



## Ādi Śaṅkarācārya and His Works

Dr.Pankaj Kumar Mahana

*Assistant Professor (Guest) in Sanskrit, P.G. Department of Sanskrit, Dharanidhar University, Keonjhar, Odisha, India.*

**Abstract** – Ādi Śaṅkarācārya (788–820 CE), one of the greatest spiritual luminaries in Indian philosophical tradition, was not only a profound thinker but also an extraordinary reformer whose works re-established the authority of the Vedas and gave new life to the Advaita Vedānta system. His writings, both philosophical commentaries and devotional hymns, display a rare synthesis of rigorous logic and poetic fervor. Through his bhāṣyas on the Brahmasūtra, principal Upaniṣads, and the Bhagavadgītā, Śaṅkara laid the foundation of non-dualistic Vedānta that emphasized the ultimate unity of the individual self (jīva) and the Supreme Reality (Brahman). His commentaries are marked by brevity, clarity, and uncompromising adherence to scriptural authority.

Śaṅkarācārya's influence extended beyond philosophy into the realm of spirituality, culture, and religious practice. He composed numerous hymns such as Saundaryalaharī, Bhaja Govindam, Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotra, and Śivānandalaharī, which reflect deep devotion and aesthetic beauty while simultaneously serving as vehicles for Advaitic insights. These hymns, though devotional in tone, are philosophically profound, often encapsulating the essence of Vedāntic truths in accessible poetic forms.

As a reformer, Śaṅkara undertook extensive journeys across the Indian subcontinent, engaging in debates, establishing monasteries (maṭhas), and organizing the Daśanāmī order of monks. His efforts ensured the survival and spread of Vedānta philosophy, providing it with institutional strength that continues to the present day. He harmonized diverse religious practices, upheld the authority of Vedic tradition, and emphasized the pursuit of liberation (mokṣa) as the ultimate goal of human life.

The study of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya's works is not merely of historical interest but remains deeply relevant today. In an age of philosophical pluralism and spiritual seeking, his vision of non-duality provides a universal framework that transcends sectarian boundaries. His ability to integrate rigorous philosophical reasoning with devotional piety presents an enduring model for harmonizing intellect and faith.

This article seeks to explore Śaṅkarācārya's life, his philosophical and devotional works, and their impact on the Indian knowledge system. It will critically examine his major commentaries, stotras, and independent treatises, supported by Sanskrit verses with diacritical marks, while also analyzing their continued significance in modern times. By surveying both primary texts and scholarly interpretations, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Śaṅkara's multifaceted contributions as a philosopher, poet, and reformer.

**Keywords:** Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, Advaita Vedānta, Brahmasūtra-bhāṣya, Upaniṣad-bhāṣya, Bhagavadgītā-bhāṣya, Saundaryalaharī, Bhaja Govindam, Vedāntic philosophy, Non-duality (Advaita) and Indian Knowledge System.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The history of Indian philosophy is adorned with towering figures who have shaped its spiritual, cultural, and intellectual trajectory. Among them, Ādi Śaṅkarācārya (788–820 CE) stands out as a luminary whose



influence continues to resonate through centuries. He was not merely a philosopher in the academic sense but a teacher (ācārya), reformer, organizer, poet, and saint. His life and works redefined the spiritual landscape of India by rejuvenating the declining Vedic tradition and establishing Advaita Vedānta as a dominant philosophical school.

In the eighth century CE, India witnessed a period of religious and philosophical ferment. Diverse schools of thought—Buddhism, Jainism, various sects of Hinduism such as Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā, as well as ritualistic tendencies—were competing for intellectual and cultural supremacy. The Vedic tradition, though rich in heritage, had fragmented into multiple sectarian practices. It was in this context that Śaṅkarācārya appeared as a unifier, harmonizer, and systematizer of Vedāntic thought.

Śaṅkara's philosophy of Advaita Vedānta—the doctrine of non-duality—asserts that the ultimate reality (Brahman) is one without a second (ekam eva advitīyam). The individual self (jīva) is not different from Brahman, and ignorance (avidyā) alone creates the illusion of multiplicity. Liberation (mokṣa) is attained through the removal of this ignorance by the knowledge (jñāna) of Brahman. His writings provide a clear, authoritative, and rational exposition of this philosophy, while his hymns express it in lyrical devotion.

