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Bijoy Ghosh

Research Scholar,

Department of Sanskrit,

Gour Banga University,

Malda, West Bengal, India

A critical study of the *Vaiṣṇavaite Upaniṣads* of later origin

Bijoy Ghosh

Abstract:

The *Upaniṣads* are commonly referred to as *Vedānta*. The concepts of *Brahman* (ultimate reality) and *Ātman* (Soul or Self) are central ideas in all of the *Upaniṣads* and ‘know your *Ātman*’ is their thematic focus. The later *Upaniṣads* numbering about 95, also called minor *Upaniṣads*, are dated from the late 1st millennium BCE to mid 2nd millennium CE. *Upaniṣads* are divided according to religion into *Śaktism*, *Sannyāsa*, *Śaivism*, *Vaiṣṇavism*, *Yoga*, and *Sāmānya*. Here, I want to discuss the nature, content, doctrine of five *Vaiṣṇavaite Upaniṣads* of Later Origin. The *Vaiṣṇavaite Upaniṣads* are *Kali-Saṅtāraṇa Upaniṣad*, *Vāsudeva Upaniṣad*, *Nārāyaṇa Upaniṣad*, *Hayagrva Upaniṣad* and *Dattātreya Upaniṣad*.

Keywords: Upaniṣad, Vedānta, Vaiṣṇavism, Kali-Saṅtāraṇa, Vāsudeva, Nārāyaṇa, Hayagrva, Dattātreya, Avatāratattva etc.

1. Introduction

1.1 Meaning of Upaniṣad

The Sanskrit term *Upaniṣad* (उप = by, नि = nether, सद् = sitting) translates to ‘sitting down near’, referring to the student sitting down near the teacher while receiving esoteric knowledge. *Śaṅkara* rightly said in his commentary - ‘सेयं ब्रह्मविद्या उपनिषच्छब्दवाच्या तत्पराणां सहेतोः संसारस्यात्यन्तावसादनात् उप-नि-पूर्वस्य सदेस्तदर्थ्याद् ग्रन्थोऽपि उपनिषदुच्यते’। *Ādi Śaṅkara* explains in his commentary on the *Kaṭhā* and *Bṛihadaranyaka Upaniṣad* that the word means *Ātmavidyā*, that is, ‘knowledge of the self’ or *Brahmavidyā* ‘knowledge of Brahma’. Other dictionary meanings include ‘esoteric doctrine’ and ‘secret doctrine’. The *Upaniṣads* are commonly referred to as *Vedānta*, variously interpreted to mean either the ‘last chapters, parts of the Veda’ or ‘the object, the highest purpose of the Veda’^[1]. ‘*Upaniṣads*, called *Vedānta*, are the repository of supreme wisdom, the highest flights of spiritual insight of the Seers, which are nothing but the profound answers that discovered in the depths of their consciousness in response to certain simple, straightforward, direct inquiry into our daily experience.’^[2] The concepts of *Brahman* (ultimate reality) and *Ātman* (Soul or Self) are central ideas in all of the *Upaniṣads* and ‘know your *Ātman*’ is their thematic focus.

2. Composition time of Upaniṣad

Scholars are uncertain about the exact time in which the *Upaniṣads* were composed. Indologist Patrick Olivelle says that ‘in spite of claims made by some, in reality, any dating of these documents [Early *Upaniṣads*] that attempts a precision closer than a few centuries is as stable as a house of cards’. Stephen Phillips places the early *Upaniṣads* in the 800 to 300 BCE range. He summarizes the current Indological opinion to be that the *Bṛhadāranyaka*, *Chāndogya*, *Īśa*, *Taittirīya*, *Aitareya*, *Kena*, *Kaṭha*, *Muṇḍaka* and *Praśna Upaniṣads* are all pre-Buddhist and pre-Jain, while *Śvetaśvatara* and *Māṇḍukya* overlap with the earliest Buddhist and Jain literature.

There are more than 200 known *Upaniṣads*, one of which, *Muktikā Upaniṣad*, predates 1656 CE and contains a list of 108 canonical *Upaniṣads*, including itself as the last. The earliest ones such as the *Bṛhadāranyaka* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣads* date to the early centuries of the

Correspondence

Bijoy Ghosh

Research Scholar,

Department of Sanskrit,

Gour Banga University,

Malda, West Bengal, India

¹ “The doctrine of *advaita* (non dualism) has its origin in the Upanishads.”

