

S. RADHAKRISHNAN'S TRANSLATION OF *THE PRINCIPAL UPANISHADS*: A STUDY IN SPIRITUAL DIASPORA

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Abstract: Translation, as an act of 'carrying across' meanings from one system of signs to another through the medium of language, or otherwise, has been much theorized about and contemplated upon. My paper shall take into consideration the translation of *The Principal Upanishads* by S. Radhakrishnan and his attempt to show how the basic concepts of the self and the Supreme Self allude to one another in various cultures and civilizations, thereby, harmonizing the apparent gulf of differences. In a world perplexed by the heterogeneity of existence and identity at all levels, the text emerges as a possible answer enabling one to transcend the apparent differences and attain harmonization of being through the understanding of the basic tenets of faith which form the roots of all civilizations.

Introduction: The Upanishads, more than 200 in number and identified as *sruti* or 'revealed' literature, are considered to be the earliest texts concerned with some of the central concepts of Hinduism. While the Vedas are known to form the corpus of Hindu religious texts, the Upanishads which form the concluding section of each of the Vedas are said to be the essence of the Vedas, conveying a spiritual vision. Etymologically, the term Upanishad has been variously interpreted. Dr. Radhakrishnan interprets it as an amalgamation of three syllables – *upa*, *ni* and *sad*, i.e., 'sitting down near'. It, thus, emerges to be a secret doctrine concerning the nature and form of the Supreme Self, the Ultimate Reality and Salvation, revealed by a teacher orally to his group of pupils in the silence of the *ashramas*.

The earliest Upanishads – *Brihadaranyaka* and *Chandogya* Upanishad, are said to have been composed sometime around 6th/7th Century B.C.E. It would be interesting to note that invisibly and silently these texts, though, classified as pertaining to a certain religion, have been explored and translated by people across nations and cultures. The earliest known translation of the Upanishad into English is that done by Henry Thomas Colebrooke in 1805. He translated the *Aitareya* Upanishad. Raja Rammohan Roy translated the *Kena* Upanishad in 1813. However, the first organized attempt at the translation of the Upanishads is considered to have been made by Friedrich Max Müller who identified the eleven principal Upanishads and translated the same to comprise two volumes of *The Sacred Books of the East*, published by the Oxford University Press in 1879 and 1884, respectively.

Apart from this quality of being accepted by intellectuals across nations as a text worth translation, what makes a fascinating study is the transcultural impact the Upanishads have had on minds whose contribution to the shaping and moulding of the discursive paradigms has been immense. For instance, in the neocolonial context of the present age, if the impact of English Romanticism

is taken into account, not only in the way it continues to nurture a large section of poetic sensibility, but also in its academic worth which makes it a subject of detailed study and research in the University curriculum across the world, one would be impelled to acknowledge at its root the German school of transcendental idealism, which saw as its pioneers philosophers and thinkers like Schopenhauer and Schelling.

In his Introduction on the General Influence of the Upanishads, Dr. Radhakrishnan refers to Maurice Bloomfield's *Religion of the Veda* (1908) and writes that "Schopenhauer had the Latin text of the Upanishads on his table" and said that from each sentence of this text "deep original and sublime thoughts arise, and the whole is pervaded by a high and holy and earnest spirit" (Radhakrishnan 17). This essential transcendentalism is what makes the Upanishads unique in their appeal. The secret to their wide acceptability perhaps lies in the fact that the Upanishads were not written or narrated by one particular philosopher. They originated from renowned seers and sages like Aaruni, Yajnavalkya, Balaki, Svetaketu and Shandilya, to name a few.

Incorporating the diverse plurality of such great minds, therefore, the Upanishads become enriched to offer to the common reader a transcendental vision of life and the world from multiple perspectives, which overcome the rigid boundaries drawn by the commonly parochial understanding and vision of the mutual differences and the segregated concept of the Other. In the present world, we regularly negotiate with issues of global terrorism, sectarian violence, questions of race, ethnicity, gender and Nation. Theories are generated to assert the dominance of one over the other or relate a history of aggression or to enable a comprehensive understanding of the centre and the periphery. Returning to this earliest form of literature, one may find a contrapuntal approach towards the genesis of the roots which emphasizes upon simplification and acceptance of differences through tolerance.

The structure of the universe as described by the Upanishads consists of three levels – *Hiranya garbha* or the golden germ, *Brahman* or the Absolute Self and *Ishvara* or the personal God. The three major deities of the Hindu religion – Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are seen as forms of *Ishvara*, interpreted as the creator, the nurturer and the destroyer, respectively. Radhakrishnan in his translation relates it to the other religions like Buddhism and Islam, and observes that it is the same structure that these religious doctrines adhere to. In Buddhism the structure is that of *Buddha*, *Dharmakaya* and *Sambhogakaya / Nirmanakaya*, while in Islam it is manifested as *Al Haqq*, *Allah* and *Mohammed* (Radhakrishnan 38). Christianity also advocates the conception of divinity as the Trinity – the *Father*, the *Son* and the *Holy Spirit*. The Supreme Self can be understood only through the amalgamation of these three layers, which are distinct from one another and still same in essence.

The Upanishads narrate the origin of the Universe from the “void or abyss of waters” and Radhakrishnan links it to the Biblical chapter of Genesis where “the Spirit of God is said to move on the face of the waters” and Homer’s *Iliad* “which speaks of Oceanos as the source of all things, including even the gods” (Radhakrishnan 35). By constantly relating the basic beliefs of Creation and God across religions and Nations, the translator here creates a space for the interaction and understanding of the differences, thereby generating a multiplicity of discourse to determine human existence across boundaries.

