

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Why study Indian philosophy?

Philosophy literally means the love of knowledge. According to the Webster's dictionary, it means the study of knowledge. In either case, all departments of knowledge are being referred to. As such, it includes all departments of human endeavour and knowledge. Thus, in some sense, to be a philosopher is to be "all-knowing."

It is clear that when we meet the world and experience it, not all of it makes sense. Thus, it is natural to inquire into the meaning of things. Such an inquiry can be traced to several ancient civilizations. When we look at Indian philosophy, particularly the thought embodied in the ancient writings of the Upanishads, we can only marvel at the boldness of this questioning in that remote and primitive period of human history. The dating of these writings is not clear. It is believed that a long period of time must have elapsed between the time when these thoughts were current and the time when they were written down. There is some evidence that some of the hymns of the Rg Veda were part of the culture as long ago as 1500 B.C. Many of these writings have been preserved and handed down by an oral tradition and may have been written down a few centuries before the advent of Buddha, which is around 500 B.C. If we separate out the stray mythological components and verses pertaining to some social customs of the time, we find in these writings, the true spirit of philosophy, an intense zeal to understand and to gain knowledge.

Now, how to acquire this knowledge? It is clear that knowledge is infinite and is it even humanly possible to acquire all knowledge? In the Mundaka

Upanishad, it is asked, “What is that by knowing which everything is known?”

*Kasmin nu bhagavo vijnāte sarvam idam vijnātam bhavati iti.* (Mundaka Up. 1.1.3)

In Chandogya Upanishad, (6.1.4), we meet with a slightly more precise reformulation of the question. “Just as the knowledge of one slab of clay gives us knowledge of all clay, what is that, by knowing which everything else becomes known.”

Here we see something very fundamental. The individual who asks this question implies that we can understand through the method of analogy, from general principles. The implication is that there must be a subtle method of going from the particular to the general. Second, the person seems to think it may be possible to enter into the heart of knowledge, to arrive at the essence of knowledge. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the individual asks a question indicating that by asking questions, we may arrive at knowledge.

The method of asking questions is usually attributed to Socrates. The Socratic method is to probe deeper through a sequence of questions. Philosophers ask questions. These questions may not have immediate answers. They may be “unanswerable” in some sense. But this does not prevent us from asking them. Asking questions is the essence of modern research. So we see here in this Upanishad, the spirit of modern research. In fact, this spirit is the essence of the Upanishads. If modern science has taken the physical universe as its field of investigation, the Upanishads have taken the entire field of experience, both outer and inner, as the field of inquiry. We will see that the act of asking profound and fundamental questions, which lies at the heart of modern science, is the essence of the Upanishadic spirit.

Sometimes, these questions may not have answers. But still, we must ask them. In this context, Bertrand Russell writes in his “Problems of Philosophy,” that “Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation; but above all because, through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good.”

Thus, philosophy does not give definitive answers. It was a profound discov-

ery of the 1930's, that even a highly precise subject like mathematics, can also pose seemingly accurate questions for which there are no mathematical answers. One of the greatest achievements of 20th century mathematics is a fundamental theorem of Gödel. This theorem is set against the background of what we would call logical thinking and deductive reasoning. When we speak about the truth of a mathematical proposition, we imply that it can be deduced by applying a set of "rules", if you will, or to be more accurate, axioms, to a proposition which you have deemed to be known, to derive the new proposition. Gödel's theorem tells us that reasoning has limitations in the following sense. In any axiom system, one may write down propositions which can neither be proved or disproved. In other words, they cannot be derived by applying the axioms, nor can their negations be so derived.

In the light of Gödel's theorem, is the question of arriving at all knowledge placed before us by the Upanishads a valid one? Can we even rely on reasoning to achieve this purpose? This question can be addressed in various ways. Reading through the Upanishads, it becomes clear that detailed knowledge is not what is meant when one asks for all knowledge. Rather, one implies the essence of knowledge, or the underlying principle of knowledge. To this end, inquiry is a powerful and viable tool, not to be abandoned, even though its limitations are acknowledged in the Upanishads. In addition, language and even the mind are acknowledged as limited for this experience. The claim is made that mind must be transcended through mind by a refinement of inquiry.

