

# CHAPTER-1

## AN INTRODUCTION TO PRASTHĀNATRAYĪ AND IT'S MESSAGE

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

**Prasthānatrayī** (Sanskrit: प्रस्थानत्रयी *Prasthānatrayī*), known as the Triple Canon or the Triple Foundation, comprises three fundamental texts in the philosophical and spiritual tradition of the Vedānta . These revered texts hold great importance in understanding the philosophical concepts and spiritual practices within Vedānta. The three texts that make up **Prasthānatrayī** are:

**Upanishads** (*Upadesha prasthanā* or *Śruti prasthāna*): “The Upanishads comprise ancient philosophical texts exploring the essence of reality, the self (Atman), and the ultimate reality (Brahman)”. “Serving as the concluding segment of the Vedas, they are referred to as Vedānta, signifying the "end of the Vedas." Through dialogues and conversations between teachers and disciples, the Upanishads impart deep metaphysical and spiritual insights. “These texts underscore the importance of self-realization and illuminate the interconnectedness of all existence”.

**Bhagavad Gītā** (*Sadhana prasthanā* or *Smṛiti prasthāna*) : The Bhagavad Gītā, consisting of 700 verses, is a significant scripture embedded within the Indian epic Mahabharata. “It unfolds a dialogue between Prince Arjuna and Lord Krishna, who serves as Arjuna's charioteer and spiritual mentor”. Set on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, the Bhagavad Gita delves into the moral and philosophical quandaries faced by Arjuna. Within its verses, it imparts profound teachings on important concepts such as duty (Dharma), righteousness,

selfless action (Karma Yoga), and the transformative path leading to spiritual liberation (Moksha). This sacred text offers timeless guidance on ethical living, selflessness, and the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment.

**Brahma Sūtras** (*Sutra prasthanā* or *Nyaya prasthanā*) : The Brahma Sūtras, also known as Vedānta Sūtras, are concise statements systematically summarizing and interpreting the profound teachings of the Upanishads. Traditionally, the sage Vyasa is credited with these proverbs. Their purpose is to provide a structured and philosophical framework for understanding the intricate and at times enigmatic teachings found in the Upanishads. The Brahma Sūtras delve into the essence of reality, exploring themes such as the fundamental nature of existence, the intricate connection between the individual soul and the ultimate reality known as Brahman, and the methods by which one can achieve spiritual liberation. Through careful analysis, these sūtras offer profound insights into the spiritual wisdom encapsulated in the Upanishads.

The term "Veda" originates from the Sanskrit root "vid," meaning to know or understand. "There are four Vedas: R̥gveda (the Veda of poems), Yajurveda (the Veda of sacrifices), Sāmaveda (the Veda of songs), and Atharvaveda (the Veda of black magic)". "Each Veda is further divided into Samhitā (collections), Brāhmaṇa (dealing with Vedic rituals and sacrificial rites), Āraṇyaka (sacrificial rites), and Upaniṣads". The Vedas have been transmitted through generations without a specific beginning or end; they are considered apauruṣeya, not authored by any individual but visualized by sages in deep contemplation.

The Vedas represent divine and indescribable truths. According to Sāyanacārya, a Vedic commentator, "The entire world was created out of Vedic knowledge." This implies that supreme knowledge predates humanity. The Vedas are self-authenticating and do not rely on external validation; they are their own authority. The Samhitās, Brāhmaṇas, and Āraṇyakas focus on actions and rituals, known as karma kāṇḍa, while the Upaniṣads,

forming Vedānta, emphasize knowledge, known as Jñāna kāṇḍa. The first three chapters extol a personal deity and outline rituals and sacrifices for worship. The Upaniṣads, on the other hand, are considered Vedānta and are found at the end of the Vedas. In Indian tradition, there are around 360 Upaniṣads; however, only 108 have survived, of which 16 are considered real and authoritative by Śankarāchārya.

