



METHODS OF PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY IN UPANISHADS

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Philosophy is a subject which does not concerned only to an expert or specialist. It appears that there is probably no human being who does not philosophise. Good philosophy expands one's imagination as some philosophy is close to us, whoever we are. Then of course some is further away, and some is further still, and some is very alien indeed. We raise questions about the assumptions, presuppositions, or definitions upon which a field of inquiry is based, and these questions can be concerned with the meaning, significance, or integration of the results discovered or proposed by a field of inquiry. We find Karmic, Bhaktic and Jnamic interpretations of an ancient text in Indian philosophy because of different approaches adopted to inquire the text. This paper is an attempt to draw an outline of Upanishadic methods of inquiry in Indian philosophical tradition. Several methods like Enigmatic, Aphoristic, Etymological, Mythical, Analogical, Dialectical, Synthetic, Monologic, Temporising and Regressive methods etc., we can find in Upanishads.

Philosophy comes from the Greek words *philein* to love; *sophia* refers to any form of skill, art, dexterity, but especially the knowledge, knowing, above all, the higher wisdom, which includes virtue and art of living.¹ There are several sources of Indian philosophy, where "Darùan" means the realization of the ultimate reality. As far as the Indian tradition goes, philosophy is not an inquiry but also a realization. The concepts are mere instrument to carry the experience to others. Panikkar describe the main characteristics of Indian philosophy, "which he includes in the symbol *prajna*:

- a) A *karmic* element containing a movement towards the realisation of the goal of life, the praxis of salvation, the actual goal into the path of liberation, wisdom, union, happiness and knowledge.
- b) A *bhaktic* element of consecration, service, striving, desire, and love, to reach that goal, be it actually reachable or beyond every means, be it fullness or emptiness, the plenitude of existence or the way out of existence.
- c) A *jnamic* element of an actual sharing, relishing, tasting, experiencing, knowing reality, be it perfectly or by approximation, in appearance or in actual facts."²

These above said characteristics lead us to the basic attitude and methodology of different philosophical traditions of Indian philosophy. "Indian philosophy is marked, in this respect, by a striking breadth of outlook which only testifies to its unflinching devotion to the search for truth. Though there were many different schools and their views differed sometimes very widely, yet each school care to learn the views of all



the others and did not come to any conclusion before considering thoroughly what others had to say and how their points of view could be met. This led to formation of a method of philosophical discussions.”³

The Common Method of Indian Tradition

The most common method of Indian philosophical traditions can be describe as, “A philosopher had first to state the views of his opponents case which came to be known as the prior view (*purvapaksha*). Then followed the refutation (*khandana*) of this view. Last of all came the statement and proof of the philosopher’s own position, which, therefore, was known as the subsequent view (*uttarapaksha*) or the conclusion (*siddhanta*).”⁴

This method is dominant method in Indian traditions and is similar to the Western dialectical method. Dialect usually refers to the Socratic method of philosophising through discussion as set forth in Plato’s early dialogues featuring the Socratic figure. According to Socrates, the dialectics is a method of argumentation. Later it was highlighted by Plato as a science of the first principles.⁵ There are three important parts of this method i.e. thesis, antithesis and synthesis. “The triad thesis, antithesis, synthesis is often used to describe the thought of German philosopher G.W.F.Hegel. He never used the term himself, and almost all of his biographers have been eager to discredit it. The triad is usually described in the following way:

- The *thesis* is an intellectual proposition.
- The *antithesis* is simply the negation of the thesis, a reaction to the proposition.
- The *synthesis* solves the conflict between the thesis and antithesis by reconciling their common truths, and forming a new proposition.

The triad is often said to have been extended and adopted by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, however, Marx referred to them in *The Poverty of Philosophy* as speaking Greek and ‘Wooden trichotomies’.”⁶ A most incessant analysis of Dialectics was given by Hegel. For him, dialectics operates on the basis of the following laws:

- Law of identity
- Unity and struggle of opposite forces
- The transformation of quantitative changes into qualitative changes
- The law of negation of negation

Above discussion is very important because in Indian tradition it is said that wisdom (*prajna*) arrived at through dialectical transcendence of all theoretical positions.

