

# Shankaraachaarya: Life and Works

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Let us offer our praNaams to Adi Shankara, one of the greatest philosophers, mystics, and poets to grace bhaaratavarshha and this planet.

According to various historians, Adi Shankaracharya was born at a time when Buddhism held sway in India, and the philosophy of Buddhism had come to be interpreted as a denial of God. Hinduism was divided into various sects and the ritualistic practice had taken a predominance over actual philosophical practice.

Shankara, in his indisputable style, set out on a difficult mission and changed the outlook of the country and its people by revamping the vast hindu literature into simple, easy to understand language.

## The life of Shankara

Among numerous biographies of Shankara, the earliest one is by Chitsukha titled brihat-shankara-vijaya. However, the most widely cited biography is the one by aanandagiri titled praachiina shankara vijaya. Another one of the well known biographies is titled sankshepa shankara vijaya and is by Advaitist maadhavaachaarya. The composer of the biography is usually identified with the sage vidyaara.nya, who wrote one of the best manuals on advaita metaphysics titled panchadashii 15 chapters. There are many wonderful stories regarding Shankara and his life.<sup>2</sup>

Vidyaadhiraaja lived in a small village of Kaladi in Kerela, South India. His only son, Shivaguru, was inclined to asceticism and spirituality. However, on Vidyaadhiraaja's insistence, Shivaguru married Shivataarakaa (also known as Aryamba) from a nearby village. In spite of a virtuous life, they were not blessed with a child for a long time. However the prayers at the vrishabhachaleshwara temple at Trichur borne fruit and Lord Shiva appeared as an old man in a dream to Shivaguru and gave him a choice of hundred sons who would be happy or a single son who would become a great sage but condemned to a short and severe life. Shivaguru chose the latter. On the same day, Lord Shiva appeared in the dream of Aryamba in all His brilliance riding the Nandi bull and told her that her son would become a great sage. After the couple awakened and told each other about their dreams, they heard the voice of Lord Shiva together exclaiming, 'I will be born as your son.' Shortly

<sup>1</sup>Please direct all your suggestions, corrections, and additions to mgiridhar@ucdavis.edu.

The text can be found in the html format at the author's home page, <http://www.geopages.com/RodeoDrive/1415/shan.html>

<sup>2</sup>Some of the stories may be mythical and readers discretion is advised.

thereafter, the couple was blessed with a wonderful son and they named him Shankara. According to historians, Shankara was born in the year Nandana (26th year of the sixty year cycle or sa.nvatsara) in the lunar month of Vaishaakha (corresponding to May/June) under the Zodiac sign of the Archer on Monday in the year 805 AD.<sup>3</sup>

Once Aryamba was shocked to find a large cobra coiled around the neck of Shankara. While she was watching, it turned to a garland. It is said that Shankara could read, write, and speak Sanskrit at the age of one. Once some children were arguing about the number of seeds inside a melon. Young Shankara said that the number of seeds inside that melon would correspond to the number of gods who created the universe. When the children cut open the melon, they found only one seed !! Once, Shankara was collecting alms from various families in the village. A lady, who was in abject poverty possessed only a piece of amla fruit but seeing Shankara gave him her food. Shankara, taking pity on the woman composed kanaka (amla) dhaaraa (shower) stotra to Shrii at her doorstep and golden amlas rained upon the lady.

Shivaguru did not live long thereafter and died when Shankara was five, and Shankara was raised under the loving care of his mother. He started studying arts, sciences based on the Vedas. He was a prodigy and completed his Vedic studies at the young age of eight. Even at this early age, he exhibited ascetic tendencies. However, his mother, since she had no other support, was unwilling to allow her only son to take up sanyasa. Since the purpose of Shankara's life was much greater than taking care of his mother, a 'miracle' happened. When Shankara was taking bath in the Purna river, a crocodile caught hold of his leg and started to drag him. Hearing the cries of the children nearby, Aryamba rushed to the scene. Since every Hindu is supposed to enter the phase of Sanyasa before his/her death, Shankara requested the permission of his mother to become a Sanyasi. Having no choice, Aryamba gave her consent. The crocodile let go of his leg immediately. Shankara consoled his mother, and promised her that he would be at her bedside during the time of her death. Soon he became a wandering monk at the age of eight.

He proceeded north and reached the banks of Narmada. He saw a group of sannyasins surrounding an imposing old man, who was deeply engrossed in medi-

<sup>3</sup>The exact dates of Shankara's birth and mahaa-samadhi have been debated among various historians, but the dates mentioned here are based on astronomical data given in brihat-shankara-vijaya.

tation. He folded his hands respectfully, approached the old man, prostrated before him and exclaimed 'I bow down before my guru, Govinda.' Govinda Bhagavata-paada greeted him fervently as a long-promised disciple (Legend is that Govinda was promised this disciple by his guru, GauDapaada). During this time, Shankara became acquainted with the foundations of Advaita and wrote several shiva hymns, some philosophical treatises, and the commentary on brihadaara.nyakopanishad.

