

An Introduction to Smarta – Smartism – Smartha Traditions.

A. Background History

About.

Smartism is a sect of Hinduism that allows its followers to worship more than one god, unlike in sects like Shaivism and Vaishnavism, in which only Shiva and Vishnu are worshipped, respectively. Smartas, followers of Smartism, may actually worship one or more of the five main Hindu gods - Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesha, Surya and Shakti - as they are all considered equal. This practice is called panchayatana puja in Sanskrit.

Smartism was founded by the Hindu spiritual guru, Adi Shankaracharya. The idea behind the founding of Smartism was to do away with certain practices in Hinduism, such as animal sacrifice; and also because Adi Shankaracharya believed in the concept of Advaita Vedanta, in which Brahman is the fundamental and highest reality above all gods.

Smartism follows the Vedas, the sacred Hindu texts, and abides by orthodox Hindu philosophy. The sect recognizes God as both Saguna and Nirguna. God as Saguna is a representation of infinite nature and traits such as love, compassion and justice. God as Nirguna symbolizes pure consciousness, or Brahman, the creative principle and key concept of the Vedas.

Smartas worship the Supreme in one of five forms: Ganesha, Shiva, Shakti, Vishnu, Surya. Because they accept all the major Hindu Gods, they are known as liberal or nonsectarian. They follow a philosophical, meditative path, emphasizing man's oneness with God through understanding.

*** most Hindus follow the Smarta/Smartha traditions, philosophies and practices.

More Detail.

Smartism is an ancient brahminical tradition reformed by Shankara in the ninth century. Worshiping five forms of God (Ganesha, Shiva, Vishnu, Durga, and Surya), this liberal Hindu path is monistic, nonsectarian, meditative and philosophical.

The word Smartha originally just meant "follower of Smriti. (Hinduism has two sets of scripture, Shruti – "that which is heard" and Smriti - "that which is remembered.) But the Smartha came to denote the followers of the sect founded by Adi Shankaracharya, which he did in order to create a more streamlined version of Hinduism.

In Adi Shankaracharya's time, Buddhism and Jainism had great influence in India. These two religions rejected the authority of the Vedas, and they attacked the Yagnas (fire-rituals) prescribed in the Vedas as cruel and barbaric. Unfortunately, the Hindu philosophers of the day were woefully unprepared to defend their religion, because the dominant school of Hindu philosophy at the time was Purva

Mimamsa, a school which considered the Vedic hymns as eternal truths, but doubted the existence of the gods mentioned in those hymns! So most Hindu philosophers at the time were just as atheistic as the Buddhists and Jains they were debating.

In contrast to the Purva Mimamsa school, the Vedanta school of Hindu philosophy accepted the existence of the gods as well as the abstract entity Brahman. Adi Shankaracharya subscribed to a particular version of Vedanta called Advaita Vedanta, according to which the gods are just manifestations of Brahman, Brahman and the individual soul are identical, and the physical world is an illusion. With this belief system he was better-equipped to defend Hinduism than the followers of Purva Mimamsa.

But there was a problem: Hinduism as it existed at the time was in Adi Shankaracharya's view too ritualistic and disorganized due to diverse parochial beliefs and customs. So it was hard to defend Hinduism as it was actually practiced from Buddhist and Jain critiques. This motivated Adi Shankaracharya to create a more streamlined version of Hinduism. First of all, he tried to put an end to some traditional Hindu practices which he felt were justifiably criticized by non-Hindus (like animal sacrifice). Second of all, since he believed in Advaita Vedanta and thus believed that all the gods were just manifestations of a single Brahman, he saw no reason why anyone would need to worship so many different gods.

So he started to encourage people to worship just five gods, the **Panchayatana: Shiva, Vishnu, Durga, Ganesha, and Surya**. Other than Surya, the other gods in this list are ones that are mainly emphasized in Smriti texts like the Puranas, so the Adi Shankaracharya's new sect soon came to be called Smartha.