**The following ten Upanisads are called as major Upaniṣads:**

“Ísa-Kena- Kaṭa-Praśna- Mūṇḍa-Māṇḍūkya-Tittirīhi |

Aitareyam ca Chāndogyam Bṛhadāraṇya eva ca ||”

### **1.1 MEANING OF THE WORD PRASTHĀNATRAYĪ**

The Prasthanatrayī, consisting of the Brahmasutras, Srimad Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads, forms the foundational framework of Vedanta philosophy. These texts encompass discussions on the paths of devotion, knowledge, and renunciation. They are regarded as the three fundamental pillars of Vedanta. The Upanishads are known as Shruti Prasthan, the Bhagavad Gita as Smriti Prasthan, and the Brahmasutras as Nyaya Prasthan. In ancient India, scholars and spiritual teachers would write commentaries on these texts to present and establish their philosophical beliefs and interpretations.

### **1.2 THE SUBJECT MATTER OF THE PRASTHĀNATRAYĪ**

The Brahma Sutras ,Upanishads and Bhagavad-gītā form the essential trio in Vedanta, often referred to as the three crowns or the three pillars of Vedanta, known as the Prasthānatrayī. As the Jñāna kāṇḍa of the Vedas, the Upanishads, offer profound insights into spirituality and are recognized as śruti prasthāna, representing a higher vision of spiritual knowledge.

The Brahma Sūtras logically establish the philosophical ideology of the orthodox vedantic interpretation and attempt to harmonize the ample teachings of the Upaniṣads into one dependable system (Das, 2021).

### **1.3 WHAT PRASTHĀNATRAYĪ CONTAIN**

Various commentators wrote scholarly commentaries on Prasthānatrayī, but they also tried to present their ideology and views, mainly guided by their understanding and the realities of their era, in the interpretation of the Vedantic texts. Each commentator has interpreted the original book in a different way. In interpreting the sources of the original text of Vedānta, various commentators have gained so much freedom of diversity based on their ingrained conceptions in different commentaries that different sub-sects have sprung up in Vedānta philosophy centering on the differences in this interpretation. They all tried to prove by their arguments that their doctrine was the only one as if Bādarāyaṇa had propagated it through his formula (Das, 2021).

### **1.4 THE PRINCIPLE UPANIṢADS**

The principal Upanishads traditionally acknowledged in the Vedantic tradition are the ten Upanishads that Śaṅkarācārya (788 CE) chose to comment upon. “They are enumerated as follows: Isha, Kena, Katha, Prashna, Mundaka, Māṇḍūkya, Taittiriya, Aitareya, Chandogya, and Brihad āraṇyaka”. “Additionally, some scholars suggest that Shankara also provided commentary on an eleventh Upanishad, the Shvetashvatara. In his commentary on the Brahma-Sutras, he references four more Upanishads, namely, Kaushitaki, Jabala, Mahanarayana, and Pingala”.

### **1.5 THE BRAHMASŪTRAS**

The *BrahmaSūtras* (Sanskrit: ब्रह्म सूत्र): The BrahmaSūtras, credited to the sage Vyasa or Badarayana, is a significant Sanskrit manuscript of four chapters and 555 aphoristic verses,

or sutras. These verses explore the nature of the universe, human life, and ideas pertaining to Brahman, the philosophical principle of ultimate reality. The Brahma Sūtras, the Principal Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita are important texts in the field of Vedanta.

In the Vedanta tradition, the first chapter of the Brahma Sūtras is honoured as Samanvaya (Harmony). This chapter serves to distill, synchronize, and unify the apparently diverse and conflicting passages found in various Sruti texts, establishing a harmonious coherence among them.

In the Second chapter (Avirodha) of the BrahmaSūtra, objections to Vedanta philosophy are thoroughly examined and refuted, emphasizing the consistency of the central themes across various Vedic texts.

