

Beyond Beating Love's Drum: Glimpses of Upanishadic Thought in Mirabai

Dr. Aditi Govil

Ph.D. Associate Professor,

Swami Shraddhanand College,

University of Delhi, Delhi

Abstract: This paper analyses the extent of impact of Upanishadic philosophy in a 16th century Bhakti saint, Mirabai's padas. The paper discusses how she retold the complex Upanishadic concepts of omniscient Brahman, maya, karma, rebirth, meditating upon God, union of Brahman and atman, Moksha, fickleness of mann etc. through her simple and lucid love poems. These concepts formed a deep undercurrent to her philosophy. The only differences were between the sakar and nirakar worship and that of jnana marg and bhakti marg. But these differences were complementary, not exclusive of each other.

Keywords: #Mirabai # Upanishads # maya # karma # samsara # mann #naam-smaran

Introduction

The figure of Mirabai, a 16th century bhakti saint from Rajasthan, has occupied popular imagination since centuries now. Associated with krishna worship, she has been lauded as one of the greatest Bhakti poets in Hindi. Beginning with Bhaktmal of Nabhadass in 16th century, she has been discussed in a variety of ways by near contemporary and later writers from all disciplines such as her life, legends around her, miracles, anecdotes, her devotional poetry, perceptions about her among

various social groups, her depiction as a rebel Rajput queen against patriarchy etc.^{xxiv} Mira has also been associated with high Hinduism. According to Kumkum Sangari, the liberalising and dissenting forms of Bhakti merge as a powerful force which selectively use the metaphysic of high Hinduism (maya, karma, rebirth) and derive moral legitimacy from transformation of some prescriptions of Smritis and Puranas (as sources of law) into an internal ethic.^{xxv} Kumkum Sangari analyses her religious belief as stemming from these texts and dharmashastras. However, it is a truism that the core doctrines of Hindu philosophy run deep in Indian society at all levels, sometimes even irrespective of religion. And the first contribution comes from the Upanishadic philosophy which forms a deep undercurrent to most of the Indic philosophical systems. Mira's eclectic philosophical world is a shining example of this. Among other influences, she has imprints of Nath panth^{xxvi} and Upanishads. Also, the ideas of so-called 'high Hinduism' are present in almost all Bhakti saints, regardless of caste, class and gender. And since these ideas were given a profound form when Upanishads were written, this paper seeks to exclusively discuss the extent of Upanishadic philosophy in Mira's padas.

Nature of 'God' in Upanishads and Mirabai's Padas

To begin with, Upanishads see Brahman (God) as omniscient and pervading in all body and matter as Brihadaranyaka Upanishad says, 'sa va ayam purushah sarvasu purshu purishayo nainen kinchana navritam nainen kinchanasamvritam.'^{xxvii} Isha Upanishad and Svetashwata Upanishad also attest to the same.^{xxviii} The monistic influence of Nasadiya sukta on identification of Brahman with Atman in Upanishads is evident on Mira as well. In Brahma Parinam vada of Uddalaka in Chhandogya Upanishad, the physical frame that separates Atman from Brahman is artificial. Though this Brahman is formless, it is identical with life and is spiritual. Here, Mira's Krishna, although having a form (sakar) is also a Brahman. In Shrimadbhagvadgeeta, Krishna says, Brahmano hi Pratishthaham (I am the source of Brahman).^{xxix} Kathopanishad says, 'aish

sarveshu bhuteshu gudhomana prakashate, drishyate tvagrayaya budhhaya sookshmaya sookshmarshibih i.e. God resides in everyone but remains unseen due to maya and is only seen with mind's eye through God's grace.^{xxx} And hence, union of her atman with Krishna (Brahman) is sought by Mira who says, 'mhare hriday vasya murari... and also calls Him omniscient or 'antarjami'. In one of her padas, she says, 'kyun tarsavo antarjami ...^{xxxi}. This is how Mira's Krishna becomes Brihadaranyaka Upanishad's 'puri shete sah purishayah purusho va'.^{xxxii} Upanishads thus treat Brahman as a primordial reality and as the lord, sustainer, protector of the world, without whom the world cannot exist. Similarly, Mira calls Krishna her helper, master of the universe and the one who removes obstacles and pleads Him to help her attain moksha- Mira re Prabhu Girdhar nagar, bedo paar lagajyo ji.^{xxxiii}