Is it possible to arrive at the essence of knowledge? Is it possible to arrive at something through which we can understand ourselves and this entire universe? The word *śraddhā* or faith is a word we will meet in the Katha Upanishad and it refers to this quality of the human mind. "Faith" is a poor translation of the word. It maybe more accurate to say it is an innate feeling that there is structure in this universe, both inner and outer and that we have the ability to discover it. This resonates with a famous quotation of Einstein: "One of the most incomprehensible things about the universe is that it is comprehensible." This is what science has discovered. The Upanishadic claim that is implicit and in some cases explicit is that it is possible to arrive at such a point but not by objective reasoning, but rather by an inner experience that lies beyond language and beyond explanation. This is a profound stage that we will try and explore when we come to a detailed study of the Upanishads.

The method of analogy is a method of knowledge. We will find the sages, often frustrated to put their experiences into language, resort to poetry and the method of analogy. For instance, in the same Mundaka Upanishad quoted above, we find the following. As a spider sends forth and draws in its thread, as herbs grow on the earth, as the hair grown on the human head and body, so also from the Imperishable arises this universe. The sages at the same time never

refrain from telling us that That which they are trying to describe is beyond mind and speech.

## 1.2 An outline of Indian Philosophy

In broad outline, we may divide the development of Indian philosophy into five historical periods: the Vedic period (2500 B.C. to 600 B.C.), the Epic period (600 B.C. to 200 A.D.), the Sutra period (200 A.D. to 600 A.D.), the Scholarly period (600 A.D. to 1700 A.D.) and the Modern period (1700 A.D. to present). The writings on which we base our study are all written in Sanskrit, except for those of the modern period, where in nearly all cases, they are written in English.

Sanskrit is a highly structured language with precise rules of grammar. It is phonetic, in the sense that the writing corresponds precisely to the pronunciation. Linguists and philologists have traced many of the Indo-European languages to their Sanskrit roots. To cite one instance, the English word “is” is derived from the Sanskrit word, *asti* and the cognate word *īs*, which means the cosmic ruling force, or cosmic “glue” to put it more poetically. Thus, the Isa Upanishad is a tribute and analysis of this ruling principle. The discovery of Sanskrit by European scholars can be traced back to the 18th century. Since that period coincides with the height of British rule of India, it is not inaccurate to say that some of the translations of the early Sanskrit texts were distorted and casual. For example, the word *Īsa* of the Isa Upanishad is translated as the “Lord” in the early translations implying a dualism when no dualism was meant. Thus, we must proceed with caution and carefully ascertain that the translations are faithful to the original spirit.

The writing of the Vedic period consists mainly of the four Vedas (Rg Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda) each of which has four parts known as Mantras, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads. The Mantras (or hymns) can be said to be the foundation of Indian philosophy. In the beginning, these hymns seem to be poetic utterances and adoration of the natural forces. At the same time, we can trace within their structure a monistic theme that later pervades the Upanishads. The Brahmanas contain the ritualistic instructions. The Aranyakas and the Upanishads constitute the philosophical portions. Sri Aurobindo, in his *Secret of the Veda*, gives a psychoanalytic interpretation for the hymnal portion of the Rg Veda. From a philological and linguistic standpoint, there is some basis for this interpretation.

The word “mantra” is derived from two Sanskrit words, *manas*, which refers

to the mind, and *trayate* which means to reflect upon, or to cogitate upon. The word can also be defined as “that which protects.” The word, *manush* refers to the human being who has a mind or more precisely it refers to the ability of the human species to reflect. The English word, “man” is derived from this Sanskrit word *manush*. It is important to keep in mind, the cognate Sanskrit word, *mananam*, which means reflection or meditation that has the same roots. There is no doubt that the early writings have declared the power of the word. In these writings, we see a continuous fascination for the interrelationship between the thought and the word.

The word, *brahman* is derived from the Sankrit root, *brihi*, which means vast and expansive. Brahman thus refers to that which is vast and expansive. In the early translations, this word has been incorrectly translated into the word “God” and naturally, this leads to a great deal of confusion. As signalled above, we must be aware of this imprecision when we study some of these translations. The word Brahmin refers to the priest or to be more accurate, the scholar. Since many found pure reflection difficult, the Brahmins contrived ways of involving physical actions to facilitate the meditation on the mantras. These rituals were then written down into the Brahmanas. Naturally, over time, much of this degenerated into pure priestcraft.