The Third chapter (Sādhana) delves into the process leading to ultimate emancipation. This chapter explores diverse topics, notably focusing on the nature of spiritual knowledge and the paths to attain it. Sections 3.1 and 3.2 discuss the theories of death and rebirth, the idea of karma, the importance of behaviour and free will, and the close relationship between the Brahman and the Atman (Self, Soul).

अपि संराधने प्रत्यक्षानुमानाभ्याम् ॥ api samrādhane pratyakṣānumānābhyām ॥

“And (Brahman is apprehended) in perfect meditation also, according to perception (Sruti, *Pratyakṣa*) and inference (Smṛiti, *Anumāna*)”.

प्रकाशवच्चावैशेष्यं प्रकाशश्च कर्मण्यभ्यासात् ॥

prakāśavaccāvaiśeṣyaṃ prakāśaśca karmaṇyabhyāsāt ॥

The two Selves are one and the same, just like physical light and other occurrences. The light Self and the active Self, due to their continuous activities, which are repeatedly emphasized in the scriptures.

अतोऽनन्तेन तथा हि लिङ्गम् || ato'nantena tathā hi līṅgam ||

“Therefore (the individual soul enters into unity) with the infinite (the highest Self), for thus (is the scriptural) indication.— *Brahma sutra* 3.2.24 - 3.2.26”

Sections 3.4 and 3.3 of the Brahma Sutras delve into the significance of self-study, reflection on texts read, and the practice of meditation. According to George Thibaut, these sections mark a new thematic shift in chapter 3, emphasizing the centrality of meditation in Vedic texts. “They summarize various Vedic theories from different Shakha (Vedic schools) on "how meditation on Brahman enables the individual soul to attain ultimate liberation."

“In Vedanta texts commenting on the Sutras, meditation is defined as a continuous succession of comparable basic conceptions and beliefs, uninterrupted by dissimilar ones”. “It follows the scriptures and pertains to an object prescribed in the scriptures,” as explained by Klaus Witz.

Fourth chapter (*Phala*:- the result): Discusses the condition attained with ultimate freedom.

Upon the soul reaching the Supreme light, its genuine nature is revealed, as indicated by the term "own." The Self, whose true essence becomes apparent, attains liberation as assured by the scriptures. The luminosity the soul merges into is the Self, evident from the chapter's context.

The liberated soul remains undivided from the highest Self, Brahman, as observed in the scriptures.

## 1.6 THE BHAGWAD GITA

The ShrimadaBhagavadGita (श्रीमद्भगवद्गीता, *śrīmadbhagavadgītā*)

The 700-verse poem "The Song by God," also known as the Gita (gītā), is included in Book 6 of the epic Mahabharata and is located in Chapters 23–40 (also known as the Bhishma Parva).

The Prasthanatrayi, which includes the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras, and the Bhagavad Gita. The basic texts of Vedanta philosophy are these three writings.

“The Brahma Sutras form the Nyāya Prasthāna, representing the "starting point of reasoning canonical base." In contrast, the principal Upanishads make up the Sruti Prasthāna, denoting the "starting point of heard scriptures." The Bhagavad Gita, meanwhile, constitutes the Smriti Prasthāna, indicating the "starting point of remembered canonical base.””

“Sivananda's commentary interprets the Bhagavad Gita's eighteen chapters as a progression, where Krishna guides Arjuna "up the ladder of Yoga from one rung to another." Madhusudana Sarasvati, an influential commentator, divided the Gita into three sections of six chapters each. According to this system, Karma yoga leads to Bhakti yoga, which in turn leads to Jnana yoga, reflecting a successive approach as outlined by Swami Gambhirananda”.

Chapters 1–6 = “Karma yoga, the means to the final goal”.

Chapters 7–12 = “Bhakti yoga or devotion”.

Chapters 13–18 = “Jnana yoga or knowledge, the goal itself”.

