Humanistic Education During Upanishadic Period

Abstract

This dissertation is based on interdisciplinary and comparative approach to the concept of humanistic education as expressed in the major Upanishads and the related literature. The eleven Principal Upanishads have been studied from several angles, mainly as texts of philosophical significance having deep bearings on some major ontological issues. But the educational aspect of upanishadic texts have scarcely been the object of enlightened enquiry. The present project is intended to critically examine Upanishads to find out how far they reflect a humanist ideology of education which has been the major theory in educational theory-building from the renaissance onwards. Therefore, this dissertation is practically an endeavour to examine the text and formulate concepts that point up to a philosophical base of education, and it seeks to bring together in one coherent view the ideas reflected by the humanistic psychologists of America in the field of education in the 1960s.

In the West the term "humanism" as a nontheistic creed has often been used to value systems that emphasise the personal worth of each individual. In the Upanishads, which are mainly delightful blend of philosophic and mystical reflections and utterances of sages "humanism" refers to an attitude of mind that receives inspiration in man's personal quest for the paradigm of truth and goodness. Upanishads arose as the cardinal text for teaching the students of a monastic order to
get at the concept of 'Being' as revealed in the functional
efficacy of human consciousness. This has a phenomenological
import with deep ethical bearings on human conduct, his social
responsibility and the legitimacy of his actions. So Upanishads
are not simply meant to provide the students with a theory of
Being; it also means to teach pragmatics by setting down the
total perspective where the life of man takes on the accents of
meaning.

The first segment of the analysis underscores the
historical context within which the upanishadic texts were
written. It includes the connotations, classification, numbers,
authorship and authenticity of the eleven Principal Upanishads.
Controversies about the dating of Upanishads indicate certain
uniformity and unanimity of opinion among the scholars. Almost
all the major students of Upanishads agree that the main
Upanishads antedate the rise of Buddhism and were composed at
the end of the vedic age. The researcher finds them post-vedic
and pre-paninian. This chapter also highlights the geography of
Upanishadic India, place of the Upanishads in vedic literature,
their style, form and content.

The third chapter of the analysis focuses on the
upanishadic system of education—the teacher-taught relation,
the curriculum, academic institutions, method of teaching and
women education. The necessity of a humanist orientation can only
be brought forth if the whole profile of education is outlined
in its historicity. For this purpose Upanishads are used as the
text that registers the various aspects of the educational
system in its secular and spiritual objectives. The study of
vedic texts is used to supplement where Upanishads are not
adequate to picture a formalised system of education. Their
curriculum consisted of two kinds of knowledge -- Para vidya and
Apara vidya. Apara vidya was considered as the temporal
knowledge and it was the base upon which Para vidya or higher
knowledge was erected. The principal goal of education was
personal enlightenment and self-actualisation and the rest were
only means. Meditation or the pursuit of knowledge of Brahman
were means for leading a life of enlightenment, so that an
individual can get rid of the beliefs that mislead one and
devote himself to deliver good to his fellowmen. A life of
communal harmony or spiritual communism was the main target of
all these endeavours.

Schools were residential and in the residential
atmosphere the teacher remained a father substitute, a real
friend, a philosopher and guide who could guide the student
towards leading a complete life. Although the goal of education
was self-actualisation vocational training was not ignored. As
a member of the teacher's family the students served and
studied. Caste or wealth was not the criterion for admission
into a gurukula or monastic order. Women were not debarred from
education and both in Vedas and Upanishads we find examples of
women who took part in philosophical discourse and were admitted as scholars in those ages.

The fourth chapter analyses the most important doctrines that the students were taught to make their life more meaningful. The upanishadic seers had shaped the vedic theories so systematically that there was no gap between theory and practice in their life. Ranging from cosmology to liberation they analyse Atman and its relation to Brahman, immortality of soul through rebirth and reincarnation; rebirth, its relationship with Karma and Jnana, four ultimate ends of life and final beatitude.

These concepts and theories had a prominent place in upanishadic teaching. Their hundred-years-plan with four ultimate ends of life had its prop in their immortality of soul and rebirth. Their concept of Karma and Jnana depended on their theory of liberation. To make society better-run they discovered caste according to labour and potentiality. The upanishadic teachers drew their conclusion in the algebraic formula by setting up an equation between Brahman as X and Atman as the manifest symbol.

