

## The Upanishadic Polity: Some Speculations

Aditya Angiras\*

---

### Abstract

*Every faction of present day society remains unsatisfied from the social set-up due to one reason or the other Upanishadic society, depicted through various anecdotes, never had, any grudge in any manner against the then prevailing social administrative/governing system, which remains ideal for the present set-up. We can achieve the said idealistic condition in the present day society if we are endowed with the wiser vision of life. The paper explains the process of achieving the ideal conditions propagated by the Upanishads.*

**Keywords:** Upanishads, Ancient Indian polity, Anti- Materialists, Ethical polity,

The social polity, which existed in the Indian sub-continent (Aryavarta) before the advent of Islam, may be referred to, as 'Hindu State polity' since we do not find vestige traits or mentioning about any other religious cult besides Hinduism which might be noteworthy in any of the text available. The Hindu religion of the said period may be called as secular one since there was no other sectarian practices prevalent except Hindism and it was the only surviving religion at that time and it, interestingly, did not asserted it's values and ideologies regarding following any specific way of worshipping ardently at any one and they were free to choose the way of living. The polity of Vedic and Neo-Vedic times, it may be avowed, was rather based on certain moral values and certain purposes of life namely Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha and certain customs of social conduct suggested by various religious texts, and they have formed the core of ancient Indian civilization and culture of the said times. The roots of social polity of Pre-Vedic times can not be traced, it must be pointed out, since, we do not have any authentic and legitimate literary work or any information on Pre-Vedic civilization which might be anterior to these times which might be effecting and are the forefronts of the thought process of said times. Even the eminent sages of the Vedic and Neo Vedic times do not present a clear outline of the social polities of the earlier times of this larger sub-continent named as AryaVart. It would not be erudite to attempt to trace the features of the polities prevalent in Pre-Vedic times from the extant relics and claim that they are indelible and indisputable archaeological evidences. The existing versions of the Vedas and Neo-Vedic works do indicate efficaciously that the values of life were all time high and were upheld with utmost care during the Vedic and Neo-Vedic times. The entire set of values, which governed the human life may be termed as "Rta" and "Satya." The collection of codes for leading a cheerful and contented life became the ideal for the then prevalent clans and communities and these very concepts have come down the ages. The set of norms, propagated through various Upanishadic texts, not only upholds what had been the core of the common practices and determinants but also give the description of the practices which are desirable and advantageous at subtle level for the human society, and which the human society must refrain themselves from. The legends in this regard are still alive in one way or the other.

---

\*Lect. In Hindi, Deptt. Of VVBIS & IS (PU), Sadhu Ashram, Hoshiarpur, India

Interestingly, as mentioned earlier, we find two conspicuous and distinct expressions for “The Ultimate Truth” namely “Rta” and “Satya”<sup>1</sup> in Vedic and Neo-Vedic texts. Although both of the terms “Rta” and “Satya” denote “The Ultimate Truth” but both of these terms have a typical individuality and thus have distinct connotations. It becomes the necessity here, to make a differentiation between these two terms here. Sanskrit English dictionary defines “Rta” as: “to go, abhor, to hate, to avoid, to shun<sup>2</sup>” and Satya as: “True, Real, Actual, Sincere, Honest, Truthful, Pure, Virtuous, Good, Successful, effectual, Valid, Realize<sup>3</sup>”. Whereas Hindu Dharma Kosha defines both of the terms Rta as “Natural system, Physical and definite divine Laws<sup>4</sup>” i.e. The Cosmic Laws and “Satya” as :”Which is uniform in all Lokas (undeterred by causal laws of time and space<sup>5</sup>) consecutively. It must be mentioned her that Satya and Dharma are concordant with each other<sup>6</sup>. This dictionary defines the three dimensions of Rta namely 1. Cosmic order of celestial bodies, 2. Moral laws in relations prevalent in Human society, 3. Religious Austerities<sup>7</sup>.

