



SANKARACHARYA AND ENLIGHTENMENT MOVEMENT IN KERALA

History

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ABSTRACT

Sankaracharya was a Saint who completely renewed the practice of Hinduism and established monastic orders in the four corners of India. His vast literary output includes poems, hymns, scriptural commentaries and the great philosophical treatise called 'The Crest-Jewel of Discrimination'. Sankaracharya was born in a Namboodiri Brahmin family at Kaladi in Kerala. At the age of 18 he had studied and mastered Vedas and Puranas. Sankaracharya's attempts to culturally unite the country in his short life span are unprecedented and unmatched to this day. He undertook the task of reforming and reviving religion at a time when the Indian society was deeply entrenched in many ills, conservative ideas and religious fanaticism. He travelled throughout the country and infused a fresh life in the dying Hindu religion. Wherever he went, Sankaracharya compelled the great scholars of the day to concede defeat by sheer force of his scholastic arguments. He brought about a new awakening in the Hindu society and has thus immortalized himself.

KEYWORDS

Hinduism- Kaladi -monastic orders- Namboodiri- Advaita Vedanta

INTRODUCTION

Sankaracharya, one of the most influential philosophers of India, was born in Kerala in the 8th century. He was an advocate of Advaita or the doctrine of the oneness of the individual soul and the Supreme God which is the Ultimate Reality. He taught that Brahman, the only or Ultimate Reality, was formless and without any attributes¹. He considered the world around us to be an illusion or maya, and preached renunciation of the world and adoption of the path of knowledge to understand the true nature of Brahman and attain salvation. Not only did he infuse a new life into the Vedas, but also advocated against the Vedic religious practices of ritualistic excesses. He founded four monasteries in the four corners of India, which continue to promote his philosophy and teachings².

Childhood & Early Life

Sankaracharya was born into a poor Brahmin family in the year 788 A.D. in a village named Kaladi, six miles to the east of Alwaye, Kerala³. He died in 820 AD at the early age of 32 in Kedarnath, in Uttarakhand⁴. He reformed the rituals and doctrines in Hinduism, which was followed blindly by Hindus in those days. His parents Sivaguru and Aryamba had been childless for a long time and had prayed to Lord Shiva to bless them with a baby. It is said that Aryamba had a vision of Lord Shiva who promised her that she would be born as her first-born child. Soon she gave birth to a son in the auspicious Abhijit Muhurta and under the constellation Ardra. The boy was named Sankara⁵. He proved to be a brilliant boy and mastered all the Vedas and the six Vedangas from the local gurukul. From a young age Sankara was more inclined towards religion and spirituality and did not show much interest in worldly affairs. He wanted to become a Sannyasi (hermit) though his mother disapproved. She wanted him to get married and live the life of a house-holder⁶.

Legend has it that Sankara once went to take a bath in the river when a crocodile grabbed his foot. He then called out to his mother to give him permission to become a Sannyasi or else the crocodile will kill him. His mother agreed in desperation and the crocodile let go of his foot. He emerged unharmed from the river and proceeded to renounce all his worldly attachments⁷.

Sankaracharya was a religious reformist who critiqued the rituals-oriented schools of Hinduism and cleansed the Vedic religious practices of ritualistic excesses. He is best remembered for his remarkable reinterpretations of Hindu scriptures and his commentaries on the Vedic canon (Brahma Sutras, Principal Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita). He was an exponent of the Advaita Vedanta School of philosophy which refers to the recognition that the true Self, Atman, is the same as the highest Reality, Brahman. His teachings on the philosophy have tremendously influenced various sects of Hinduism and have contributed to the development of the modern Indian thought⁸.

Monastic Life

Throughout the course of his early life, Sankara astounded many with his knowledge intelligence. He started writing his own analysis of the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras and the Bhagavad Gita at a young age.

Right from his childhood, he was keen on becoming a monk. He wanted to get formally initiated into the sacred order of Sannyasa and thus sought a guru to guide him in this direction⁹. He then went in search of a guru and according to a few ancient scripts; a young Sankara walked at least 2000 kilometers before meeting Govinda Bhagavatpada. On the banks of Narmada River, Sankara met him. Impressed by his knowledge of the Vedas and Vedanta, he took Sankaracharya under his tutelage. Under Govinda Bhagavatpada's guidance; Sankara studied Brahmasutra, Gaudapadiya Karika, Vedas and Upanishads¹⁰. To his teacher's amazement, Sankara was able to master almost all the ancient scripts in a short time. He even started writing commentaries on major religious scripts. Once he had a clear understanding of the ancient Hindu scripts, Sankara started traveling across India, propagating 'Advaita Vedanta' and 'Dashanami Sampradaya'. During the course of his journey, Sankara's teachings were challenged by many philosophers and thinkers. He was even involved in a number of debates pertaining to Hinduism and its beliefs, but Sankara managed to astound all his doubters with his intelligence and clarity. He then went about propagating his ideas and was soon accepted as a guru by many¹¹.

