

The glorious life & teaching of Adi Shankara

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Shankara introduced Advaita Vedanta to the people of India and to the rest of the world in a very concrete and lucid way. Here I wish to present a concise and clear account of Shankar's glorious life and his contribution on developing the concept of Advaita Vedanta. Many scholars in the world today apprehend just Shankara's concept of Vedanta as complete Indian philosophy. It is known to us that Shankara was not only a popular Hindu- preacher, a sage and a spiritual genius but also was one of the most famous and influential philosophers of India. Although the duration of his worldly- life was very trifling, but the action he did and the struggle he made in this short span of life is rare and incomparable. Shankara's whole life can be termed as self-sacrifice for the cause of Wisdom. It is impossible for a single man to perform such a titanic works for the field of wisdom within so short a time. Shankara's outstanding life attempts elucidation of his idea. Hence, it would be of immense stimulation for us to know his celebrated life. Now I proceed to compose the story of his momentous life consistently.

Source of Shankara's Biography:

Some of Shankara's disciples and followers wrote varied books on the life and achievements of Shankara mostly known as Shankara-vijayas. The details of Shankara are found in these books. T.S. Narayana Sastry have mentioned such ten Shankara-vijayas in his book "The Age of Shankara."¹ They are:

- (1) Brihat-Shankara-vijaya of Chitsukhacharya;
- (2) Priichfna-Shankara-vijaya of Anandagiri;
- (3) Shankara-vijaya of Vidya Shankara alias Shankarananda;
- (4) Keralfya-Shankara-vijaya by Govindanatha, (known as Achiirya-charita);
- (5) Sankariibhyudaya of Chudamani Dikshita;
- (6) Shankara-vijaya of Anantanandagiri known also as Guru-vijaya.
- (7) Shankara-vijaya of Vallisahayakavi named as Acharya-dig-vijaya.
- (8) Shankara-dig-vijaya-siira of Sadananda;
- (9) Shankara-vijaya-viliisa of Chidvihisa; and

¹ Sastry, T. S, Narayana, "The Age of Shankara" Ch-3, P.32.

(10) Samkshepa-Shankara-vijaya of Madhava-Vidyaranya.

Each of above Shankara-vijayas or all of these together cannot be taken as the source of Shankara's proper biography as they all hold half- history as well as half-legendary. Almost all of them are written mixing the natural facts with the supernatural. So, I would like to highlight the commonly undisputed facts of Shankara by considering different books and evidences written on his life. Actually, this is a selection of some key episodes from his thrilling Life.

Birthplace and time of Shankara:

Shankara's father Sivaguru was a poor Nambudri Brahmana who belonged to the Vedic branch of Krishna Yajurveda. Shankara's mother was Aryamba who was also referred to as Subhadra. The place of his birth was Kaladi,² a village, on the banks of the Poorna River in the southern Indian state of Kerala. The village is famous for the Shiva mound Vrischachala. Reportedly, Shankara's parents were childless for a long time. They were devotees of Lord Shiva. They both used to go to the temple of Vrischachala and observed strict penance praying for the birth of a virtuous son. Their penance flourished one day. Lord Shiva appeared in Sivaguru's dream and asked him to accept a divine son of very high intellect who would not live long. Shivaguru received the Lord Shiva's blessings. Aryamba became pregnant in due time. A divine child was born to them on the day auspicious to Lord Shiva, in Spring at noon, in the propitious Abhijit Muhurta and under the constellation Ardhra. Since the son was born due to the blessings of Lord Shiva, the elders named him Shankara (another name of Shiva).

Shankara's advent took place at a very perilous epoch in the national and Vedic life of India. Buddhist faith in the then India had elapsed through many stages of rise and fall for about thousand years. Besides, varied sects like Charvakas, Lokayathikas, Kapalikas and Sankhyas also sprang up to convince the people in their own way. There was contest and fight amongst sects. Chaos, confusion, fallacy, unrest and bigotry prevailed over glorious land of the Aryans, Rishis, Sages and Yogins in the matter of society, faith and philosophy. The seeds of honesty were then removed from the minds of almost everyone. At such a crucial juncture of the then India Shankara

² Tapasyananda, S. Shankara-Dig-Vijaya - Introduction, Page-V.

arrived on the earth and within a very short time, he tried his best to restore the Advaita Vedanta to its pristine purity, not with the help of physical forces and sword but by the weapon of knowledge and self-purification.