The Smartha tradition is a movement in Hinduism that developed and expanded with the Puranas genre of literature. This Puranic religion is notable for the domestic worship of five shrines with five deities, all treated as equal – Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesha, Surya and Devi (Shakti). The Smartha tradition contrasted with the older Shrauta tradition, which was based on elaborate rituals and rites. There has been considerable overlap in the ideas and practices of the Smartha tradition with other significant historic movements within Hinduism, namely Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Shaktism.

The Smartha tradition developed during (early) Classical Period of Hinduism around the beginning of the Common Era, when Hinduism emerged from the interaction between Brahmanism and local traditions. The Smartha tradition is aligned with Advaita Vedanta, and regards Adi Shankara as its founder or reformer. Shankara championed the ultimate reality is impersonal and Nirguna (attributeless) and any symbolic god serves the same equivalent purpose. Inspired by this belief, the Smartha tradition followers, along with the five Hindu gods include a sixth impersonal god in their practice.

To sum up, Advaita Vedanta is a (sub) school of Hindu philosophy and Smartha is sect of Hinduism, but in practice people who subscribe to one subscribe to the other as well.

Adi Shankara lived from 788 to 820 ce, a mere 32 years, yet he gave Hinduism a new liberal denomination—Smartism. Here, wearing sacred marks, he holds his writings and is flanked by the six Deities of the Smartha altar: Surya the Sun, Siva, Shakti, Vishnu, and Ganesha.

Smartha devotees are followers of classical Smriti, particularly the Dharma Shastras, Puranas and Itihasas. Smartas revere the Vedas and honor the Agamas. Today this faith is synonymous with the teachings of Adi Shankara, the monk-philosopher known as Shanmata Sthapanacharya, “founder of the six-sect system.” He campaigned India-wide to consolidate the Hindu faiths of his time under the banner of Advaita Vedanta. To unify the worship, he popularized the ancient Smarta five-Deity altar—Ganapati, Surya, Vishnu, Siva and Shakti—and added Kumara. From these, devotees may choose their “preferred Deity,” or Ishta Devata. Each God is but a reflection of the one Saguna Brahman. Shankara organized hundreds of monasteries into a ten-order, dashanami system, which now has five pontifical centers. He wrote profuse commentaries on the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras and Bhagavad Gita. Shankara proclaimed, “It is the one Reality which appears to our ignorance as a manifold universe of names and forms and changes. Like the gold of which many ornaments are made, it remains in itself unchanged. Such is Brahman, and That art Thou.”

B. Smarta Traditions

The Smarta Tradition believes and practices that all gods are equal. They do not value one god above another and have a polytheistic view on their religion. However, the Samrtas do believe in 5 major deities. These deities are Vishnu, Surya (Sun god), Ganesha(elephant headed son of Shiva), Durga, and Shiva. The Smarta tradition began with a man named Shankara in the 8th century. Shankara was born in a time when there were multiple religions in India such as Buddhism, Jainism, as well as Hinduism and Shakara wanted to show that all religions could come together if he found an original tradition. Shankara proved that all Hindu gods are one but just different incarnations. He got the vaishnavists to think that Vishnu was an alternate aspect of Shiva or the Goddess.

What and who is a Samrtha?

Before we could see what is the difference between the two, let’s start with what “Smartha” (which sometimes spelt “Smarta”) is.

It is a Sanskrit word, which denotes the “smartha sampradayat”, a liberal or nonsectarian tradition or denomination of the Vedic Hindu religion, which accepts all the major Hindu deities as forms of the one Brahman, in contrast to Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism, the other three major Hindu sects, which revere Vishnu, Shiva, and Shakti, respectively, as the Supreme Being.

The adherents who follow the Vedas and Shastras are, in this regard, called Smarta. Smartas are, therefore, followers and propagators of Smriti or religious texts derived from Vedic scriptures. Smarta religion is practiced by people who believed in the authority of the Vedas as well as the basic premise of puranas.

