



ISSN Print: 2394-7500  
ISSN Online: 2394-5869  
Impact Factor: 5.2  
IJAR 2020; 6(2): 376-377  
[www.allresearchjournal.com](http://www.allresearchjournal.com)  
Received: 23-12-2019  
Accepted: 18-01-2020

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## Life, works and philosophy of Sri Sankara

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### Abstract

Adi Sankara was an Indian philosopher and theologian, most renowned exponent of the Advaita Vedanta School of philosophy. He started writing his own analysis of the upanishads, Brahmasutras, and Bhagavat Gita at a young age. Sankara has often been called India's greatest philosopher and his influence on Indian thought, religion, and culture has been highly significant.

**Keywords:** Authenticity, adversaries, antagonists, ascended, propagation

### Introduction

All the systems of Indian philosophy may be roughly divided into two classes, the Asthika systems and the Nasthika systems. As each one of them is the product of some kind of perception which its founder had, each came to be called a Darsana or revelation. We have, therefore, two classes of Darsanas; the Astikadarsanas and the Nastikadarsanas. Astikadarsanas are those systems of philosophy that recognize the authority of the Vedas and accept the concept of Isvara, a personal god; and the Nastikadarsanas are those that do not. Of these systems, Charvakadarsana, Baudhadarsana and Jainadarsana are Nastikadarsanas. Sankhyadarsana of Kapila, Yogadarsana of Pathanjali, Nyayadarsana of Gautama, Vaiseshikadarsana of Kanada, Purvamimamsadarsana of Jaimini and Uttaramimamsa of Badarayana are the Asthikadarsanas.

Among the systems of Astikadarsana, the Uttaramimamsa of Badarayana is the basis of Sri Sankara's philosophy called Advaitavedanta. Uttaramimamsa or Kedanta being a religio-philosophical system, has a vast literature presenting in different shades, the views of different sampradaya (hereditary tradition) such as Advaita, Visishtadvaita, Dvaita, Suddhadvaita, Bhiedabheda Acintyabhedabheda and some other schools of thought. Among these systems, the Advaita school of Vedanta advocated by Sri Sankara enjoys primacy, because of its metaphysical, philosophical and logical appeal.

A short account of the life and works of Sri Sankara, is now, not out of context, but presenting his philosophy. There is no other name in the history of Indian philosophy which is more honoured and inspiring than that of Sri Sankara the greatest philosopher of the world. Several writers have written the life of Sri Sankara and several poets have sung his glory. But it is unfortunate that a trust-worthy biography of such a famous philosopher has not come down to us. Even the date of his birth left uncertain. If the date of Sankara could be satisfactorily determined, it would form a land-mark in the history Indian philosophy in general and Advaitavedanta in particular.

There are several opinions that have been advanced regarding the date of Sankara of different scholars. Dr. T.C. Cintamani after examining the different opinions, concludes as follows: - "According to the testimony of It-sing, The Chinese traveller, Bhartṛhari should have live between - 600 - 650 AD. Vachaspathi Mishra, the commentator of the Sutrabhasya of Sankara, according to his own statement, composed the work Nyayasichi-nibandhana in 841 AD. Sankara who criticised certain views of Bhartṛhari, should have lived, therefore, later than Bhartrhari and earlier than Vachaspatimishraie between 640-841 AD. We shall safely accept this conclusion, regarding the date of Sri Sankara.

### Sankara's Life

According to tradition Sankara was a native of Kerala. He belonged to a Nampoothiri family settled in Kalady near Aluva. He was the only son of his father Sivaguru, who died when the boy was very young.

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The boy was very earnest in his studies. By playing a trick he prevailed his mother Aryamba to let him Sanyasin. After promising to return for the due performance of her funeral rites, he went away to the banks of Narmada River, where he meet the famous monk Govinda bhagavatpada. Sankara received formal Advaitic instruction from him. Govind bhagavatpada was a student of Gaudapada, the author of the Karikas on the Mandukyopanisat.