### **1.7 THE MESSAGE OF THE PRASTHĀNATRAYĪ**

The message conveyed through Prasthānatrayī centers on the pursuit of knowledge, self-realization, and the path to spiritual liberation. The Upanishads place a strong emphasis on the necessity of discovering one's actual self and the ultimate reality in order to break free from the cycle of birth and death, or Samsara. The Bhagavad Gita emphasises the value of carrying out one's responsibilities without regard for the results, as this will eventually result in spiritual realisation and oneness with the divine. The Brahma Sutras provide a systematic and philosophical analysis of the Upanishadic teachings, assisting seekers in gaining deeper insights into the profound truths presented in these texts.

अथातो ब्रह्मजिज्ञासा ॥ 1.1.1 ॥

athāto brahmajijñāsā ॥ 1 ॥

At the outset, the very need for such an inquiry is challenged. Typically, an intelligent individual does not engage in an inquiry about a subject already familiar or one lacking practical utility. Rationality dictates their pursuits. Now, Brahman falls into this category. Brahman, being pure and unconditioned, is unequivocal and clearly defined, as evidenced by statements like "Brahman is Truth, Knowledge, Infinity" (Taitt. 2.1). Moreover, according to Vedanta, Brahman is identical to the Self (Atman), which poses no ambiguity. The Self is the subject of the 'I' notion, distinct from the body and senses, a fact universally acknowledged. Furthermore, no one questions their own existence. Thus, there is no vagueness regarding Brahman that might prompt an inquiry.

It is implausible to argue that this empirical self is not the actual Self but rather the product of the superimposition (Adhyasa) of the non-Self onto the Self. It is improbable to



superimpose two completely conflicting entities in this way. Additionally, the knowledge of this Self or Brahman, inherent in every individual as demonstrated earlier, cannot obliterate the world phenomena or lead to Liberation. These phenomena have coexisted alongside this knowledge throughout eternity. As 'Ego-consciousness' is the sole authentic understanding of the Self, the world's phenomena are unlikely to disappear. In essence, the world is a tangible reality, not a mere illusion. Therefore, there is no practical benefit to learning about Brahman, such as being freed from the cycle of relative existence (Samsara). For these reasons, it is decided that a search for Brahman is not essential.

Exploring Brahman is imperative due to its inherent ambiguity, evidenced by the conflicting interpretations across various philosophical schools. The divergence in viewpoints illustrates the indefiniteness of Brahman. If the empirical self were the true Self, there would be no room for such ambiguity, and superimposition wouldn't occur. However, scriptures (Srutis) consistently describe the Self as limitless, blissful, omniscient, singular, and beyond any limitations. This portrayal cannot be taken figuratively but as a literal truth. In contrast, the empirical self is confined to specific spaces, endures suffering, and is ignorant. These limitations cannot represent the true Self. Taking into account the boundless Self as limited is a delusion, indicating the existence of superimposition, a self-evident reality.

Since true self-knowledge results in liberation, this investigation is extremely important. Consequently, it is crucial to explore Brahman by studying the Vedanta literature that are devoted to it.

The term "now" in the Sutra doesn't introduce a new topic but signifies an immediate sequence, implying a necessary antecedent condition. "This condition is not the mere study of Vedas, applicable to both Purva Mimamsa and Vedanta, nor the knowledge and performance of rituals from the Karmakanda, which don't aid knowledge seekers". Instead,

it pertains to specific spiritual prerequisites, without which Brahman inquiry would be impossible.

The mentioned spiritual prerequisites are:

1. Making a distinction between what is permanent and what is temporary;
2. Giving up the pleasure of action's results in this life and the next;
3. The so-called "six treasures," which include: refraining from externalising and examining the external instruments of the sense organs (Shama and Dama); refraining from thinking about sense-related things (Uparati); perfect forbearance (Titiksha); persistently fixing one's mind on God (Samadhana); faith (Sraddha); and a strong desire to be free (Mumukshutvam).