Smartas believe that the worshiper is free to choose a particular aspect of God to worship, to the extent that the worship practices do not contradict the Vedas and the Smritis. So, in that sense, an orthodox smarta is unlikely to view gods of non-vedic religions favorably, even though he may hold the religion acceptable to its own traditional followers.

Sri Adi Shankaracharya

Sri Adi Shankara fathered the Smartha sampradayat. He reintroduced a purer form of Vedic thought. His teachings and tradition form the basis of Smartism and have influenced Sant Mat lineages. He is the main figure in the tradition of Advaita Vedanta. He was the founder of the Dasanami Sampradaya of Hindu monasticism and Sanmata of Smarta tradition. He introduced the Pancayatana form of worship. Adi Shankara is believed to have propagated the tradition of Shanmata (Sanskrit, meaning Six Opinions). In this six major deities are worshipped.

This is based on the belief in the essential sameness of all deities, the unity of God, and their conceptualization of the myriad deities of India as various manifestations of the one divine power, Brahman.

Smartas accept and worship the six manifestations of God, (Ganesha, Shiva, Shakti, Vishnu, Surya) and the choice of the nature of God is up to the individual worshiper since different manifestations of God are held to be equivalent.

List of some prominent Smarta Teachers:

- Mata Sri Amirtanandamayi
- Appaya Dikshitar
- Swami Sivananda
- Swami Haridoss Giri
- Swami Gnanananda
- Paramahansa Yogananda
- Swami Rama
- Govinda Bhagavatpada
- Sri Ramakrishna Paramhahansa
- Swami Vivekananda
- Brahmananda Saraswati the Shankaracharya of Jyotir Math, the Guru of Transcendental Meditation.
- Jagadguru Swami Sri Bharati Krishna Tirthaji Maharaja. Vedic Mathematics.
- Madhusudana Saraswati
- Jagadguru Sri Sacchidananda Shivabhinava Nrusimha Bharati, Sringeri Sharada Peetam
- Jagadguru Sri Chandrasekhara Bharati III, Sringeri Sharada Peetam
- Jagadguru Sri Abhinava Vidyatirtha, Sringeri Sharada Peetam
- Jagadguru Sri Bharati Tirtha, Sringeri Sharada Peetam
- Chandrashekarendra Saraswati, Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham
- Srimad Raghaveshwara Bharathi Swamiji of Ramachandrapura Mutt, Hosanagara
- Swami Chinmayananda
- Dayananda Saraswati (Chinmaya Mission)

C. Why Hare Krsnas (Vaishnavites) Say that there is the Only True Way?

By contrast, the Vaishnavite regards Sri Krishna (or Krsna) or Vishnu as the only true God, who is worthy of worship, and that all other forms as his subordinates. Accordingly, the Vaishnavite, for example, believe that only Krishna or Vishnu can grant the ultimate salvation for mankind, “moksha”.

D. The Saivites

In the same manner, many Saivites (the worshipers of Lord Shiva) too hold similar beliefs about Lord Shiva. Notably, many Saivites believe that Shakti is worshiped to reach Shiva, whom for Saktas is the impersonal Absolute. In Saktism, emphasis is given to the feminine manifest through which the male un-manifested, Lord Shiva, is realized.

E. The Different Schools of Thoughts — Their Unity and Diversity

The Smartas, like many Saivites and Vaishnavites, consider Surya an aspect of God. Many Saivites and Vaishnavites, for example, differ from Smartas, in that they regard Surya as an aspect of Shiva and Vishnu, respectively.

For example, the sun is called Surya Narayana by Vaishnavites. In Saivite theology, the sun is said to be one of eight forms of Shiva, the Astamurti. In addition, Ganesh and Skanda, for many Shaivites, would be aspects of Shakti and Shiva, respectively.