“Rta” the Cosmic law, as designated and understood in Hindu Dharma Kosha, earmarks by the system of the 'laws of nature', which may be called the replica of the theory propagated by Charles Darwin since at initial level, it implies to the free play of expression of personal propensity and talents. It also indicates that there is a sense of competitiveness among individuals of a society, which is always dominating. It also validates the fact that conflict between groups and struggle for existence and/or dominance is a natural process and that the fittest would survive. This may mean that the elements of empathy and co-operation between different groups always remain although there may be a feeling of antipathy and rivalry among them as well. We must admit that the Hindu way of life had idealized the “Yajñashish<sup>8</sup> tradition of religious austerities in the later Vedic and Neo-Vedic Period which mean “to accept and dole out remnants after oblations/offerings have been made<sup>9</sup>”. Hinduism, as understood, has the ritualistic and optimistic inclinations for human life. The “Cosmic laws” were enhanced at later stage and were succeeded by the puritanical laws during the second stage, termed as “Satya” in the Upanishadic Era. The Puritanical law termed as “Satya”, ardently prescribes certain duties for every one and asks everyone to refrain from certain undesirable acts. They have been categorized as Niyama and Yama. The details of these Yama and Niyama have been well defined in Paatanjal Yoga Sutra. Adherence to the basic principles of humanity, it must be said, was strictly stressed upon during the Neo-Vedic times. However, it was palpable soon from the experiences that only a few people would consistently abide by truth and the undertaking to abide by truth could not be made mandatory for everyone, due to varied levels of comprehension and understanding. Those who were unable to abide by the principle of truth, due to their lower level of intellectual capacity about the truth, were asked to, at least, disavow and relinquish falsehood from their behavior and attitude as they were also part of human society and they also wanted to be at par with the people of first category. This very distinction became the dividing factor of the society and thus the entire society was sliced into two classes i.e. one who followed the truth with utmost devotion and faith at their own and others, who tried to abjure falsehood from their behavior and attitude. The First Group includes Sages like Yajñavalkya, Raikva, Angirasa & Devas like Yama who had attained the absolute. The other group of sliced society, included Kings like Janaka Ashvapati, Janushruti & Pravahini and Nachiketa, Satyakam Jabal etc. and they always had asked and discussed the former group the sensibility which could lead them to eternal solace. The former group of preachers or sages, who followed the path of wisdom, abstained from violence of every kind and practiced generosity and other noteworthy qualities in their behavior, which is the crux of Neo-Vedic polity. Thus, needless to submit that the Upanishadic polity revolves around the indispensable ideas of existence at higher level triggered by humanistic feelings since confronting truth, had been accepted as a pre-condition in society<sup>10</sup>. It will not be amiss to mention that

the purpose of polity, of the said times, indicates the irresistible desire for peace for self and the society.<sup>11</sup>

We, as mentioned earlier, find the names of some monarchs in Upanishads such as kakayeRaj Ashvapati, JanuShruti etc. This, itself, indicates that the entire Aryavart was divided into many small states and monarchism was prevalent even during the Upanishadic times. These kings had been inviting great Sages, going to places of Sages for discourses on self-realization and had been organizing sacrificial Yjanas for years together in which they had been inviting the sages. Interestingly the great Sages gave these monarchs and commoners the necessary guidelines and treated all of them with the same standards as implied to self, through self-imposed restrictions and guided every one without any apprehension during their discourses, which makes polity of Upanishadic times humanistic in approach. We do not any stance of variance or scuffle between these kings of various domains which itself implies that there was peace during Upanishadic times since the monarchs are not only self contained but their behavior and attitude are self-controlled, guided by various teaching of great sages of Upanishadic times. It may be added that the social polity of said times was driven by the ideal taught by the great sages like yajnavalkya etc,

It becomes inevitable to analyze the constituent factors of the polity which drove the society to tranquility and peace.