² “Upanishadic Unique Teaching Method –Inquiry and Penace” (*Jijnāsā* and *tapas*) by Swami Atmapriyananda

1st millennium BCE, and the latest to around the mid 2nd millennium CE during a period of Islamic invasions and political instability. Various scholars include the earliest 10, 11, 12 or 13 *Upaniṣads* major or Principal *Upaniṣads*, all composed in the 1st millennium BCE. The remainder 95 to 98 are called minor *Upaniṣads*, and were likely composed between the last centuries of the 1st millennium BCE and about mid 2nd millennium CE.

3. Division of Upaniṣads

Upaniṣads are further divided according to religion into *Śaktism*, *Sannyāsa*, *Śaivism*, *Vaiṣṇavism*, *Yoga*, and *Sāmānya*. The *Muktikā Upaniṣad*'s list of 108 *Upaniṣads* groups the first 13 as *mukhya*, 21 as *Sāmānya Vedānta*, 20 as *Sannyāsa*, 14 as

Vaiṣṇava, 12 as *Śaiva*, 8 as *Śākta*, and 20 as *Yoga*. The 108 *Upaniṣads* as recorded in the *Muktikā* are shown in the table below. The major *Upaniṣads* are the most important and highlighted.

4. Relation between Vedas and Major & Minor Upaniṣads

Each of the principal *Upaniṣads* can be associated with one of the schools of exegesis of the four Vedas. The new *Upaniṣads* often have little relation to the Vedic corpus and have not been cited or commented upon by any great Vedanta philosopher: their language differs from that of the classic *Upaniṣads* being less subtle and more formalized. Here, I want show the relation between Vedas and *Upaniṣads*:

| Veda | Number | Mukhya | Sāmānya | Sannyāsa | Śākta | Vaiṣṇava | Śaiva | Yoga |
|------------------------|--------|--|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| <i>Ṛgveda</i> | 10 | <i>Aitareya, Kauṣṭhīki</i> | <i>Ātmabodha, Mudgala</i> | <i>Nirvāṇa</i> | <i>Tripura, Saubhāgya-lakshmi, Bahvṛca</i> | -- | <i>Akṣamālika</i> | <i>Nādabindu</i> |
| <i>Sāmaveda</i> | 16 | <i>Chāndogya, Kena</i> | <i>Vajrasūchi, Maha, Sāvitrī</i> | <i>Āruṇi, Maitreya, Brhat-Sannyāsa, Kuṇḍika (Laghu-Sannyāsa)</i> | ---- | <i>Vāsudeva, Avyakta</i> | <i>Rudrākṣa, Jābāli</i> | <i>Yogachūdāma-ni, Darśana</i> |
| <i>Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda</i> | 32 | <i>Taittiriya, Kaṭha, Śvetāśvatara, Maitrāyaṇi</i> | <i>Sarvasāra, Śukarahasya, Skanda, Garbha, Śārīraka, Ekākṣara, Akṣi</i> | <i>Brahma, (Laghu, Brhad) Avadhūta, Kathasrutī</i> | <i>Sarasvatīrahasya</i> | <i>Nārāyaṇa, Kali-Saṅtāraṇa</i> | <i>Kaivalya, Kālāgnirudra, Dakṣiṇāmūrti, Rudrahṛdaya, Pañcabrahma</i> | <i>Amṛtabindu, Tejobindu, Amṛtanāda, Kṣurika, Dhyanabindu, Brahmavidyā, Yogatattva, Yogaśikhā, Yogakuṇḍalini, Varāha</i> |
| <i>Śukla Yajurveda</i> | 19 | <i>Brhadāranya-ka, Īśa</i> | <i>Subala, Mantrika, Niralamba, Paingala, Adhyatma, Muktika</i> | <i>Jābāla, Paramaha-mṣa, Bhikṣuka, Turīyāttav-adhuta, Yājñavalkya, Śātyāyaniya</i> | | <i>Tārasāra</i> | | <i>Advayatārak-a, Haṃsa, Trīśikhi, Maṇḍalabrāhmaṇa</i> |
| <i>Atharva-veda</i> | 31 | <i>Muṇḍaka, Māṇḍūkya, Praśna</i> | <i>Ātmā, Sūrya, Prāṇāgniho-tra</i> | <i>Āśrama, Nārada-parivrājaka, Paramaham-sa parivrājaka, Parabrahma</i> | <i>Sītā, Devī, Tripurātāpini, Bhāva-na</i> | <i>Nṛsiṃhatāpanī, Mahānārāyaṇa (Tripād vibhuti), Rāmarahasya, Rāmatā-pani, Gopālatāpani, Kṛṣṇa, Hayagrī-va, Dattātreya, Gāruḍa</i> | <i>Atharvasiras, Atharvaśikhā, Brhājābāla, Śarabha, Bhasma, Gaṇapati</i> | <i>Śāṇḍilya, Pāśupata, Mahāvākya</i> |