Division of Indian Philosophy

We generally differentiate between *astika* and *nastika* systems in Indian philosophy. Here those traditions believe in the authority of Vedas called as *astika* and those who rejected the authority of the Vedas called as *nastika*. On the distinctions in



the methods of speculations adopted by different systems we classify it as follows:⁷

- A. Natika** (Heterodox): Schools rejecting Vedic Authority: Charvaka, Bauddha, Jaina.
- B. Astika** (Orthodox): Schools not rejecting Vedic authority. We can also classify astika in two:
- Schools directly based on Vedic texts: Emphasising the ritualistic aspects of the Vedas (viz. Mimànsa) and school emphasising the speculative aspect of the Vedas (viz. Vedanta).
 - Schools based on independent grounds (e.g. Sàškya, Yoga, Nyàya, Vai-eùika) Generally the foundation of philosophy is the experience and the chief tool use is reason. But when we clearly see these schools we find different conceptions of philosophy:
 - Philosophy should be based on Ordinary Experience: The Nyaya, the Vaiseshika, the Samkhya and the Charvaka and also the Buadha and the Jains.
 - Philosophy should be based on the experience of Saints, Seers or Prophets: Authority or the testimony of reliable personas and scriptures thus forms the basis of philosophy here i.e. Mimamsa, Vedanta and even Baudha and Jains depend sometime on this.

There is a common characteristic of these schools is, to use of reasoning. As, “Reasoning is the chief instrument of speculation for philosophers of both these classes. The difference is that while by the former reasoning is always made to follow the lead of ordinary experience, by the latter; reasoning is made to follow in some matters the lead of authority as well.”⁸ This statement made us clear that Indian philosophy used the reason as well as authority to perform the basis of philosophical speculations. Now we come to a quarry that how many types of philosophical methods or mode of inquiry we can find in Indian philosophical tradition. As we know that Upanishad is an important part of Indian philosophical literature and they represents real philosophical wisdom by its strong style of interpretation, arguments and language. Jonathan Ganeri rightly said, “There are lists of the different means of knowing, of the categories of knowable things, of the variety of psychological and physical constituents of a person, and generally, of the modes, realms and states of existence.”⁹ From here we can start our discussion on different philosophical methods.

Methods of Philosophical Inquiry in Upanishads¹⁰

Generally the text books begin with the Vedic literature, go on to Upanishads, and then to the six classical systems. Upanishads “tend to break with the Vedic tradition of representing worship as the route to knowledge and salvation, arguing by contrast that the seeker after the truth needs to discover the meaning of his soul.”¹¹ In this



regard the study of methods of inquiring or philosophical speculation will have a greater importance. The philosophers of the Upanishads have utilized various methods in their discussions and teachings. Here a short introduction is given and examples can be found to study the original sources¹². Their main methods were as follows:

1. *Enigmatic Method*: A statement having more than one possible meaning. The best illustration of the enigmatic methods is found in the *Svetashvar* Upanishad, where it describes the meaning of the reality.¹³ These types of puzzles also are found in *Isavasyopanishad* and other Upanishads.
2. *Aphoristic Method*: Aphoristic method of Upanishads has been widely used in the later philosophical treatises as well. In this method, much knowledge is compressed in small aphoristic sentences, which require sufficient intelligence to understand them. It is for this reason that the same sentences have been interpreted differently by different commentators. In the *Mandukya* Upanishad we find a good example where the nature of Brahman and Atman described¹⁴. This passage related to Vedanta philosophy.
3. *Etymological Method*: In the etymological method, the meaning of the word is explained according to its root. In the *Brahdarànyakà* Upanishad, we are told that “Purusha is really Purisaya” i.e. inhabiting the citadel of heart. Examples like this can be seen in other Upanishads also.
4. *Mythical Method*: Mythical method has been mostly used in the teaching. In Upanishads, e.g. in the *Kena* Upanishad, the parable of the Indra and demons has been told to preach humanity. Sometimes the myth is introduced for etiological purpose, as for example the myth of the sun coming out of the huge world egg. *Aitreya* Upanishad describes transcendental myth i.e. how Atman entered in the human skull and became individualized as the human soul.
5. *Analogical Method*: Here things which cannot be explained by reasoning are explained by analogy e.g. Yajnavalkya introduces the analogy of the drum of the conch in order to explain the processes of the apprehension of the self.
6. *Dialectical Method*: The dialectical method is one of the most widely used methods of the Upanishads as we discussed earlier. In the Upanishads discussions and symposiums have been mentioned at many places.
7. *Synthetic Method*: In the synthetic method, the discussions of the dialectical method is substituted by the creative syntheses of the synthesis method. In the fourth chapter of the *Brahadarnyaka* Upanishad, Yajnavalkya synthesises the several standpoints by the kind Janak. Examples like this can also be found in *Chandogya*, *Prasana* and other Upanishads.¹⁵