One of his celebrated verses encapsulates this Advaitic vision:

**ब्रह्म सत्यं जगन्मिथ्या जीवो ब्रह्मैव नापरः ।**

**brahma satyaṁ jagan mithyā jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ ।**

“Brahman is the only reality, the world is an illusion, and the individual self is none other than Brahman.”

This aphorism, though not directly from Śaṅkara's own texts but often attributed to his school, perfectly summarizes his vision. It is through such statements that his philosophy has become timeless.

## 2. LIFE AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Śaṅkarācārya was born in a small village called Kāladī in present-day Kerala. His parents, Śivaguru and Āryāmbā, were devout but childless for many years. According to traditional accounts, Śivaguru prayed at the temple of Lord Śiva in Trichur and received the boon of a son who would be either long-lived but ordinary or short-lived but extraordinary. Choosing the latter, they were blessed with Śaṅkara, who displayed prodigious intelligence and spiritual inclination from an early age.

Śaṅkara became a saṁnyāsīn at the age of eight, after receiving permission from his mother. He then set out in search of a guru and found Govindapāda, the disciple of Gauḍapāda, under whom he mastered the essence of Advaita Vedānta. His intellectual brilliance and mastery over scriptures soon established him as a formidable thinker.

It is believed that within a short span of thirty-two years, Śaṅkara traveled across the length and breadth of India, engaging in debates with scholars of other schools, defeating them in philosophical contests, and reviving the Vedic tradition. He established four maṭhas (monastic centers) in the cardinal directions—Śṛṅgeri in the South, Dvārakā in the West, Badarī in the North, and Puṛī in the East—entrusting them to his disciples to ensure the continuity of Advaita Vedānta.

## 3. ŚAṅKARA AS A PHILOSOPHER AND REFORMER

While his philosophical contributions are profound, it is equally important to note his role as a reformer. In an era where ritualism had become mechanical, Śaṅkara emphasized the centrality of jñāna (knowledge) as the means to liberation, without dismissing the value of devotion (bhakti) and ritual (karma). He



harmonized diverse strands of Hindu practice, acknowledging the importance of worship, ethics, and meditation as preparatory steps leading to the realization of Brahman.

In his famous hymn Bhaja Govindam, he urges seekers not to be entangled in worldly pursuits but to direct their minds toward the Divine:

भज गोविन्दं भज गोविन्दं  
गोविन्दं भज मूढमते ।  
सम्प्राप्ते सन्निहिते काले  
नहि नहि रक्षति डुकृङ्करणे ॥

“Chant the name of Govinda, O fool! When death approaches, grammatical rules will not save you.”

This verse demonstrates Śaṅkara’s unique approach—he was a rigorous philosopher, yet he recognized the importance of devotion as a practical path for common people.

#### 4. ŚAṅKARA’S DUAL ROLE: JÑĀNA AND BHAKTI

One of the remarkable aspects of Śaṅkarācārya is the balance between intellectual inquiry and devotional expression. His bhāṣyas (commentaries) are austere, logical, and scriptural, intended for serious seekers and scholars. On the other hand, his stotras (hymns) like Saundaryalaharī, Śivānandalaharī, and Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotra are poetic, filled with aesthetic beauty and deep devotion. This synthesis reveals that for Śaṅkara, Advaita Vedānta was not a cold intellectual abstraction but a living, vibrant experience of oneness with the Divine.

For example, in Saundaryalaharī (Wave of Beauty), Śaṅkara extols the Goddess in exquisite imagery:

शिवः शक्त्या युक्तो यदि भवति शक्तः प्रभवितुं  
न चेदेवं देवो न खलु कुशलः स्पन्दितुमपि ।

“Śiva becomes capable of creation only when united with Śakti; without Her, He is not even able to stir.” This verse reflects his understanding of metaphysical principles through the language of devotion and poetry.

#### 5. SIGNIFICANCE OF ŚAṅKARA IN INDIAN TRADITION

Śaṅkarācārya’s significance cannot be overstated. He not only revitalized Vedānta but also laid the foundation for its survival across centuries. His organizational genius in establishing maṭhas provided institutional strength, while his philosophical clarity gave Advaita Vedānta an unassailable intellectual base. Even opponents acknowledged his brilliance.

In modern times, Śaṅkara’s works continue to inspire scholars, saints, and seekers. His vision of Advaita transcends sectarian boundaries and provides a universal spiritual framework relevant in an age of global dialogue and pluralism.

