge, I have come to the conclusion that they do not contradict each other".¹⁰

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid, PP-119-20

⁶ CWSV, Vol.-III, P-120

⁷ Kathopanisad,1-20

⁸ CWSV, Vol.-III, PP-393-94

⁹ CWSV, Vol.-III, P-396

¹⁰ CWSV, Vol.-III, P-396

Upanisads as authority

Vivekananda discovered the vital breath of the vast corpus of Indian religious literature comprising the Vedas, the Upanisads, the Gita, the *Brahmasutra*, the *Yogasutra*, the smrtis, the Puranas and the various medieval commentaries on them, in the life of his Master Sri Ramakrsna, in his words and silence, in his trance and songs, even in his jokes and repartees. That was Vivekananda's great school, the source of all his ideas. He himself cleared this in his historic address, 'Vedanta in its application in Indian life'. "It was given to me to live with a man who was as ardent a dualist, as ardent an advaitist, as ardent a Bhakta as a jnani. And living with this man first put it into my head to understand the Upanisads and the texts of the scriptures from an independent and better basis by blindly following the commentators"¹¹.

Vivekananda had a new modern rational approach to the tradition which he wanted to present in a fresh light in his grand endeavour to bring about an installation of the ancient wisdom of India, for the regeneration of its people. His aim was not to produce a new commentary on any of the sacred texts of the scriptures. He was not at all concerned with questions of textual exegesis of any branch of sacred literatures. His sole aim was to summon his people and the people of the world to a new spiritual and moral ideal for their regeneration. R. K. Dasgupta observes, "I am stressing this point by way of removing the misconception, yet to be finally removed, that Vivekananda was a revivalist who wanted to call us back to our ancient faith by invoking ancient texts. That was farthest from the mind of one who appeared at the time of the last century (19th century) and he thought it was an hour of spiritual and moral crisis for the world as a whole as a prophet of what he called a universal religion, We will miss the essence of his message, its meaning and its drift, if we do not look upon him as the new prophet of a new message. Let us be ready to receive his words as a new revelation"¹². Dr Huston Smith, an American thinker has boldly given the message of Vivekananda, the status of a revelation. Prof. Smith says, "If we listen through the words to the thoughts they express, we know that Vivekananda is their conduit only, not the author."¹³

Vivekananda brings to bear on his understanding of upanisadic philosophy with the modern idea of progress. He did not think. that the idea of progress was repugnant to the idea of sanctity of revelation. He never thought that the final truth could be given at a particular moment in history. A belief such as the world would be rejecting the idea of a reality. And a proof of change and progress within the ancient scriptures that the many gods and goddesses of the Vedas gradually gave place to one god and that the gem of the monotheism was to be found in the poetry of polytheism itself. Vivekananda contemplated religion as an unending movement towards the *morning* sun. In his address 'Mohammed' delivered at Sans Francisco, he said: "These (great souls) are signposts on the way. That is all they are. They say 'onward, brothers' we cling to them; we never want to move"¹⁴

In the same address he says, "*Religion is not* a doctrine, not a rule, it is a process. That is all. Doctrines and rules are all for exercise. By that exercise we get strong and at last break the bounds and become free. Doctrine is of no use except for gymnastics. Through exercise the soul become perfect, that exercise is stopped when you say 'I believe'.¹⁵ And he adds by quoting the words of the Gita, whenever virtue subsides and immortality abounds, I take human form, in every age I come for the salvation of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, for the establishment of spirituality'.¹⁶ Such are the great messengers of light. They are our great teachers, our elder brothers; but we must go on our own way.¹⁷ In his address, the way to the Realization of a Universal Religion' he says, 'All that we call progress, evolution has been always measured by that one search, the search for human destiny, the search for God'.¹⁸

It is this idea of dynamism in the spiritual history of a pupil which made Vivekananda turn to his Master for a new vision of the Upanisads. He says: "I, through the grace of God, had the great good fortune to sit at the feet of one whose whole life was such an interpretation, whose life a thousandfold more than his teachings, was a living commentary on the texts of Upanisads, was in fact the spirit of the Upanisads living in a human form. Perhaps I have got a little of that harmony".¹⁹

¹¹ Ibid, P-233

¹² R.K.Das Gupta, Swami Vivekananda on Indian Philosophy and Literature, The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Culcutta, 1996, P-59

