



Adi Shankaracharya

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Sri Adi Shankara was born as a blessing of Lord Shiva to the couple, Kaippilly Shivaguru Namboodiri and Arayamba who worshiped and prayed to Lord Shiva for a son. They named him Shankara. The child lived with mother in her house – Melpazhur Illa. When the child was three years old, mother and child moved to father's house Kaippilly Mana in Kalady.

According to British historians, Shankara was born in 788 C.E. and died in 820 C.E. The documents available at Sringeri Sharadapeetha established by Adi Shankara more or less agree with this. The people of Shankara math at Kanchi hold that Shankara was born in 4th century AD. At the age of five after upanayana, Shankara started taking his lessons. By the age of eight, he knew all the *Vedas* byheart. By this time his father had died. But he had advised Shankara to learn more from Guru Govinda who had his ashram on the banks of river Narmada in North India. Shankara was therefore longing to take *Sanyas* at the tender age itself. However, his mother would not agree to the proposal. There is a legend that one day as Shankara was taking bath in River Periyar, a crocodile caught hold of his leg and

Shankara convinced his mother the crocodile would leave him only if she agrees to his taking *Sanyas* and mother permitted Shankara to take *Sanyas*. After assuring the mother that he will reach by her side in her last moment, Shankara started his journey towards the north, in search of his Guru.

Adi Shankara met Gaudapada's disciple Govinda Bhagavadpada on the banks of River Narmada, who accepted Shankara as his disciple. For three years, Shankara stayed with his guru and learnt the scriptures. Govdina Bhagavadapada advised Shankara to write a commentary on Brahmasutra and to propagate the Advaita doctrine.

Accordingly, Adi Shankara reached Kashi, where a youth by name Sanandana from the Chola Kingdom became his disciple. Once, while going to Kashi Vishwanath Temple, a person appeared to be belonging to low caste, came with four dogs from the opposite side. Shankara's disciples asked the man to move away. The man asked: whether this perishable body or the imperishable *atman*? At that instant, Adi Shankara realised that the

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man was Lord Shiva in disguise and the four dogs were the four Vedas. He prayed to Lord Shiva and wrote five verses extolling Shiva, namely Manisha Panchakam. Later at Badri, Shankara wrote commentary to Brahmasutra.

He then proceeded to Badrinath, where he renovated the Narayana Temple. He instituted a proper ritualistic worship system there and appointed a Namboodiri family from Kerala as the priests of the temple. Later on, he established a math at Joshimath (Jytohirmath) and installed Totakacharya as the head of the Peetha. Adi Shankara went to Kumarila Bhatta, a renowned scholar for a philosophical debate. He asked Shankara to meet his disciple Mandana Misra at Mahishamati and hold the debate with him. Accordingly, Adi Shankara went to Mahishamati (located in present day Bihar) and engaged in a Scholarly debate with Mandana Misra, who became Adi Shankara's disciple.

Thereafter Adi Shankara visited Maharashtra and Srishaila. In the text 'Madhaviya Shankara Vijayam', it is mentioned that Shankara authored 'Shivananda Lahari' at Srishaila. There, some *kapalikas* (a *trantric sect*) tried to offer Shankara's head in a sacrificial ritual. It is said that Sri Shankara without hesitation offered his head for the Kapalikas. However, his disciple Padmapada exhorted Lord Narasimha to rescue Adi Shankara and the Lord appeared and saved Shankara and reformed the Kapalikas by divine intervention. It was then that Shankara composed 'Lakshmi Narasimha Stotram'.

Further, Adi Shankara visited Gokarna and Kollur. At Gokarna (Karnataka), he converted Ganapatyas who were following some horrible practices in a Vedic mode of life. He then visited Sringeri, where he

established Sharadapeetha (*peetha-seat*) and made Totakacharya his disciple. Then started Shankara's Digvijaya (conquering the world) journey. He travelled extensively in south and north of India and Nepal and propagated the doctrine of *Advaita*. He entered into debate with those who believed in different doctrines in Hinduism as well as Buddhist monks, won them over and made them his disciples. After overwhelming all the scholars at Sharadapeetha temple in Kashmir, Shankara ascended the *Sarvajna Peetha* (Supreme seat of Omniscient).