एतेन सर्वे व्याख्याता व्याख्याताः ॥ 1.4.28 ॥

etena sarve vyākhyātā vyākhyātāḥ || 1.4.28 ||

“The unity of the material and efficient causes of the world refutes doctrines positing two distinct causes. This refutation extends beyond the Sankhyan philosophy to include atomic and other theories, contradicting various scriptural texts and lacking scriptural authority. The repetition of the verb in the aphorism merely signifies the chapter's conclusion”.

“The advocates of the atomic theory or those asserting the First Cause as non-existence or Sunya (Void) cite specific texts as their authority. The term 'infinitesimal' or 'atomic' refers to the Atman, denoting its subtlety. The concept of non-existence pertains to a subtle causal state of the world, not absolute non-existence. Nature as the First Cause is presented as a Purvapaksha (opposing view) by Sruti, but it is refuted in subsequent texts. Thus, Brahman alone stands as the true First Cause”.

In summary, the Prasthānatrayī illuminates the path for seekers of spiritual wisdom and self-realization. These sacred texts continue to inspire and guide countless individuals, providing profound insights into existence, the self, and the ultimate reality, shaping the spiritual journeys of millions.

## 1.8 SUMMARY

Śaṅkarācārya's profound commentary on the Brahmasūtra, known as the Brahmasūtra Śaṅkarabhāṣya, is rooted in the path of knowledge (Jñāna mārga). According to him, one must purify the mind (Chitta) and follow the methods of sadhana to attain self-realization in Brahman. Until that realization dawns, it is essential to engage in the practices of Manana, Nididhyāsana, and śravaṇa.

Śravaṇa entails hearing about the attributes of Brahman, Omakārā, and related hymns. It includes meditating upon the secret and sacred teachings of the Upaniṣads and contemplating their profound meanings. Manana encompasses the continuous contemplation and repetition of thoughts, focusing on Omakār and reflecting on the Upaniṣadic sentences and Vedānta sūtras.

Nididhyāsana emphasizes feeling that Brahman is pure consciousness, distinct from all living and non-living entities, and recognizing its all-pervasive nature. Samādhi, a state where the mind is controlled, undisturbed, and detached from worldly affairs, leads to complete knowledge of Brahman and self-realization. Samādhi can be classified into two types: Savikalpaka Samādhi and Nirvikalpaka Samādhi.

In Savikalpaka Samādhi, the mind is absorbed in Brahman through contemplation on the Upaniṣadic statement "Ahaṃ Brahmāsmi" (I am Brahman). The second aspect involves acquiring knowledge (Jnana), understanding the knower (Jnatru), and the known (jneya),

and discerning the distinctions among these aspects, ultimately realizing the profound truth of "Ahaṃ Brahmāsmi."

Śaṅkarācārya illustrates his point with the analogy of a patient taking medicine. The patient might still feel unwell even after taking the medicine, but it doesn't mean the medicine is ineffective. Similarly, when someone perceives a mud idol, they recognize it as clay or mud. In the context of the Upaniṣadic statement "Sarvaṃ Khalvidaṃ Brahma" (all this is Brahman), one can interpret it differently. This statement implies that everything, including mountains, caves, rivers, and oceans, is an unbroken manifestation of Sat-Chit-Ānanda (existence-consciousness-bliss).

Śaṅkarācārya in his *Brahma sūtra Bhāṣya* says that Brahman is all-pervading in the entire space, but it remains unattached and unchanged. The rays of the full moon appear bright sometimes and dull other times but Brahman appears luminous all the time. This Brahman is unborn, imperishable, indestructible, and all-pervasive in nature. Thus Śaṅkarācārya in his *Brahma sūtra Shankara Bhāṣya* says that purification of *Chitta* will lead to Brahman realization. Till then, one should practice *śravaṇa*, *manana*, and *Nidhidhyāsana*.