



Call for Papers

Two Day National Seminar On the theme

Revisiting the Upaniṣads: Classical and Contemporary Approaches

Organized by
Department of Philosophy
Assam University, Silchar, India
and
Centre for Indian Knowledge System (IKS)
Date: 28th & 29th July, 2025

Concept Note

The Upaniṣads, commonly known as Śruti, represent the pinnacle of the Vedas. As the concluding and essential section of the Vedas, they are also known as Vedānta. The Upaniṣads should not merely be viewed as a concluding part of the Vedas rather they embody the philosophical evolution and transformation of thought that began during the Vedic period. In general, the teaching of the Upaniṣads is considered as ‘*guhya ādeśaḥ*’ – the secrete teaching or the supreme teaching. The etymological translation of the term, which means “to sit close by devotedly” (*śad-upa-ni*), does not fully capture its true essence, it reveals only a partial meaning. Great commentators and scholars have interpreted the term in multiple ways, for instance, Sureśvara defines the root *śad* in three senses: to decay, to go, or to know. Again, Śaṅkara means by the term ‘Upaniṣad’ one that destroys ignorance or leads to the knowledge of Brahman. Nevertheless, despite these minor differences among the interpreters, the Upaniṣads are generally recognized as a source of profound philosophical insights and the highest knowledge of the Vedas. Unlike Samhitā and Brahmana, this final section of the Vedas encompasses a wider and deeper significance marking a remarkable shift in our attitudes and culture toward life and the world. While most inquiries, studies, and practices in the earlier periods of the Samhitā and Brahmana were restricted to specific sections, the Upaniṣads opened these up to a wider seeker. It has often been observed that speakers of the Upaniṣads do not necessarily share the same social status. Instead, they come from diverse social backgrounds, age groups, genders and classes. This diversity reflects a sense of acceptance, appreciation, improvement and openness toward philosophical thinking during that Upaniṣadic period.

In different contexts, a group of critics have often challenged and questioned the philosophical insights of the Upaniṣads and Classical Indian schools. It is commonly argued that philosophical literature of Classical Indian systems (what is called as Darśanas), including the Upaniṣads, is primarily concerned with practical affairs, also abstract ideas and solely engaged with soteriological and religious motives. It keeps us far away from academic philosophy. While this extensive literature satisfies the thirst of a spiritual aspirant or a religious follower, it hardly fits into the framework of modern academic philosophy that strictly emphasises the pursuit of knowledge through analysis of concepts, language, meanings, etc. Undoubtedly, such contention is partial and untenable. The vast literature of classical Indian tradition, including the Upaniṣads—the foundational texts of Indian philosophy—reflects the profound intellectual climate of ancient India. They should not merely be regarded as soteriological or religious texts rather they are the philosophical classics in their own right. Indeed, the tradition of intense debate, dialogue and the methodologies prevalent in the Upaniṣads inspired the latter schools to develop their rigorous and critical philosophical theories. Even the Non-Vedic Indian traditions could not ignore the Upaniṣadic ideas in formulating their philosophical doctrines.

There is no fixed and unanimous pattern in these Upaniṣadic teachings. The Upaniṣads don't directly propose a theoretical explanation of philosophical problems, they can be considered a pre-theoretic source of philosophical thinking and ideas. While Western tradition has given maximum emphasis on formulating systematic theories to address philosophical issues, the Upaniṣads expressed the inadequacy of thoughts and words in articulating complex issues of metaphysics and the transcendental dimension of life. Instead of proposing any theory, attempts have been made to bring out the truth indirectly but methodically and progressively. Some of the important techniques employed by the Upaniṣads to answer deep philosophical questions include dialogues, debates, storytelling and narratives involving two or more seekers who are collaboratively pursuing a common goal. Thus, Upaniṣadic verses don't simply narrate stories but dig out the truth from deeper layers of life, experience, and existence transcending the surface level of intelligence, understanding and perceptions. They contain the seeds of rational and analytical thinking and can be aptly regarded as a valuable source of philosophical inquiry.