Sri Adi Shankara established four *peethams* (dioceses) in India to preserve and propagate *Sanatana Dharma* and *Advaita Vedanta*. These were Sringeri Sri Sharada Peetham (Karnataka) in the South, Dwaraka Sarada Peetham (Gujarat) in the West, Puri Govardhan Peetham (Odisha) in the East and Jyothirmath (Uttarakhand) in the North. He also instituted the tradition of appointing a succession of monastic pontifical heads, called the *Jagadgurus*, to each of the four monasteries.

Buddhism and Jainism originated in India (Bharath) during the 5th Century B.C by which time Hinduism had become highly corrupt with various superstitions and practices like animal sacrifice, high and low status of varnas and caste systems, untouchability etc. Hindu practices had deviated from Sanatana Dharma which is based on Sanatana Gunas such as Truth, Kindness, compassion, love, ahimsa and purity of mind. These new religions gave importance to Sanatana Gunas, and explained in simple, easy to understand way to the common man their philosophy and moral practices and spread all over Bharath.

Adi Shankara was against animal sacrifices, and practice of caste systems. He wanted to eradicate such evil practices and reintroduce the practice of Sanatana Dharma. He suggested to perform sacrifices symbolically by using white pumpkin filled with 'Guruthi' - a sacred red liquid. He preached equality among all irrespective of 'Varnas – caste' and upheld the dignity of work as all forms of work as per our dharmic duties are worship of God. He read and learnt extensively, travelled across the length and breadth of Bharath meeting learned people, debating and discussing, accepting some as his Gurus and some as his disciples. He advocated Advaita philosophy along with Dvaita philosophy to give a way for ordinary human beings to attain liberation by Bhakti marga through praying to ishtadevatas God, in any forms and names (as per their liking / faiths), and yet realising and respecting the oneness of God.

Shankara Philosophy

There are mainly three different schools of philosophy in Hinduism. These are Dvaita, Visishtadvaita, and Advaita. Madhavacharya was the exponent for Dvaita, Ramanuja for Visishtadvaita, Adi Shankara for Advaita. The sum and substance of these philosophies can be summarised as follows:

Dvaita believes that *atma* and *paramatma* are different. Even on getting *mukti*, *atma* remains as a separate entity in *Vishnuloka*. Visishtadvaita says that *atma* and *paramatma* are different, but on attaining *mukit*, *atma* will merge with *paramatma*.

It was Adi Shankara, who collated the *Advaita Vedanta*, into a doctrine. *Adi Shankara* wrote a commentary on all the

three texts *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad-Gita* and *Brahmasutra* in *Prasthanathrayi*. The gist of all these is presented in the following one sentence in Viveka Choodamani, authored by him:”

‘Brahmasatyam, Jagannithya, Jeevo Brahmevana para!’

The only truth is Brahman. The world is illusory. There is no difference between *atma* and *paramatma*. Brahman the Supreme Reality is actually formless, Nirguna. For, the formless alone can be present everywhere.

All the *mahavakyas* state the same thing. *Sarvam akhila brahman* – everything is brahman. *Ekamevaadvitiyam – brahman* is single and incomparable and without a second entity. *Ayam atma brahman* – all the visible objects are *brahman*. All visible and invisible worlds are *brahman*. *Aham brahmasmi* – I am the *brahman*. *Tattvamasi* – what you are looking for is within you. *Idam sarvam yadaya atma* – everything is *atma*. *Prajnanam brahma* – knowledge is *brahman*. *Brahmaveda brahmave bhavathi* – those who realise *brahman* will become *brahman*.

An Advaiti, Shankara realised the importance of Dvaita as far as the common man is concerned. He knew that all people are not capable of understanding Advaita. Even if they understand, it is very difficult to practice. There is no way ordinary people can understand and accept that *atma* and *paramatma* are the same and universal. Therefore, Adi Shankara said “Do not teach Advaita to ordinary people and confuse them. Advaita should be taught only after teaching all other philosophies. Dvaita is a stepping stone to reach Advaita. Adi Shankaracharya

realised that ordinary human beings are unable to worship a formless all pervading energy.

They need a personal God who has form and emotions to pray, confess and request for favours and blessings, believed that God can excuse their sins and grant blessings and fulfil desires. They wanted God to give expression to their devotion. Adi Shankara realised this and approved Dvaita philosophy for the benefit of the common man. He also established Shanmatha, that is worship of six deities, namely Shiva, Vishnu, Devi, Ganesha, Surya and Karthikeya. Devotees can select anyone of their favourite deities from this group or worship all of them if they so desire. However, Adi Shankara also preached that all these six deities (and more) are one and the same or different *bhavas* or concepts of the same God.

