

What India Owes to Her Upanishads

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The subject which our people must know very thoroughly, if they are to find a way to the bright future, is ‘What India Owes to Her Upanishads.’ Our history has got a unique characteristic. At the very beginning of our historic career, our country produced great thinkers—great seekers of truth. The Vedic period is marked by a tremendous effort to search for truth fearlessly. And with that search began the journey of the Vedic literature in general, and the Upanishads, in particular. The Upanishads form the last portion of Vedic literature. It is good for us to know what kind of effect this wonderful literature had on the culture and history of India, and what we can get out of it today to build up a brighter future for India.

At some point in our very early history, intelligence and spirituality were in ferment and out of that ferment developed a literature known as the Upanishads. The capacity for independent, fearless thinking was developed even earlier, during the Vedic period. I use the word ‘fearless thinking’ because there was neither an all-powerful church nor an all-powerful state to suppress human thinking in India for a few thousand years. By the time of the Upanishads, a number of people participated in this great search for truth. Originally the quest was about the external world. What is the world in which they live? As soon as the baby is born it is confronted with this sensible universe around it and the baby is puzzled—What is

this world? The first question the human mind asks is about the world outside. So, in our early history, the Indian thinkers also did the same and out of that investigation came several scientific ideas which are found today in many books such as *History of Science in India*. We did not know all this before. The greatest thing this search for truth achieved in India was not in the sphere of the sensory world but in the sphere of man himself. That is what makes the Upanishads so outstanding and they have great relevance to the contemporary age.

These seekers after truth came from various levels of society. It is something wonderful. Kings, emperors, children, intellectuals, women—all participated in this search for truth. What was common to all of them? It was love for truth and that love for truth found expressions in the wonderful words of the *Mundaka Upanishad* that declared—‘*Satyameva jayate na anritam*’ (III.1.6)—‘Truth alone triumphs, and not untruth’. Our Indian Republic has taken these words as its motto. So this quality of a human mind is what makes it scientific. What do we mean by ‘Science’? Search for truth, without any kind of condition—fearless search. Do not stop till the truth comes to you. This kind of scientific mind we find was cultivated by our seers and sages. Even today foreign writers on the Upanishads refer to this quality of the mind of the sages of the Upanishads. They had the courage to ask

questions till an answer was found. If the answer was not found, they said they did not know. They had the courage to say, 'I do not know'. So when you study the Upanishads, you can see this type of human mind which we find today only in modern scientific thinking. There is so much of kinship between the two—the Upanishadic mind and modern scientific thinking. The field of study was quite different nevertheless. Having studied the external world they found the world inexplicable. It is a mystery. The more you study, the more mysterious the world becomes. That was the conclusion arrived at by the sages. And that is the conclusion arrived at by the modern scientific thought as well. This is a mysterious universe as much to the ignorant villager as to a great scientist.

The second truth

India discovered a second truth along with this. She discovered that this mystery can be cleared only when you clear the other mystery—the man himself. Inside this man the observant, man the thinker, man the seer, there is a profound data waiting to be unravelled and explored. That is exactly what the Upanishads did. That is why what they did and achieved has much contemporary relevance.

An article was published in a serious journal some years ago. There, a scientist-writer probed this question. He remarked that the modern age started as an age of exploration. We started exploring the seas. Columbus discovered America and Vasco de Gama came towards the East. Then man went into the depths of the ocean. Man went to the North Pole and South Pole. He climbed Mt. Everest and Mt. Blanc. Yet man was not satisfied. He then started exploring the sky sending rockets until they landed on the Moon. And now the

Voyager is going beyond the solar system. These various aspects of exploration are mentioned by the writer first. Then he makes a remarkable observation. He says, there is one exploration, the exploration of the innermost recesses of our own consciousness, which is still waiting to be undertaken by modern science. What is behind this sensory system of man? What is behind the mind? Absolute mystery! We do not know anything. As the late biologist, Sir Julian Huxley, has said, we have scratched only the surface of this great subject—the study of man in depth.