Once Shankara along with other disciples of Govinda were meditating in a cave. Due to a massive flood, the level of the water in Narmada river rose to the entrance of the cave. Having seen what happened, he put a small bowl in front of the cave and chanted a mantra which forced all the water into the bowl, and the flood subsided. At this point, Govinda remembered the prophecy of Baadaraaya.na that the best commentary on brahma suutras would be written by a person who tames the river and asked Shankara to write the commentary on the triple cannon(prasthaanatravii) : 'brahma suutras', 'bhagavadgiitaa' and the major upanishhads.

At the age of fifteen, Shankara reached Kashi and started to spread the Advaita philosophy, and started writing the commentaries on the Brahma suutras, the upanishhads, and Bhagvadgiitaa. During his stay at Kashi, he wrote bhaja govindaM (details are given in the bhaja govindaM section).

In a very short time, he had established himself as an authority on Vedanta philosophy (imagine at the age of fifteen). Shankara proceeded to tour the vast country of India (Bharatavarshha) and to establish his philosophy. This is often referred to as his dig-vijaya. His spiritual insights and vast knowledge won him many debates, and subsequently many disciples.

Padmapaada was one of his primary disciples. Once Shankara was standing on the banks of a river. Some of his clothes were on the other side of the river, where his disciples were standing. Shankara requested these disciples to fetch his clothes. Since there was no boat available, the disciples hesitated, except for one disciple named Sanandana. He started to walk in the water, and for each step he took, a lotus appeared, and the disciple crossed the river even touching the water below. Hence, Shankara named this disciple, Padmapaada (padma- lotus, paada- feet). Shankara also composed Atma-bodha, the awakening of the atman, as a favor to this disciple.

At this time, he received the tidings of his mother's grave illness. He rushed to the bedside to his dying mother at Kaladi. He tried to explain to her the majestic philosophy of Advaita, the image of the illusionary world, and nirguNa brahman. However, this frightened the poor woman who lacked the philosophical acumen

of Shankara. Then the Shankara, the king among jnanis, resorted to bhakti and composed various hymns in praise of Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu. The chanting of these verses calmed her and she reached Brahmaloaka. He performed the cremation rites for her despite opposition from the ritualistic kinsmen. It is said that a visit to Kaladi is unfulfilled unless one visits this place of cremation and the spot where Shankara was granted sanyas by his loving mother.

Shortly after the death of his mother, Shankara had to endure the blow of another death – his guru, Govinda. He paid his last respects to Govinda and established a temple in his honor. He then proceeded to Prayaag, where he met the famous miimaa.nsakaas namely Kumarila and Prabhaakara. Kumarila was born in a Brahmanic family in South India and devoted his entire life to struggle against the 'heretical' doctrines of Jains and Buddhists. It is even said that he disguised himself as a Buddhist monk and got instruction from celebrated Buddhist teachers, so that he could get a clear idea of their philosophy. Kumarila was very much responsible for the decline of Buddhism. It is mentioned in Brhat-shankara-vijaya that these victories of Kumarila indirectly contributed to the death of his former teacher, the buddhist Sugata. Meanwhile, Shankara met Prabhaakara and his son, prthiviidhara. He won over both of them as disciples after defeating them in philosophical debates.

Among his various debates, the most famous one was the one with another famous miimaa.nsaka, Mandana Misra, who was the authority on Karma Kanda (the ritualistic portion of the Vedas). Since Shankara espoused Jnana Kanda (the path of knowledge), he agreed to have a debate with Mandana Misra. The loser of the debate would then agree to become the disciple of the victor. Mandana Misra's scholarly wife, Ubhaya Bharati, agreed to serve the judge of the debate. Garlands were placed on both Shankara and Mandana and it was agreed the person wearing the garland that would fade would accept defeat. The debate prolonged for fifteen days, and finally the garland on Mandana Misra faded and he accepted defeat and became a disciple of Shankara and was named Sureswaracharya. However his wife continued to be engaged in debate with Shankara. Bharati conceded to Shankara on many points in the debate but, as the story goes, when she asked about the marital life and obligations, Shankara was stumped. Shankara had been an ascetic since he was eight and he had no answer to her questions. At the same time, the king of the state, Amaruuka, was on his death bed. In order to answer her question, Shankara decided to inhabit the body of the king. Requesting his disciples to take care of his own body, Shankara entered

the king's body and lived like the king, catering to the various wives of the king, attending to kingly household duties, and enjoying the immense riches of the kingdom. Slowly, Shankara was drawn into the material world and forgot who he really was. At this time, his disciples became concerned and decided to confront him. The disciples began singing verses from Bhaja GovindaM. Shankara immediately realized who he was and dropped the king's body and reappeared in his own body. Thus having experienced marital life for a brief period, he was ready to confront Bharati. Bharati, having realized this, conceded defeat and became a disciple of Shankara.