These differences and the understanding of these differences are now generally diminishing between the Hindus, and the current practitioners of Hinduism are converging towards the Smarta philosophy, where Shaivites accept and pray to forms of Vishnu and vice-versa. That Vishnu, Shiva and Shakti are all forms of the same principal divinity is slowly gaining understanding and acceptance.

F. How Adi Shankaracharya united a fragmented land with philosophy, poetry and pilgrimage

Those who insist that history is real, and mythology false, go against the very grain of Adi Shankaracharya’s non-dualist maxim: Jagat mithya, brahma satyam, which means the world, including measured scientific conclusions, that we experience is essentially illusory or rather, mind-dependent epistemological truths. The only mind-independent ontological truth is brahma, variously translated as God, soul, consciousness, language, or the infinitely expanded, eternal, unconditioned mind.

This doctrine of reducing the world to mere illusion, popularly known as maya-vada, enabled Shankara to do something remarkable: unite a land with diverse communities and diverse, seemingly irreconcilable, worldviews – from the Buddhists, the Mimamsakas (old Vedic householders) and the Vedantins (the later Vedic hermits), to the Shaivas, the Vaishnavas, and the Saktas. This is evident in his copious literary outpourings.

Political sage

Shankara's philosophy is avowedly Vedic. Unlike Buddhists and Jains, he traced his knowledge to the Vedas and submitted to its impersonal authority, which made him a believer (astika). In his commentaries (bhasya) and monographs (prakarana), he repeatedly sought a formless divine (nirguna brahman) being the only reality, outside all binaries. This is evident in his commentary on Vedanta, the Brahma-sutra-bhasya, his Sanskrit poems Vivekachudamani and Nirvana-shatakam and his treatise Atma-bodha. Many consider this to be an acceptance of the Buddhist theme of the world being a series of disconnected transitory moments, hence amounting to nothingness (shunya-vada), while giving it a Vedic twist, which is why Shankara was often accused of being a disguised Buddhist (prachanna bauddha).

But Shankara's poetry (stotra) also celebrates several tangible forms of the divine (saguna brahmana) as they appear in the Puranas. He composed grand benedictions to Puranic gods: Shiva (Daksinamurti-stotra), Vishnu (Govinda-ashtaka) and Shakti (Saundarya-lahari). This makes him the first Vedic scholar, after Vyasa, to overtly link Vedic Hinduism to Puranic Hinduism, an idea further elaborated a few centuries later by other teachers of Vedanta, such as Ramanuja, Madhva, and Vallabha. Shankara even wrote on tantra, which made its presence explicitly felt around that time.

For all his talk of formlessness and nothingness, and the world being an illusion, Shankara went on to connect holy spots of India such as the 12 jyotirlingas, 18 shakti-peethas and four Vishnu-dhaams to create pilgrim routes that defined India as a single land. In his legends, he travelled from Kerala to Kashmir, from Puri in present-day Odisha to Dwarka in Gujarat, from Shringeri in present-day Karnataka to Badari in Uttarakhand, from Kanchi in present-day Tamil Nadu to Kashi in Uttar Pradesh, along the slopes of the Himalayas, the banks of the rivers Narmada and Ganga, and along the eastern and western coasts.

Shankara then is not an ivory tower philosopher; he is a political sage, engaging with and responding to the historical context of his time. Through philosophy, poetry and pilgrimage, he attempted to bind the subcontinent of India that was constantly referred to in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain texts as well as in the Vedic ritual of sankalpa as Jambu-dvipa, the continent of the jambul tree, and Bharat-varsha, the land of the Bharata kings.

Historical context

In his commentary on the Brahma-sutra (1.3.33), Shankara observed, "One can say that there never was a universal ruler as there is none now," an acknowledgement of the fragmented nature of his society at his time, and refusing to accept the mythology of Chakravarti, or universal emperor, found in Buddhist, Jain and Hindu lore.

Most historians agree that Adi Shankaracharya lived in the 8th century CE, or 1,200 years ago, 1,300 years after the Buddha.