Today many Western writers discover in the Upanishads this wonderful study scientifically undertaken. They have noticed that until the sages found the result they did not stop; they continued to march on. And when they found the result they conveyed it to others. Others also checked up and they said, yes it is true. Therefore, the study of man in depth is a great subject in the Upanishads. You can call it by a term coined by Sir Julian Huxley—the science of human possibilities.

Physics and other physical sciences study nature and its possibilities. What are the possibilities of this physical nature? They go deep into the nature. Today it is the nuclear science that has gone to the farthest point in the depths of the external nature. But they do not know about the inner world of man. Even their psychology is much more physiology than psychology. So, now there is a tremendous effort in the West to achieve this kind of penetration into human possibilities. For that they turn to the Upanishads. That is the science you get in the Upanishads, the science of human possibilities—our muscular possibility, our nervous possibility, psychic possibility and ultimately the possibility coming from the infinite Ātman which is

the true nature of our soul. This subject was a subject of investigation. The sages struggled for Truth, not for an opinion, not for a dogma. Once they discovered a truth they did not ask you to believe it. You could check up for yourself as it was truth and not dogma. That is the strength of the Upanishads. That is why, among the great books of the world, this is the only literature that can stand and withstand the great axe of modern science.

Modern scientists stand in reverence before the Upanishads because of their investigative spirit, their concern for Truth, nothing but Truth. In this struggle they took their gods very much worshipped by the common people as well as by the higher people and subjected them to scrutiny. They asked one question: Are you true? All the gods and all the various theories of heaven and hell they took up and examined if they were true. If they were not, they had no interest in those things. Thus we can see that a tremendous effort by a group of trained human minds had taken up this gigantic task of realizing what is present behind the psycho-physical system of man. That penetrating study we find all over the Upanishads.

Max Müller's observation

Max Müller refers to this investigative spirit and says why this wonderful edifice of Vedanta built up by the time of the Upanishads thousands of years ago has stood steady and strong through all these thousands of years and even today it is strong and can face the challenge of modern science. How could the sages do so? Max Müller answered that this had been possible because the sages pursued truth with a single-minded devotion. Again, that was possible because they had few public to please or critics to appease. Indeed, whenever you have a public to

please or a critic to appease, you water down your ideas. You mix up truth with so many things. The sages had no such problems. They went straight ahead undeterred by all these things. Therefore they could build up an edifice of philosophy and spirituality which has stood the test of time and today which is going to do good not only to India but even to the rest of the world. This is called the Vedanta or the philosophy and spirituality of the Upanishads.

This radiation of lamp on the table is very ordinary. You can block it with a piece of paper. But the same radiation, when you subject it to high frequency, training it to penetrate deep into the body of man is called X-ray. The sages discovered the same truth regarding the mind also. Ordinarily, this mind is very weak. It cannot penetrate deep. But if you train the mind and make it of a high frequency, it can penetrate the inner nature of man. That is also a great science. Therefore, in the Upanishads they proclaimed two sciences or two departments of one science of reality. They are called *aparā vidyā* and *parā vidyā*. *Aparā vidyā* or ordinary knowledge is based on sense data. All positivistic knowledge belongs to this category. The other is higher knowledge or *parā vidyā*, which is about the imperishable Reality behind the world of perishable things. It was that Reality the sages were seeking because they found everything that belongs to this world is perishable; everything is changing; everything is grasped by death. Is there anything deathless? Anything changeless? They could not find it in the world. Indeed, the more you go out, the more change you find. Terrestrial change is there. Go to the celestial, there is much more. So there is nothing changeless in this external world. If there is anything

