CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: KĀṬHOPANIŚAD

Indian culture is distinct from the other cultures of the world for its peculiar spiritual character which promoted tolerance among the human beings by teaching equality not only of humans but also of other beings. The earliest source of our culture is the Vedic literature comprising the four Vedas —— Rg, Yajus, Sāman and Atharvan —— along with their Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads. The Vedas and their exegetical works like Brāhmaṇas have several
branches. The life of the individuals of the Indian society, their social set-up and national unity depended on the principles taught in this vast literature. The Upaniṣads are the final portions of the Vedic literature spread in various branches. They are the foundation on which the most celebrated philosophical system of India is established and that system is rightly called Vedaṇta.

The Word Upaniṣad

The word Upaniṣad is formed by the

1. Vide: Catvāro vedāḥ sāṅgāḥ sarahasyā bahudhā bhinnāḥ -- ekāṣatam adharyuśākhāḥ, sahasravartmā sāmavedāḥ, ekavimśatidhā bāhvṛcyam, navadhātharvaṇo vedāḥ .......

Mahābhāṣya—Parsaṇa, p.71.
combination of the prepositions "upa" meaning "near" and “ni” meaning "surely" and the verbal root "sad²" meaning "to be destroyed" "to go" and "to be weak". Taking the meaning "to go" the word *Upaṇiṣad* is interpreted as that which surely makes one go to (i.e. attain) *Brahman*. *Brahman* is the subject matter of the major *Upaṇiṣads* and it is its knowledge that enables one to identify oneself with *Brahman*. According to Śaṅkara³ this knowledge of *Brahman* is the primary meaning of the word *Upaṇiṣad*. Its secondary meaning is the text dealing with that knowledge. If the meaning of the root is taken as "to be destroyed" the word

2.Śadā viṣaragatyavasādaneṣu, Pāṇinīya Dhātupāṭha (Siddhāntakaumudi reading) 854
means that by which the ignorance impeding the attainment of Brahman is destroyed. By the third meaning of the root (i.e., to be weak), the word is interpreted as denoting the knowledge by which the ignorance is weakened. Thus all interpretations of the word point to the same meaning. The root "sad" with the prefix "ni" means to sit down. Thus *Upaniṣad* stands for the knowledge acquired by sitting near the teacher. It implies that the texts known as *Upaniṣads* were taught only to the intimate students in whom the preceptor had faith.

The *Upaniṣads* have attracted the attention of the students of philosophy all over the world by their treatment of the wonderful science of the absolute reality, *Brahmavidyā*. The nature of *Brahman*, its manifestation in the forms of individual souls, the problem of life after death,
the apparent creation of the universe, the ways to achieve peace and happiness in this world, the final liberation, etc, find suitable treatment in the Upaniṣads. The enunciation of the principle of the soul (Ātman) is apt to bring peace to the individuals who are frustrated by the chain of the pleasures and pains in the worldly life. A proper understanding of the theory of the oneness of the soul, though it appears as several being manifested in the forms of individual souls, is conducive to universal peace.

The learning which brings knowledge of the only imperishable thing, Brahma, is termed higher science (Parā vidyā). All other learnings including the four Vedas are termed lower science (Aparā vidyā). The major Upaniṣads mainly describe Parā vidyā. But in the
course of discussions, sometimes containing objections and rejoinders also, the *Upaniṣads* deal with many aspects of life. They include the theory of *Karma*, equality of all creatures, unity in diversity, cultural thoughts, social set-up, status of women, opposition to sacrifice and caste system, etc. The origin of Indian thoughts, philosophies, culture and civilization is connected with the *Upaniṣads*. As Bloomfield says there is no form of Indian thought, not even Buddhism, which is not derived from the *Upaniṣads*.

**Major *Upaniṣads***

More than two hundred *Upaniṣads* have come to light. Finding the honourable position

4. Bloomfield, *the Religion of the Veda*, p.51
enjoyed by the Vedic *Upaniṣads*, people with sectarian interests have created works with the label of *Upaniṣads*, even during the modern period. *Allopaniṣad, Śirīmaṇḍapaniṣad* and *Kraistavopaniṣad* are such modern creations. The *Muktikopaniṣad* enumerates one hundred and eight *Upaniṣads* and these may be of considerable antiquity. However, the oldest of them having link with any Vedic branch may be around twenty. Scholars have been speaking of a group of ten *Upaniṣads* implying that they are the principal ones. They are *Īsāvasyopaniṣad, Kenopaniṣad, Kaṭhopaniṣad, Praśnopaniṣad, Muṇḍako-paniṣad, Māṇḍukyopaniṣad, Taittirīyopaniṣad, Aitareyopaniṣad, Chāndogyopaniṣad* and

5. *Muktikopaniṣad* 30-39
Brhadāraṇyakopaniṣad. Śaṅkara, the greatest exponent of Advaita philosophy, composed his commentary on these ten and also on the Śvetāśvatāropaniṣad. On the basis of antiquity, language, style and contents, we may consider these eleven as the major Upaniṣads.