¹³ Voice of Freedom, (ed.) Advaita Asram, Mayavati, 1987. P-10

¹⁴ CWSV, Vol.-I, P-483

¹⁵ Ibid, P-484

¹⁶ Bhagavadgita, IV-7,8

¹⁷ CWSV, Vol.-I, P-484

¹⁸ Ibid, Vol. II, P-359

¹⁹ CWSV, Vol.-III, PP-323-24

The philosophical scene in Bengal was not perhaps so cheering for an exponent of the philosophy of the Upanisads. Vivekananda was unhappy about the state of the religious life of the common man. He did not disparage it because it was essentially puranic religion and he thought it was possible to give that religion an Upanisadic strain. The Upanisads were the foundation of the reformed religion of the Brahmasamaj founded by Ram Mohan Roy in 1828. Ram Mohan's English translation of four Upanisads. Isa, Kena, Katha and Mundaka were published in Calcutta between 1816 and 1819.²⁰ Vivekananda was also aware of Devendranath's final acceptance of Upanisad philosophy as the foundation of the Brahma-religion as he explained it in his '*Brahmadharma Vyakhyana*', a Bengali work on the reformed religion. But Vivekananda's response to the Upanisads was a more comprehensive and deeper than that of those who found in it nothing more than common theism.

Vivekananda decided to present his view of the Upanisads due to several reasons. He thought that the Brahmasamaj gave only a theistic interpretation to these doctrines *ignoring* their other and no less significant dimensions and he was unhappy about the Christian missionary attacks on the Upanisadic philosophy as a *kind* of primitive pantheism. Moreover, he found that even the educated classes of his country who at all cared for religions had no conception of the value of the Upanisads as the basis of a universal religion, which was the need of the hour throughout the world. Vivekananda had his own way of summoning us to a new ideal without repudiating old ideals; he knew how to work for a great future without denouncing the past.

One striking fact about Vivekananda's approach to the Upanisads is its modernity. It is not modernity intended to be a sop to the fashionable modernism of the products of English education. Vivekananda believed in reasons, but had no respect for any kind of imported rationalism. He knew the antinomians of the age and he knew how shallow they were in whatever they thought, wrote or said. When he introduced the idea of evolution or the progress in the religious history of India, he did not bring in the evolutionary ideas of Darwin or Spencer. He just pointed out what any sensible person would see our moral and spiritual progress from the old Vedic age to the new Upanisadic or Vedantic philosophy through a succession of transitions from one phase to another, the whole process representing periodic renewals of kind of primitive pantheism. Moreover, he found that even the educated classes of his country who at all cared for religions had no conception of the value of the Upanisads as the basis of a universal religion, which was the need of the hour throughout the world. Vivekananda had his own way of summoning us to a new ideal without repudiating old ideals; he knew how to work for a great future without denouncing the past.

On the ideas of progress and creative evolution in the religious life, Vivekananda says: "But one fact is memorable or remarkable that these ideas in the Upanisads would be always progressing. In that crude old language, the working of the mind of every one of the sages has been, as it were, painted just as it went; how the ideas are at first very crude, and they become finer and finer till they reach the goal of Vedanta and this goal assumes a philosophical name".²¹ The sages of the Upanisads themselves had this idea of progress from one stage to another. That is, they had a historical sense and they presented their ideas according to that sense. They knew how society should grow. Vivekananda opines that patiently, slowly, surely they went on applying their remedies, not by denouncing and frightening people, but by gently and kindly leading *them* upwards step by step. Such were the writers of the Upanisads. They knew fully well how the religious ideas of God were not reconcilable with the advanced ethical ideas of the time. They knew fully well that what the atheists were preaching contained a good deal of truth, nay, great nugget of truth, but at the same *time* they understood that those who wished to sever the thread *that* bound the beads, who wanted to build a new society in the air, would entirely fail"²²

Vivekananda does not deny that the Vedas and the Upanisads are the words of God. At the same time he mentions the sages of the Upanisads as the writers of the Upanisads, and he attributes to them a strong historical sense which certainly relates to the empirical world. He analyses the ideas of the Upanisads without denying their sanctity. For him the thoughts of God as brought to man by the sages could imply progress without ceasing to be the word of God. God fulfils himself in many ways and none should imagine that the word of God comes to man only once and that it embodies all that God means to say for the human world. When Vivekananda believed in revelation, he also believed in the continuity of revelation.

