



Shruti Philosophy: The forgotten Hinduism



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The morning begins in a house where everything is already decided by the past. The daughter is told to speak softly, dress “modestly”, and remember that a woman’s honour lies in obedience. The son is served first because “that’s how it has always been.” The maid uses the back door because the front is “not for her kind.” If someone disputes these practices, an elder will quote a verse from a scripture they have never read and insist that this is the culture and tradition. Discrimination turns into discipline, casteism becomes order, superstition becomes faith, and fatalism becomes wisdom.

The Upanishads are sitting in the same city, unread. Yajnavalkya’s debates on the self, Nachiketa’s meeting with Death, and Ashtavakra’s unyielding advice to Janaka: these works that used to define a civilisation’s understanding of reality are now collecting dust, as astro downloads grow. Ask a devotee about the Kena Upanishad, and you get a blank stare. Ask about a ritual fast, and every detail is offered with aplomb.

This is not a harmless shift. It is a civilisational forgetting.

We call ourselves followers of Sanatan Dharma, yet few can explain the words. Vedanta is not one school among many; it is the philosophical culmination of the Vedic corpus, the summit toward which the Vedas move. To claim the Vedas as supreme while ignoring Vedanta is to possess a treasure and never open it.

The Bridge That Collapsed

To understand how we arrived here, one neglected distinction must be seen clearly: Shruti and Smriti.

Shruti means “that which was heard.” It refers only to the Vedas and the Upanishads. The philosopher-sages did not call themselves authors but seers. They claimed no originality; they said, “We heard.” Hence Shruti is described as *apaurusheya*, not authored by human intention, making it timeless and authoritative.

Smriti means “that which is remembered.” It includes the epics, Puranas, and Dharmashastras. While useful for ethical guidance, Smriti is human written and carries the colours, proclivities, and weaknesses of the human mind. These works reflect not the eternal truth but an author’s perspective influenced by the conditions of his era.

Smriti arose for a reason: The Upanishads are strict in their demand. They declare that the self one assumes is an illusion, that only Brahman is, and that one is ‘That.’ This is unbearable to the ego. Stories, rituals, and symbols were meant as a

bridge toward this truth.

Vedanta dissolves the ego. The ego resists dissolution, so it reshaped religion in its own image: gods to be pleased or angered, heavens to be earned, rituals promising reward. What was to lead toward Shruti was made a substitute for it.

Shruti remains the final authority. Whatever in tradition aligns with it is valid dharma. Whatever contradicts it, however old or popular, stands disqualified.

What Popular Religion Teaches

Look honestly at today’s Hindu practice. Much of it arises from genuine longing: the desire for meaning, protection, transcendence. That longing is not the problem. The question is: Do they align with Shruti or contradict it?

- **Worship as transaction:** People make offerings, place requests, and wait for results. The lord is approached as a higher power who can be swayed through devotion, gifts, or persistence. Not many find anything wrong with this. Psychologically, this breeds dependence. Instead of asking what is false within, the mind asks what must be offered to secure protection or advantage. Fear dresses as faith, obedience as devotion. The ego survives because it is never examined, only bargained with.

Vedanta dismantles this completely. The Mundaka Upanishad distinguishes between higher knowledge and lower, placing ritualistic action in the lower category. Ashtavakra goes further, declaring that he solely worships the Self.

Once this is realised, petitionary worship collapses.

- **Physical locations as sacred:** Pilgrimage is an important part of religious life. Sacred sites promise faster spiritual progress through physical closeness.

Yet pilgrimage often becomes movement without inner movement. Distance is mistaken for depth, fatigue for transformation. The body travels far, so the mind may avoid travelling inward.

Shruti leaves no ambiguity. The Mundaka Upanishad states plainly that the Self is found in the heart, not in geography. One may travel thousands of kilometres outward and still remain untouched within.

- **Fasting and vows:** These are widely practised as spiritual bargaining: “Suffer now, receive later.” This may discipline the body, but it preserves the ego. The mind stays unquestioned while the stomach is trained. Austerity becomes a substitute for understanding.

Vedanta does not endorse this trade. In the Katha Upanishad, Yama tells Nachiketa that austerity without right knowledge does not lead to the Self. Ashtavakra is blunt: bondage arises from identification with the body, and only knowledge cuts that bond. If the problem is identification, starving the body does not address it.

- **Astrology and planetary fear:** People fear Saturn, blame Rahu and wear gemstones. The adult mind goes back into infancy, seeking reassurance rather than clarity.

Vedanta does not contest astrology; it simply renders it superfluous. It doesn’t ask, “Which force governs me?” but, “Why am I so eager to believe something else does?” Astrology gives answers without understanding and predicts without responsibility. It survives only where there is reluctance to face one’s own fear, desire, and indecision.

- **The domesticated deity:** Perhaps the most revealing distortion is what has been done to Krishna. This sentimental figure inspires devotion in millions, yet the voice of the Gita’s Krishna, revealing the structure of reality, has been softened into something manageable and harmless.

A god who demands transformation threatens comfort; a god who demands surrender threatens identity. A domesticated deity asks nothing and changes nothing.

When Arjuna breaks down on the battlefield, Krishna does not offer him emotional shelter. He calls out the confusion directly, telling Arjuna that what appears as compassion is ignorance, and that grief born of attachment is not wisdom. This is not a god who comforts a trembling mind; this is clarity speaking to delusion. One image of Krishna demands inner change, the other lets us remain as we are. We have chosen the latter, and we live with what that choice produces.

These practices differ in appearance, but they arise from the same refusal: to look directly at oneself. Ritual replaces inquiry, movement replaces insight, suffering replaces understanding, fate replaces responsibility, comfort replaces transformation.

The Lamp in Darkness

The irony is painful. Vedanta has awakened seekers across the world, yet remains unread in the civilisation that birthed it. The lamp was lit here, yet the darkness remains here.

We recite stories with passion, but often cannot explain a single Mahavakya. We elevate Smriti above Shruti and then complain that our culture feels confused. We turn Krishna into sentiment and then wonder why courage does not appear. A civilisation does not collapse by losing rituals; it collapses by losing truth.

The test is straightforward. Whatever aligns with Shruti is dharma. Whatever defies Shruti, however old or beloved, is not. Shruti demands only one thing: self-knowledge. Everything else is ornament.

Without Vedanta, Hindu identity risks becoming ritual without philosophy. Offering flowers may express devotion, but it is not Sanatan Dharma. Seeing the Self is. The Upanishads stand where they have always stood: patient, piercing, waiting for the reader willing to be transformed. The question is whether we will stop postponing our own clarity and embrace the self-knowledge they offer.

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