Social atmosphere delineated in the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad

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The Upaniṣads represent a marked transition period in the realm of social, economic and religious affairs of the people. They record the change from the archaic ritualism of the Vedas into new religious ideas and institutions. The earliest Upaniṣads signify the emergence of primitive Hinduistic ideas and certain other religious movements like Buddhism and Jainism, which materialized as full-fledged religious systems latter along with Hinduism, soon after the composition of the early Upaniṣads. The concepts like doctrine of re-birth, mental conditioning associated with Yoga, self-denial, the renunciation of sex, wealth and family life etc were also evolved with the emergence of the Upaniṣads. The common belief is that the Vedas are the revealed truths and bear the germs of religious background, but actually the Upaniṣads only subscribe to this character. The later developed literature, continued to influence the life and thought of the society which in turn became the foundation of all the religious traditions.

The Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad, discloses the varied nature of the social life enjoined during its composition. It consists of Six Chapters and divided into three sections:

1. Adhyāyas 1-2 are called Madhukānda [Honey Section] getting its name from the final part [2.5] of this section.

2. Adhyāyas 2-3 called the Yājñavalkya Kānda where the sage Yājñavalkya plays the central role; and
3. Adhyāyas 5-6 called as Khila Kānda [supplementary section.].

On linguistic and other grounds, there is a general agreement that the Bṛhadāraṇyaka as a whole is the oldest of the Upaniṣads, even though individual passages in it may be younger than those of others especially those of the Chāndogya . Together with the latter, the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad not only continues about two third of the corpus of ancient Upaniṣadic document but also represents the oldest and the most important part of this literature.

Authorship

Some of the source material consists of dialogues, debates and formal teachings by famous teachers of the time, prominent among them are identified as Yājñavalkya, [in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka] Uddālaka Āruṇi [Chāndogya], Janaka,Pravahaṇa Jaivali, Ajātaśatru etc. Many of these teachers were of course Brāhmins, who are not only priests but also the theologians and teachers, within the social hierarchy of the time. It is therefore surprising that several prominent teachers of the Upaniṣadic doctrines were presented as kings or at least as belonging to Kṣatriya class. The Kṣatriya contribution to Upaniṣadic thought has been an issue long debated among the scholars. Certain scholars opine that certain interference is being purposefully incorporated in the Upaniṣads for the Kṣatriyas to edge the Brahmin supremacy over them.

The Upaniṣads themselves appear to lend support to such a view. They record numerous episodes where a Brāhmin or a group of Brāhmins claim to be learned were defeated in debate by a Kṣatriya

who then goes on to teach a new doctrine to them. King Pravahaṇa Jaivali, for example, claims that the famous doctrine of the five Fires had not even attained by the Brāhmins. Similar episodes were being narrated with reference to king Aśvapathi Kaikaya[CU. 5.11-24] Ajātaśatru [Br Up 2.1] and others .

Society during the Upaniṣadic Age

The entire Brāhmanical ideology of the society and the science and practice of rituals were designed on the one hand to enhance Kṣatriya power and on the other to ensure their recognition by the Kṣatriya that the source of Kṣatriya power was the Brāhmin. It is naïve therefore to accept the literary evidence of the Upaniṣads regarding their Kṣatriya authorship at face value and as historical fact. Surely these documents were composed and transmitted by Brāhmins. Then the question: why Brāhmins purposefully include episodes that placed them at a disadvantage, vis a vis the royal class? There must have some political, religious, economic and literary reasons for including these episodes.

The relationship between the priestly and royal classes in ancient India was complex. In one point of view it was symbiotic; the co-operation between these two groups, in whose hand power was concentrated, permitted both to thrive. In another point of view, the two groups formed rivals for power and prestige. In the Bṛhadāraṇyaka I.iv.2 there is a verse which goes on like this : In the beginning this world was only Brahman. Hence there is nothing higher than the ruling prince .Accordingly at a royal anointing a Brāhmin pays homage to a Kṣatriya by prostrating himself. He extends this honor only to the ruling power. Now the priestly power is the womb of the ruling power. Therefore even

if a king rises to the summit of power, it is the priestly power that he returns.