**Unparalleled ethics:** The Upanishads among 'Prasthanatrayee' are considered as milestones in the ancient Indian wisdom, which guide the wayfarer to a definite way for the ultimate growth of self. This journey of growth is a process of "becoming from being"<sup>12</sup>. According to Upanishads an individual, who is on to the path of self-realization, is a bundle of imperfections and only through moral corrections, he can achieve his final destination i.e. self-emancipation. These self-corrective measures which have been taught by the great Upanishadic sages, play the pivotal role in the life of an individual as well as in society. While the process of becoming from being means realizing one's own bona fide existence, may be said that, this process of becoming is revealed through the self-constrained attitude triggered by selfless Ego and unconditional compassion etc. Whole of the Upanishadic literature has emphasized upon the ethical contents, although the core contents of Upanishads are the Jiva, Jagat and Brahman<sup>13</sup>

Before we could talk about the polity driven by these certain self-corrective measures provided by the Upanishads, it is worthwhile to mention that the western minds have raised their speculations over the morality of the Upanishads. Western minds consider the ethical contents meaningless. Dussen asserts, "Moral conduct can not contribute directly but only indirectly to the attainment of knowledge that brings emancipation"<sup>14</sup>. On the other hand A.B. Keith opines that the ethical contents of Upanishads are valueless since 'In comparison with the intellectual activity of the Brahmanas, the ethical contents of the Upanishads must be said to be negligible and valueless'<sup>15</sup>. R.E.Hume repeats his version by saying "No longer the worship or sacrifice or good conduct is the requisite for the religious life or for salvation in the next ..... Sacrifice and works of merit towards hypostatized activities are, in the light of metaphysical knowledge, seems to be futile"<sup>16</sup>. Such comments certainly undermine and devalue the ethical contents of Upanishads undoubtedly. Upanishads like Brhadaranyaka Chandogya, Taittiriya and Kaushitaki stress on the fact that, the moral conduct loses its significance only after obtaining the supreme goal<sup>17</sup>. We may appreciate the fact that one is not bothered about his actions or conduct when one obtains the ultimate goal of life, because after having known 'The Supreme Reality' the morality becomes redundant. When the seeker realizes that everything is the part and parcel of the Brahman and nothing, except Brahman, has its own peculiar identity or every thing is the part of the Brahman, in such a case his actions, his meritorious or sinful deeds have no accomplishment since they are triggered by

compassion and universal love for humanity. Eventually, downsizing or neglecting the values taught by Upanishads completely remains out of question. Needless to say that these Upanishadic texts emphatically provides the ask everyone to differentiate between righteous and wrong deeds encryption mode for great cause of humanity.

As mentioned earlier, the entire Aryavart was sliced in to two parts, one who realized the ultimate truth through self-controlled actions and the other who followed the path of abjuring falsehood from their attitude. Interestingly, we do not find any incident of scuffle between the latter category because their ultimate aim was finding the self, although we find description of brawl between gods and demons. That too is for self-dominance in which Demons made the debut by winning over the gods. This, interestingly, indicates that the moral values were held high in the neo-Vedic period and material gain remained second on the list since the basic aim of human life was realization of ultimate truth although the Upanishads do not denounce the worldly riches completely<sup>18</sup>. It also indicates the fact that path of sensory objects is transient in nature and can not lead the seeker to emancipation.

Remarkable mind: We find some references on the creation of caste system in Brihadarnyakopanishad. We must yield to the fact that the great sages of Upanishads never considered caste system as a barrier in realizing the ultimate truth. They guided everyone including monarchs and kid on the righteous path without any ill consideration or prejudice. To them, age, caste factor or designation did not matter. We, therefore, also, should not ardently consider the man made barricades of social stratum and divisions made on the basis of caste, creed. Surprisingly Ishavasyopanishad asks every one to abstain himself from differentiation between entire human race<sup>19</sup> as it is sin. For, it's approach is humanistic. The same Upanishad makes a distinctive and clarion call to all of the people disputing with each other over a small piece of land to give up the niggardliness and consider the whole of the earth as the abode of the Lord thereby shunning the petty feeling of greed and lust although nowhere worldly riches are abhorrent. It goes further by proclaiming that when everywhere the Brahman or the Supreme Master prevails, it is a trivial matter of no importance to quarrel over the material gains. The instance of yajnavalkya and Maitreyi also deals with the same problem and maitreyi, being wiser one, opts Sheryas rather than Preyas by putting the sensible question to self "If the whole earth filled with were mine, would I be immortal<sup>20</sup>". It must be pointed out here that this very Upanishad asks the entire human society to act sensible so that life could be better experience for all. It must be admitted that he entire humanity is suffering from pangs due to faulty co-location of ideals for life as we are triggered by lust, deceit and anger etc.