Adi Shankara debated with almost all the scholars and rulers of his times and made them accept vedic Hinduism. Ordinary people followed their *gurus* and rulers and thus Vedic Hinduism again came to existence in Bharat.

For God realisation, there are mainly three ways. They are *bhakti marga*, *karma marga*, *jnana marga*. Ordinary man is more attracted to *bhakti marga*, which is mainly based on Dvaita philosophy. They want a personal God to worship, pray and unload their problems and request for blessings and rewards. Confession and prayers will increase their self-confidence and hope. There is no way they can think that *atma* and *paramatma* are the same and universal. They believe in reward and punishment, sin and virtue, heaven and hell, birth and rebirth. They also believe that God will forgive their shortcomings and bless

them to achieve their goal. Supreme God or supreme consciousness will accept such *kaama or nishkaama bhakti* or devotion of his devotees and fulfil their demands.

Adi Shankara realised the fact that the average man, who is in the middle of various problems is not in a position to understand and follow *Jnana marga*. Therefore, Adi Shankara realised the importance of Dvaita for the people and approved the same. Adi Shankara taught that Dvaita and Visishtadvaita are the stepping stone to Advaita. He said that Advaita should be taught only after learning all the other schools of philosophy. Advaita believes that *atma* and *paramatma* are the same and universal.

Contribution of Adi Shankara to the Society

- o Without any hate-lessons Shankara debated with Buddhist, Jain and Hindu scholars and re-established Vedic Hinduism – *Sanatana Dharma*.
- o Though he was an Advaiti and believed in the *Jnanamarga*, he gave importance to other *margas* or paths such as *bhaktimarga*, *yogamarga* and *karmamarga* for God-realisation and promoted all such *margas* for people with different aptitude and knowledge levels and allowed worship of God in different forms and names but at the same time with the realisation that all are leading to the same one and only GOD.
- o He demonstrated brotherhood, acceptance and tolerance to other philosophies / faiths such as Dvaita and Visishtadvaita for the benefit of people who are not capable of understanding Advaita philosophy.

- o He established the message of various *mahavakyas* such as ‘*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*’ (the whole world is one family), ‘*aham brahmasmi*’ (I am the brahman), *prajnanam brahma* (knowledge is brahman), ‘*tatvamasi*’ (what you are looking for is within you), *ayamatama brahma* (this soul is brahman) and established peethas for the propagation of these *mahavakyas* and guide people to lead a life of purity, tolerance, acceptance and brotherhood.
- o He declared through Advaita that there is only one God. All deities are various *bhavas* or concepts of God. One can select anyone of the concepts as his favourite deity (*ishtadevata*) to express his devotion. Idol is only a symbol of the *ishtadevata* to express his devotion. One should worship his favourite deity with the understanding that God is everywhere as also in the deities which are different concepts of the one and only Supreme God.

Shankara’s Samadhi

Adi Shankara came to his mother just before her departure from this world. Other Namboodiries of the area did not co-operate with him for performing the last rites, since considered Adi Shankara as an outcast. Adi Shankara composed Mathru Panchakam and performed the funeral of his mother all by himself. Shankara attained *samadhi* at the age of 32 years. It is commonly believed that he disappeared walking in the snow-clad mountains of Kedar.

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Some famous books written by Adi Shankara

More than one hundred and twenty-five works are attributed to Adi Shankaracharya. Comprising of commentaries on *Brahmasutra*, *Dasopanishads*, *Srimad Bhagavad-Gita*, *Vishnu Sahasranama*, *Sanalsujathiyam* etc., treatises like *Viveka Choodamani*, *Aparokshanubhuti*, *Upadesahasri*, *Atmabodha*, *Sarva Vedanta Siddhanta Sara Sangraha*, *Vakyavrithi* etc., *stotras* (hymns) extolling different deities and holy rivers like Vishnu Bhujangam, Shiva Bhujangam, Saundarya Lahari, Bhajagovindam, Kanakadhara Stotram, Srirama Karnamrutam, Tripurasundari Stotram, Dakshinamoorthy Stotram, Vishnu Kesadipada Stotram, Shiva Kesadipada Varnana Stotram, Gangashtakam, Narmadashtakam, Yamunashtakam. All these works are famous for their forte of meaning and sweetness of words.