5. Features and Origin of Vaiṣṇavaite Upaniṣads

From the above chart, I can easily discuss the later origin, characteristics and fundamental doctrine of *Vaiṣṇavaite Upaniṣads*. Here I will discuss the selected (Five) *Vaiṣṇavaite Upaniṣads*.

5.1. Kali-Saṅtāraṇa Upaniṣad

The *Kali-Saṅtāraṇa Upaniṣad* is a Sanskrit text attached to the *Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda*. It is a minor Upanishad of Universal Religion.

The *Upaniṣad* was likely composed before about 1500 CE, and it was popularized in the 16th century by *Caityanya* in the *Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism* tradition. The short text presents two verses called the *Mahā-mantra*, containing the words 'Hare', 'Kṛiṣṇa' and 'Rāma'. The word *Hare* or goddess *Rādha* is repeated eight times, while the other two are Hindu gods who are repeated four times.

At the end of the *Dvāpara Yuga* sage *Nārada* approached *Brahma* and requested him to enlighten him on the path he should follow to alleviate the detrimental effects of *Kali Yuga*. *Brahma* said that by way of taking the name of the supreme Lord *Nārāyaṇa*, all the tribulations of *KaliYuga* will be washed away. These sixteen names to be chanted are as -

“Hare Krishna Hare Krishna,
Krishna Krishna Hare Hare,
Hare Rama Hare Rama,
Rama Rama Hare Hare [3].”

Chanting of the sixteen word mantra is asserted by the text to be constantly done by sage *Nārada*, who with his musical instrument *tanpura* has been doing it for ages. Apart from this Upanishad, chanting of this mantra has also been prescribed in *Purāṇas* such as *Brahmānanda Purāṇa*, the *Agni Purāṇa* and so forth. In modern times, Lord *Chaitanya* who is believed to be the incarnation of Lord *Kṛiṣṇa* also preached chanting of this mantra. It should be chanted always irrespective of whether one is in a pure or impure condition.

5.2 Vāsudeva Upaniṣads

It belongs to the *Vaiṣṇava sect*, which worships *Viṣṇu* and his avatar *Kṛiṣṇa*. This minor *Upaniṣad* is attached to the *Sāmaveda*.

The composition date or author of the text is unknown. Maxmuller states that this text is a relatively modern.

³ Aiyar, K. Narayanasvami. "Kali Santarana Upanishad". Vedanta Spiritual Library. Retrieved 1 January 2016.

The sage *Nārada* visited the god *Kṛṣṇa*, who is called by his patronymic *Vāsudeva* in the text and asked *Kṛṣṇa* about the rules of *Ūrdha Puṇḍra*, the *Vaiṣṇava tilaka*.

Viṣṇu and *Kṛṣṇa* are compared to *Brahman*, who is non-dual and infinite without a beginning, middle or end. His form is said to be *satchidananda*. Its indestructibility only comprehended by devotion.

5.3 Nārāyaṇa Upaniṣad

It is written in Sanskrit language, attached to the *Kṛṣṇa* (Black) Yajurveda, is one of 14 *Vaiṣṇavaite Upaniṣads* and it recommends the *bhakti* of Lord *Nārāyaṇa* (*Viṣṇu*). It posits the formula, "*Aum Namō Narayanaya*", a mantra as a means of reaching salvation, which is communion with *Viṣṇu*. The text is classified as one of the Mantra *Upaniṣad*.

The Upaniṣad is short and has five chapters.

Chapter 1: Everything was born in *Nārāyaṇa*, everything ends in *Nārāyaṇa*.

Chapter 2: The chapter declares that *Nārāyaṇa* is one without a second, eternal god, same as *Brahman*, *Śiva*, *Sakra*, time.

Chapter 3rd and 4th: 3rd and 4th chapter state that studying the *Nārāyaṇa Upaniṣad* is the path to fearless life, achieving immortality, entering Brahman-hood.

Chapter 5th: The last chapter states that the one who worships with the formula, '*Aum Namō Narayanaya*', goes to *Viṣṇu*'s heaven, becomes free from birth and *samsāra*. A person who recites this *Upaniṣad* expiates sins and attains communion with *Nārāyaṇa*.