Status of Women

The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad presents at least two women, Gārgi Vācaknavi [Br. 3.6.8] and Maitreyi, wife of Yājñavalkya [Br 2.4.,4.5] as participating in philosophical disputes and discussions. The fact that those women were introduced without any attempt to justify or explain how women could be engaged in philosophical matters suggests the relatively high social and religious position of at least women of some social strata during this period. This is confirmed by a ritual for obtaining a learned daughter recorded in Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 6.4.17.

Polygamy was prevailing at that time. Women were given much more freedom. But they were not at all free to take their own decision in their sexual relationship. In the 6th Brāhmaṇa of the Sixth chapter, there is a verse which goes on like this: If she refused to consent, one should bribe her. If she still refused he should beat her with a stick or with his fist or overpower her, saying I take away the splendour from you with my virility and splendour. (6.4.6)

At the time of her menstrual period, as insisted in 6,4,7, when a man finds that his wife is having her period, he should make sure that she should not drink from a metal cup or wear fresh clothes for three days. Nor should a low caste man or woman be allowed to touch her. When the three days are over and she has taken her bath, he should get him thrush some rice.

This may perhaps to avoid her from being polluted, for at the time of menstrual period usually women have the sexual

aptitude a little bit higher when compared to the normal case '

Despite such discriminations, it is significant that the women education was not prohibited. The following verse shows that there were people who wished to get learned daughters in their family. The following verse shows the same: 'I want a learned daughter who will live out her full life span, he should get her to cook that rice with sesame seeds and the two of them should eat it mixed with ghee' (6,4,18). The couple thus becomes capable of getting such daughters.

Prime priority for Dharma

In the I. iv.14, it is confirmed that it created the law [Dharma], a form superior to and surpassing itself. And the law is here the ruling power standing above the ruling power. Hence there is nothing higher than the law. Therefore a weak man makes demands of a stronger man by appealing to the law just as one appealing to a king.

Kṣātriya is teaching the wisdom of Brahman to a Brāhmin

In the II.1.15first, there is a passage, Ajātaśatru replied: it is not a reversal of the norm for a Brāhmin to become the pupil of a Kṣatriya. It means that in those days usually Brāhmins were regarded as the preceptors.Here the matter is reversed, a Kṣatriya is initiating a Brahmin. Not only in this Upaniṣad there are certain other instances of Kṣatriya teaching Brāhmin on Self-knowledge. The Kṣatriya are equally well versed in this matter.

Renouncement of Gṛhasthāśrama

In the II.iv.1. there is a narration of Yājñavalkya and his wife Maitreyi. Maithreyi, Yājñavalkya once said ' look I am about to

depart from this place. So come let me make a settlement between you and Kāthyayani'. From this narration we can conclude that at the Upaniṣadic period, sages used to relinquish their family life after entrusting all the wealth to their wives. Here polygamy also was in practice even among the sages.

Ātman alone the dearest, the universal truth

In the II.iv. 5. an eternal truth is revealed. One holds a husband dear, you see, not on for the love for the husband; rather it is out of love for ones self [Ātman], that one holds a husband dear. One holds a wife dear. One holds children dear not out of love for children; rather it is out of love for ones self that one holds children dear. One holds wealth dear not out of love for wealth; it is out of love for oneself hence one holds wealth dear. For everyone his own self is the dearest of all. It is because of that.

A sage renounces the world-Why?

In the IV.iv. 22. there is a passage : This immense unborn Self is none other than the consious self in beings. T there in that space within the heart, he lies, the controller of all, the lord of all. He does not become more by good actions. It was when they know this that man of old did not desire offspring, reasoning. Ours is the Self and it is our world. What then is the use of offspring for us? So they gave up the desire of sons, the desire of wealth and the desire for worlds and under took the mendicant life. One cannot attain Salvation through wealth.