A major disagreement prevails about the living time of Shankara. Vedic families consider that Shankara lived during 6th Century BC showing some authentic proof in support of their claim, while a group of saints associated with a Shankara Matha in Kancipuram claims a pre-Buddhist period for their preceptor Shankara's time. They demonstrate a chronological name-list of their gurus on after another from Shankar to present existing guru. There is, however, a common agreement among the majority of modern scholars that Shankara's lifetime was 788-820 CE.³ In fact, Shankara left his worldly body, but he has appeared as an immortal soul who will continue to live forever in our hearts as a torch of Vedanta and the light of which will linger incessantly to remove the darkness of ignorance from our minds.

Early Days of Shankara:

Shankara was a juvenile genius. It is said that he started talking at the age of two and learned to read and speak Sanskrit at the same age. At the age of three he learnt to recite holy verses which were taught by his father. Whatever he heard once, got engraved in his mind instantly. Around this age, he knew the art of controlling mind and self-concentration. Shivaguru made elaborate arrangements for his schooling, but Fate decided otherwise. One day while chanting his prayers, Shivaguru breathed his last. Shivaguru passed away when Shankara was only five years old. Now, Shankara had none to look after him and care for his education. Only the mother Aryamba had to bear the responsibility of bringing him up. She took special care to educate her son in all the Shastras. After his father passed away, he was old enough to take part in the sacred Upanayana or thread ceremony and start studying the Vedas. She performed this in his fifth year according to Vedic tradition.

Shankara at Gurukula:

The boy Shankara proved to be a prodigy. His mother sent him to the nearby Gurukula on the banks of river Poorna. The Guru was charmed by observing his genius and the devotion to learning. His accuracy and mode of pronouncing words and the sharpness of his intellect quite fascinated him.

3. Bernard, Theos.-Hindu Philosophy. Page-8.

Within a short time, the young Shankara became the Guru's most favorite one. As we know from biographies, under the guidance of Guru he learned the four Vedas and their branches from his Guru in only two years. He learned Yoga philosophy, Samkhya philosophy of Kapila and doctrine of Mimansa as expounded by Bhatta and mastered in all other subjects say Upanishads, Puranas, Itihasa, Smriti etc. However, his real interest was the non-dualistic doctrine of the Upanishads, the philosophy of the Advaita Vedanta. More than any other subject, he was greatly absorbed in the Advaita – the explorer of spiritual truth or the most advanced part of the Vedas. Thus, his talent in realizing the climax of wisdom brought credit to the entire Gurukula.

The Kanakadhara Stotra and a poor Brahmin:

As per Vedic the practice, the brahmachari has to go from house to house, take alms and submit this to his guru. Oneday, when he was collecting alms, he stopped in front of a very poor brahmin's house and uttered the usual word of request for biksha-"Bhavati bikkshamdehi." He repeated it several times, but no reply came out. At last, a woman came out with a sad face. She was unable to offer anything to the boy as she had not a single grain of rice in her house. She mourned her fate wretchedly and gave him away an amalaki (gooseberry). Shankara was moved by the poverty and altruism nature of the lady. He instantaneously composed the great stotra (hymn) on Mother Lakshmi by which, he prayed to Goddess Lakshmi to extend Her Grace on the poor lady. This prayer of Shankara has come down to us as the "Kanaka Dhara Stotra".⁴ Highly pleased with the stotra, Goddess Lakshmi appeared before Shankara in person and showered a rain of golden coins resembling gooseberry on the poor lady's house. Thus as a result of Shankara's prayer to the Goddess, the poor family became rich. The Guru considered himself especially esteemed having a pupil of such matchless intelligence. He blessed Shankara overpoweringly and thought that such a competent boy had not to stay with Guru for long. So, he permitted him to return home long before the expiry of the prescribed term of pupilhood.

⁴ Chinmayananda, H.H. Swami.-Shankara the missionary. Mumbai, 1998. P-23.

Shankara at home:

Shankara returned home from Gurukula at the age of seven after mastering on all the Vedas and other subjects. At home, he continued to pass his time in practicing the Vedas and carrying out the destined rituals. Here he was spending his time very quietly serving his ill mother and teaching some pupils. The vast proficiency in studies and uncommon skill in teaching brought him much celebrity. Within a few days, his fame diverged all around. Even matured scholars from all corners in large numbers began to come to him for a profounder study of the scriptures. The inspiring elucidation of scriptures and flare of intellect of a boy were indeed revealing his Divine Power. Aryamba felt very happy about the virtuous conduct of her son. At this phase, Shankara wanted to take up sanyasa. When he expressed it to his mother, she was not at all willing to let her only son take up sanyasa. On the contrary, she informed him that she had negotiated his marriage with a lovely girl in the locality. She reminded him the teaching of the scriptures that soon after schooling the pupil had left the Guru's residence to the parental home, he should get married. Everyone had to take up Grihastha Ashrama (Marital life) at the close of Brahmacharya Ashrama. But Shankara, under any circumstance would not agree to get married. His mother tried many ways of persuasion and shed tears many a time. But Shankara firmly knew that though he was the only son of his widowed mother and supposed to be the only hope of all her future happiness and welfare, even the purpose of his dedicated life was much greater than taking care of his mother. He took firm determination not to get into wedding and would not relent in this case. Such ominousness of resolve on the part of a boy really surprised his mother.

