



SS-10

Upanisadic Philosophy as Reflected in Gandhian thought

Dr. M.S. MURALEEDHARAN PILLAI

DEPARTMENT OF VEDANTA

SREESANKARACHARYA UNIVERSITY OF SANSKRIT
KALADY, KERALA

The upanisadic literature have had a vast and pervasive influence in Indian life and tradition. The upanisadic teachings and upanisadic type of realization run through a wide range of Hindu religious literature and culture. The upanisadic philosophy and moral teachings stands supreme as regards social and intellectual influence, especially in the modern period. Upanisads teachings and ancient traditional works were more influenced and studied by our social reformers, political leaders and philosophers in the nineteenth and twentieth century. They are all stimulated and heavily influenced by western culture, but their fundamental standpoint was consistently upanisadic tradition in nature ie, the universal brotherhood.

In the renaissance period, Rajaram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayananda Saraswathy, Rama- Krishna Parama Hamsa, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Acharya Vinoba, Rabindranatha Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi etc., have re-interpreted the essence of upanisadic thoughts with the humanitarian consideration ie, the need and the demand of the society. Gandhiji was a great man and a respected personality of the world. He was a great practical philosopher, educator, thinker and a social reformer of India. His ideas and thoughts permeated the entire human community especially the lower caste people of the society. He made an attempt to eradicate untouchability that was existed among the Indian society. He was a social reformer who preached every thing for the benefit of human life. To him religion has got practical importance in life. He tried to spiritualize all aspects of human life.

The central theme of Gandhian philosophy and his life is the integral humanism. To prove the integral humanism as the central theme of Gandhian thought it is necessary to prove that integral humanism existed in the upanisad philosophy as well. The universal message of the oneness is the central teaching of the upanisads. Gandhiji added a social dimension to this universal method. The upanisads gave us first the message of non-violence. The Chandogya Upanisad declared that non-violence was an ethical quality of man. Hindu ethics since the time of the upanisads had always laid stress on the virtue of 'ahimsa' to all living beings, human or otherwise. Upanisadic philosophy is also deeply entrenched in Indian culture and way of thinking that is Gandhiji in a way epitomises ancient Indian non-violence and life of renunciation, he in fact reflects the crux of upanisads. He said "I believe in the Vedas, the upanisads, the puranas and all that goes by the name of Hindu scriptures, and therefore in avatars and rebirth".

Gandhiji declared, explicitly that he was a believer in Advaita, "the essential unity of God and man and for that



matter of all lives². The base of upanisadic tradition and the Bhagavadgita mainly form the foundation of Gandhian life and thought. He for the first time read the Gita, the translation of Sir Edwin Arnold. He was ashamed of this and then he read the original sanskrit of the Gita and many translations. This was the first vedantic influence on Gandhiji's life. His philosophy and life was influenced by different systems like vaisnavism, Buddhism, Jainism and Christianity. But to a great extent the upanisadic tradition, the philosophy of Sankara influenced more the life of Gandhiji.

The period of upanisads is the most glorious era of Indian ideal Humanism. The upanisads proclaim the existence of spiritual unity behind all physical existence. According to Gandhiji - "one must give up attachment to things and dedicate one's all to God and make use of his gifts to serve Him only". In the first mantra of Isavasyopanisad explain that "all that moves in this moving world should be known as enveloped by God. Leave the transient and find joy in the eternal. Do not covet what belongs to others³". Gandhiji said that one is asked to dedicate every thing to God and then use it to the required extend⁴. He also said, "The prayer is not restricted to one's caste or community, it is all inclusive. It comprehends the whole of humanity, and welfare of the society." The ancient seer prays the social happiness;

"Serve bhavantu Sukhinah Sarve-
Santu niramayah
Sarve bhadrani pasyantu makascid-
duhkhabhag bhvet."

ie, may all of us become happy and healthy in life. May all attain the good thing, may none suffer any moment. This is we find that a lofty, noble and elevating idea of universal brotherhood. This shows that all are equal in the eyes of God. The seer's vision and sympathies are not limited to humanity alone but overflow to all beings - "loka samastah sukhino bhavantu". This can be shown that the social happiness as a necessary condition for cultural growth and development. The upanisadic seers and tradition also realised that social happiness should be within the reach and every member of the society.

"bhadram Karnebhi Srunuyama devah
bhadram pasemah⁵....."