Upanishads such as Brihadarayaka call the Brahman indescribable- 'itthan yat kimapi moortamvamoorta vastu vartatey tena samam na brahmasti...' i.e. Brahman cannot be described as having either a form or formless. It also says, 'dvai vav brahmano rupe, moortam chaiv, amoortam cha...'^{xxxiv} Mira similarly talks about impossibility of describing God. She says, 'virad barvane ganatam na jaana, thaka ved purana'^{xxxv}

Transmigration of souls

Brihadarayaka Upanishad has serious discussions on transmigration of souls in the form of a dialogue between Rishi Yajnavalkya and Raja Janak. Responding to the query of Raja Janak on this matter, Rishi Yajnavalkya says that a soul takes rebirth as per its past karma - Vartman Janma purvasya janmano dharmadharmau soochayati. He also says- 'sa yatraymanimanam nyeti jaraya vopatpata vaanimanam nigachhati yadyathamram vodumbaram va pippalam va bandhanat pramuchyate evamevayam purusha aibhyoangebhyah sampramuchya punah pratinyayam pratiyonyadravati pranayaiva.' i.e. when body gets feeble and old, the prana leaves and the soul seeks another birth to suffer karma.^{xxxvi}

Belief in samsara (transmigration of souls) is closely connected to the theory of karma. Kathopanishad says, 'yonimanye prapadyante sharir tvayay dehinah. Sthanumanye

anusayanti yatha karma yathashrutam.’ It likewise says- ‘ sasyaniv martyah pachyate sasyamivajayate punah.’ It also mentions Brahman as ultimate decision making authority of karma when it says, ‘nityo nityanam chetanashchetanana meko bahunam yo vidadhati kaman.’^{xxxvii} Chhandogya Upanishad as well says, ‘ath khalu kratumayah purushoyatha kraturasmilloke, purusho bhavati tathetah pretya bhavati sa kratum kurveet’. It also says, ‘ta ih vyaghro vriko va simho va varaho va keeto va patango va dansho va mashako va yadyadbhavanti tada bhavanti’.^{xxxviii} Svetashwatar Upanishad also says that samsara leads to delusion and the soul suffers due to past karma. It says, ‘sarvajeeday sarvasansthay brihante, asmin hano bhramyate brahmachakray’.^{xxxix} Brihadarayaka Upanishad also says that the rebirth is decided according to the past karma.^{xl} Mira confirms to this theory when she says- ‘kaanyi mharo janam bar bar; purbata Kaanyi punna khoontyan, maansa avatar’. She calls the world ‘kubudh ro bhando’ and ‘karam ri kugat kumavai’ as she believes that it is impossible to escape the fruits of karma. She also writes ‘Mira Hari ke haath bikani, janam janam ri dasi’ and ‘Purab janam ri Preet purani’ and ‘janam janam ri kwaran’. Further she says, ‘Mira dasi janam janam ri.’ She believed that her bhakti was a gift of good deeds of previous birth- ‘Mira ne Girdhar milya ri, purab janam ro bhag’ and she is fearful that if she fails in her bhakti, she may have to take birth again, that is, she won’t attain Moksha- ‘ulat janam phir aasi’.^{xli}

Moksha the ultimate goal in Upanashadic Traditions

Moksha therefore is the ultimate aim. About it Svetashwatar Upanishad says, ‘sookshmatissooksham, kalilasya madhye, vishwasya srashta ramanekarupam, vishwasyaikam pariveshtitaram, jnatva Shivam shantimatyaantameti’ i .e. one who is able to know Shiva through sadhna, is able to attain peace and is free from samsara.^{xlii} Mira repeatedly expressed the desire to cross the ocean of life and attain moksha. She says, ‘bhausagar tar jasya,’ which she believes is in the hands of Krishna, ‘jug jug bheer hari bhagwan ri, deejyo moccha niwaj’ and ‘Mira peeda soi jaane, maran jeevan jin haath’ .^{xliii}

