The Kanva and Madhyandina Recensions of the Isha Upanishad: Exegetical Notes and Translations

VIKRAMAN BALAJI

In this series of articles, we will be guided by the following general principle: the deeper one comprehends the Veda, the more one unravels the mysteries in the Upanishads. Our primary sources of inspiration are the writings of Sri Aurobindo and Ananda Coomaraswamy. In this article, we take several verses from the Isha Upanishad as an illustration of this general principle.

THE CONTEXT OF THE ISHA UPA NISHAD IN THE YAJURVEDA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

The Isha Upanishad is the last chapter (Chapter 40) of the Shukla Yajurveda and derives its name from the first word of this last chapter. We read in the Srimad Bhagavata that the Shukla Yajurveda was revealed to Vajasaneya Yajnavalkya by Aditya, so it would be reasonable to take Yajnavalkya to be the “author” of this work. The Isha Upanishad traditionally has two recensions, the Kanva and the Madhyandina (see [8, page 150] for the Madhyandina recension).

While writing his commentary on the Isha Upanishad, Adi Shankara followed the Kanva text which has eighteen verses. We feel that it would benefit us immensely if we keep both recensions clearly in view when we read this Upanishad, more so since the latter half of both these recensions have subtle differences. We will have occasions to see more of this in our future discussions.

Hiranmayena patrena satyasya apihitam mukham,
Tat tvam Pushan apavnu satya dharmaya drstaye. - 15

By a Golden platter is covered the face (or door) (mukham) of Truth; that face do you unveil (apavnu) (or that door do you open) O Pushan, that I may contemplate with my eyes the Dharma of Truth. (Compare Sri Aurobindo [2])

Pushan, eka rshe, Yama, Surya, Prajapaty avruha rashmin samuha,
Tejo yat te rupam kalyanatamam, tat te pasyami. (4) Yosavasau Purushah soham asmi. - 16

O Pushan, O Sole Rishi, O Yama, O Surya, O power of Prajapati, marshall your rays, gather your light; the fiery-energy which is your most blessed form, that in you I behold and experience. Yonder Purusha there I my-Self am He! (Compare [2])

In his brief lecture on the Isha Upanishad, Swami Vivekananda gives an interpretative rendering of these verses as “Thou sun, who hast covered the Truth with thy golden disc, do thou remove the veil, so that I may see the Truth that is within thee. I have known the Truth that is within thee, I have known what is the real meaning of thy rays and thy glory and have seen That which shines in thee; the Truth in thee I see, and That which is within thee is within me, and I am that.”

In the traditional commentaries (based on the one by Shankara), these two hymns are treated as a “dying-man’s prayer” (see for instance Radhakrishnan [6, page 577]). That there is very little in support of this interpretation is our submission. In our opinion, this is a triumphant chant of a Seer who is at the culmination of his experience of the highest identification. This is consistent with the view expressed by Swami Sarvagatananda in his exposition of the Isha Upanishad. In [9, p.106] he states “This is a prayer of the struggling soul in the last stages before illumination”. Again, in [9, p.109] he states “This is not at the point of death; the devotee is prepared to die to realize that … Even if he faces death he will not cease his struggle.”

This is supported by the Madhyandina recension which we give below, especially because of the placement of the hymn in the text of this recension.

In the Kanva recension, these are verses 15 and 16. In the Madhyandina recension, unlike the Kanva, it is the last two verses of the Upanishad, namely 16 and 17 and goes as follows:

Hiranmayena patrena satyasya apitham mukham,
yosava aditye Purushah sosavaham. -16
By a Golden platter is covered the face (or door) (mukham) of Truth; the Parusha within the Supernal Sun Him, I my-Self am!

Om Kham Brahma. - 17

Om the Void is Brahman

We trace back to a possible source of inspiration for the hymn in the Isha. It is the following hymn from the fifth Mandala of the Rig Veda, a book attributed to the Atri family of rishis. The hymn is addressed to the solar deities Mitra-Varuna.

Om the Void is Brahman

Veda, a book attributed to the Atri family of rishis. The hymn is the Isha. It is the following hymn from the fifth Mandala of the Rig Veda.

The Rishi’s realization of Order overlaid by a Higher Order (ṛtena rtam aprīhitam), the Higher moveless Truth covered by a dazzling Truth, is much as in the Isha Upanishad. The Rishi sees that one order of realization is so overpowering that its glory even obscures the vision of an even greater order of reality.

The word .satya. comes from the root as, to be, to exist, therefore “esse”. Sat is the present participle connoting “Being”, likewise essence, from esse, while .Satya. is “beingness”, “the state or condition of Reality”. It has come to be termed “Truth”.

The word .ṛta. comes from the root .ṛ-, which is to move, to act, and therefore .ṛta. is the Truth dynamis, or Truth in movement, or manifested Truth. Ṛta is also accurately rendered as Cosmic Order from Greek .rētos., Latin .ordo.