Shankara's Mother and the changing course of the river Purna:

The devout Aryamba observed many vows (vratam), frequent fasting being one of them. So day by day she grew very weak and emaciated due to over performance of ascetic observances. Every early in the morning, she used to go for the holy bath to the river Alwai (or Purna) which was at some distance from her house. One day she fell down exhausted when she went to take her bath in the Purna. Shankara was very much worried as she did not return home in time. He went out in search of her and found her lying unconscious on the roadside. In deep misery at the sight he wept profusely and started nursing his mother back to her senses and when she came round he then slowly led her home by hand. Shankara worried by his

mother's condition appealed the river deity to turn her course nearer his home. During the night, rains were so heavy that the river changed its course. The river deity, being pleased with the prayer of Shankara, turned the course of the river through the neighbourhood of Shankara's home. This miraculous incident was big news and spread within a few days to all corners of the area. General public came in groups to have a sight of this amazing boy.

Shankara with Rajashekhara, the ruler of Kerala:

Rajashekhara was the ruler of Kerala at that time. He was a scholar and familiar in different scriptures. When he came to hear of Shankara's divine powers, he was filled with wonder. Coming to know of the extraordinary depth of scholarship and the abundance of divine power in a Brahmin boy of seven, the ruler ardently desired to meet him. He sent his chief minister to Shankara, with the gift of an elephant and extended an invitation to him to meet him at the royal place. When the minister in all humility told Shankara of the king's desire, Shankara said, "O best of, of what avail is an elephant to those who live only on alms, whose clothing is only deer-skin and whose daily round of duties consists of sun-up and sun-down prayers, adoration of fire, study of Vedas, teaching and the service to the Guru? O minister, carry this reply of mine to your royal master and expressly tell him that a monarch's primary duty is to endeavor to ensure that the four Varnas duly perform the duties allotted to their particular stations and lead righteous lives. A king should never good people to wrong ways through temptation."⁵ With these words he declined the invitation to call at the royal palace. This behavior of Shankara in no way displeased or annoyed the King. On the other hand, he became even more drawn to the precocious boy. One day the ruler himself arrived at Kaladi accompanied by the ministers of state. Shankara cordially welcomed the king. After a brief discussion with Shankara, the ruler realized that the boy was a prodigy distinguished by intellectual sharpness and extraordinary discriminating skill. That Shankara was endowed with divine powers the king had now not the least doubt. He then laid at the feet of

5. Tapasyananda, Swami. - Shankara-Dig-Vijaya - The Traditional Life of Sri Shankaracharya by Madhava Vidyananya. Introduction, Page-41.

Shankara with huge gold coins and paying obeisance to him begged him to accept the money and the gift. But in a severe way did Shankara neglected his gift. The monarch saluted Shankara's genius and bent his head in reverence to his brilliance and ordered the distribution of the offered money among the Brahmins assembled there. This incident of Shankara's refusing to accept the preferred money made a deep impression on the ruler's mind. The news of the king's offer of favours to Shankara and of his spirit of desirelessness soon spread all round. Even from far off places many people started to come to see him and hear the clarification of the scriptures from him.

Shankara's initiation into Sanyasa:

Shankara had a firm resolve to become a Sannyasin. At this, Shankara's mother was very much grieved that there would be no one even to perform her funeral rites after her death. But by Divine Providence, Shankara got the opportunity to become a Sannyasin. Oneday Shankara was taking bath in the Purna River when a crocodile caught hold of his leg and started to drag him into the river. Shankara felt that his life would soon come to an end. He loudly called out to his mother. Aryaamba rushed to the scene. Shankara cried out to his mother that the last moment of his life has come, but if she gave her permission for Sannyasa, the crocodile might release him. The mother instantly gave her permission. The crocodile at once released him. Thus, Shankara took Apata Sannyasa and mentally renounced the world. Gradually, he prepared to leave home. He promised his mother that he would come to her side at the moment of her death and perform her funeral rites. Thus consoling his mother, Shankara renounced his home. Shankara travelled a long distance and came to the hermitage of sage Govindapada who was engaged in meditation. Approaching the sage, Shankara chanted a hymn in praise of the sage with full devotion. Govindapada came out of his meditation. He was highly pleased with the depth of Shankara. By divine insight, he knew that Shankara was a unique personage born to revive the spiritual greatness of the Vedanta. He initiated him into Sannyasa and taught the Knowledge of Brahman through the four Mahavakyas. Thereafter Govindapada taught him the Vedanta Sutras of Vyasa.

