

The Rosary and Reality: A Study on the basis of Akṣamalikopaniṣad

Abhimanyu R Nair

Research Scholar, Department of Sanskrit Vedanta, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady.

Abstract

This study is based on the metaphysical characters of Śaivism represented in the Akṣamālikopaniṣad. The Upaniṣad is directly related to the ritualistic and devotional standards of Śaivism; however, the philosophical means of Śaivism are also presented in this Upaniṣad to an extent. The Śaiva metaphysics is recognized with terms like Pati, Paśu, Pāśa, and Mokṣa. This paper elaborately discusses these terms based on the key terms of Śaivism with references to the Akṣamālikopaniṣad.

Keywords: Śaivism, Akṣamālikopaniṣad, Pati, Paśu, Pāśa, Mokṣa.

Introduction

History of India lies within the religious traditions of the land. Indian scriptures like Vedas and Upaniṣads embody unique theological, ritualistic, and philosophical dimensions that underpin various aspects of Indian thought and practice. Śaivism an ancient and traditional sophisticated culture worshipping Lord Śiva which has a history of pre-Vedic existence, with the people has really not mentioning the beginning have contributed to a great extent.¹ Even the tradition is deeply attached to the devotional and ritualistic practices it also shows a strong metaphysical foundation. Several schools like Śaiva Siddhanta, Pāśupata, Pratyabhijñā, and Vīra Śaivism etc., were emerged on the basis of the different metaphysical ideas followed by each. They mainly followed Śaiva Āgamās instead of Vedic literature.

A. Mahadeva Sastri, 19th-century Indologist and Sanskrit scholar noted for his accurate translations and interpretations of classical Indian texts. He edited and published ‘Śaiva Upaniṣads on the basis of the commentary of Śrī Upaniṣad Brahmayogin’ via The Adyar Library in 1925. The text contains fifteen Upaniṣads from Muktika Canon under sectarian classifications of Śaiva Upaniṣads with Upaniṣad Brahmayogi’s commentaries. Akṣamalikopaniṣad is one among them.²

Akṣamālikopaniṣad

Akṣamālikopaniṣad forms part of R̥gveda and Comes as sixty seventh in the Muktika canon. The text was less known and likely a late medieval period scripture, which was not mentioned by Dara Shikoh in Mughal Era, neither by Narayana in Bibliotheca Indica Anthology of popular Upaniṣads in 18th century.³ Upaniṣad contains only sixteen hymns as discourse between Lord Guha and Prajāpati. The name

¹ Evolution of Hindu sects up to the time of Śaṅkarācārya, p.1.

² Śaiva Upaniṣads, p.1.

³ Akṣamālika Upaniṣad, p. 1.

Akṣamāla denotes a string made up of beads where each bead represents the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, A to Kṣa, hence it is known as Akṣamālikopaniṣad. The Upaniṣad discusses about the different types of rosaries like coral, pearl, crystal, silver, gold, lotus-seeds and Rudrākṣa beads. The importance of rosaries and their ways of being used in recitation are embodied in letters beginning with “A” and ending with “Kṣa.”⁴ Explains symbolism of rites and objectives of worship in Śaivism and how it helps to overcome obstacles and leads to the path of liberation. The use of 108 beaded Akṣamāla is not limited to Śaiva tradition, but found in other Indian traditions such as Vaiṣṇavas, as well as among the Buddhists. The method of consecration and invocation with mantras is similar in all these traditions.

Śaiva Metaphysics

Indian traditional schools of philosophy hold important metaphysical standards. Each philosophy shows its derivations to metaphysics for its existence. The Śaiva metaphysics is recognized with terms like Pati, Paśu, Pāśa, and Mokṣa. Śaivism, being a theological philosophy, shows the supreme character of Śiva as the supreme reality. “He is the Pati because he is the supreme cause of the bound souls, the world, the fetter, and the like.”⁵ While individual souls are referred to as Paśu, a misguided Jīva is trapped in the quagmire of saṃsāra, connected to the material world by the impurities. These impurities cause the individual soul to act and behave like atomic entities limited in capability and consciousness. Pāśa is the bond that prevents individual souls from realizing their genuine Śiva essence. These binds enslave the individual soul, restrict reality, and keep them away from experiencing their genuine consciousness for a temporary period. Mokṣa is the state where Jīva enters a condition of oneness with Śiva after releasing the conflicts of dualism. Different schools of Śaivism show differences in their concepts of realization. Paśupata School says that the soul is freed from bondage and attains a state of eternal union with Śiva. Trika School shows no separation between self, world, and Śiva — pure non-dual awareness. Śaiva Siddhānta states soul attains Śivaloka and enjoys eternal bliss near Śiva. Śiva – Advaita states a complete dissolution of individuality into Śiva.