Here is an interesting story about the meeting of Srisankara with Govindabhagavatpada. At the first sight itself Sankara bowed down praising Govinda in the following sloka–

Paryangathaam Vrajathiyapathagendraketho  
Paadaangadathvamadhavaaparameswarasya  
Thasyeavamaulidhrthasaarnavasailabhume  
Seshasyavigrahavisheshamahobhajethavaam

Hearing this sloka, Govinda wonderfully asked Sri Sankara who he was. The reply includes ten advaiticslokas called Dasasloki which begins

Na bhuminathoyamnathejonavayu  
Na ravamnaindriyamvanatheshaamsamuha  
Anaikaanthikathvathsushupthaikasidha  
Thadekoasishtasivakevaloham

Then after finishing his course of instruction, Sankara travelled all over India, defeated some adversaries in dispute, wrote a number of important philosophical works, firmly established Advaitaphilosophy by silencing its principal antagonists – the Baudhas, the Mimamsakas, the Samkhyas and the Naiyayikas, and at the end of his VijayaYatra all over Bharata, he reached Kashmir (Sharadigram) and after defeating the other scholars there in disputation, Sankara ascended on the ancient Sarvavinjanapeedha of Sharadigram in Kashmir. Then returned home in due time to perform the funeral rites for his mother. And then established four madhas (Sringeri, Dwaraka, Badari and Puri) for Advaita propagation and finally departed from this world at the early age of thirty two. This in essence is the life of Sankara without any miracle.

### Works of Sankara

Sri Sankara 's work can be grouped under four heads.

1. The Bhashyagranthas i.e. the commentorial works.
2. The Prakaranagranthas or the expository works.
3. The Stotragranthas (the Hymns) and
4. The Tantragranthas and others.

The first category includes the Bhashyas on the Vedanta sutras of Badarayana, the Bhasyas on the ten principal Upanishads, the Bhashya on the Srimad Bhagavadgita, the Nrsimhatapanyanupanisabhaskhya, Atharvasikhabhashya and the Sanatsujatiyabhaskhya.

The Prakaranagranthas are Vivekachudamani, Upadesasahasri, Aparokshaubhuti, Vakyavrtti, Svatmanirupana Atmabodhaetc 42 in number.

Stotragranthas are Saundaryalahari, Sivananda Laharietc 59 in all.

The Prapanchasara, Saparyahrdya, Subhagodaya Paddhati, Sankarasmrtaietc are included in the other categories of his work.

Here is a question: Are all the works attributed to Sankara really Adisankara's own?

It is difficult to say exactly how many works were written by Adisankara himself. There is little doubt that quite a number of works attributed to Sankara were not written by him. According to Das Gupta those books that seems to be his genuine works are the works which have been commented upon by other writers, since this shows that these works have the strength of tradition behind them to support their authenticity.

The main reasons why a number of works which probably were not written by him were attributed to him seems to be twofold; first because, there were other writers of the same title i.e. Sankaracharyas in succession in the Sankaramathras, and secondly, the tendency of Indian writers to increase the dignity of their works by attributing them to great writers of the past; as an example the attribution of all the pura,as, to Vyasa.

The most important works of Sankara are his commentaries, (the Bhasyas) on the ten principal UpanisatsIsa, kena, katha, prasna, mundaka, Mandukaya, Aithareya, Thaittiriya, Chandogya and Brhadaranyaka; the Suriraka mimamsa bhaskya or the Bhashya on the Badarayana sutras and the Bhashya onthe SrimadBhagavadgitha.

By commenting upon these Prasthanatraya works ie the Upanishats, Brahmasutras and the Bhgavadgitha and also onthe gaudapadarika onthe Mandukyopanisat, SriSankara systematised a philosophy called Advaitavedanata which is survived all other systems of philosophy and is accepted the most important metaphysics (Addhyatmavidya) of the world.Now we may analyse the Advaitavedanta of Sankara by expounding almost all the topics of this system of philosophy.

The purpose of the philosophy of Sankara has clearly stated in his Adhyasabhaskya or the introductor of portion of the Bhashya on the Badarayanasantas. There is a beginning less and erroneous concept of Addhyasa (Superimposition) like "I am stout or lean or fair or I am standing or going and that I am glad or sorrowful etc which is of the nature of wrong conception and which promotes the notion of the self as being an agent, or experiencer, which is perceived by all. This is an erroneous conception without knowing that the self is identical with supreme self. It is with a view to destroy this cause of all evil and acquiring the knowledge of the unity of the individual self with the supreme self i.e. Parabrahman or Brahman. Sri Sankara propounds a theory of Advaitavedanta on the authority of the aruti (Veda) i.e. Upanishats and Brahmasutras and the Bhagavatgitha.

The main topics of the philosophy of Sankara are the Brahman (i.e. Paramatman), the jiva (or individual soul) and the world and the relation with the two, and the liberation or Mukti (freedom) of the individual self.

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