Brahman is a logical construction of the ultimate reality reached through stages of abstractions from the facts in perception leading to knowledge which is based on human experience. It is shown to be formless attributeless and ultimate in every respect. It is the supreme fullness of
"being" as the ultimate truth and nothing can affect its existence which shines in itself. The identification between Brahman and Atman has a number of resonances in the text and that is why it has been discussed for a better comprehension of upanishadic ideology. This elevates human essence above all other beings and invests his life with a rare sublimity. The mystery of creative process is thus internalised by positing Atman or human soul as the principle of animation in the gross physical body.

The theory of rebirth and the law of Karma seem to sustain the view that the purpose of upanishadic education was essentially spiritual, mainly salvationist in design. But this spiritual objective does not appear to be the sole end of such an education. The present pursuit reveals that there are reasons to believe that this method of training and education was meant to produce men capable of leading their fellowmen along the right path, capable of healthy leadership and sacrifice.

Fifth chapter examines modern education in relation to humanism. From the Renaissance onwards educational ideology has become more and more secularised. This chapter traces the genesis and growth of humanism from Hellenic age till the present times, the main thrust being to expose the philosophy underlying education and articulating it as a process and system in all its formal and material aspects. The theocentric nature
of medieval education posed innumerable obstacles to the free spirit of enquiry and enslaved man within the prescriptive limits of the scriptures. The rise of humanism placed man in the centre of the cosmic picture and planned out the curriculum accordingly. An analysis of the different aims and objectives of modern education has been attempted to show how it became more and more sociocentric and extremely pragmatic in course of time. This is succeeded by an inquiry into the nature of psychocentric education that aims at getting at the crux of human problem about the existential value of life. That is why Maslow, Rogers, RolloMay and other humanistic psychologists who started humanistic education as a movement in America have been dealt with in some details. For the first time they showed that no education can bring fulfillment to an individual unless it trains him to reach creative experience or self-actualisation. This approach to education encourages a student to become "fully human".

The final chapter moves along the axis of explicit comparision between the upanishadic ideology that centres around self-realisation as the ultimate pursuit of Being and self-actualisation as the final objective of humanistic education proposed by Maslow and his group. A one-to-one correspondence between these two systems cannot be worked out because distanced in history they reflect different strategies for self-realisation. Yet the final goal in either case is essentially geared to the pursuit of Being that results in self-knowledge,
in the realisation that "man" is at the centre as an actor who is capable of relating himself to the phenomenal world as the site of creativity unique in his creative endeavour.

This chapter explains Maslow's concept of a "good person" or "self-actualised person" in the line of Patanjali Yoga Sutra. It assimilates the fourteen B-values that Maslow enumerates such as truth, goodness, beauty, integration, aliveness, uniqueness, perfection, fulfillment, justice, simplicity, richness, effortlessness, playfulness and self-sufficiency with Yoga Sutra's Yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, dharana, dhyana and samadhi.

Analysis of the mental functions and states of consciousness has been attempted to show that these operations of mind should not be identified as the functions of Being. So meditation is proposed to circumvent this inordinate problem. This chapter also discusses philosophical bases of education in the Upanishads and relevance of upanishadic ideology in the context of contemporary civilization.

It is hoped that this research may open up fresh avenues for further exploration of the Upanishads in the light of some hypotheses thrown up by analysis, interpretation and comparative study in this project. The term of further research may be briefly sketched out. Firstly, there is the scope for a phenomenomenological interpretation of the principal Upanishads. On many occasions the nature of consciousness has been pursued
with an introspective keenness and analytical precision which is rare elsewhere. The authors practiced meditation which opens up a broad avenue to the study of consciousness by tracking it in controlled stage of transformation as one proceeds from initial stage central to the final moment of peak experience. Such a study demands a direct reporting of meditators in practice, a laboratory to record and analyze their reports and findings, and collaboration of a psychologist working with a self-actualizer who can alone undertake such a research with some success. Secondly, a linguistic analysis may open up further avenues for the nature and function of language expressible in certain states of experience.

On the whole, I have to restrict my research to analysis and interpretation, explication of certain cardinal concepts and values of education as a process that may lead to self-actualization. I have kept the investigation away from any spiritual or religious bias and all along I have striven to show that humanism is a very broad ideology that can be deflected to any of the systems of values. I make no claim for the success of this project and feel that the exploratory undertaking may open up new avenues for an approach to Upanishads quite different from what have been achieved in this field.