In Kashi, Shankara resided with his disciples in one of the most famous ghats, manikarnika (the ear-ring of Shiva). This ghat is probably one of the most visited ghats and occupies a honorable place in the neighbouring temple of Visvanatha.

Another incident happened at Kashi. During his regular visit to the temple, he was blocked by an untouchable with a dog. Shankara requested him to move since he wouldn't touch this person. At that time, the untouchable asked 'O Shankara, the expounder of advaita, even if you are blinded by outward appearances and by maya, how can you preach the Truth?' Shankara immediately realized his folly and offered his pranams at the feet of the untouchable and composed manishhaa panchakam that exemplifies that the atman shines forth equally in a Brahmana and an untouchable. The 'untouchable' was none other than the Lord Shiva himself who wanted to remove the last traces of ego in Shankara.

Shankara continued his digvijaya and travelled around the land refuting all objectionable practices. To spread his teaching evenly around the country, he established Maths in four places; at Sringeri in the south; Badri in the north, Dvaaraka in the west and Jagannath Puri in the east. He also installed the Shri Chakras in many temples like Kamakshi temple of Kanchi, Nara Narayana temple of Badri, and Guhyesvari temple in Nepal, etc. He appointed his disciples as the head of each of these maths and established a lineage of shankaracharya. He placed Sri Sureswaracharya at the head of the Math in Sringeri, Sri Padmapada in Dvaaraka, Sri Totaka in Badri, and Sri Hastamalaka in Puri. There is some dispute whether Shankara established a math at Kanchi in the south.

His next journey was to Kashmir where he again held his philosophical acumen and triumphed in various debates including debates on tantric practices which were prevalent at that time. This was followed by a visit to Nepal, where he had a vision of Sri Dattatreya (the author of Tripura Rahasya, Avadhuta Gita, and the guru of Patanjali (of the yoga sutras)).

At least three versions exist on his maha-samadhi

event from this world. A place near the shrine at Kedar-nath is supposedly his place of disappearance. Another version says that he merged with Mother Kamakshi in Kanchipuram. Yet another version insists that he climbed Mount Kailasa and disappeared. It is generally agreed upon that he attained maha-samadhi either on the month of vaishaakha (April) or pausha (Dec/Jan) of the year raktaakshin (58th year of the sixty year cycle, sa.nvatsara) in the year 837 AD.

[Disclaimer : The reader is advised that the attribution and mythological tales given above vary between various biographies. The manuscripts of both the prachina and brihat Sankaravijayams are currently unavailable. Further, some of the stories like the one on bhaja govindaM are not found in digvijayams. Similar to the dates, there exists a controversy regarding the establishment of Kanchi matha by Shankara. With the controversies and opinions projected by scholars, the reader is requested to pay attention to the positive side since the message of Shankara's works is more important than his exact life details].

### Shankara and his philosophy, major works.

His advaita philosophy is recognized all over the world. His stronghold was so great that all the later philosophies which evolved in India had either to agree with him or refute him in order to establish their philosophy.

Shankara wrote on almost all major vedic literature. Nearly 400 works have been attributed to him and this is a partial list of his contributions.<sup>4</sup>

#### Major works :

- Commentary on brahmasuutra.
- Commentary on bhagvad gita.
- Commentary on the following upanishads :  
iisha, aitareya, katha, kena, chaandogya, taittiriya, prashna, bhadaaraNyaka, maanDuukya and muNDaka.
- The authorship of the commentary of shvetaashvataropanishad attributed to Shankara is slightly doubtful.
- Commentary on vishhNusahasranaama
- Commentary on sanat.h sujaatiiya
- Commentary on lalitaatrishati

#### Minor philosophical works :

- upadeshasaahasrii (Thousand teachings, basis of upanishads)
- viveka-chuudaamaNi (crest jewel of discrimination, available)

<sup>4</sup>Those texts, available in ITRANS or Devanagari format, are indicated as 'available' or as 'work in progress.' Contact mgiridhar@ucdavis.edu for details or if you want to encode any text.