The details regarding the later years of his life are somewhat obscure though it is generally accepted that he travelled widely, participated in public philosophical debates with religious scholars, preached his teachings to his disciples and founded several "matha" (monasteries)¹².

Philosophy and religious thought

At the time of Sankara's life, Hinduism had lost some of its appeal because of the influence of Buddhism and Jainism. Sankara stressed the importance of the Vedas and his work helped Hinduism regain strength and popularity. Although he did not live long, he had travelled on foot to various parts of India to restore the study of the Vedas. His philosophy was simple and straightforward. He advocated the existence of the soul and the Supreme Soul and believed that the Supreme Soul alone is real and unchanging while the soul is a changing entity and that it does not have absolute existence¹³. The philosophy and teachings of him was based on the Advaita Vedanta. He preached 'Non-Dualism'. It means that each and every person has a divine existence, which can be identified with the Supreme God. The mere thought that human being is finite with a name and form subject to earthly changes, is to be discarded. The bodies are diverse, but the soul of all the separate bodies is the same, the Divine One¹⁴.

The Philosophy of Sankara is known as advaita (monoism). According to him Brahman is alone real and the individual self is only the Supreme Self and no other. The empirical world is unreal, an illusion born of ignorance. The jiva continues in Samsara (world) only so long as it retains attachment due to Maya or ignorance. If the individual casts off the veil of Maya through knowledge, it will realize its identity with the Brahman and get merged into it. This attempt to reconcile the plurality of the empirical world with the Brahman is the greatest contribution of Sankara¹⁵. According to Prof. A.L. Basham "Sankara's greatness lies in his brilliant dialectic. By able use of logical argument, and we must admit, by interpreting some phrases very figuratively, he reduced all

the apparently self-contradictory passages of the Upanishads to a consistent system which, though not unchallenged, has remained the standard philosophy of intellectual Hinduism to this day. The comparison of Sankara in Hinduism with St. Thomas Aquinas in the Roman Catholic Church is a very fair one¹⁶. It may be noted that Sankara was not merely a great idealist; he was a great practical teacher. He realized that his philosophy was beyond the comprehension of ordinary people and therefore insisted that a true religion should be an avenue to vital religious experience.

Sankaracharya was born when Hinduism as a religion was in utter chaos. The multiplicity of religious practices saw the rise of many cults all claiming to be the real Hinduism. The real Hinduism or the Sanatan Dharma was passing through a difficult phase. With Vedic tradition under attack, it was Sankaracharya's genius that reinvented Hinduism and re-established the Vedic tradition with his excellent commentaries on Brahmasutras, Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita¹⁷.

It was his period that saw the re-emergence of Hinduism. The basic contribution of Sankaracharya was his brilliant explanation of the Indian philosophical thought and his concept of advait or non-dualism that tends to give a unique position to Hinduism among a pantheon of religions. His philosophy is a complete philosophy that gives a holistic explanation of Hinduism. According to him, the ultimate reality is Brahman or pure consciousness, the consciousness of the pure self that is devoid of all attributes and all categories of the intellect. The common understanding of the concept of Maya as given by Sankara is that the world is an illusion and this makes the understanding of his philosophy difficult. The world for all practical purposes is real, then how can it be an illusion¹⁸.