changeless it must be within the individuality of man. So they turned their attention inside themselves. They reasoned, if they found nothing there, they would proclaim that there was nothing changeless in this universe. That kind of scepticism prevailed during the beginning of their investigation. But they found to their great joy the immortal behind the mortal. Swami Vivekananda proclaimed this truth in his Chicago lecture in which he addressed the listeners as children of the Immortal Bliss—‘*amritasya putrah*’. The sages of the Upanishads thousands of years ago said: I know the Truth—the Infinite person, the Infinite divine Self of man—*Purusham mahāntam*. The word *mahāntam* means infinite, expansive. That Self manifest in this organic system is a tiny little self; but that is not the whole of man. Behind it there is something infinite. That I have discovered—the infinite man behind the finite man. ‘*Vedāhametam*’—‘I have known’. It is not mere belief. I have realized it. I have known it. What is it like? *Ādityavarnam tamasah parastāt*—‘Self-luminous like the sun that is beyond all darkness and delusion.’ You see, in the Upanishads there are profound approaches emphasizing experience, realization, and not just belief. About this Shankarāchārya had later on said in his *Brahmasutra* commentary—*anubhava avasānam brahmavijnānam*. That means ‘knowledge of Brahman consummates in the experience of Brahman’. That Infinite Reality is pulsing somewhere in the back of myself and I can very well discover that by penetrating deep inside my little self.

This kind of study started by the sages developed later on in the historic period of Buddha. He penetrated deep into himself and attained *bodhi* or enlightenment. In his discourses, he said, the Immortal had been gained by me. This being is the central

theme of what you call religion and God. What is God? Whatever is immortal alone can be God. The nature of God has to be properly understood. They discovered that God as the infinite Self in man and all other beings. Out of Him the whole world has come. In Him it rests and to Him it returns. This is called unity behind multiplicity. The world came from the One, the world will return to the One. That is the wonderful teaching of the Vedānta and the modern science as well. There was singularity in the beginning, say the astrophysicists today. Again we will return to that singularity after passing through the manifestation stage of diversity and plurality.

Infinite is within

So the sages discovered that Infinite One, not outside the universe but within the universe, within man, in their own self. That is the repetitive statement in the Upanishads of which the most famous is from the *Chāndogya*—‘*Tat tvam asi*’. Do not treat yourself as the tiny self, as an organic limitation. There is something big about yourself. Try to manifest it. That is spirituality. That is called spiritual life. That is the meaning of religion. Not belief, not dogma, not mere conformity. This is how the Upanishads set in motion what I call today a scientific approach to religion, that you can experience the Divine. And when you do that, a change comes upon you—a little man becomes a big man. Then you have an expansive feeling of oneness with all. That is the Advaitic view, the famous Advaitic vision of Oneness—*ekameva advitiam Brahma*. Brahman is one and non-dual. We are essentially that Brahman. Unfortunately we do not know that Truth of all truths. This subject is taken up in the *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad* where we find a wonderful passage that says that the realization of Brahman is possible for every

person. There is no difference between great sages like Vāmadeva and human beings of today so far as the truth of Brahman is concerned, so far as man's capacity to realize It is concerned.

Some of the most revolutionary ideas you get in the Upanishads. In the pre-Upanishadic days worship of gods and goddesses, going to heaven, sacrifices, ceremonials and some such ideas were there. The Upanishads took all of them and questioned their validity or credibility. The ideas, however, could not stand this probe. There you can find a passage which says that when man tries to realize the Ātman, he ceases to be the 'creature' of gods anymore. See the language, mark the word 'creature'—*pashurevam sa devānām*—we become a *pashu* to the *devas* or gods. One cowherd, for example, has many cows and that is his wealth. If a tiger takes away a cow, he will be very unhappy. Similarly, gods are unhappy if a man realizes the Ātman and goes beyond their control. They want man to remain a creature of themselves. But they cannot stop you perpetually because this knowledge of Ātman takes you beyond the gods and goddesses. That is a tremendous statement the value of which you can easily understand for the well-being of society.