–aatma-bodha (awakening of atman)  
 –aparokshaanubhuuti (not invisible realization)  
 –shata-shlokii (a hundred slokas)  
 –Commentary on yoga sutras, upa-commentary to Vyasa’s  
 commentary on yoga sutras.  
 –Commentary on aapstambha suutra.  
 –sarva-darshana-siddhaanta-sa.ngraha (attribution is doubtful) (collection of the essence of all schools)

Verses :

–dakshiNaa-muurtiistotra (praise of Shiva, work in progress)  
 –guruvaashhTakaM (eight poems to the Guru)  
 –bhaja govindaM (praise of VishhNu, available with translation, includes charpaTapaJNjarikaa and dvaadashapa-JNjarikaa and comments)  
 –shivaanandalaharii (wave of bliss of Shiva)  
 –saundaryalaharii (attribution doubtful) (wave of bliss of Devi, work in progress)  
 –bhavaanyashhTakaM (eight verses to bhavaani, na taato na maataa)  
 –annapuuraNaa-stotra (praise to the giver of food)  
 –vishhNu-shhaT-padi (six verses to VishhNu, avinayama-panaya vishhNo)  
 –shriiga.ngaa stotraM (Praise to river/goddess Ganga, devi sureshvarii bhagavati)  
 –shriiga.ngaashhTakaM (bhagavati tava tiire)  
 –devii-aparaadha-kshamaapaNa-stotra (praise to Devi for forgiveness, available)  
 –vedasaara-shiva-stotra (praise of Shiva as the essence of Veda)  
 –shivanaamaalyashhTakaM (eight lines in praise of Shiva)  
 –shiva-aparaadha-kshamaapana-stotra (praise to Shiva for forgiveness)  
 –kaupiina-paJNchakaM (five verses on the loin cloth of an ascetic)  
 –nirvaaNa-shhaTakaM (six verses on liberation, available)  
 –shivamaanasapuuja (mental worship of Shiva, available with translation)  
 –shriigovindaashhTakaM (eight verses on the glory of Govinda, satyaM GYaamanantaMavailable)  
 –prapa.nchasaaratanttraM (work on tantra)  
 –paJNchikaraNaM  
 –shivaashhTakaM (tasmaai namaH paramakaaraNakaaraNaaya)  
 –shivapaJNchaakshara stotraM (available)  
 –lalitaapaJNchakaM(praataH smaraami lalitaavadanaaravindaM)  
 –miinaakshiipaJNcharatnaM (udyadbhaanusahasra-koTisadRishaaM)  
 –aanandalaharii (bhavaanii stotum tvaam)  
 –shriilakshmiinRisi.nhastotraM (shriimatpayonidhiniketana)

–achyutaashhTakaM (achyutaM keshavaM raama)  
 –kRishhNaashhTakaM (shriyaashlishhTo vishhNuH)  
 –shriikRishhNaashhTakaM (bhaje vrajaikamaNDanaM, available)  
 –yamunaashhTakaM (kRipaapaaraavaaraaM)  
 –shriiyamunaashhTakaM (muraarikaayakaalimaam)  
 –praataHsmaraNaM (numbers in prentesis are the number of shloka-s.)  
 1) parabrahmaNaH (praataHsmaraami hRidi sa.nsphuradaatmatattvaM 4)  
 2) shriivishhNoH (praataH smaraami bhavabhiitimahaarttishaantyai 3)  
 3) shiiraamasya (praataHsmaraami raghunaathamukhaaravindaM 6)  
 4) shriishivasya (praataH smaraami bhavabhiitiharaM sureshaM 4)  
 5) shriidevyaaH (chaajNchalyaaruNa 2)  
 6) shriigaNeshasya (praataH smaraami gaNanaathamanaathaba.ndhuM 4)  
 7) shriisuryasya (praataH smaraami khalu tatsaviturvereNyaM 4)  
 –saadhanapaJNchakaM (vedo nityamadhiyataaM)  
 –dhanyaashhTakaM (tajGYaanaM prashamakaraM)  
 –paraapuujaa (akhaNDe sachchidaanande)  
 –ratnamaalaa  
 –hastaamalak  
 –prabodha sudhaakar  
 –upadesha paJNchaka  
 –yatipaJNchaka  
 –dashashlokii  
 –maayaapaJNchaka  
 –jiiivanamuktaana.ndalaharii  
 –yogataaraavali  
 –adhyaatmapaTal  
 –svaatmaprakaashikaa  
 –maniishhaapaJNchaka  
 –advaita paJNcharatnaM  
 –advaitaanubhuutii  
 –brahmaanuchi.ntanam.h  
 –sadaachaaraanasusa.ndhaanam.h  
 –anaatmashriivigarhaNaprakaraNam.h  
 –svaruupaanusana.ndhaanaashhTakam.h  
 –tattvopadesha  
 –ekashlokii  
 –prauDhaanubhuuti  
 –brahmaGYaanaavaliimaalaa  
 –laghuvaakyavRitti  
 –nirvaaNama.njarii  
 –vaakyavRitti

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The End