Sages at the Upaniṣadic period were fully aware of the fact that nobody can attain Brahman hood by wealth. The same thing is illustrated through a narration. Once sage Yājñavalkya called on

his two wives and informed them that he wished to relinquish his family life and go for Samnyāsa. He said that he wished to give away all his wealth to his two wives. Then Maitreyi asks whether all his wealth can bring forth her eternal desired end . Then Yājñavalkya exclaimed 'Neti neti'. Maitreyi asked in reply: ' If I were to possess the entire world filled with wealth Sir, would it or would it not make me immortal? 'No 'said Yājñavalkya, it will only permit you to live the life of a wealthy person. Through wealth one cannot expect immortality.

During the Upaniṣadic age only the Kṣatriyas were empowered with the knowledge. In the fifth Chapter of the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad, one can see the methods for attaining all the mundane objectives, for which there is no scope in the final realization. In this Chapter reference to this is also seen. Gautama replies: 'I have my share of Gold, Cows, Horses, Slave girls, blankets, and clothes. Do not be stingy to your honor, in giving me more than that – in giving me the infinite and the boundless'. 'You will have to request it in the correct manner' exclaimed Pravahaṇa to Guatama. Then Gautama said; I come to you my Lord as a pupil'. With just these words did the people of old place themselves as pupils under a teacher? And Gautama lived there openly as a pupil. Jaivali then told him; 'as before, now this knowledge has not resided in any Brāhmin, so may you, Gautama or your grandfathers not cause us harm? But I will tell it to you, for who can refuse you when you speak like that.

Then he explained the knowledge of fire thus: 'A fire is what the world up there is, O! Gautama. Its firewood is the sun; its smoke is the sun beams, its flame is the day; its embers are the quarters; and its sparks are the intermediate quarters. In that very fire gods offer faith and from that offering springs King Soma' [6.2.8]

Concept of Karma and re-birth

The Upaniṣadic people believed that the birth of each living creature is due to the Karma which he or it performs. In the fourth and fifth Brahmanas of the iv chapter, it is explained: Clearly this Brahman, this self, is made of perception, made of mind made of breath, made of hearing, made of earth, made of work---------- what a man turns out to be depends on how he acts and on how he conducts himself. If his action is good he will turn into something good; if his actions are bad, he will turn into something bad. And so people say a person here consists simply of desire, acts in accordance with his resolve , and turns out to be in accordance with his action.

From all these quoting one may conclude that the society in the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad, which represents the early Upaniṣadic age is somewhat cultured when compared to the Vedic period. Even though women were given proper education and learned daughters were solicited they were not given full-fledged freedom. The ruling group as well as the Brahmins used to overpower the other group of people with mutual understanding. Even then both of them were eager to capture the supremacy over the other whenever there arises such situations. For the proper functioning of the administration in a social situation certain ethical norms are essential. They were fully aware of the same truth and to sustain this they propagated the need of Karma doctrine, so that fearing which the people will not indulge in cruel activities. Another important thing which is striking to an ordinary reader is that even though the prime motive of an individual is nothing but acquiring salvation, this Upaniṣad contains certain methods for attaining mundane happiness. Hence, this has a universal vision, so that this can satisfy the need of even an ordinary person too. Another

striking peculiarity of this Upaniṣad is the description of the three kinds of interpretation of the triple 'da's by three sets of people. Actually if the three groups will follow the same method, the society will become ideal and for an administrator it will become an easy venture to rule the kingdom. Above all for the human community, who are hunting after two desired ends in their life ie, Abhyudaya –personal earnings and Nihśreyasa-the final salvation this is an advisable text for reference. On reading the whole text one could feel that only through Abhyudaya one can search for Nihśreyasa, which is the final goal of each and every individual and from where there is no chance of reoccurrence.

References:

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