When the British Parliament discussed the issue of spreading primary education, there was a big opposition from the conservative people. Their apprehension was, if all people were educated, who will be their servants? Even in India we had this feudalistic attitude. But once they get education they would not care for you and me. They will assert their own individuality. That is national progress. In Vedantic language this is a profound idea. None can resist once you have the knowledge in your hands. Knowledge of Ātman takes you away from all weakness,

makes you fearless and strong. So Vivekananda said that in all his lectures he has preached nothing but the Upanishads, and from the Upanishads that one particular word—*abhih, abhih, abhih*. That is, be fearless, be fearless! The Ātman is described in the Upanishads as fearlessness—*abhayamvai brahma*. Brahman is fearlessness, *abhayam*. So when you realize Brahman you become totally fearless. That is the message you get in the Upanishads and in their broad attitude there is no distinction between man and man. All are equal and free. Man in the Upanishads is seen as man and not fragmented into sex, creed and nationalities. It is a universal vision and, because of this, you will find a great spirit of toleration developing in India. This spirit is percolating to every stratum of society. This is very rare in the whole human history. You can study the history of other parts of the world; nowhere will you find that experience which you find here in India—respect for all religions, respect for the atheists and agnostics as well. We never persecuted the atheists and agnostics because that is never possible in the light of the profound Upanishadic vision. Belief is secondary here, experience is primary. Therefore, unbelief is not a sin.

A free mind

Swami Vivekananda says, the greatest period of Indian history will be then when an atheist would stand on the steps of a Hindu temple and criticize the people who worship there. He would not be molested by anybody, for he has every right to say these things. Our faith is not based on such tiny things and this sort of attitude is what Vedanta gave India. That is why we need to understand the Upanishads much more today than ever before. The greatest contribution of the Upanishads is to inspire

us to have a free mind, respect for everybody else and his or her opinion. This is tolerance of the highest kind and India has been the home of this wonderful idea of active toleration.

We have never established a central church to control human thinking. Here we are free to think. The freedom that we have is tremendous in the world of religion and spirituality. That is why new teachers could come, new religions could come. They were welcomed, they were honoured. They were not persecuted, hanged or crucified. In no other parts of the world you will find new teachers coming and welcomed by the people themselves. But here so many new teachers have come, so many new systems have come. We welcome them all. We watch and see if he is genuine. If he is genuine we welcome him. These are all tremendous achievements of our whole culture. It is a great wealth of the nation. You cannot get it in a few years. It comes with years of discipline, years of teaching by an unbroken tradition of successive teachers.

A great teacher comes. His teachings make an epoch. Whenever national light goes down there appears a great teacher who brings this truth afresh to the people and the nation becomes young again. This has happened several times in our history, happening in our own time in the 19th century when this whole Vedanta became embodied as Sri Ramakrishna. What a wonderful synthesis of both ancient and modern we find in him! And this we cannot find in any other society. In other religions too, when a new teacher comes, they kill him off. Even Greece, such a noble nation of many gifted people, could not tolerate Socrates because he was not politically narrow. He was a corrupter of the youth, that was the judgement against him and Socrates had to drink poison. Jesus Christ is

another example of a divine person who was tortured and crucified.

I refer to these incidents when I speak in the Western countries and ask the audience what if both of them were in India? Certainly they would not have been killed. They would have been honoured and worshipped. This is our history. This is the gift of our Upanishads. From the Upanishads has come the tremendous attitude of respect for highly spiritual characters and toleration of different forms of beliefs and practices.

Though we cannot estimate easily how much we owe to our Upanishads, it is all the same possible to guess it from the renewal of our national life again and again for several thousand years. That is something extraordinary. Sri Krishna said in the *Bhagavad Gitā* that to preach the truth, to renew our yoga, '*sambhavāmi yuge yuge*'—'I come in every *yuga*.' That is our religious belief. But study history, you will also find that this declaration is true. Some great power always comes to renew our spiritual life when it sags down, when it gets mixed up with superstitions and other evil practices. No pandit, no scholar can correct these things. Only a man-God can do so. He has the power and authority to change human thought and action. This you find happening even today. Swami Vivekananda is a glaring example. He condemned the evils of the society, but gave us a new vision of human quality and freedom. Thus we have inherited from the past a fund of wisdom. That wisdom has kept us alive all these thousands of years. We have a continuity of spiritual life emanating from the Vedas down to Sri Ramakrishna. We call it in Sanskrit the *rishivamsha*. The other is the *rājavamsha*. *Rishivamsha* has been continuous in India, never broken from the ancient times to modern times. Even the worst period of our

history has produced great sages who have given a new life to our culture. Guru Nānak was born when Babur was invading India, killing hundreds of people, carrying away our beautiful Punjabi women to be sold in Central Asia. Nānak himself has described these atrocities in his songs. Politically it was a most difficult situation, but spiritual life was vibrant.

