

# The Role of Scripture in Self Knowledge

Kathirasan K

The word 'śāstra' is a Sanskrit word for 'Scripture'. The role of śāstra in the Vedic tradition cannot be understated due to its epistemological value. The popular contemporary view that stresses the need for spiritual practice leading to a subjective personal experience called mokṣa (liberation or freedom) has led to the mistaken notion that the knowledge of the śāstras are of no value to seeker of mokṣa. Such a misconception arises due to a severe lack of proper appreciation of the nature of śāstra. If the nature of śāstra is properly understood, one would come to a conclusion that the knowledge revealed by it is indispensable for spiritual growth or mokṣa.

Etymologically the word śāstra means 'that which protects by teaching' (śāsanāt trāyate iti śāstram). Therefore, the intention of śāstra is to protect us from the ills that our ignorance can afford to create. It saves us by revealing the knowledge of realities that may be unknown to us. For this reason the śāstra is called a 'valid means of knowledge' (pramāṇa). In the tradition of vedānta, the knowledge of the Self is the means to mokṣa.

śāstra is seen to have two distinctive features which are its defining characteristics and conditions:

1. knowledge not obtained elsewhere (anadhigata<sup>1</sup>) and
2. cannot be negated (abādhita<sup>1</sup>).

## Anadhigata

Anadhigata which means 'knowledge not obtained elsewhere' points out the fact that the śāstra reveals a unique kind of knowledge which cannot be obtained from other bodies of knowledge. These bodies of knowledge refer to all kinds of knowledge that we gain from sources like science, philosophy, history, fiction, tabloids etc. The śāstras specifically reveal subjects like the following:

- God (īśvara)
- Self (ātma)
- Creation of the Universe (sṛṣṭi)
- Ethics (dharma)
- Law of Action (karma)
- Merits & Demerits (punya & pāpa)
- Goals of Life (puruṣārtha)

- Freedom (mokṣa)
- Means to mokṣa

As one would realise that all of the above are not within the domain of human speculation or inference. The above subjects deal with realities beyond the scope of our sensory organs and hence human minds are incapable of obtaining knowledge of these subjects independently or with an experience. This creates a need for another 'pair of eyes' that make this knowledge evident to the human mind. Herein is the key to the appreciation of śāstra where it is seen as a body of 'knowledge' that any person could utilise to understand the deeper truths of life. This is especially so in the case of Self Knowledge (ātma vidyā) where the Self cannot be objectified like an apple or a table.

### **Abādhita**

The second characteristic of śāstra is that which cannot be negated (abādhita). This means that the knowledge gained via the śāstra cannot be negated by other kinds of knowledge or means of knowledge that we know or yet to know. A simple illustration of this point would be the scientific knowledge of the existence of gravity not contradicting the knowledge of the existence of God or law of Karma. Both of the views could coexist without negating any one of it. Therefore, this unique knowledge of the śāstras cannot be negated by other means of knowledge. This feature also means that one need not accept the teachings of the śāstra with blind faith but a 'faith pending discovery' attitude is essential for the appreciation of śāstra in the domain of Self Knowledge. In fact, reasoning and experience are also used along with the knowledge gained from the śāstra<sup>2</sup> to ensure that the knowledge is not something that had to be believed without proper verification.

Especially in the domain of Self Knowledge where the goal is mokṣa, śāstra is indispensable. The śāstra serves like the purpose of a mirror in looking at one's own eyes. Eyes are not capable seeing itself without a mirror but yet it reveals objects within the range of its sight. Similarly the Self, which cannot be objectified, can only be known through the śāstra which acts like the mirror to the Self. The only difference being that it does its job through instruction in the form of words (śabda pramāṇa). Hence, the vedānta tradition proclaims that the sole means to know the Self is śāstra<sup>3</sup>. The body of śāstras that serves this unique purpose is called the upaniṣads. And there are also other śāstras penned by traditional teachers with the same goal in mind and with the aim to explain and elaborate the terse teachings of the upaniṣads.

Another value that śāstra provides is in challenging the conventional views that an individual has about oneself by revealing an unconventional yet desirable definition of the Self as being absolute happiness and eternal. Its unique vision cannot be found in other sources of knowledge that repeated reinforces a limited perspective of the Self. This is the unique contribution to mankind by the vedānta śāstras through which one comes to know that the Self that I am is truly acceptable regardless of time, place and circumstances.

## **Conclusion**

The relevance of śāstra is that it reveals 'knowledge which is not obtained elsewhere (anadhigata) and cannot be negated (abādhita)'. To know oneself, śāstra is the sole means of knowledge and hence it is indispensable for any individual desiring mokṣa.

## **References:**

1. Vedānta Paribhāṣa, Chapter 1
2. Pancadaśī, 6.56
3. Brahma Sūtra, 1.1.4