The Aranyakas and Upanishads comprise the philosophical portion of the Vedas. Here again, it may help us to understand the Sanskrit roots of these words. Firstly, the word *veda* is derived from the root word, *vid*, which means to know. Thus, *vidya* or *veda* means knowledge, taken in its most comprehensive sense. *Aranya* means forest, and *Aranyaka* refers to forest writings. It is an ancient tradition, going back to the Vedic period, that the philosopher must retreat from society into the forest in order to understand human society and in a larger context, the meaning of life. Only by such a retreat can you examine the human species in a clinical fashion and arrive at some objective understanding of the phenomenon of life and gain some comprehension of its mysteries. Thus, whoever had a desire to become a philosopher, made such a retreat into the forest and pondered over the fundamental questions of life. After much reflection, they would gain some insight and these insights they recorded in their forest writings. In time, these writings gained currency and attracted students. Unlike today, the sages and students both realised that knowledge is not in books. Books can only be a guide but cannot really ignite the torch of knowledge. That must come from a living teacher and student must sit near an illumined teacher so that the knowledge is transferred to the student, by some mysterious process of osmosis. This is the meaning of the word, *upanishad*, which literally means, “below, near, sit,” signifying that knowledge comes by sitting near a learned teacher. Thus, the Upanishads are the essential writings of the forest philosophers, or more precisely, their students.

It is in the Upanishads that we find the dominant theme of non-dualism which is central to Indian philosophy. One can discern a certain impatience, and sometimes even explicit denunciation of the ritualistic portion of the Brahmanas in these writings. Occasionally, some mythological or ritualistic motif does intervene in a few of the Upanishads, but often it is to illustrate a subtle philosophical point. Still, we must be careful to sift out the pure philosophy from the mythology or aspects of social custom and ritual prevalent at that time. There is no doubt, however, that in all of the Upanishads, we find the assertion of the existence of an Ultimate Reality and that this Reality can be experienced through the mental faculties of reason and intuition.

The Epic period refers to the two great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, written according to tradition by Valmiki and Vyasa respectively. These epics are comparable to the Greek epics of Homer, the Iliad and the Odyssey. As such, they try to record history in a poetic narrative. In one sense, however, they differ from the Greek epics. Interspersed in both of these works, are large tracts of philosophical discourse. Thus, again, we must be careful to separate the philosophy from the literary narrative. The most significant such treatise is the Bhagavad Gita contained in the Mahabharata. This treatise ranks as one of the foremost texts in Indian philosophic thought.

To the Epic period also belong the early developments of Buddhism, Jainism, Saivism and Vaishnavism. Each of these have their own philosophical foundations and in some cases, like Saivism and Vaishnavism grew out of the earlier Vedic tradition, and in others, like Buddhism and Jainism, developed orthogonally to the earlier traditions.

The Sutra period spanning four centuries gave rise to systematic treatises of various schools of philosophy. One can see the critical attitude in a sophisticated stage of development in this period. Six systems have emerged at this time and they are the schools of Nyaya (logical realism), Vaishesika (realistic pluralism), Samkhya (evolutionary dualism), Yoga (disciplined meditation), Purva Mimamsa (preliminary interpretation of the Vedas) and Uttara Mimamsa, also known as Vedanta (synthesis of the Vedic tradition) or alternatively viewed as a deeper or higher interpretation of the Vedas.

The fourth period, called the scholastic period, extends for a 1000 years. During this time, many scholars took up the older texts such as the sutras or the Upanishads, and wrote extensive commentaries upon them. Three great philosophers stand out prominently during this period. They are Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva founders of the philosophies of non-dualism, qualified non-dualism and dualism respectively.

The modern period may be said to begin with Vivekananda. Unlike the earlier periods where the writings were mainly in Sanskrit, the writings of the modern period are mainly in English. At this time, one may cite thinkers such as Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, Krishnamurti, Ramana Maharshi, and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan as the principal contributors to modern Indian philosophy.