Concept of Pati reflected in Akṣamālikopaniṣad

Śaivopaniṣads states Pati or Śiva as the independent, omnipotent Lord who liberates souls through grace. Here Śiva remains the distinct deity, the silver circlet on the right side of the Beads. The supreme reality is described with the syllable ‘Aum’, the alphabets from ‘A’ to ‘Kṣa’ invoking the characters to be resident in the beads.⁶ Each mantra which narrates the powers of its specific characters, the conqueror of death, the protector of universe, the destroyer of all evil spirits, the immanent in all phenomenal existence, and the auspicious etc.

Concept of Paśu reflected in Akṣamālikopaniṣad

Paśu is mentioned as the soul with ignorance of the real character of Ātman trapped in the delusions of this phenomenal world. The very first verse of the Upaniṣad mentions the Ātman with the delusion who thinks the phenomenal world as real.⁷ The soul is eternal, conscious and real, but limited in its

⁴ Śaiva Upaniṣads, English Translation, p. 3.

⁵ Schools of Śaivism, p. 106.

⁶ Śaiva Upaniṣads, p. 5.

⁷ Śaiva Upaniṣads, p. 1.

awareness. It experiences duality, perceiving itself as separate from supreme due to an impure character of their interior sense organs and ignorant mind which cannot find the real knowledge.

Concept of Pāśa reflected in Akṣamālikopaniṣad

Through a garland of words, Akṣamālikopaniṣad esoterically and symbolically communicates the idea of bondage, without always clearly naming each form. Pāśa is depicted as the threads of Akṣamāla, the one which connecting the beads with others like the bond connecting the souls by sense of individuality, accumulated actions and their effects, ignorance. These delusions and ignorance stands as obstacles in the way of their spiritual elevation. In the sixteenth verse of describing the fruit of the Upaniṣad it mentions the sins. The commentary by Upaniṣad Brahmayogin also mentions the delusion that affecting the Individual soul which manifests the duality and products the phenomenal world.⁸

Concept of Mokṣa reflected in Akṣamālikopaniṣad

Mokṣa is only attained through worship using beads and reciting mantras. The way to liberation through use of rosary beads is the most detailed topic of the Upaniṣad. According to the Upaniṣad the impure mind can never achieve liberation; purification of mind is only happens with the help of rosaries and reciting the mantras. The disciplined Japa using mālā reciting pañcākṣara mantra and Praṇava with conceive of the fifty letters commencing from ‘A’ and ending with ‘Kṣa’ becomes efficacious at once. By knowing the real embracing nature of the rosary the practitioner become pure minded and conquers over the delusions and finds the knowledge of Brahman. “By meditating upon akṣamālā, one realizes Śiva as the source of all sound and existence, and the soul attains mokṣa.”⁹

Liberation is the clear recognition that the individual soul is no different from the ultimate reality, not an endeavor to a different dimension. It is the realization that one's true self is pure consciousness, existing beyond the body, mind, and ego, and the dissolution of ignorance.

Conclusion

The Akṣamālikopaniṣad expound a profound and cohesive philosophy centered on the nature of the soul, the cause of bondage, and the path to liberation through devotion to Śiva. At the heart of these teachings lies the triad of Pati, Paśu, Pāśa, and Mokṣa which together define the framework of Śaiva metaphysics. The ultimate goal of Śaiva spirituality is mokṣa — liberation from the cycle of birth and death — achieved through the recognition of the soul's inherent unity with Śiva. The Upaniṣads emphasize that ignorance veils the true nature of the self, leading to identification with the body, mind, and worldly illusions. This ignorance, along with accumulated karma, constitutes pāśa, the binding force that keeps the soul entangled in suffering.

Śiva, as the compassionate liberator, provides the means for transcendence. Through jñāna, bhakti, yoga, and kriyā the seeker gradually dissolves these bonds. The Akṣamālikopaniṣad particularly highlight the importance of divine grace which alone can fully awaken the soul to its true, liberated state.

The Akṣamālikopaniṣad present a path that balances philosophical inquiry, disciplined practice, and loving surrender to Śiva. They teach that liberation is not merely an intellectual realization but a transformative experience of oneness with the Supreme. By overcoming pāśa, the soul rediscovers its eternal, blissful nature as none other than Śiva Himself — free, infinite, and beyond all limitations.

⁸ Śaiva Upaniṣads, p.15

⁹ Śaiva Upaniṣads, p. 13.

Thus, the Śaiva tradition, as distilled in this Upaniṣad, offers a timeless road map from bondage to freedom, from individuality to divine unity, guiding the seeker toward ultimate liberation in the boundless consciousness of Śiva.

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