These are the universal concept of the Indian ancient "Sanatanadharma." Gandhiji applied pragmatic measures to achieve the fulfilment of the universal brotherhood and humanism. He indulged in pragmatic method in every walk of life for the welfare of mankind. Dynamism also is a characteristic of Gandhian humanism. He believed that, God is an indefinable mysterious power that pervades everything. God as Saccidananda

Gandhiji defines God as "Saccidananda" In his view God is present in everything and everybody and He is undetachable and also pure and infinite spirit. It is this spirit that exists in all creatures, both living and non-living. In this view he accept the svetashvaropanisad principle. "The one God, hidden in all things, all pervading, the inner soul of all things⁶". This principle is fully accepted in the Gandhian thought. He also describes God as the nameless and the

formless, this idea may be compared to that of Sankara, who describes that Supreme, power through 'Neti', 'Neti'⁷. He said that in God there is no duality⁸. He describes God as the essence, pure consciousness, asforce, truth, goodness, love etc., God according to Gandhiji is undefined power pervading all life, the spirit, the formless, the nameless Truth⁹. This God is the creator, preserver and destroyer of the universe. The taittiriopanisad already earlier said this idea related to Brahman ie, "That verily, from which these beings are born, that by which, when born they live, that into which, when departing, they enter. That seek to know, that is Brahman.¹⁰" Here we can assume that the concept of upanisadic Brahman and Gandhiji is God are one and the sameone.

He says, "and where there is truth, there is also knowledge which is true. Where there is no truth, there can be no true knowledge. That is why the word 'cit' or knowledge is associated with the name of God. And where there is true knowledge, there is always 'ananda' ie, bliss. There sorrow has no place. And even truth is eternal, so is the bliss derived from it. Hence we know God as "Saccidananda". Thus, the ultimate reality is known as "Saccidananda". He also believed that Brahman is 'Sat', 'Sat' means existence. Brahman is 'cit'. 'Cit' means consciousness. Brahman is 'ananda'. Ananda means bliss. Thus Brahman is "Saccidamanda." Brahman is infinite (anandam). This infinite power is the Absolute truth. That is "Truth is God"¹¹. The taittiriopanisad 'Sruti' "Satyamjanamanandam brahma"¹² is fully absorbed Gandhian concept of God.

According to Gandhiji he who follows the absolute truth can get moksha. This was the fundamental thrust of the upanisads ie, knowledge for liberation "Jnanadevatu Kaivalyam". He says there is one absolute truth, which is total and all-embracing. He believed every living being as a spark of the ultimate truth. He also knew that the sum total of all these sparks of the supreme truth. These facts are developed in his thoughts from the help of the aitareyopanisad sruti "Sarvam khaluidam brahma."¹³ He expressed the upanisadic view that truth and reality are not different. He pointed out that, God or Brahman described as the ultimate reality, highest knowledge, infinite, bliss etc. For the upanisadic seers and Sri Sankara, truth and reality are individual entities, And long before the emergence of Gandhian thinkers, both western and eastern treated truth as identical with reality or God.¹⁴

Influence of the Bhagavadgita

The Bhagavadgita is the quintessence of the upanisads. The Gita constitutes the quintessence of the doctrine of dharma. Gandhiji was very much influenced by the Bhagavadgita. It was to Gandhiji the unfailing guide in all circumstances. Gita is the most revered scripture of Gandhiji. He said that "the Gita inspires us to do our duties, neglecting the suffering and the torture that we receive in course of our action."¹⁵ He considered Gita as his spiritual dictionary where he found solution for his problems at the most crucial moments of his life. He said "when doubt haunts me, when disappointments stare me in the face, and when I see not one ray of light on the horizon, I turn to the



Bhagavadgita and find a verse to comfort me; and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of over whelming sorrow. My life has been full of external tragedies, and if they have not left any visible and indelible effect on me, I owe it to the teachings of the Bhagavatgita."¹⁶

According to Gita 'Karmayoga' is one of the highest paths to attain liberation. Gandhiji believes in the law of 'Karma', this belief obviously has the source in the upāśisadic doctrine. He learnt from the Gita that religion is no opposed to material good. it is a misconception to hold that in business, vocation and day-to-day work, religion has not place and that religion is only for attaining spiritual salvation. The Gita dispels all such erroneous views. The Gita preaches, we have a right to actions, but not to their fruits, ie, Karmanyevadhikarasthe....."¹⁷. The second and eighteenth chapter of the Gita give us the central teachings as their way to self-realisation and idea of 'niskamakarma', that is action without desire for the result. This proved for him to be of priceless worth.

