

RIDDLE NO. 8

HOW THE UPANISHADS DECLARED WAR ON THE VEDAS ?

What is the position of the Upanishads in relation to the Vedas ? Are the two complimentary to each other or are they antagonistic ? Of course, no Hindu would admit that the Vedas and Upanishads are repugnant to each other. On the contrary, it is the common belief of all Hindus that there is no antagonism between them and that both form part and parcel of the same single system of thought. Is this belief well-founded ?

The principal reason for the rise of such a belief is to be found in the fact that the Upanishads are also known by another name which is called Vedanta. The word Vedanta has got two meanings. In one sense, it means the last parts of the Vedas. In the second sense, it means the essence of the Vedas. The word Vedanta being another name for the Upanishads, the Upanishads themselves have come to acquire these meanings. It is these meanings which are responsible for the common belief that there is no antagonism between the Vedas and the Upanishads.

To what extent are these meanings of the word Upanishads justified by facts ? In the first place, it is well to note the meaning of the word Vedanta. What was the original meaning of the word Vedanta ? Does it mean the last book of the Vedas ?

As observed by Prof. Max Muller¹:

“Vedanta is a technical term and did not mean originally the last portions of the Veda, or chapters placed, as it were, at the end of a volume of Vedic literature, but the end i.e., the object, the highest purpose of the Veda. There are, of course, passages, like the one in the Taittiriya-aranyaka (ed-Rajendra Mitra p. 820), which have been misunderstood both by native and European scholars, and where Vedanta means simply the end of the Veda : *yo vedadu svarah*

¹ The Upanishads (S.B.E.) Vol. I, Introduction, p. LXXXVI.

This 15-page typed MS with modifications in the handwriting of the author was originally entitled ‘Vedas versus Upanishads’. Concluding two paragraphs are added by the author in his own handwriting.—Ed.

prokto vedante ka pratishthitah, ‘the Om which is pronounced at the beginning of the Veda, and has its place also at the end of the Veda.’ Here Vedanta stands simply in opposition to Vedadu, it is impossible to translate it, as Sayana does, by Vedanta or Upanishad. Vedanta, in the sense of philosophy, occurs in the Taittiriya-aranyaka p. 817, in a verse of the Narayana-upanishad repeated in the Mundak-upanishad 111 2, 6 and elsewhere *vedantavignansuniskitarah*, ‘those who have well understood the object of the knowledge arising from the Vedanta’ not from the last books of the Veda and *Svetasvatara-up* VI-22, *vedante paramam guhyam*, ‘the highest mystery in the Vedanta’. Afterwards it is used in the plural also, e.g., Kshurikopanishad, 10 (bibl. Ind. p. 210) *pundariketi Vedanteshu nigadyate*, ‘it is called pundarika in the Vedantas’ i.e., in the Khandogya and other Upanishads, as the commentator says, but not in the last books of each Veda.”

More direct evidence on the point is that which is contained in the Gautama Dharma Sutras. In Chapter XIX verse 12 Gautama speaks of purification and says :

“The purificatory (texts are), the Upanishads, the Vedantas, the Samhita—text of all the Vedas” and so on.

From this it is clear that at the date of Gautama the Upanishads were distinguished from Vedantas and were not acknowledged as a part of the Vedic literature. Hardatta in his commentaries says “those parts of the Aranyakas which are not (Upanishads) are called Vedantas”. This is unimpeachable proof that the Upanishads did not come within the range of the Vedic literature and were outside the canons.

This view is also supported by the use of the Veda in the Bhagwat Gita. The word Veda is used in the Bhagwat Gita at several places. And according to Mr. Bhat¹ the word is used in a sense which shows that the author did not include the Upanishads in the term.

The subject matter of the Upanishads is not the same as that of the Vedas. This is also another reason why the Upanishads are not a part of the Vedas. What is the origin of the word Upanishad ? The point is somewhat obscure. Most European scholars are agreed in deriving Upanishad from the root *sad*, to sit down, preceded by the two prepositions, *ni* down and *upa* near, so that it would express the idea of session or assembly of public sitting down near their teacher to listen to his instructions. This is because in the Trikandasesha, the word Upanishad is explained by *Samipasadena* as sitting down near a person.

¹ Sacred Books of the East Vol. II p. 275.

But as Prof. Max Muller points out there are two objections to the acceptance of this derivation. Firstly such a word, it would seem, would have been applicable to any other portion of the Veda as well as to the chapters called Upanishad, and it has never been explained how its meaning came thus to be restricted. Secondly, the word Upanishad, in the sense of session or assembly has never been met with. Whenever the word occurs, it has the meaning of doctrine, secret doctrine, or is simply used as the title of the philosophic treatises which contain the secret doctrine.

There is another explanation proposed by Sankara in his commentary on the Taaittiriya-Upanishad II, 9, noted by Prof. Max Muller. According to it the highest bliss is contained in the Upanishad (*param sreyo 'syam nishannam*). That is why it is called Upanishad. Regarding this, Prof. Max Muller says :

“The Aranyakas abound in such etymologies which probably were never intended as real as plays on words, helping, to account somehow for their meaning.”

Prof. Max Muller however favours a derivation of the word ‘Upanishad’ from the root *sad* to destroy, and meant knowledge which destroys ignorance, the cause of Samsara, by revealing the knowledge of Brahmana as a means of salvation. Prof. Max Muller points out that this is the meaning which the native scholars have unanimously given to the word Upanishad.