8. *Monologic Method*: Though the philosophers of the Upanishads speak very seldom, but when they speak, sometimes they forget the presence of others and go on talking to themselves for a long time. In the *Kathopanishad*, in the discussion of Yama and Nachiketa, Yama goes on talking to himself for the long time while replying the third question of Nachiketa.
9. *Ad hoc or Temporising Method*: The teacher of the Upanishad taught the disciples according to his mental and psychological level. In the temporising method, as the spiritual level of the enquire increase the teacher not only shows him the path ahead, but tells him the whole truth at once. This method has been accepted as very much important by the modern psychology of education as well. In this method, the enquirer himself struggles to understand the truth and the teacher only guides him.¹⁶
10. *Regressive Method*: The regressive method is in the form of many successive questions in which every new question carries us behind the answer to the previous one. When Janak asked Yajnavalkya about the light of man he told that it was sun. Janak went behind answer after answer, carrying from the fire.... to the Atman, which exists behind them all as the light in itself. In the same Upanishad the regressive method has been used in the discussion between Yajnavalkya and Gargi.

The above said methods usually adopted by all systems of Indian philosophy. To study these methods of Upanishads and also other schools of Indian philosophy, we can find many positive points of agreement, which may be regarded as the common marks of Indian epistemology and a comparative study surely provide us a justification for these methods. I am not here claiming to be providing conclusive arguments for a particular conclusion. But a systematic study of original texts of Indian philosophy can be beginning from above said discussions and a detailed examination is required to defend these methods. But this is our intension that, "If Indian philosophy is once more to revive and continue its great career, it can do so only by taking into consideration the new ideas of life and reality which have been flowing into India from the West and the East, from the Aryan, the Semantic, the Mongolian and other sources."¹⁷

Notes:

1. Quoted from Amaladas, Anand (2001). *Introduction to Philosophy*. Chennai: Satya Nilyam Publications, p.133.
2. *ibid*, p.137.
3. Chatterjee, S.C. & Datta, D.M. (2011) *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., p.04.
4. *Ibid*.
5. Kanika, K. (Eds.) (2003). *Philosophy Terminology*. Delhi: Lakshay Publication, p.76.
6. "Thesis, antithesis, synthesis" (2011) From *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*,



Retrieved on 30/11/2011. URL : http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thesis,_antithesis,_synthesis

7. Chatterjee, S.C. & Datta, D.M. (2011) *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, p.04.
8. Ibid, p.08.
9. Ganeri, Jonardon (2009). *Philosophy in Classical India*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., p.71.
10. Upanishadic methods quoted from Sharma, R.N. (1993). *Indian Philosophy (Problems & Theories)*. Delhi: Surjeet Publications , p.39-41.
11. Cited from Leaman, Oliver(2004). *Key Concepts in Eastern Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, p.268.
12. Although some hints and examples are available but for the consistency we should check it to the referred Upanishad.
13. ibid , for detail example see " *Enigmatic method*" ,39.
14. ibid , for detail example see " *Aphoristic method*" ,p.39.
15. ibid.
16. Ibid , for detail example see " *Ad hoc or Temporising method* " ,39
17. Chatterjee, S.C. & Datta, D.M. (2011) *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, p.04