No other book influenced him so deeply as the study of the Gita. He learnt a good deal about 'aparigraha' and 'Sambhava' from this moral text only. The teaching of the Gita became an infallible guide of conduct to him. Gita was born to lift Arjuna from his dependency and the teaching given to Arjuna was the teaching given to all mankind and universe.

The Gita teaches the cultivation of 'Samatva' and the means of doing service of every living creature without thought of reward. The secret of the Gita which Gandhiji discovered and deduced in to a commentary on the Gita - "anasaktiyoga". He has treated Gita as a work on religion, ethics and philosophy all combined in to one. Here he said that religion is 'Karmayoga' ethics is anasakthi and bhakti and philosophy is jnana as also self - realisation after absolute submission of the self to God. Thus through out his life the Gita remained the source of his pleasure and joy, solace and strength, and the reference book for resolving all knotty problems both in personal and public life. His idea of 'Sarvodaya' also derived its primary inspiration from the upāśisadic tradition especially in the Gita. The idea of Bread labour equally derived its inspiration from the 'Karmayoga' of the Gita inspired him. His idea of 'Trusteeship' of the rich can be traced to the philosophy of renunciation of the fruits of one's action for the community as advocated in the Gita. Thus the Gita proved to be a decisive factor in shaping Gandhian life and philosophy in the right path.

Advaita philosophy had great influence on Gandhiji's every activities. His view of ultimate reality as an all inclusive spiritual one reminds us of idealistic monism. "ekamsatviprabahudavadanti"¹⁸ ie, that which exists is one, men call it by various names. This sruti which had deeply impressed to the Gandhian life and thinking.

Gandhiji like Sri Sankara says that nothing exists except truth, which upāśisads and Sankara calls Brahman. Where there is truth, there is also true knowledge (cit) and where true knowledge exists there is also bliss (ananda). The impersonal Brahman and the personal God have been adopted in Gandhiji's philosophy, like advaitin who

distinguishes between :Paramarthika drsti" (absolute stand point), "Vyavaharikadrsti" (practical stand point). According to the metaphysical stand point of Gandhiji, God is the only reality who manifests himself in the various existing entities is only apparently real. He also said that moral and spiritual disciplines are essential for knowing God.

It was Gandhiji's life style based on his experimental quest for truth that attracted to him the great scientist like Albert Einstein. It was Gandhi's thought for an eternal modern social system that had brought to him a new generation which had been craving for a new world system. He re-discovered a new vision, a new dimension and a new meaning to life, which had been forgotten by people for a long time.

According to the principle of "niskamakarma" Gandhiji dedicated his life to the Indian society. He was against the untouchability and social evils which existed among the Hindus. He considered all human beings are equal and one in spirit. This was based on the inspiration of the universal message of oneness of the upāśisadic thought. Thus Gandhiji was a man of peace and sacrifice, millions of people accepted his teachings which indeed came to constitute a separate religion, namely gandhism. Thus Gandhiji has become the greatest pragmatic social revolutionary of the present century.

References

1. M. K. Gandhi, Hindu Dharma, The glory and the abuse, Navajivan Trust, Ahmadabad, 1978, P.9.
2. Young India, December - 1924
3. Isavasyo panisad - 1 -1
4. Young India, March, 1925
5. Mundakopanisad santimantra
6. Svetasvetaropanisad - VI - II
7. Dilip Kumar chakravarthy (Ed), perspective in contemporary philosophy, Ajanta Publications, New Delhi, 1978, P. 180.
8. I bid, P. 181.
9. Jaladharpal, The moral philosophy of Gandhiji, Gyan publishing house, Delhi, 1998, P.254.
10. Taittiriopanisad III-1
11. Cheriyan Gudalur, Gandhi's concept of truth and justice, Poornodaya Book Trust, Gandhi Bhavan, Kochi, 1994, P-54.
12. Taittiriopanisad - II -1-1
13. Aitareyopanisad - V. 3.
14. Jaladharpal, the Moral philosophy of Gandhi, Gyan publishing house, Delhi, 1998. P. 83
15. Young India, March 1925
16. Young India, November, 1930
17. Bhagavadgita - II - 47
18. Rgveda, -1- 164 - 46