#### 6. ŚAṅKARA’S MAJOR WORKS

Ādi Śaṅkarācārya’s literary legacy is immense and multifaceted. Within his short lifespan of thirty-two years, he produced an astonishing range of works—dense philosophical commentaries (bhāṣyas), independent treatises (prakaraṇa-granths), and devotional hymns (stotras). These writings not only reflect his mastery over Vedic scriptures but also display his ability to communicate profound truths in



forms accessible to both scholars and laypersons. His works can broadly be classified into three categories: i.e-

1. Philosophical Commentaries (Bhāṣyas)
2. Independent Treatises (Prakaraṇa-granthas)
3. Devotional Hymns (Stotras and Laharīs)

## 1. Philosophical Commentaries (Bhāṣyas)

Śaṅkara's most enduring contribution lies in his commentaries on three principal texts of Vedānta: the Brahmasūtra, the Upaniṣads, and the Bhagavadgītā. Collectively known as the Prasthānatrayī-bhāṣya (commentary on the "threefold foundation"), these works systematized Advaita Vedānta and provided it with intellectual authority.

### a. Brahmasūtra-bhāṣya

The Brahmasūtras of Bādarāyaṇa, also known as Vedāntasūtras, summarize the teachings of the Upaniṣads in 555 aphorisms. Before Śaṅkara, many schools had attempted to interpret them, but Śaṅkara's bhāṣya established Advaita as the most coherent system.

He begins his commentary with the famous aphorism:

**अथातो ब्रह्मजिज्ञासा ॥**

"Now, therefore, the inquiry into Brahman."

Śaṅkara explains that human life's highest purpose is the realization of Brahman, the ultimate reality. His exposition is marked by logical rigor, scriptural fidelity, and philosophical depth. He refutes opposing schools like Nyāya, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Buddhism, and Mīmāṃsā, while consistently affirming the non-dual vision:

**ब्रह्म सत्यं जगन्मिथ्या जीवो ब्रह्मैव नापरः ।**

"Brahman is the only truth, the world is illusory, the individual self is none other than Brahman."

Although this verse is a later summary, it captures the essence of Śaṅkara's interpretation.

### b. Upaniṣad-bhāṣyas

Śaṅkarācārya wrote extensive commentaries on the major Upaniṣads, including the Bṛhadāraṇyaka, Chāndogya, Īśa, Kena, Kaṭha, Praśna, Muṇḍaka, Māṇḍūkya, Taittirīya, and Aitareya. example, in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad commentary, he elaborates on the mahāvākya:

**अहं ब्रह्मास्मि ॥**

**I am Brahman.**

Śaṅkara interprets this not as an egoistic assertion but as the recognition that the innermost self is identical with the infinite reality. Similarly, in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (6.8.7), he explains the famous dictum:

**तत्त्वमसि ॥**

**Thou art That.**

These commentaries are invaluable for their clarity, precision, and defense of non-dualism.



## c. Bhagavadgītā–bhāṣya

Śaṅkara's commentary on the Bhagavadgītā is one of his most popular works. He interprets the Gītā through the lens of Advaita Vedānta, emphasizing knowledge (jñāna) as the highest path, while recognizing the value of devotion (bhakti) and action (karma) as preparatory disciplines. On the famous verse (2.47):

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।  
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥

Śaṅkara explains that one should act without attachment to results, as selfless action purifies the mind and prepares it for knowledge of Brahman.

## 2. Independent Treatises (Prakaraṇa–granthas)

Besides his commentaries, Śaṅkara authored several independent works to explain Advaita philosophy in simpler terms. These treatises serve as introductions for beginners and remain popular even today.

### a. Vivekacūḍāmaṇi

This text, often attributed to Śaṅkara, means “Crest-jewel of discrimination.” It outlines the qualifications of a true seeker, the nature of the self, and the path to liberation. A famous verse states:

मनोबुद्ध्यहङ्कार चित्तानि नाहं  
न च श्रोत्रजिह्वे न च घ्राणनेत्रे ।  
न च व्योमभूमिर्न तेजो न वायु  
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहम् शिवोऽहम् ॥

“I am not the mind, intellect, ego, or memory; not the senses of hearing, taste, smell, or sight; not space, earth, fire, or air. I am the form of pure consciousness and bliss; I am Śiva, I am Śiva.”