But the essence of his philosophy is that from the phenomenal point of view the world is quite real. It is not an illusion but a practical reality. He uses an analogy of dream to explain this. Just as things seen in a dreaming state appear to be quite true for the dreamer who partakes in that, so also is this illusory nature of the world. Only after waking does one realize that it was an illusion. Thus it is the ignorance in Sankaracharya's terms that makes this illusory world of Maya appear real and we get involved. Maya thus is not only absence of knowledge; it is also positive wrong knowledge. This nature of Maya renders it indescribable as it is both real and unreal¹⁹. Parallels can be drawn with the concept of perception in experimental psychology. The real world is not the perceived world. Rather it is the perceived world that appears to be the real world. Apparently Sankaracharya's philosophy is supposed to be an antithesis of Buddhism. But if we go deep we find that the influence of Mahayana Buddhism is there in Sankaracharya's philosophy²⁰. Though understanding his philosophy requires a thorough understanding of the Vedanta, yet the crux of his theory lies in the statement that brahman is the only reality, the world is ultimately an illusion. But this realization can only dawn when ignorance that arises from the ego vanishes. As once again Hinduism is being defined and redefined, it is time to go back to Sankaracharya's philosophy that is perhaps the best description of this great religion.

Establishment of monasteries

Sankaracharya founded four monasteries (mathas) - one each at the four cardinal points in India with the headquarters at Dvaraka in the West, Jagannatha Puri in the East, Sringeri in the South and Badrikashrama in the North. He then placed four of his prominent disciples, Sureswara Acharya, Padmapada, Hastamalaka and Trotakacharya, in charge of the mathas²¹.

Major Works

Sankaracharya was an intellectual prodigy who attained a phenomenal mastery over the scriptures even when he was less than 8 years of age. Using the Sanskrit language with a felicitous clarity all his own, he wrote elaborate commentaries on the tripod of Hindu religion and philosophy evincing a dialectical skill which even to this day is the despair and envy of his adversaries. The original treatises that he produced on Advaita Vedanta ranging from a single verse to a thousand for all grades of mental comprehension live even today as fresh as ever, in the thoughts and tongues of men²². He was a prolific author and wrote many commentaries which are considered authentic by scholars. His important works include Commentaries on the Brahma sutra, the Bhagavad-Gita and the principal Upanishads²³. In addition he also wrote works like Viveka Chaudamani, Atma Bodha, Soundarya Lahari, Ananda Lahari and certain stotras. These works also contain valuable ideas about the philosophy and religion²⁴.

Death

Sankaracharya is believed to have died aged 32, at Kedarnath in the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand, a Hindu pilgrimage site in the Himalayas. Some texts locate his death in alternate locations such as Kanchipuram (Tamil Nadu) and somewhere in the state of Kerala²⁵. According to the tradition in Kerala, after Sankara's samadhi at Vadakkunnathan Temple, his disciples founded four mathas in Thrissur city, namely Edayil Madhom, Naduvil Madhom, Thekke Madhom and Vadakke Madhom²⁶.

CONCLUSION.

Such was the life and work of Sankaracharya who packed within a brief period of 32 years a series of achievements which are unequalled both in their content and variety. Judged by any test, as a writer, as a poet, as a thinker and debater, as a prophet and mystic, as a religious organizer and by any aspect of his diversified personality Sankaracharya is unique among the great men of the world²⁷. He holds a pre-eminent position among the Master Minds that have shaped the thoughts and actions alike of their contemporaries and of posterity. Above all, the Advaita Vedanta that he expounded to such artistic perfection is the one and only philosophy that will effectively make for personal liberation from the shackles of life on the one hand and for universal amity and peace liquidating social and national rivalries on the other²⁸. The Vedanta associated with his name belongs not to one section of the Hindus only. It is the philosophy of the entire humanity and deserves to be carefully studied and scrupulously practiced by men in every part of the globe. Most truly, Sankaracharya is referred to with love and devotion as Lokasankara, the most brilliant among the benefactors of mankind for all time and in all times²⁹.

Sankaracharya paved the way for solid edifice of Indian culture by his scientific and rational exposition of Upanishad philosophy. He propounded the timeless truths of Vedanta so that everyone would understand and live. His contribution to Indian philosophy, in fact humanity, is so perpetual that all the later philosophers have only tried to refute or elaborate his ideas³⁰. Sankaracharya's message is a message of hope, truth and love. Through his life, Sankara presented an example before us to live by the Truth. Sankaracharya was an intellectual and spiritual prodigy. His flowing language, his lucid style, his stern logic, his balanced expression, his fearless exposition, his unshakable faith in the Vedas and other manifold qualities of his works convey an idea of his greatness that no story can adequately convey.

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4. Uttarakhand was formed on 9th November 2000 as the 27th State of India, when it was carved out of northern Uttar Pradesh. Located at the foothills of the Himalayan mountain ranges, it is largely a hilly State. It is rich in natural resources especially water and forests with many glaciers, rivers, dense forests and snow-clad mountain peaks.
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