The prayers made in the beginning of all of the Upanishads denote the concern for entire human race and thus they long for the peace "Serenity that yields the understanding to all<sup>21</sup>". It not only indicates a sense of oneness but, on the contrary, also indicates the selective sense of sharing<sup>22</sup> which enables the person to transcend the anti-social ideas of meanness and self-domination. It also, on the other hand, tries to concentrate on the concept of cosmic unity<sup>23</sup> when Upanishads proclaim "one who sees all beings in himself and self in all of the beings, he never hates any one<sup>24</sup>". Eventually, the situation of entire society, in present times, remains miserable since our actions are triggered by petty feelings of selfishness, greed, lust, etc and have completely rejected the thoughts propagated by great sages of Neo-Vedic civilization.

Anti-materialists: A human society has to guard itself from the unethical practices and follow the social norms of fraternity, compassion and love so that it can flourish in the right direction because there is the tendency of growth in the unwanted direction of the human behavior by default and this very tendency, which includes stealing, prostitution, bribery, etc., play the negative role for the human

society. Chandogya, in order to make the society aware of these factors, invariably denounces such practices. Thus, the moral guidelines provided by the Upanishadic literature not only set guard the human society against all odd practices, but, on the contrary asks the society to be aware of such damaging vices which are avoidable. It is worth to point out, that the Upanishads repeatedly emphasize on life's great virtues like chastity, desire-less actions, faith<sup>25</sup>, etc. by rendering various stories. The Kathopanishad, surprisingly, is very conscious about the spiritual progression when it guides everyone to "arise, awake and get the final objectives and understand it"<sup>26</sup>. The process of self realization is a process of becoming from being in which one has to uplift himself by means of these very basic qualities of life for self liberation and this only can be done by adopting these great virtues of life only.

Right from the beginning, the human mind has always been confounded to choose from the good, better, best and pleasant and the Kathopanishad, very subtly has presented the discrimination in this regard by proclaiming the "The better is one thing, the pleasant may be other. But both of these, having different aims, bind the person"<sup>27</sup>. And at the same time the subtle difference is also made clear by saying "Of these both, come to the man at will. The wise person makes the discrimination after judging both of them and opts which is the best for him and the fool chooses the vice-versa"<sup>28</sup>. So, eventually, this indicates that the wise person chooses 'Sreyas' rather than 'Preyas' to stabilize the society. The Isavasyopanishad categorically announces that "yearn for not the wealth of anyone at all"<sup>29</sup>. The Kathopanishad also suggests the same through the dialogue of Nachiketa and Yama "Not with the wealth (power) is a man to be satisfied ever"<sup>30</sup>, although it does not negate the idea of acquiring wealth. A person is eventually never satisfied with the worldly riches at all<sup>31</sup>. The trekker always considers the wealth as the barring substance in his journey towards the truth and always tries to keep himself off and away from the wealth.

The seeker, who has not experienced the ultimate truth, always tries to see the truth which is covered with the golden lid<sup>32</sup> since the aim of human life is self realization and worldly riches play the role of barring catalyst in human society. Here, it must be admitted that the golden lid is the symbol of worldly riches which hinders the person from the path of self liberation and sets off the race for material gains consequently leading to unrest and cut throat competition. It must be pointed out, that the peace in the society may not be possible if the laws of worldly riches govern the society.