Shankara's Digvijaya:

Govindapada ordered Shankara to go to Kasi to take the blessings of

Lord Shiva and Divine Mother and elucidate the philosophy of Vedanta by writing commentaries on the principal Upanishads, the Brahma Sutras and the Bhagavad Gita. At Kasi, Shankara met Sanandana who was a Brahmana, learned in Vedas and was free from the bondages of family. Shankara initiated Sanandana into Sannyasa as his first disciple. Sanandana was later known as Padmapada because of his mysterious feat of crossing the river Ganga on foot at his Guru's order and wherever his foot steps (Pada) fell on the water, jumped a lotus (Padma) to support him. Shankara went to Badari walking long distances through difficult tracks. At Badari, Shankara held discussions with many pundits of the orthodox system of philosophies. He had his glorious tour all over India. He met the leaders of different schools of thought. He persuaded them by opinions and established the supremacy of the religion that he illustrated in his commentaries. He went to all the eminent seats of learning and debated with them and converted them to his outlooks. He defeated Bhatta Bhaskara and condemned his commentary on the Vedanta Sutras. He then imparted his philosophy to Dandi and Mayura. He defeated many scholars in argument like Harsha, Abhinavagupta, Dharmagupta, Udayanacharya, Murari Misra, Kumarila and Prabhakara.

The great Debate:

Shankara then proceeded to meet Mandana Misra who was the chief Pundit of the court of Mahishmati. Mandana was brought up in the Karma Mimamsa faith and had extreme hatred for Sannyasins. He was performing a Sraaddha ceremony when Shankara somehow dropped down there. Instantly Mandana became very furious. An ugly dialog was started between them. The present Brahmins pacified Mandana. Then Shankara asked Mandana to a religious debate. Mandana accepted it. His wife Ubhayabharati having scholarly intellect was appointed as the judge. She came forward to do her duty without any fear or favor. The condition of the debate was that the vanquished should go over to the victor's side, accept his views and spread his faith. Many scholars assembled at the place realized the importance of the debate and waited there in great curiosity. Ubhayabharati knew that announcing a winner from two great scholars would not be easy. So she put garlands of flowers on the necks of both saying that he whose garland would fade first, be the vanquished in the debate. The debate went on for seventeen days. The garland of Mandana Misra began to fade first. Mandana Misra accepted his defeat. Ubhayabharati noted this

and felt much distressed as a loving wife she was. She declared that the defeat of Mandana is only half- defeat since she, being the wife of Mandana, to be the other half of him.⁶ So Shankara needed to defeat her also. Shankara agreed and a second debate started which continued for seventeen days. Ubhayabharati passed from one Shastra to another. Finding Shankara unbeatable, she raised the subject of Kamasutra thinking that a Sannyasa would not have any knowledge on this subject. Shankara asked Bharati to give him an interval of one month for his preparation to hold controversy in the science of Kama Shastra. She agreed. Shankara went to Kashi. Shankara then entered the body of a dead king and learned Kamasutra in that body. Returning to Ubhayabharati he answered all her questions reasonably. Finally, Shankara initiated Mandana into the holy order of Sannyasa and gave him the name of 'Sureswara Acharya'. Shankara then moved southwards and went to Srisailam, Gokarna, Harihar, Mukambi, etc. and reached Sringeri along with his disciple Mandana to build a mutt and a temple. Mandana became the first Sannyasin of the Sringeri Mutt.

Mother's Funeral Rites:

In Sringeri, just before the death of his mother, Shankara came to know through his yogic vision that his mother is in death-bed and went to perform the last rites in Kalladi. With death approaching, Shankara prayed lord Mahavishnu through hymns. The mother perceived the radiant form of pure consciousness within herself and thus died with her mind absorbed in Him. Remembering his promise to her, Shankara performed her funeral rites. His ritualistic relatives and the local Nambhudiris forbade him to do the rites himself and stopped everyone offering help to Shankara as he was a sannyasi, but Shankara overrode their objections and built a fire himself and cremated his mother in her own backyard.

