

Universal Crisis, The Humanism in the Upaniṣads: A South Asian Response to Global Turbulence

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Abstract:

This paper aims to tackle the current challenge of hyper-individualism, social fragmentation and moral decay by offering a framework for change inspired by ancient philosophy from South Asia. It assumes that the present day world's unrest and social disrespect is a spiritual flaw, neglecting the eternal soul (Atman). When they lose this transcendent self, they fall into the clasp of fear and greed and become oppressors of the weak and helpless and alienate people even in intimate relationships. In modern political discourse, phrases such as integrity and equality are often used to preserve vested interests, but the Upaniṣads provide a truly authentic program of global and active humanism.

The study of Vedic texts and their classification reveals that the Upaniṣads contain a taxonomy of texts, indicating the extent to which they summarise various ritualistic practices and concepts into short, all-encompassing philosophical nuggets. It explores the basic pillars of the material world, especially the nature of absolute cosmic unity (Brahman) and the union with individual self (Atman) which, in turn, eliminates the bases of hate and division. This spiritual non-duality becomes ethical responsibilities in action. The concept of "sacrificial enjoyment" (Tena tyaktena bhuñjīthā) is an important antidote to predatory consumerism, and happiness is defined as a moral failure if it is excessive. In addition, the paper discusses the traditional trio of restraints (rising, Dāmyata (self-control), Datta (charity), Dayādhvam (compassion) as the key instruments for maintaining human dignity.

The paper shows how historical critiques of 'world-denying' pessimism come to terms with world-denying optimism in Upaniṣadic philosophy, which is dynamic and rooted in universal joy (Ānanda). It asserts the elevation of human dignity through the principle of nothing being superior to Man and the universal vision that the entire world is a single nest (Yatra viśvaṁ bhavatyekarīḍam), which offers the modern society a sustainable way forward towards actual cohabitation, mutual respect and a global harmony.

Keywords: Upaniṣads, Universal Humanism, Cosmic Unity, Ethical Restraint, Global Turbulence.

Introduction:

The Anatomy of Modern Global Turbulence

There is now a great tension in the world, an existential and social tension. Basic values form the basis of human behavior and the working mechanisms of contemporary societies. These systems help a collective or an individual to decide what is good or bad, ethical or unethical. These moral coordinates may shift in various cultures, places and times but some are absolute. Ahim sa, love, forgiveness, mutual friendship –

such values are not ephemeral cultural constructs, but timeless, universally recognized principles that have helped to hold human civilization together throughout history.

But in this global context, there is a clear and rapid shift away from these timeless values. The universal cause for this decrease is that the immortal eternal soul (Atman) is ignored and doubted. Classical South Asian philosophy teaches that this deeper, transcendent self is lost when one does not know it, leading to fundamental weakness in the spirit and mind. This is not just a weakness of moral fortitude, it's a destructive weakness. As the text says, "weakness is death. Where people and nations have lost their sense of spirit, fear and insecurity have replaced it and the weak have become the oppressors of the weakest of their own.

This is a psychological decay that is directly reflected in the structure of modern human society, which is becoming more hostile, cynical and divided. The defining feature of modern social interactions is mutual contempt and intense hatred, both of which are a violent enemy to flourishing collectivity. Humans are so engrossed in their own interest and in an extreme self-centred state that they are in need of being socialised and morally educated. Due to hyper individualism and unrelenting self centeredness, human beings are moving towards an extreme state of social and moral brutality.

This is not only happening on a macro-geopolitical level, but also at the most intimate levels of human connection. Within a family, close family members, often two brothers under the same roof, are frequently emotionally separated, split by competing and separate self-interests. This decay of the humanity of the world is cutting into the social fabric of society from within.

Society notes and recognises this general malfeasance and may even embrace it as a given and an inevitable aspect of modern life. But a careful examination of their use shows that such deep ideas are co-opted. In fact, they serve more rhetorical than moral purposes, and are often employed strategically to shield and defend enduring vested interests.

This is an important question because is this a kind of state—this piecemeal, hyper competitive state—is this our identity? Is this the only fate that awaits humanity? The story of the origin of the world has a definite “no.” Ancient sages openly challenged this path and called it the life of the human being lived through balance of personal experience and material restraint. They advocated for enjoying things while sacrificing and said that there can be no fundamental opposition between enjoying and being self-controlled. It is not only an economic imbalance to have more than is needed to maintain a balanced life, but an ethical failure. What is considered material victory is actually a deception of self. The only way forward is to foster a sincere and engaged movement of love and caring throughout the world.

Textual Taxonomy: The place of the Upaniṣads in the Vedic literature is dealt with in this chapter.