Take the last three centuries when we were dominated by the powerful Western nations, Western religious ideology and Western culture. But even at that time India produced Sri Ramakrishna, followed by Holy Mother Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda. All these will show that our spiritual tradition is a continuing tradition like the Ganga flowing from the ancient to modern times.

In sharp contrast to this reality, the *rājavamsha* has suffered repeated setbacks. We had not the political wisdom to keep our states together. That is why in modern times Vivekananda uses this very Vedanta to make the political tradition also strong, to develop a new India that is politically strong, socially progressive and spiritually as beautiful as ever. That is why a total view of human life you will find in Vivekananda literature and he calls it Practical Vedanta.

Source of strength

The Upanishads have been the greatest strengthening factor in India's long history. But it had preached to the people only indirectly. Today, Swami Vivekananda says, it will preach to the people directly. We had many great things in the past. But as centuries rolled on, one aspect of our life suffered very badly, namely inter-human relations. There we started treating people with discrimination. Caste superiority, caste distinction, untouchability, all these began to develop

in India. Women were badly treated every time. Take all the books of the past and you will find the 'duties' of the wife and the 'rights' of the husband everywhere. Nowhere will you find the rights of the wife. Today, for the first time, Swami Vivekananda has brought this idea that every person must rise to the highest level of development—no distinction between man and man, woman and man. We shall make Vedanta practical from this point of view. The same Ātman is there in every being—the lowest of the low, the poorest of the poor, the weakest of the weak. So Swamiji wanted these Upanishads to become the greatest source of our strength and action to re-shape our destiny in the modern period. What we owed to them in the past is immense. What we are going to owe to them in the modern period is still immense. Spiritually, we have produced great men and women. We have a great spiritual heritage. But we have failed again and again in the political and social spheres. That should not happen. A more perfect culture we shall have to develop in India which will improve not only the social and political situation, but also the spiritual situation in the country. Swamiji turned to the Upanishads in this connection. So in all his lectures he has always laid emphasis that he has preached nothing but the Upanishads. Vedanta has not only the energy to build our nation but to build the international community as well. It is a universal philosophy that preaches man as man and does not view man on the basis of caste, creed, gender and so on. That universal dimension of Vedanta was lived by Sri Ramakrishna himself and proclaimed by Swami Vivekananda.

Our erstwhile Hindu society was nourished by the Smritis and the Purānas. Very little Upanishadic influence was there

on our social life. The Upanishads say man is divine; yet we treat him as an animal all the time. That is why Upanishadic influence is very little in the Smritis and the Purānas which contain plenty of discriminating ideas. That weakness we have to overcome today.

Swamiji's man-making message

Swamiji drew our attention to the fact that this modern age will see the development of a Vedantic society, Vedantic culture and civilization in this country where social, political and intellectual strength will combine with spiritual strength. Spirituality is our birthright, says Vedanta. We do not have to go anywhere to become spiritual. That divine quality is within you. Manifest it in all your actions, in inter-human relations. That is Practical Vedanta. This is the teaching Swamiji has given. Slowly it is penetrating our people. This great message of Swamiji is for all people. He gave us a man-making, nation-building message. I am glad to say the policymakers in India are slowly realizing the profound significance of this Vedantic message for our nation today. When the Government of India in 1984 declared Swamiji's birthday (12 January) as the National Youth Day, that was the beginning of recognition of the relevance of Swamiji to the rebuilding of our nation.

A few years ago, the then Education Minister, P. V. Narasimha Rao, spoke at a seminar in Coimbatore Ramakrishna Mission on 'Vivekananda and the Education Policy'. There he said: When we planned this education policy, we were inspired by Swamiji's great idea of man-making education. We are trying to implement it as far as we can. Not engineer-making, doctor-making, but man-making education.