The verses and passages of the Upaniṣads unfold the subtle and complex philosophical issues which are not only abstract subjects of metaphysics but also issues related to our social life, dharma, or ethics and epistemology. The seers explore and pour light on variety of issues, such as the nature of Truth, phenomenal world, meaning and goal of life, concept of freedom, possibility of knowledge, problem of error, moral dilemmas, eradication of suffering and so on. One important purpose of the Upaniṣadic teachings is to impart the right knowledge through a series of arguments and counter-arguments that enable us to learn coherent, critical and logical thinking skills. Instead of dictating the truths, the verses of the Upaniṣads incorporate different rational and analytical methods to clarify and comprehend the subtle ideas and complex concepts. A unique amalgamation of objective and subjective methodologies has been implemented in different contexts to deal with the most intricate philosophical questions related to our subjective experience, the nature of reality and the phenomenal world. Furthermore, the methodologies of the Upaniṣads extend beyond these approaches, incorporating traditional methods such as *neti, neti*, meaning "not this, not this", the method of elimination, and the techniques of *adhyāropa* and *apavāda*, which deserve careful consideration and examination.

The trend of interpreting and reinterpreting the various Upaniṣadic verses is quite evident in the philosophical traditions of both the Classical and Contemporary periods. It would not be an exaggeration to argue that the rich and vast corpus of the post-Upaniṣadic philosophical systems in the Indian continent have consistently rendered their own development by interpreting and explicating this Upaniṣadic wisdom. This seminar aims to provide an academic platform to revisit and reconnect with the essential ideas and profound philosophical insights of the Upaniṣads through dialogue and discussion, especially in the light of contemporary thoughts, challenges and needs. The goal of philosophy is not confined to restating the past rather it seeks to expand and create opportunities for novel ideas and innovative approaches. As an open-ended inquiry, philosophy always keeps open the space for debate, discussion, criticism and further development. This seminar aspires to achieve that spirit of philosophy.

Sub-Themes (not exhaustive):

1. The Principal Upaniṣads and their commentaries
2. Śruti, Smṛti and Tarka
3. Upaniṣadic Perspectives and Counter Perspectives
4. Human Freedom and Determinism
5. Problem of error, ignorance and Knowledge
6. Dharma/morality in Upaniṣads
7. Contemporary Consciousness studies and the relevance of Upaniṣads
8. The Upaniṣads and Modern Science
9. The Upaniṣads and Modern Crisis
10. The Upaniṣads, Indian Culture and Religion
11. Logic and Mysticism
12. Self and No-Self Debate
13. Upaniṣadic Hermeneutics and the Style of Narrations
14. Methodologies in the Upaniṣads

Note: Special sessions will address the themes related to Indian Knowledge Systems. Participants are also encouraged to deliver their presentations in Sanskrit and other regional languages. No travel allowance (TA) or daily allowance (DA) will be provided to participants or paper presenters, so plan accordingly. Additionally, for those joining from out of town, we are pleased to offer the option of online presentations, ensuring everyone can contribute and engage in this meaningful discourse.

Modality: Blended Mode

Deadline for submitting Abstract (250 words): 1st July 2025

Deadline for submitting Full Paper (4000/5000 words): 15th July, 2025

Abstracts/ Papers to be sent to: munmunchakraborty58@gmail.com, nongchongtham@mail.com

Organizing Committee:

Prof. M Gangabhushan,
Director -CIKS, AUS
Dr. Pius V Thomas, Head, Dept. of Philosophy,
Prof. Subhra Nag, Dept. of Philosophy
Prof. Nirmali Barman, Dept. of Philosophy
Dr. Joyeeta Deb (Co-PI, CIKS),
Dr. Ajita Tiwari (Co-PI, CIKS),
Dr. Govind Sharma (Co-PI, CIKS),
Dr. Kevin Kago. Guest Faculty, Dept. of Philosophy, AUS.

Co-ordinator: Dr. Munmun Chakraborty
Assistant Professor, Dept. of Philosophy, AUS
Co-PI, Centre for IKS, AUS

Deputy Co-Ordinator: Dr. Chongtham Nonglen Meitei
Research Associate, Centre for IKS, AUS
Deputy Co-Ordinator: Dr. Kevin Kago, Guest Faculty, Dept. of Philosophy, AUS

For further Information, please contact: 8724092142, 9435984007(WhatsApp)

Email: munmunchakraborty58@gmail.com, nongchongtham@mail.com

Google Form Link for Registration: <https://forms.gle/BwsHgu8BhxRvLxtV7>

Fees Payment Details

Account Name: Assam University Project A/C II
Bank Account Number: 20050110035450
IFSC code: UCBA0002005
Bank Name: UCO Bank
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Seminar Registration Fees

(open till 15th July, 2025)

Faculty: ₹1000
Scholar: ₹500

Sponsored by Indian Council of Philosophical Research, (ICPR), New Delhi and Centre for Indian Knowledge Systems (CIKS), Assam University, Silchar.