This period was a major cusp in Indian history – between the collapse of the Gupta Empire 1,500 years ago, and the Muslim conquest of South Asia 1,000 years ago. Harshavardhan of Kannauj had died, the Rashtrakutas held sway on either side of the river Narmada, constantly at war with the Pratiharas of the North, Palas of the East, and Chalukyas of the South. Regional languages and scripts which are now so familiar had not yet emerged. South Indian temples did not have their characteristic gopuram gateways, the Ramayana had yet to be translated into Tamil, Jayadeva had yet to write the Gita Govinda that introduced the world to Radha.

Adi Shankara, who travelled the breadth of the land, communicated through the one language that connected the intellectual elite of the land: Sanskrit.

To appreciate the spirit of this time, we must understand the fundamental tension of Indian society between the world-affirming, ritual-bound householder and world-renouncing, ritual-rejecting hermit.

Householder vs hermit

When Alexander of Macedon attacked India in 327 BCE, the Vedic worldview favoured the householder, while the Buddhist (and Jain, and Ajivika) worldview favoured the hermit.

In Shankara's time, the Vedic worldview was split into the Mimamsaka worldview that favoured the householder, and the Vedantik worldview that favoured the hermit.

Some people argue that this shows the influence of Buddhism on Vedism, causing Hindu supremacists to bristle. What is often overlooked is the influence of Vedism on Buddhism, for by Shankara's time, the intellectual hermit Buddha had been replaced by the more-worldly Bodhisattva, and his feminine form, Tara, who valued compassion (karuna) over wisdom (pragnya).

And while the Brahminical elite argued over the ritual ways (karma marga) of the Mimamsika and the intellectual ways (gyan marga) of the Vedantin, the storytellers (suta) of India from Vyasa to Valmiki were reshaping Hinduism dramatically with the composition of the Puranas, where the hermit Shiva was being compelled to marry the Goddess, Shakti, and Vishnu was duty-bound to take care of Lakshmi and Saraswati.

Biography

Shankara was born to a poor Brahmin (Namboodri) family in Kerala. His father's name was Shivaguru, suggesting Shaiva roots. His father died when he was very young, and he was raised by his mother, known to us only as Aryamba (noble lady). She was a worshipper of Krishna, indicating Vaishnava roots. Despite his mother's protests, he chose to become a hermit as he favoured the prevailing Vedantik worldview to the Mimamsik. His guru, Govinda Bhagavatapada, whose name suggests Vaishnava roots, who chose the hermit's life on the banks of the river Narmada, was deeply influenced by Buddhism.

From Central India, Shankara moved to Kashi where he encountered a chandala, keeper of the crematorium, the most polluted of professions in the Hindu caste hierarchy. When Shankara asked him to move aside, the chandala chastised him saying, "My body, or my soul, the form, or the formless, the limited, or the limitless?" This incident had a deep impact on Shankara, as it made him question the invalidity of the flesh proposed by the hermit tradition. Shankara was steeped in the traditional varna-ashrama-dharma, where caste purity and pollution mattered, so his acceptance of the chandala as his guru holds special significance. The incident led him to compose the Manisha-panchakam where he looks beyond divisions that create dualities (dvaita) and affirms non-duality (advaita). Wisdom is seen here as the tool to transcend caste.

Shankara then encountered the great Mimamsaka scholar Mandana Mishra at Mahismati in Bihar and convinced him of the superiority of knowledge (gyana) over ritual (karma). But then, Mandana's wife, Ubhaya Bharati, playfully challenged him to knowledge of erotics (kama-shastra). When the celibate Shankara pleaded ignorance, the lady asked him how he could claim to have understood the world without experiencing sensual pleasure and emotional intimacy. What followed is shrouded in mystery, and edited by latter-day puritans.