5.4 Hayagrva Upaniṣad

It is a minor *Upaniṣad*, dedicated to *Hayagrva* – the horse-faced avatar of the god *Viṣṇu*. It belongs to the *Vaiṣṇava* sect, which worships *Viṣṇu*, and is associated with the *Atharvaveda*. The *Hayagrva Upaniṣad* presents mantras to know the nature of the supreme reality *Brahman*.

The composition date of the text is unknown. Patrick Olivelle states that sectarian *Upaniṣads* attached to *Atharvaveda* were likely composed in the 2nd millennium, until about the 16th century.

Hayagrva refers to a horse-themed avatar, also known as *Aśvamukha*, *Aśvaśīrṣa* and *Hayaśīrṣa*. The word *Hayagrva* means 'horse necked'^[4]. In the *Hayagrva Upaniṣad*, the term refers to half-human horse-headed Vishnu avatar who is the teacher of humanity.

The *Hayagrva Upaniṣad* has 20 verses and is divided into two chapters. It is narrated as a sermon by the god *Brahma* to sage *Nārada*. The text opens with an invocation to the god *Viṣṇu*, *Indra*, *Garuda*, the Sun, and *Bṛhaspati* are also invoked for welfare of all^[5]. In tradition of *Upaniṣads*, the *Hayagrva Upaniṣad* ends by mentioning the merits of the text. The text ends with a prayer that this knowledge of the *Brahman* may remain with the devotee.

5.5 Dattatreya Upaniṣad

It is attached to the *Atharvaveda*, and classified as a text of the *Vaiṣṇava* sect, which worships the god *Viṣṇu*. The text is named after sage *Dattātreya*. He appears in several

Upaniṣads, states Rigopoulos, because he symbolizes the mastery of Yoga and the perfectly liberated individual (*Avadhūta*) in ancient and medieval Hindu texts.

The author and composition date of the text are unknown. Rigopoulos states it is a tantric sectarian work, with a mix of *Vaiṣṇavism* and *Śaktism* ideas.

The *Dattātreya Upaniṣad* is divided into three *khaṇḍas*. The first section opens with the creator *Brahma* asking *Viṣṇu* (*Nārāyaṇa*) how to overcome *samsāra*, the cycle of birth-death-rebirth. *Viṣṇu* replies that he is *Dattātreya* (Datta), the Supreme God and one should meditate on *Viṣṇu* in the form of *Dattātreya* to free oneself from *samsāra*. After following *Viṣṇu*'s advice of meditating upon him as *Dattātreya*, asserts the text, *Brahma* realizes that the infinite and peerless *Brahman* is realized, as the residuum after one meditates *नेति, नेति* ("not this, not this") negation process on the phenomenal universe.

The text presents various mantras of *Dattātreya*. The six-syllabled mantra "ओं श्रीं ह्रीं क्लीं त्र्लौं द्रं" is given. This mantra shows Tantric and *Śākta* influences, and contains a reference to *Dattātreya*'s *Śakti* (female counterpart), denoted by ह्रीं. श्रीं denotes *Lakṣmī*, *Viṣṇu*'s consort *Śakti*, thus *Dattātreya*'s *Śakti* is in the mantra. The eight-syllabled 'द्रं दत्तात्रेयाय नमः' follows. According to the text, दत्तात्रेयाय stands for *Sat-cit-ānanda* while नमः denotes Bliss. This is followed by the twelve-syllabled and sixteen syllabled mantras of *Dattātreya*, 'ओं आं ह्रीं क्रों एहि दत्तात्रेयाय स्वाहा' and 'ओं ऐं क्रों क्लीं ह्रीं क्लीं हं ह्रीं ह्रीं सौः दत्तात्रेयाय स्वाहा' respectively. Both mantras show *Śākta* impact and have terms like *krom*, *hrīm* etc. which represent *Dattātreya*'s *Śaktis*. The second *khaṇḍa* begins with the *mālā-mantra* of *Dattātreya*, The hymn says that *Dattātreya* is propitiated easily by simply remembrance. He is the dispeller of great fears, giver of great knowledge and who dwells in Consciousness and Bliss. Finally, *Dattātreya* is called an ocean of knowledge, conveying his role as a great Teacher; this mantra is one of the most popular mantras of sage *Dattātreya* as a deity.

The last *khaṇḍa*, in tradition of *Upaniṣadic* literature, tells the advantages of reading the text.

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