So Swamiji's ideas have reached the policy-making level. Truly, as the nation faces more and more trackless problems, where shall it turn for light but in Swami Vivekananda's message, in the great Vedanta? Wherever this Vedanta has gone, it has brought inspiration. Earlier a few pundits and a few scholars and sannyasins knew it or had access to it. All others lived on some popular notions of religion with a bundle of superstitions, dry rituals, and ceremonies. Swamiji made the Upanishads available to all. Imagine, the whole nation is now getting educated in the Upanishads and the *Gītā*. What a strength will come to the nation! What manliness and courage will come to the people! What large-heartedness will come because in Vedanta nobody can be narrow, nobody can be sectarian. The *Ishopanishad* says, '*Tato na vijugupsate.*' When you see the Ātman in all beings, then you cannot have hatred. So that kind of development will come. A great people in a great country. Now we are a small people in a great country. That will change when we get a touch of Swami Vivekananda's Vedanta that is strengthening, purifying and universal and now crossing the oceans, cutting all man-made barriers, reaching all nations of the world. Even Soviet Russia, which kept itself concealed behind the iron curtain, has started a Vivekananda Society. What does it show? It shows that people are searching for light. And from where do they get this light? From the Vedanta that Swamiji made available to all. They are now increasingly turning to India for guidance, for wisdom. And Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda are epitome of condensed wisdom of India.

Swamiji's Indian lectures called '*Lectures from Colombo to Almora*' must be read by every literate person to make him truly educated, truly an Indian. It is

these books that made great leaders, that awakened the Indians and India's consciousness to fight for freedom, that inspired many great freedom fighters including the great Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. In this book Swamiji exhorts everyone:

Teach yourselves, teach every one his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.

There is some weakness now because we have not yet touched the deeper levels of our being. Let us touch it, new energy will come. New strength will come. It is my life's privilege. I am not to beg and borrow this wonderful strength. It is already in me.

When Lokmanya Tilak said 'Swaraj is my birthright', it galvanized the political movement. Vedanta says, this spirituality is your birthright. Unfold it in life and action. That is a wonderful teaching. We did not know about it. We knew about rituals and ceremonies and all other things. 'Touch the tail of a cow, give five rupees to a priest at Hardwar and you go straight to heaven.' That was all the religion we knew. But today a most strengthening, purifying, more elevating concept of religion and life you will find in the Vivekananda literature. This whole thing is Vedanta, Practical Vedanta, that gives that clarion call—'Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached'—'*Uttishthata, jāgrata, prāpya varān nibodhata.*' These words had been read by

people thousands of time. But they could not understand the significance of these words until Swamiji touched them. Since then, this particular passage of the *Kathopanishad* is a marvel—'Arise, awake and enlighten yourselves from those who are enlightened.' Why? '*Kshurasya dhārā nishitā duratyayā durgam pathastat kavayah vadanti.*' Because the road is very sharp like a razor's edge; it is very difficult to tread on, say the wise ones. Even then, march on, march on—that is the call.

Finally, the Upanishads introduced something that we missed during the past few centuries. What is that? Swamiji refers to it and says, it is the heroic attitude to life. We had a very tame attitude to life. Heroic attitude we missed completely. Rabindranath Tagore has also spoken about this 'Shudra' habit of India. But Vedanta is the lion-roar. Swamiji roared this great Vedantic truth which had inspired people. Today it will also inspire the younger generations. The younger generations are becoming very violent. For example, in Japan, young people are getting violent. They do not know what to do. People in the West are also becoming violent. Even sports, such as soccer, have become centres of violence. So the youths must learn to take care so that their energies are not wasted in violent, anti-human activities. From where shall they get strength? That strength will come from understanding and assimilating Swamiji's Vedanta. A profound dimension is there—how to transform human energy into helpful forces. We have therefore to educate our people in the great message of strength, fearlessness and compassion which is Vedanta. ■

* This article is based on a lecture Srimat Swami Ranganathanandaji Maharaj, who later became the 13th President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, delivered at the Institute on 12 September 1989.