Period of Upaniṣads

We have no clear picture of the historical evolution of the Upaniṣadic literature. Scholars

6.Īśakenakaṭhaḥprāśnamunda māṇḍukya tittryhi
Aithareyam ca chāndogyam brhadāraṇyakam
tathā. Muktikopaniṣad 30
7.Cf. Bandhu, Manudev, Brhadāraṇyakopaniṣad
  Ek Adhyāyan, p.8.
have made attempts to classify the *Upaniṣads* on different considerations. Probable period of origin was a criterion adopted by Macdonell and Paul Deussen. According to Deussen, there are some early prose *Upaniṣads* like *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, *Chāndogya*, Taittirīya and *Aitareya*; there are some early *Upaniṣads* in verse like *Kaṭha*, *Īśa*, *Mundaka* and *Mhānārayana*, there are later prose *Upaniṣads* like *Praśna*, *Maitrāyaṇī* and *Māṇḍūkya*; and also there are later *Ātharvāṇa* *Upaniṣads* which include sectarian *Upaniṣads*. No scholar was able to find out conclusively the date.

of any of the ancient Upaniṣads. The period of the major Upaniṣads have been differently pronounced between 1200 B.C and 300 B.C. According to R.D.Ranade, the upward and lower limits of the whole Upaniṣadic period may be fixed without much difficulty as being between 1200 and 600 B.C\textsuperscript{10}. Radhakrishnan considers the period of the early Upaniṣads as between 1000 B.C and 300 B.C\textsuperscript{11}. Dasgupta takes the period of ancient Upaniṣads as 700 - 600 B.C\textsuperscript{12}. We may subscribe

\textsuperscript{10}Ranade, R.d., \textit{A Constructive Survey of Indian Philosophy}, p.88
\textsuperscript{11}Radhakrishnan, S., \textit{Indian Philosophy} (Hindi translation by Vidyalankar, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition, p.129.
\textsuperscript{12}Dasgupta, \textit{A history of Indian Philosophy}, vol:I, p.28
to the view of Max Muller that, though it is easy to see that these *Upaniṣads* belong to very different periods of Indian thought, any attempt to fix their relative age seems for the present almost hopeless.

**Kathopaniṣad** : Name

*Kātha* was a disciple of Vaiṣampāyana who taught the *Krṣṇayajurveda*. The recension of the *Krṣṇayajurveda* taught by *Kātha* and the allied literature came to be known by his name. "*Kāthena proktam adhiyānāḥ Kāthāḥ*" - Those who learn what *Kātha* taught are also known as *Kāthas*. Similarly, the *Upaniṣads* connected with

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this branch is called _Kāṭhopaniṣad_. It is also called _Kāṭhakopaniṣad_. The tradition of those who learn what _Kaṭha_ taught is _Kāṭhakaṁ_. _Kaṭhena proktam adhiyānānām āṁśāyāḥ_. Since the _Upaniṣad_ in our consideration is related to this tradition, the name _Kāṭhakopaniṣad_ also is valid. As the divisions of this _Upaniṣad_ are called _Vallīs_, the _Upaniṣad_ is sometimes referred as _Kaṭhavallī_.

**Later Addition In _Kāṭhopaniṣad_**

In the present form of the _Kāṭhopaniṣad_ there are two chapters (_adhyāyas_) of three _Vallīs_ (sections) each. The last _Vallī_ in the first chapter ends with a _Phalasruti_ along with the

15. _Siddhāntakaumudi on Pāṇinisūtra_ IV.iii.126.
repetition of the last line of the last verse. Usually it happens only at the end of an *Upaniṣad*. This has led scholars to presume that the original *Upaniṣad* consisted of the first chapter only and the second is a later addition. Macdonell points out the more developed notions about Yoga and much more pronounced view as to the unreality of phenomena in the second chapter in support of this assumption. Swami Chinmayananda points out this controversy and remarks that we need not pause to condemn or to applaud these scholarly conclusions. He advocates the study of the

second chapter to understand the principles of the main *Upaniṣad*.