In order to appreciate this humanist philosophy that can deal with this turbulence in a global context, it is important to consider its structural elements in classical South Asian literature. This knowledge is derived from a vast body of knowledge, the Vedic corpus. The boundaries of this literature are traditionally marked by a very clear structural statement, namely:

"Mantrabrahmanayorveda namadheyam"

This definition has laid emphasis that the Vedas have got two mutually interdependent aspects, one is the Mantra aspect and the other is the Brahmana aspect.

The structure of these texts is developed in a systematic way and the texts are applied in specific practice:

The Mantra Portion (Contemplation): This section includes the first-hand experiences of the ancient seers. It is the fundamental plane of spiritual knowledge, which is caught in sharply defined phonetic and poetic forms.

The Brahmana Portion (Sadhana): This section is the way of implementing the knowledge of the Mantras. It gives the organized processes, approaches and guidelines for spiritual practice and systemized ritual use.

The Brahmana part is split into two special evolutionary layers:

The Forest Treatises (the Āraṇyakas): This is a transitional period. They move away from external physical rituals and towards inner meditative and symbolic ones, which is usually studied in the serenity and stillness of the woods.

The Upaniṣads (Vedanta): At the very end of the Vedic corpus, the Upaniṣads give a short, pure summary of the philosophical findings of the Vedas. The first part of the Vedas is full of the technicalities of ritual sacrifices; the Āraṇyakas are more developed in metaphorical interpretation; and the Upaniṣads are the most elevated in this philosophical investigation.

The Upaniṣads, therefore, are the last and most philosophical section (Vedanta) of the Vedas but are rich enough to attract both hearts and minds, and so are universally accessible. The two pillars of existence are Brahman and Atman.

Core Ontological Pillars: Brahman and Atman

The ethical and humanist teaching of the Upaniṣads is based on the metaphysical tenet that Brahman (Cosmic Absolute) and Atman (Individual Self) are one.

The Conceptual Framework of Cosmic Unity

Principle	Philosophical Attributes	Cosmic Function
Brahman	Eternal, self-existent, imperishable, immortal, omnipresent.	The ultimate, unchanging reality behind the shifting phenomenal world.
Atman	All-pervading, undivided, indivisible, inherently pure, free.	The true, indwelling essence of every individual human being.

The Upaniṣadic perspective is that the Atman does not exist in isolation, but is the same as Brahman in essence. The word Atman is itself a full expression of an all-pervading, omnipresent reality. The Supreme Soul is Nirguna (without attributes, passive, and devoid of any worldly limitation). It is a state of pure consciousness which is not affected by material changes. The person's personal essence can manifest this kind of nature through the three-step process of inner reflection systematically:

Hearing (Śravaṇa) → "Contemplation (Manana)" → "Meditation (Nididhyāsana)" In this act of self-realization, a person can transcend the superficial labels such as name, form, social status and nationality and discover his/her fundamental unity with everything in the universe.

The Great Utterances (Mahāvākyas)

This oneness of all that is encapsulated in the various Upaniṣads in some remarkable statements called Mahāvākyas.

Aham Brahmasmi ("I am Brahman"):

This expression is from the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, asserting that the subjective consciousness of the individual is the objective reality of the whole universe.

Tat Tvam Asi ("That thou art"):

This is the teaching of the sage Uddalaka to his son, Shwetaketu, in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, highlighting the Universal cause of the Universe is identical to the individual's inner core.

Ayam Atma Brahma ("This Self is Brahman"):

This is a direct link between what is internal and what is external in human being, and the great cosmos.

Sarvabhūtāntarātmā ("The indwelling Self of all beings"):

This is a concept mentioned in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad that says that the very same divine principle is present in each living being, regardless of who they are. The entire view changes when a person acquires this self-awareness (Brahmajñāna).

The understanding of "the other as the self" naturally eliminates the root of social hostility, including fear, jealousy, exploitation, etc.

Ethical Imperatives for a Turbulent World

The Upaniṣads convert these spiritual lessons to useful moral principles or remedies to defeat the present-day greed and social disintegration.

The Ethic of Restrained Consumption (Tena tyaktena bhuñjīthā)

Enjoy through sacrifice, or Renounce and enjoy, is a principle that is found in the first verse of the Īśa Upaniṣad, and is very important for global economic and environmental ethics. Through this principle, there are alternative ways to combat consumerist practices that lead consumers into predatory practices.

Rejection of Greed: It seeks to ask a simple question: *Whose wealth is it?* A sense of ownership is false since the material world is temporary, and God permeates through all of it. Overeating is a sign of social and moral decay, and a denial of the rightful sustenance of others; the act of getting more than necessary to maintain a balanced life.