The word .ṛta. is peculiar to the Veda and finds lesser usage in the Upanishad although one sees its negation .anṛta. in the Upanishad as something opposed to Truth. The word Ṛtu brings out the signification of the word Ṛtam as the regular and ordered succession of Time, known now as seasons.

The simultaneous occurrence of the words .Satya. and .Ṛtam. in the same line of many texts gives a clear indication that there is a distinction between them. For instance, we see in the Taittiriya Samhita, V 1.5.9 ([7, Page 201]), iyaṃ va ṛtam asau (adiitya) satyam. meaning as the Supernal-Sun is the Truth, all this is the Order. Ṛtam is distinct from satyam even as an application is distinct from the principle in which the application subsists.

From Satya, the Truth of Being, emanates the flow of Ṛta, Ṛtasya dхааa, and its flow-lines become the cosmic order. Ṛta is the Dynamic Reality in the Universe, the Universal Rhythm manifest-
ed under the Sun of Truth. The emergence of Order in the Chaos is the coming into being of the Cosmos. When the seer of the Isha prays to Pushan to contemplate with his eyes the Ṛtasya Dharma, he prays to behold the law of the Truth, to behold the Ṛta.

We will take up the role of Pushan, his identification with Yama and Surya, his being called the Sole Seer in this hymn, and his brotherhood with the solar deities Mitra and Varuna, in a subsequent article.

V. Balaji, Chennai Mathematics Institute, Chennai, India • balaji@cmi.ac.in

NOTES


REFERENCES


Ishavasya Upanishad constitutes the final chapter (40th adhyāya) of the Shukla Yajurveda from verse 1959 onwards, and survives in two recensions, named Kanva and Madhyandina. This book contains a lucid essence of these precious verses for the modern reader. It has a Sanskrit Grammar section where padachheda and anvaya with case-vibhakti of each word is clearly given. ...more. Get A Copy.

Amazon. The early upanisads annotated text and translation. Patrick Olivelle. New York. Abbreviations, xi Note on the Edition, xv Note on the Translation, xx Introduction, 3 The Social Background of the Upanisads, 4 The Literary History of the Upanisads, 7 Vedic Rituals, 16 Vedic Cosmologies, 19 Human Physiology and Psychology, 22 Cosmic Connections, 24 1. Brhadaranyaka Upanisad, 29 2. Chandogya Upanisad, 166 3. Taittiriya Upanisad, 288 4. Aitareya Upanisad, 315 5. Kausitaki Upanisad, 324 6. Ed. in the Madhyandina and the Kanva recensions with the commentary of Mahidhara by Weber (Berlin: Ferd. Dümmler's Verlag, 1852). Weber's edition of BU(M). Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Sudasiens. Though the Mandukya Upanishad gives certain symbolic instances of identification of limbs with the Cosmic Body, the meditator, in fact, can choose any symbol or symbols for such form of identification. The creation does not consist merely of the few parts that are mentioned in the Upanishad. There are many other things which may come to our minds when we contemplate. The Upanishads are secret teachings containing wisdom beyond the realm of the earth and revealing proclamations of the great sages of yore on the nature of Reality. Kena Upanishad: Word-for-Word Translation with Transliteration and Grammatical Notes. Stephanie Simoes. Download with Google. One downside is that this alphabet cannot be typed into the search box of the online Monier-Williams Dictionary: text must be inputted using ITRANS (Indian Languages Transliteration), HK (Harvard-Kyoto), or SLP1 (Sanskrit Library Phonetic Basic). IAST can be easily converted into HK according to the chart on the following page.

1 A Sanskrit term meaning “holding together”, sandhi (or saā‘fḍhi) is the alteration of sounds-both across word boundaries (external sandhi) and within words (internal sandhi)-that simplifies pronunciation. English uses sandhi, too: for example, the changing of a Madhyandina Recensions of the Isha Upanishad: Exegetical Notes and Translations VIKRAMAN BALAJI. In this series of articles, we will be guided by the following O Pushan, O Sole Rishi, OYama, O Surya, O power of Prajapati, mar- general principle: the deeper one comprehends the Veda, the more one unravels the mysteries in the Upanishads. In the Aurobindo [2]) Madhyandina recension, unlike the Kanva, it is the last two verses of the Upanishad, namely 16 and 17 and goes as follows: Pushan, eka rshe, Yama, Surya, Prajapaty vyuh samuha, Tejo yat te rupam kalyanatamam, tat te pasyami.(a) Yosavasau Purushah Hiranmayena patrena satyasva apihitam mukham, sohamasmi.(a) NOTES dara sata saha tasthuh tad ekam devanam shreshtam vapusham apasyam. - (a)