**Story of Naciketas**

*Kaṭhopaniṣad* is written in attractive narrative style filled with poetic beauty. As an effective medium of imparting the knowledge of the Self, it tells the story of Naciketas, the son of Vājaśravasa.

Vājaśravasa performed a sacrifice called *Viśvajit* by which one could win the world. In that sacrifice he gave away all his wealth. He had a son named Naciketas. He saw that the cows given as gifts to the Brahmins in the sacrifice were of poor quality. Naciketas was not satisfied with the poor offerings of his father. He feared that the
performer who gives such gifts will go to hell. 

Naciketas, a good son, desired to offer himself as homage in sacrifice; he asked twice and again: "Father to whom will you give me". Father in his fury said: "To death I give you".

Naciketas did not want his father’s word to become false. Man, like corns, decays, dies, and is born again in the transient world. Hence there is nothing to worry over the loss of this body. So he went to the abode of Yama. Yama was not there. He waited for three days without food. When Yama returned he saw the boy fasting. Hospitality is one of the chief duties of the people in Vedic India. For the negligence to the guest, Yama offered him three boons.
By the first, Naciketas prayed for the restoration of his father's affection. By the second, he knew the secret of the mystic fire. By the third, he wanted to know the secret of the life after death.

The Upaniṣad is mainly devoted to answering the third question; i.e., what happens to a man after death? 'He is', some say, 'He is not' - others say. What is the truth? We have no definite knowledge about the Self either through direct perception or through inference. But the supreme goal of life is dependent on this knowledge. Therefore Naciketas wanted to know the nature of the Self.

Having tested the disciple thus and found him fit for instruction, Yama started to impart the
knowledge regarding the ultimate truth. Yama explains to him that the individual Self is basically of an eternal nature. He survives death and takes up another body according to his deeds and knowledge.

Yama tells Naciketas that there are preferables and pleasurables (Sreyas and Preyas) in this world. Those who run after the latter falls. Those who opt for the former attain the ultimate. The ‘preferables’ and ‘pleasurables’ (knowledge and ignorance) are opposed to each other and lead man in different ways. The ignorant deeming themselves intelligent and enlightened, go round and round staggering in crooked paths, like the blind being led by the blind. Many have heard of the ultimate, but only a few could realise it. It is not possible to know whether it exists or not,
whether it is active or inactive, whether it is pure or impure. The knowledge of the Self cannot be attained through argumentation. It is hard to perceive. Lodged in the innermost recess and located in intelligence, it abandons joy and grief.

_Naciketas_, then asked about the _Self_ that is distinct from virtue, distinct from vice, distinct from effect and cause, distinct from past and future.

_Yama_ explained the form of _Sat_ as _Om_. _Om_ indeed is the lower _Brahman_; it is the higher _Brahman_, who knows this certainly attains what he desires. _Brahman_ is that supreme power on which all the others rest; all derive strength from
Brahman\textsuperscript{18}. Yama thus satisfied the quest of Naciketas.

**Interpretation Of The Story**

In the philosophical view, like other principal *Upaniṣads*, *Kathopaniṣad* also preaches the everlasting, beginningless, undecaying and transcendental principle. The story is only a skeleton to enrich the Vedic thought. A seeker after truth of the Ātman is one who discriminates between the real and unreal, whose mind is turned away from the unreal, who possesses calmness and the allied virtues. Only one who is longing for liberation is considered to be qualified to enquire *Brahman*. Naciketas is an apt example for a true

\[18.\text{KU I.ii . 15-25}\]
disciple of unlimited inspiration. The inquirer of truth who possesses the four means of attainment should approach a wise preceptor. Naciketas approaches a great teacher namely Yama and his acute desire to know the answer to his third question, compels Yama to unfold the mystery of death and profess the ultimate reality of all beings.

Naciketas is free from the lust for physical prosperities or divine gifts like long life, land, wealth etc. His mind is far from the unreal earthly profits because they are transient. He has a stubborn conviction that Brahman is real and the universe unreal, and he gave up all transitory enjoyments of subject-object relation. Naciketas is an ideal disciple of Indian concept. The great teacher Yama appreciates his pupil thus: "Thou art
fixed in truth, Let me have, O Naciketas, an enquirer like thee”\textsuperscript{19}.

The story of Naciketas is only a dramatic situation created by the poet-sage to illustrate the nature of Ātman. We get a glimpse of truth in its empirical and transcendental levels.

\textsuperscript{19} KU. I. ii. 9