This is the originality of Vivekananda's ideas of religion. He says, "Is God's book finished? Or is it still a continuous revelation going on? It is a marvellous book, these spiritual revelations of the world. The Vedas, the Bible, the Koran and all other sacred books are but so many pages and an infinite number of pages

²⁰ R.K.Das Gupta,SVIPL,P-65

²¹ CWSV, Vol.-I, P-356

²² Ibid,Vol.-II,P-117

remain yet to be unfolded."²³ First, he says that the revelation is not something which as already taken place once for all, but it is something that is continuing. Secondly he says, the revelations of the Hindus are not the sole revelation. There are other revelations in other religions and they constitute the total spiritual heritage of mankind. These two ideas sustain his view of revelation as a continuing process.

According to Vivekananda, "there is a process of evolution within the corpus of Upanisadic literature itself. The ideal of the first part of the Vedas is entirely different from the ideal of the other part of the Upanisads."²⁴ In the lecture, 'The Freedom of Soul', delivered at London, Vivekananda says, "Then comes the succeeding stages of the gradual convergence of the two advancing lines of the impersonal God and the impersonal man. And the Upanisads embody the stages through which these two lines at last become one, and the last word of each Upanisad is 'thou and that'. The work of the Upanisads seems to have ended at that point; the philosophers took up the next. The Upanisads gave the framework to them, and they had to fill in the details".²⁵

Vivekananda found in the Upanisads the basis of all India's spiritual and moral ideas, the spiritual source of all streams of Indian religious thought. The Upanisads are the firm foundation of Vedanta, which is the essence of India's religious philosophy. In his address 'Vedanta, its Application in Indian Life', he says: "In the Upanisads, we find the gem of all the subsequent development of Indian religious thought. The essence of Buddhism was all borrowed from the same Upanisads".²⁶ Notwithstanding his boundless reverence for the Upanisads, Vivekananda will admit that there are passages in them which are obscure and he will also agree that there are passages which are not essential for the presentation of their central teaching. Vivekananda says: "if we study the Upanisads, we notice, in many irrelevant subjects, the sudden wandering through introduction of the discussion of a great truth, just as in the midst of a huge wilderness a traveller unexpectedly comes across here and there an exquisitely beautiful rose with its leaves, thorns, roots all entangled"²⁷. Vivekananda pointed to those roses and presented them as the finest blossoms of Indian wisdom. In his lecture 'My Plan of Campaign', Vivekananda says, 'The truths are the Upanisads before you. *Take* them up, *live* up to them, and the salvation of India will be at hand".²⁸

Vivekananda took Advaita to be the summum bonum of one's spiritual life. He said that Advaita was not the only Upanisadic or Vedanta philosophy; Dvaita and Visistadvaita were also Upanisadic doctrines. Moreover, he asked to look for the germs of devotion also in the Upanisads. Vivekananda valued the Upanisads as a presentation in memorable words of all the shades and hues of man's spiritual life, as a house of many mansions which echo the various voices of the human spirit, and he found in them a grand harmony which encouraged him to contemplate a universal religion for mankind. Vivekananda discovers in them a firm support for his ideal of universal religion. According to him, "Unless there is unity at the universal heart, we cannot understand variety. Such is the conception of the Lord in the Upanisads".²⁹

Vivekananda not only spoke on the spiritual and the metaphysical side of the Upanisads. He also stressed its ethical side. And he thought that both would appeal to the imagination of the modern man throughout the world because they do not really call him to a new church or new text. When Vivekananda calls to the ideal of Universal religion in the name of the Upanishads, he is pointing to the great harmony of many spiritual strains in the Upanisads and the possibility to build up a universal religion on that model. The principle of a universal religion, that which is to be its breath and sustaining spirit, is the principle of unity, which is the central teaching of the Upanisads. And this unity does not mean any denial of individuality to a person or an institution. This unity is rooted in the ideal of freedom, physical, mental and spiritual. The second great idea of the Upanisads is the solidarity of this universe.

²³ CWSV, Vol.-II, P-117

²⁴ Ibid, Vol.-I, P-450

²⁵ Ibid, Vol-II, P-191

²⁶ CWSV, Vol.-III, P-210

²⁷ Ibid, Vol.-IV, P-106

²⁸ Ibid, Vol.-III, P-225

²⁹ CWSV, Vol.-I, P-120