Shankara's second digvijaya and Death:

Shankara left Kalladi for Sringeri. He then set out on a second digvijaya. He went out on a tour over the eastern coast with a large number of admirers. He reformed the Saktas and Bhairavas who were shedding

⁶ <http://www.sringeri.net/history/sri-adi-shankaracharya/biography/abridged-madhaviya-shankara-digvijayam/part-3>

human blood. He built Mutts in Kanchi and Puri. He was back on his tour of the North and then started on a journey to Kailasa. He also visited Nasik, Somanath, Dvaraka, Ujjain, Mathura and Kashmir. Finally, he reached Badrinath and Kailasa. When Shankara went to the Himalayas, he proceeded to Kedarnath. He became one with the Linga in 820 A.D. in his thirty- second year. Yet, it cannot be said definitely where he spent his last days because some say he left his body at Kedarnath and some say in Kanchipuram of Tamil Nadu.

The works of Shankara:

Shankara's works are the foundation of Advaita Vedanta and his doctrine has been the source from which the main currents of modern Indian thought are derived. Over 300 texts are accredited to his name. His works can be broadly classified into three sections as follows:

1. Commentaries (Bhasyas): The outstanding works of Shankara are his commentaries on Brahma-sutras, on the ten principal Upanisads and on the Bhagavad-gita. They together form the Prasthanatarya. These bhasyas serve as an escort for us the vast treasure chambers of wisdom contained in our scriptures. These three works form the basis on which the whole structure of Hinduism stands.

2. Books dealing with the vital concepts of Vedanta (Prakarana granthas): Prakarana Granthas are guide books on Advaita Vedanta which explain the great philosophical truths developed in a Sastra Grantha. Some of the famous prakarana granthas are Viveka-choodamani, Pancha-dasi, Atma-bodha, Drik-drisya-viveka, Tattva-bodha, Vedanta-sara, Sadhana- panchakam and so on. The central theme of these books is the identity of the individual self with the Universal Self.

3. Meditation verses (Stotras): Shankara wrote innumerable original stotras in verses which are matchless in sweetness, melody and thought. His stotras invariably consisted of prayers to lead one to the true light of knowledge and discrimination to save one from the wheel of birth and death and thus paved the way to reach the ultimate goal through devotion.

Shankara's teaching:

Shankara was a titanic metaphysician, a real dreamer, an unfailing logician and an amazing spiritual leader. His grasping and elucidating powers knew no bounds. He gave a concrete form to the truth. He was a fully developed Yogi, Jnani,

Bhakta and a Karma Yogin. Hanmantrao says, “The philosophy of Kant and the doctrine of relativity of Einstein (in the field of Physics) have something in common with the doctrine of Shankara - which fact alone shows the mighty genius of this great personage.”⁷ Shankara showed us how we should live in this world. It is his teaching that our life should shine forth with spiritual qualities like knowledge, devotion and austerity. He preached that everything in the world is Brahman and all are one. The world is relentlessly fluctuating. The reality that lies behind all these things and activities is Brahman. It cannot be described, because description implies distinction. Just as the snake is superimposed on the rope, this world and this body are superimposed on Brahman or the Supreme Self. Shankara showed the identity of our Self and the Brahman. His Atman is self-evident. This Atman need not be established by proofs. It is not possible to deny this Atman, for it is the very essence of he who denies it. The world of names and forms has no free existence. The Atman alone has real existence. Beings are many, but their breath is the same. People are many, but the Earth is one. We should develop an eye to perceive Brahman everywhere and in everything. Only then, we can take the whole world as our mother-land and treat all human beings as our friends. Shankara, within his brief life, had brought about a great religious reawakening all over India. To sum up in a nutshell, his single sentence is significant, “Brahma Satyam Jagat Mithya Jivo Brahmaiva Naparah” meaning that Brahman alone is true, the world is false and the Jivas are not apart from the Brahman.

To conclude, Shankara’s doctrine is unparalleled for its metaphysical gravity and rational consistency. He was a theologian as well as a logician who brought about social changes through the divine Advaitic philosophy of harmony and unity. His system demolished many old beliefs by peacefully suggesting something more reasonable and concrete one. By means of amazing ethics, supreme wisdom and profound spirituality he has revitalized and reawakened the people to stand in good stead even today.

⁷ Hanmantrao, Kabbur Krishnarao. - Cultural History of Karnataka. P-154.

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