Shankara used his yogic powers to enter the corpse of Amaru, the king of Kashmir, and animate it long enough to enjoy all kinds of pleasure of the flesh. Legend has it that it led Shankara to write erotic love poetry known as Amaru-shataka. In Kashmir then, and later in Shringeri, in present-day Karnataka, Shankara established temples to his personal deity, Sharada, who is commonly identified as Saraswati as she holds a book. However, she also holds a pot and a parrot, symbols of household and sensual life, indicating Shankara's acknowledgment of the senses, the flesh, matter itself: in other words, tantra. Shankara's association with the tantrik geometrical symbol of the divine feminine, the shree-yantra, reinforces this. Was the goddess inspired by Ubhaya Bharati, or his mother, who kept presenting householder wisdom? We can only speculate.

Shankara returned to Kerala to perform his mother's last rites on learning of her death. This was his promise to her when she finally gave him permission to become a hermit, after he survived an attack by a crocodile.

However, in Vedic tradition, having renounced household life, a hermit cannot perform household rituals like funerals. As a hermit, Shankara had given up his role as son, and so had no obligations to the woman who was once his mother. But Shankara here displayed the spirit of a defiant revolutionary. When prevented from performing her rites in the crematorium, he carried his mother's body to the backyard of her house and performed the rituals there.

He then proceeded to travel across India, establishing his institution (matha) in the four corners of India, all the while visiting and mapping pilgrim routes. He is said to have established the various akharas of hermits who were told to use their knowledge and their physical and yogic powers to protect Hinduism. He even organised their movements across pilgrim spots and their meetings during the Kumbha Mela.

Shankara died at the young age of 32 in the Himalayan region. The story goes that his father, on being given a choice by the gods, wanted a great son with a short lifespan, rather than an ordinary son with a long lifespan. According to legend, a child prodigy, he was supposed to die at the age of eight, but was given an extension of eight years so that he could excavate the truth of the Vedas. His commentaries and monographs were so brilliant that Vyasa, the mythical organiser of the Vedas, himself extended his life by another 16 years to spread his ideas to the world.

Decoding Shankara

Scholars wonder if Shankara, the philosopher, who valorised knowledge, was also the Shankara who composed devotional poetry? Was the Shankara who established pilgrimages the one who also spoke the futility of mindless ritual, so beautifully expressed in Bhaja Govindam? Was he Vedic or Tantric? Was he Shaivite, Vaishnavite, or Shakta? Is he this or that, or both, or neither? Was he anti-Buddhist or a subversive pro-Buddhist? The diverse fragments of his life mirror the diverse fragmented worldviews that shaped India in his time, and continue to do so today.

The diversity of India relative to the Middle East, Europe and America is undeniable. It bewilders the world. For outsiders, it is chaotic, on the verge of collapse and division. For insiders, there is meaning underlying the madness. The outsider and insider view of India is therefore divergent.

Outsiders tend to see India's diversity in divisive terms: it is either the outcome of hierarchy (casteism, Brahminism imposed through Manusmriti), or complex postmodern arguments are used to say India did not exist, mirroring the shunya-vada of Buddhists that denies continuity. By contrast, Shankara, an insider, used the doctrine of illusion to democratise fragmented and limited worldviews: all views, all perceptions, all understanding of these words are imperfect and incomplete, but they delude us into assuming they are perfect and complete.

To understand Shankara, we need to break free from the fixed Abrahamic binary of one true God and other false gods, which even influences much of today's political and scientific discourse, and move into the Hindu, rather fluid, binary where the divine can be limited (god, without capitalisation) and limitless (God, with capitalisation), and where the relationship of form and formless divine is much like the relationship between sound and meaning without which no word can exist.

Shankara sees the world around him as full of fragmented ephemeral limited truths, just like Buddhists. However, unlike Buddhists, he insists that they exist on a platform of an unfragmented eternal limitless truth, that attributes meaning and value to existence. The former is accessible; the latter is transcendental and elusive. Life's experiences are full of limited and temporary joys and sorrows. Without a transcendental underpinning, life becomes meaningless, valueless.