The destructability of the world is another major theme in the Upanishads. Brihadarayaka Upanishad says that whatever has a form or is formless, seen or unseen, small or big, ultimately meets death - ‘yadidam sarvam mrityorannam...’^{xliv} Kathopnishad also says, ‘shvobhava martyasya yadantakaitat...tavaiv vahastav nrityageetay.’^{xlv} Mira expresses the same sentiment when she says, ‘jetai deesai dharan gagan ma, te tai uth jaasi...yo sansar chahar ri baaji, saanjh padyan uth jaasi’ i.e. whatever matter and planets are seen on earth and sky are all temporary. The world is like a game of gamble which ends when evening falls. She also says, ‘bhosagar jag bandhan jhootha, jhootha kul ra nyati,’ i.e. the worldly relations are temporary. She further says, ‘jag maya ra supna ri’ i.e. this world is but a delusive dream.^{xlvi} Brihadaranyaka Upanishads says- ‘yathashastram bhojyo heyashcheti vaidikah’ i.e. world is both to be relished and despised (bhojya and heya).^{xlvii} Similarly, Mira on one hand relishes the form of sakar Krishna, His lila and the manner in which he carries out his social responsibilities. On the other hand , she sees the world as futile and her existence in it as not worth it.^{xlviii}

Aspects of remembrance of God

Since Mira is devoted to Krishna, she is yearning to meet him. And to have his darshan, she lays stress on the importance of naam-smaran. Through it or dhyana, a sadhak, with a pure heart, may get darshan of God. Kathopnishad also says, ‘na sansdrishe tishthati roopamasya na chakshusha pashyati kashchanainam, hrida manisha manasabhiklipto ya etad vidurmitaste bhavanti’ i.e. a sadhak who lovingly and constantly meditates upon God is able to see Him with his/ her mind’s eye’.^{xlix} Mundakopnishad suggests that, ‘na chakshusha grihyate na api vacha, nanyairdevaistapsa karmana va, jnanaprasaden vishuddhasattvastatastu, tam pashyate nishkalam dhyaymanah’.¹ Svetashwatar Upanishad also says, ‘adih sa samyoga nimitta hetuh...devam svachittasthamupasya poorvam’ i.e. a sadhak should try to realise the primeval, timeless and beloved Brahman.^{li} Upanishads suggest dhyana/sadhna to the same goal for which Mira prescribes naam-smaran. While the former is an attribute of jnana marg, the latter

is specific to bhakti marg. The basic idea, however, is the same- to remember and consequently, to realise Brahman, to get His darshan and attain moksha. Mira expresses the same desire when she says, 'bhaj man charan kanwal avinasi ' that is, one must chant the name of indestructible, immortal God and 'bhajan bina nar pheeko i.e. anyone who doesn't sing the praise of God is unrewarding. She also says 'piya thare naam lubhani ji, naam letan tirta sunya, jag pahan pani ji, i.e. the one who chants the name of God gets moksha. She further says, 'sanwaro umaran, sanwaro simran, sanwaro dhyan dharan ri' . . .mharo man sanwaro naam ratai ri and 'Mai mhan govind ra gun gana.'^{lii}

To realise God, however, there is a condition, which is to control the volatile mann in the first place. Upanishads say, 'vrittinam nirodhen ekagrena mansa jeevatmatmanorbodhah sambhavati.'^{liiii} i.e. human soul realises supreme soul only when it controls the fickleness of mann. Mira searches for this Sachhidanand form of God in Krishna and when her mann reposes after reigning in its volatility, she declares- 'Chanchal chit chalyani na chale, bandhya prem janjeer', thereby using the tool of love to control it.^{liv}

Conclusion

To conclude, the complex Upanishadic philosophy is retold in Mira's simple padas to a significant extent. The Upanishadic concepts of an omniscient Brahman, maya, karma, rebirth, meditating upon God, union of Brahman and atman, Moksha, reigning in of the fickle mind etc. are woven deeply into the fabric of her padavali. There is also a subtle balancing of both the utility and futility of the world which is described in the Upanishads. She balanced it through the celebration of Krishna's lila beside a pressing desire to leave the world and unite with Krishna. The only difference lay between the sakar God of Mira and nirakar God of Upanishads and their jnana marg where Mira's took bhakti marg. But these differences were not fixed, paradoxical and exclusive of each other, as the basic underlying concepts remained the same running through the period of centuries with their essential dynamism and fluidity. In Mira's retelling of these concepts, the form of God or His formlessness

became immaterial. There is no paradox between the formless (nirakar) God of the Upanishads and sakar (form) of God-Krishna of Mira. In lucid language and commonplace expressions, Mira wove the complex Upanishadic philosophy into her padas in an effortless manner.

Endnotes

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