If it be granted that the true derivation of the word ‘Upanishad’ is what is suggested by Prof. Max Muller, then it would be one piece of evidence to show that the common belief of the Hindus is wrong and that the subject matter of the Vedas and the Upanishads are not complimentary but antagonistic. That the system of thought embodied in the Upanishads is repugnant to that of the Vedas is beyond doubt. A few citations from some of the Upanishads will suffice to show their opposition to the Vedas. The Mundaka Upanishad says :

“Bramha was produced the first among the gods, maker of the universe, the preserver of the world. He revealed to his eldest son Atharva, the science of Brahma the basis of all knowledge. (2) Atharvan of old declared to Angis this science, which Brahma had unfolded to him ; and Angis, in turn, explained it to Satyavaha, descendant of Bharadvaja, who delivered this traditional lore, in succession, to Angiras. (3) Mahasala Saunaka, approaching Angiras with the proper formalities, inquired, ‘What is that, O venerable sage, through the knowledge of which all this (universe) becomes known ? (4) (Angiras) answered, ‘Two sciences are to be known— this is what the sages versed in sacred knowledge declare—the

superior and the inferior. (5) The inferior (consists of) the Rig Veda, the Yajur-Veda, the Sama-Veda, the Atharva-Veda, accentuation, ritual grammar, commentary, prosody and astronomy. The superior science is that by which the imperishable is apprehended” by which of course he means the Upanishads.

The Chhandogya Upanishad says :

“(1) Narada approached Sanatkumara, saying, ‘Instruct me, venerable sage. He received for answer ‘Approach me with (tell me) that which thou knowest ; and I will declare to thee whatever more is to be learnt.’ (2) Narada replied, ‘I am instructed, venerable sage, in the Rig-veda, the Sama-veda, the Yajur-veda, the Atharvana (which is) the fourth, the Itihasas and Purana (which are) the fifth Veda of the Vedas, the rites of the pitris, arithmetic, the knowledge of portents and of great periods, the art of reasoning, ethics, the science of the gods, the knowledge of Scripture, demonology, the science of war, the knowledge of the stars, the sciences of serpents and deities; this is what I have studied. (3) I, venerable man, know only the hymns (mantras); while I am ignorant of soul. But I have heard from reverend sages like thyself that ‘the man who is acquainted with soul overpasses grief. Now I, venerable man, am afflicted ; but do thou transport me over my grief. Sanatkumara answered, ‘That which thou hast studied is nothing but name. (4) The Rig-veda is name ; and so are the Yajur-veda, the Sama-veda, the Atharvana, which is the fourth, and the Itihasas and Puranas, the fifth Veda of the Vedas, etc., (all the other branches of knowledge are here enumerated just as above),—all these are but names; worship name. (5) He who worships name (with the persuasion that it is) Brahma, ranges as it were at will over all which that name comprehends : such is the prerogative of him who worships name (with the persuasion that it is) Brahma, ‘Is there anything, venerable man’ asked Narada, ‘which is more than name?’ ‘There is,’ replied, ‘something which is more than name’. ‘Tell it to me’, rejoined Narada.”

The Brahadaranyaka Upanishad says :

“In that (condition of profound slumber) a father is no father, a mother is no mother, the worlds are no worlds, the gods are no gods, and the Vedas are no Vedas, sacrifices are no sacrifices. In that condition a thief is no thief, a murderer of embryos is no murderer of embryos, a Pulkasa no Paulakasa, a Chandala no Chandala, a Sramana no Sramana, a devotee no devotee ; the saint has then no relation, either of advantage or disadvantage, to merit or to sin ; for he then crosses over all griefs of the heart.”

This is what the Katha Upanishad has to say :

“This soul is not to be attained by instruction, nor by understanding, nor by much scripture. He is attainable by him whom he chooses. The soul chooses that man’s body as his own abode”.

“Although this soul is difficult to know, still it may easily be known by the use of proper means. This is what (the author) proceeds to say. This soul is not to be attained, known, by instruction, by the acknowledgement of many Vedas ; nor by understanding, by the power of recollecting the contents of books ; nor by much scripture alone. By what, then, is it to be attained ?

This he declares”.

How great was the repugnance to the Upanishads and the philosophy contained in them will be realized if one takes note of the origin of the words Anuloma and Pratiloma which are usually applied to the marriage tie among the Hindus. Speaking of their origin Mr. Kane, points out that¹ :

“These two words Anuloma and Pratiloma (as applied to marriage or progeny) hardly ever occur in the Vedic literature. In the Br. Up. (II. 1.5) and Kausitaki Br. Up. IV. 8. the word ‘Pratiloma’ is applied to the procedure adopted by a Brahmana of going to a Kshatriya for knowledge about ‘*Brahman*’.

Anuloma means according to the heir that is in the natural order of things, Pratiloma means against the heir that is contrary to the natural order. Reading the observations of Mr. Kane in the light of the definition of the word Pratiloma it is obvious that the Upanishads far from being acknowledged as part of the Vedic literature were if not despised, held in low esteem by the Vedic Brahmins. This is an additional piece of evidence which shows that there was a time when the relation between the Vedas and the Upanishads was of antagonism.

Another illustration of the attitude of the Vedic Brahmins towards Brahmins who had studied the Upanishads may be given. It is to be found in the texts of the Dharma Sutras of Baudhayana. Baudhayana in his Dharma Sutras (ii. 8.3) says that at a Shradha ceremony a Rahasyavid is to be invited only if other Brahmins are not available. A Rahasyavid of course means a Brahmin versed in the Upanishads.

The belief that the Vedas and the Upanishads are complimentary came into being is really a riddle.



¹ History of Dharma Sastra Vol. II, Part-I, p. 52.