The drive for material gain through aggressive self-interest is known to be a form of self-deception. It gives a false sense of security, promotes inequality and environmental harm, at an international scale. The story of the three "D"s" is part of the Triad of Restraint.

The Triad of Restraint: The Story of the Three "D"s"

The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad presents an excellent example of these values in society: Prajāpati teaches his three sons—Gods, Humans and Demons—with the help of only one syllable 'D' or Da. Each group is assigned to a different deficiency and creates 3 core virtues based on that:

Dāmyata (Control/Restraint): The virtue to control one's senses and desires, not allowing people to act on predatory impulses.

Charity (Datta) – doing good for others, ensuring wealth returns for the benefit of others. Dayādhvam (Compassion/Kindness):

This virtue requires one to be empathetic in action toward the sufferings of all. The text is a beautiful reminder that even today, when lightning strikes the sky, it echoes this message: “Control, Give, Be Kind.” These three practices continue to be necessary instruments for maintaining the dignity of persons and promoting international solidarity.

Deconstructing Criticisms: Declinism vs. Dynamic Optimism

Sometimes in academic and historical contexts the Upaniṣadic philosophy is misrepresented as being pessimistic, attacking a worldless approach, or an escapist attitude. Critics say that the Upaniṣads teach this impermanence and suffering of the material world to promote the idea that people should give up social obligations and seek a pure, other-worldly peace. This interpretation is completely overlooked in the text, which strongly rejects it. The Upaniṣads teach that the world is real, that there is suffering in it, but that humanity is not left in that suffering. Rather, their final goal is on joy, fulfillment, and vibrant optimism.

The World as Expression of Joy: Brahman's nature is Satyam Jñānam Anantam Brahma (Truth, Knowledge, Infinity) and Anandam (Absolute Bliss) and the universe is an expression of it. The texts is clear that, Tarati śokaṁ ātmavit— "

The knower of the Self transcends sorrow. The real objective of the Upaniṣads, as stated by the modern philosopher and statesman, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, is to make peace tangible, psychological independence a reality, and reassuring an anxious humanity.

The Historical Interplay: Colonialism and the Endurance of Truth

The Upaniṣadic thought is resilient in the face of political change as revealed in its historical trajectory. Modern colonialism brought with it a new political and economic perspective that emphasized material power, territorial conquest, and systematic exploitation. The Upaniṣadic stress on unity and mutual restraint was sometimes pushed aside, for example, by competitive and divisive structures of the kind that arose in the drive for wealth and power that many of the Brahmanic traditions fostered.

However, the paper points out, "these findings could not be indefinitely silenced. This philosophy was maintained and rejuvenated by the thinkers, poets and sages of South Asia even in the time of major political upheaval. The strength of Upaniṣadic thought is not institutional or military, but is like the underground river (Phalgudhārā). It continued to have a subtle and persistent presence, maintaining the moral integrity and cultural vibrancy of the area over the course of different ages.

The harmonization between socio-cultural and universal humanism:

The practical utility of Upaniṣadic humanism is evident in the fact that it has made it possible for social harmony to be maintained in highly diverse populations.

The Human Being is a Person and has the Right to be a Person

This philosophy is rooted in an appreciation of human life, which is so poetic that it can be paraphrased in a quotation from the wider epic tradition:

In what way, then, is there anything better or more excellent than "Na mānūṣāt śreṣṭhataram hi kiñcit"? This means: "There's nothing better than man. The Upaniṣads teach the divinity of every human soul, making human dignity sacred. Service to humanity goes from being a mere social responsibility to a meaningful spiritual practice

The Vision of the Universal Nest:

This philosophical underpinning enabled South Asian history to have a remarkable ability to absorb multiple communities, traditions, and viewpoints. This can be reflected in the classic expression:

"Yatra viśvaṁ bhavatyekarīḍam"

This verse provides an image that is "the whole universe is a single nest.

Such a view has also enabled South Asia to accommodate and accommodate a diverse range of cultural and ethnic groups such as Shakas, Huns, Pathans, Mughals and many others into a social mosaic. This is not a 'melting pot' of groups destroying their individual identities, but rather a mutual understanding that all people are equal in essence.

Conclusion:

The Upaniṣads reveal timeless wisdom which can provide practical solutions to the world of today's divisions. These values can help eradicate the darkness of social isolation, greed and institutional inequality when applied to contemporary social issues. The Upaniṣads do not ask people to turn inward, but invite them to participate actively in the world with compassion. If we can transcend these limited categories of "unity" and acknowledge our shared humanity with the wider world, we can overcome our superficial notions. Rather, the effort is to create a real global harmony, based on mutual respect, self-restraint and a true respect for the universal human dignity.

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