Rejection of Brahman, that there is something permanent and unifying within and without all of us, results in nihilism, and leads to the monastic obsession with oblivion of the self (nirvana), while acceptance of Brahman enables one to enjoy the beauty of life, its colours (ranga), its juices (rasa), its emotions (bhava), its experiences (anubhava), as diverse expressions of the divine, rendered more beautiful by mortality. Hence, the importance given by Shankara to the exciting characters of Hindu

mythology whose tales in the Puranas evoke Vedic truths, and anchor them to pilgrim spots across India, on the top of mountains, in caves and at confluences of rivers, an idea that would horrify a traditional Vedic ritualist.

One reason why Buddhism did not thrive in India is its avowed distancing from the arts, viewing it as temporal indulgence, in contrast to Puranic Hinduism, where the gods danced and sang to reveal wisdom. The Buddhist elite shunned rituals at Buddhist shrines that were popular with the masses. Shankara, by contrast, realised how stories and songs connect with people and create the highway to an expanded vision of life. So he embraced Puranic temples and their rituals, which were relatively more inclusive (caste rules still prevailed), and far more artistic, and public, than the more rigid exclusivist Vedic rituals. And this played a huge role in establishing Shankara's popularity as the saviour of Hinduism.

Rather than arguing which commentary, poetry, pilgrimage, worldview, or god, is a superior or comprehensive fragment, Shankara insists that the only truth that matters is brahman, which is unreachable through reason and argument, and can only be accessed through faith, via the Vedas.

Is this real, or strategic? We cannot be sure. What we can be sure is that, with nothing superior, and everything illusory, there can be mutual respect, awareness of each other's inadequacies, and the empathy to mutually complement, or supplement, rather than substitute.

Tranquillity escapes us as long as we shun knowledge. Knowledge is acquired when we make our pilgrimage into other views – as Shankara engaged with his guru, the chandala, Ubhaya Bharati and finally his mother – and have faith in a larger transcendental mind-independent reality, the brahman.

Debate

There are many who believe that Shankara's philosophy is for the intellectual elite, and his poetry and pilgrimage routes for the less intellectual masses. This condescending suggestion is often made by those who imagine themselves to be intellectual for they fail to see Shankara's diverse body of work as an integrated whole.

Like any ancient or medieval figure of Indian history, it is difficult to separate fact from fiction about Shankara's life. Scholars are not sure which of his literary works are authentically his, and which are attributed to him to gain legitimacy or popularity. Depending on what one cherry picks, Shankara can be turned into an incarnation of Shiva, a champion of Hinduism who drove out Buddhists, a prodigious and prolific logician and poet, a savarna casteist Hindu, or a reconciler of paradoxes.

What is most interesting is that his hagiography (exaggerated biographies), composed centuries after his birth, are often referred to as dig-vijaya, or conquests, and his encounters with philosophers such as Mandana Mishra are described in combative and triumphalist terms.

This obsession of defeating intellectuals in debates has more to do with indulging the ego than expanding knowledge. And it is highly unlikely that a Vedic philosopher would engage in such activity, for the Vedas view ego (aham) as the eclipse that blocks our view of brahma, which resides within everyone as Atma.

Ego thrives on violence and violation and so chooses argument (vi-vaad) over discussion (sam-vaad). In vi-vaad, we listen not to understand but to retort, thus remaining trapped in ignorance (avidya). In sam-vaad, we listen to refine our ideas, gain knowledge (vidya). Perhaps our understanding of Shankara is contaminated by the ambitions of his not-so-intellectual fans and followers who relish the idea of domination. Sounds familiar?

But the more we argue with a bad idea, the more it entraps us. We end up as loyal opposition. It is important to let go, and seek alternate ideas. This essay is an attempt to present that alternate idea: see jagat mithya, brahma satyam (verse 20, Brahmajnanavalimala), not as a statement to invalidate experience, or establish Hindu supremacy, but as a simple framework to allow, accept and even assimilate myriad ideas, find unity in diversity, in India, and the global village.