Righteous actions: The Upanishads understand the fact that a man is destined to perform action and they want a life full of action<sup>33</sup>. They also understand the nature of action i.e. virtuous action and second being Non- virtuous actions<sup>34</sup>. They pray for virtuous action in life. The tendency of not performing the right action or indulgence in non-action is one of the factors which make the person unworthy. Thus, the Isavasyopanishad makes the person aware by saying "Even while doing the deeds here, one may desire to live for hundred years ..... not otherwise, than this is it ..... the deeds adhere not on the man"<sup>35</sup>. Here the Upanishads clearly put forth the idea of performing righteous deed, which are socially approved and comply with the social standards. The seer of the Upanishads clearly warns all the trekkers when it proclaims that "Satanic are these worlds called, with blinding darkness are they covered. They fall pray for this darkness that put forth their prayers for self"<sup>36</sup>. Thus, it is clearly that seer of the Upanishadic literature forwards the idea that one should not have tendency for escapism at all. The seer of this Upanishad not only puts one to alert by putting the fact forward that "one should not cling to the actions because he is not bound"<sup>37</sup>. It clearly indicates the freedom of will of a person for actions by indicating the value of performing righteous actions as righteous and just action maintain peace in society

It will not be amiss to mention the Brhadaranyakopanishad here which not only indicates that the actions are of two types but also suggest the type of action which are to be performed by the person by saying that “Accordingly one acts, accordingly one conducts himself so does he become. One becomes virtuous by performing good deeds and the other becomes evil by performing unworthy deeds<sup>38</sup>”. The Upanishad further mentions that “But people say a person is made of desires only what actions he had performed that he produced for himself<sup>39</sup>”. Hence, it is obvious that a person desirous of attaining peace, should perform righteous actions always and he gets the result accordingly<sup>40</sup>.

The Upanishads categorically declare that the ultimate truth is “The Brahman”<sup>41</sup>. The Mandukyopanishad repeatedly eulogize that confronting the truth is the prime factor for self-realization and considers it as an essential virtue as far as the spiritual life is concerned<sup>42</sup>. Satyakama, even though Non-Brahmin, became Brahmin due to his encounter with his personal truth<sup>43</sup>, which shows that the encounter with personal truth is an essential element, which leads everyone to peace.

The concept of ideal social polity is presented by King Ashvapati pronounces “There is no thief, drunkard or anyone alike in my state<sup>44</sup>”. This situation remains out of imagination in present times. We must appreciate to the said king since his polity is driven by humanistic touch accompanied with compassion and other rarest alike qualities. We should follow the teachings of Upanishads if we want peace and prosperity in present world.

**References**

1. Shantipatha of Taittiriyaopanishad
2. MMWilliams: Sanskrit English Dictionary PP. 226
3. Ibid PP. 1135
4. Rajbali Pandey: Hindu Dharma Kosha PP.137
5. Ibid. PP.650
6. Brihadarnyaka 1.4.14
7. Ibid PP.137
8. SriMadBhagwadGeeta 4.31
9. Rajbali Pandey: Hindu Dharam Kosha
10. Taittiriyaopanishad
11. shantipath of Kathoupanishad
12. Shoun Hino & Lalita Deodhar (Ed.): Wisdom in Indian tradition: P.192
13. Shoun Hino & Lalita Deodhar (Ed.): Wisdom in Indian tradition: P.192
14. ibid
15. AB Keith: Religion & Philosophy of Vedas: P584
16. cf. Hume: Thirteen principle Upanishads P.53
17. Brihadarnyakopanishad IV.3.22 & Chandogyaopanishads IV.14.3
18. Kathopanishad: Yama Nachiketa dialogue
19. Ishavasyopanishad 6
20. Brihadaranyakopanishad IV.5.3 & I.5.3
21. Initial obelations/shantipath of
22. Ishvasyopanishad 6
23. ibid 7
24. ibid 6
25. cf Kenopanishad IV.8
26. Kathopanishad III.4
27. Ibid II.1
28. Ibid II.2

29. Ishavasyopanishad 1
30. Kathopanishad 1.27
31. Cf. commentary of Shankara on kathopanishad 1.27
32. Ishavasyopanishad 15
33. ibid 2
34. Brihadarnyakopanishad 3.1.12
35. Ibid 1
36. Ibid3
37. Ishabvasyopanishadb 2
38. Brihadaranyakopanishad IV.4.5
39. ibid
40. Ibid III.2.13
41. Kenopanoshad
42. Mandukyopanishad
43. chandogya IV:1-7
44. Brihadaranyakoupanishad