Amartya Sen writes in *Identity and Violence* (2006) that “our shared humanity gets savagely challenged when our differences are narrowed into one devised system of uniquely powerful categorization” (Sen 17). Identity, as a concept operating upon the exercise of individual choice, necessarily calls for a plural dimension. However, the entire history of aggression documented in the annals of humanity is based upon the glorification of one facet of identity over the other. It would be interesting to note in this context that the Upanishads view the entire cosmic process as “one of universal and unceasing change...patterned on the duality which is perpetually in conflict” (Radhakrishnan 59). In *Taittiriya* Upanishad, all existence is said to have stemmed from a continuous interaction of *sat* (being) and *asat* (non being), i.e., the manifested and unmanifested forms of existence (Radhakrishnan 549). One form, thus, becomes and is comprehended as essential for the existence of the second.

Conflict denotes difference, but only towards reconciliation. Having placed difference and diversity as factors mandatory for the existence of life, the Upanishads, invite from the beginning an inclusive approach towards life, as mentioned in the fourth

Brahmana of the *Brihadaranyaka* Upanishad in the form of a conversation between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi on the Absolute self: “For where there is duality as it were, there one smells another, there one sees another, there one hears another, there one speaks to another, there one thinks of another, there one understands another. Where, verily, everything has become the Self, then by what and whom should one smell, then by what and whom should one know, then by what and to whom should one speak, then by what and on whom should one think, then by what and whom should one understand?” (Radhakrishnan 201).

When one comes to consider the differences of caste, gender and ethnicity, there too, the Upanishads uphold a vision of transcendental approach. Though often mistaken as a perpetrator of the caste system and thereby a promoter of subjugation and the culture of dominance, the story of the emergence of the four castes is completely different as narrated in the *Brihadaranyaka* Upanishad. *Prajapati*, or the abstraction from which the entire universe is said to have been generated, is said to have created “two class of descendants” – the gods and the demons, two sexes – the man and the woman, and four orders – Brahma (knowledge), Kshatriya (temporal power), Vaishya (trader) and Shudra (nurturer), pertaining both to the worlds of Gods and human beings (Radhakrishnan 169). What emerges is not the origin of a tradition of aggression and violence, but a comprehensive vision of a well-balanced Creation.

Similarly, in the context of gender, the two sexes are said to have been created like “the two halves of a split pea” – identical and complementary to the sustenance of one another (Radhakrishnan 164). The history of subjugation of the woman as the Second Sex or the marginalized Other, therefore, emerges to be a later interpretation and representation. Radhakrishnan writes in this context – “...the later subjugation of women and their exclusion from Vedic studies do not have the support of the Upanishads” (Radhakrishnan 201). The *Brihadaranyaka* Upanishad further states, after having identified the world with the Supreme Self and the self of beings who acknowledge the principle of difference and accept the same, that “as one wishes non-injury for his own world, so all beings wish non-injury for him who has this knowledge” (Radhakrishnan 172).

Though we speak of the world in terms of a global diaspora, what seems to be at the heart of all conflicts is a strong intolerance of mutual differences and the desire to assert the superiority of one system of thoughts over another, one dimension of identity over another, one stream of philosophy and being over another. Born out of a strong sense of pride, nonetheless based on strong insecurities with regard to priorities of existence, these assertions operate

through a reductionist approach towards the miniaturizing of human identity.

Contextually, one would be reminded here, of the word *ahamkara*, which is widely accepted as the linguistic equivalent for pride. Interestingly, Radhakrishnan interprets the term not as pride, but as the 'process of individuation' or 'sense of self stemming from *buddhi* or intellect. Seen in this light, Radhakrishnan's translation in deviating from accepted linguistic structures of transcultural signification, offers an alternative understanding of the basic narratives related to the formation and existence of the world as it stands to be today.

The Upanishads are complex. While the earliest Upanishads are known to have been composed around 6th/ 7th Century B.C, the comparatively later ones date around the beginning of the Common Era. Ranging over centuries in their being, and holding within themselves the pluralist tolerance and multiple perspectives related to life, divinity, salvation and death, the Upanishads offer a huge scope for philosophical discourse and interpretation to the experts. However, I picked up the volume translated by Dr. Radhakrishnan just as a common reader, devoid of any philosophical expertise and interested in exploring the alternate visions of higher truths would, and was completely taken aback by the lucidity of the absolute truths related therein.

First published in 1953 – in the context of a world which had just witnessed the Second World War, a nation which had just attained independence and an

existence sans virtual space where cartographic borderlines still held strong, Dr. Radhakrishnan's translation of *The Principal Upanishads* might be said to represent a completely different era. Having completed sixty years of its publication in 2013, it is surprising that this text in the dramatically altered global context of today still offers a hopeful refuge to the minds seeking peaceful coexistence. In his repeated references to the other cultures, philosophies, visions and modes of thoughts, Dr Radhakrishnan's text upholds the shared dream of a spiritual diaspora in the present context.

If a text in translation is compared to a reflection of the original, it is the translator who becomes, primarily, the medium for such reflection to exist. The image or translated text thus created, owes its beauty and validity to the depth of the mind involved in the act of translation. Dr. Radhakrishnan's endeavour enriches this metaphor, for through his essential pluralist tolerance, he lends an everlasting interdisciplinary contemporaneity to the texts, otherwise ascribed to ancient religion. There is no argument here; no denial of identity; no claim for superiority. What one will notice, on the contrary, is the creation of a space where cultures mingle in the highest order of their philosophies, for Life is a gift, Death, a great leveler and God, the best of human imagination, despite all the differences of worldly views and conceptions that heaven and earth can together accommodate.

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