### b. Ātma–bodha :

This short treatise introduces Advaita concepts in simple Sanskrit verses. It teaches that self-knowledge is the means to liberation, just as the rising sun removes darkness.

### c. Upadeśa–sāhasrī

Regarded as Śaṅkara's most authentic independent work, this text is a systematic manual on Advaita Vedānta. It employs both prose and verse to explain the nature of Brahman, the illusoriness of the world, and the method of meditation.

## 3. Devotional Hymns (Stotras and Laharīs)

Though remembered as a philosopher, Śaṅkara was also a gifted poet. His hymns combine devotional fervor with philosophical depth, making them beloved by scholars and devotees alike.

### Saundaryalaharī

A celebrated hymn of 100 verses in praise of Goddess Pārvatī, it blends Śākta devotion with Advaitic insight. The opening verse says:

शिवः शक्त्या युक्तो यदि भवति शक्तः प्रभवितुं  
न चेदेवं देवो न खलु कुशलः स्पन्दितुमपि ।

“Śiva becomes capable of creation only when united with Śakti; without Her, He is unable even to stir.”



## Bhaja Govindam

This practical hymn urges people to seek God rather than be lost in worldly pursuits.

भज गोविन्दं भज गोविन्दं  
गोविन्दं भज मूढमते ।

“Chant the name of Govinda, O fool!”

## Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotra

A profound hymn on Lord Dakṣiṇāmūrti, the silent teacher, presenting the Advaitic truth that the guru teaches through silence.

## Śivānandalaharī

Another devotional masterpiece, it is a stream of verses expressing blissful devotion to Lord Śiva.

## Synthesis of Philosophy and Poetry

Śaṅkarācārya’s genius lies in his ability to address both intellectuals and common devotees. His bhāṣyas provided rigorous philosophical foundations, while his stotras gave emotional and aesthetic nourishment. Through this balance, he ensured that Advaita Vedānta was not an ivory-tower philosophy but a living, accessible path.

## 7. IMPACT OF ĀDI ŚAṅKARĀCĀRYA ON THE INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM

### 7.1 Philosophical Impact

The most enduring contribution of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya lies in his establishment of Advaita Vedānta as the pinnacle of Indian philosophy. Prior to Śaṅkara, the intellectual landscape of India was dominated by various dualistic or pluralistic schools—Sāṅkhya positing puruṣa and prakṛti, Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika focusing on categories of reality, Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā emphasizing ritual, and Buddhism with its doctrine of śūnyatā (emptiness). Śaṅkara’s Advaita boldly proclaimed:

ब्रह्म सत्यं जगन्मिथ्या जीवो ब्रह्मैव नापरः ।

“Brahman is the only reality; the world is illusory; the individual self is not different from Brahman.”

This sweeping assertion unified philosophical thought, harmonizing scriptural authority with logical reasoning. It established the non-dual view as the highest truth, while relegating ritual and devotion to preparatory stages. His philosophy became the benchmark against which later Indian philosophical systems measured themselves.

### 7.2 Religious and Spiritual Impact

Śaṅkarācārya did not restrict himself to philosophy alone. He traveled widely across India, engaging in debates and reviving the spirit of Sanātana Dharma. His most remarkable achievement was the establishment of \*four maṭhas (monastic centers)\* in the cardinal directions—Śṛṅgeri (South), Dvārakā (West), Badarī (North), and Puṛī (East). These institutions preserved and propagated Advaita Vedānta for centuries.

Moreover, Śaṅkara organized the \*Daśanāmī order of monks\* (with designations like Sarasvatī, Bhāratī, Giri, Puṛī, etc.), giving structural unity to renunciates. This ensured both discipline and continuity of Vedāntic teaching.

He also harmonized various forms of worship under the pañcāyatana pūjā system, where devotees worship Śiva, Viṣṇu, Devī, Sūrya, and Gaṇeśa together, thus promoting inclusivity and avoiding sectarian conflict.



## 7.3 Educational and Epistemological Impact

By writing lucid commentaries on the Prasthānatrayī, Śaṅkara provided a standard methodology for scriptural interpretation. His approach combined \*śruti-pramāṇa\* (authority of the Vedas) with \*yukti\* (reasoning). This established a model for later philosophical writing—concise, rigorous, and authoritative.

In his works, Śaṅkara emphasized that \*knowledge (\*jñāna) alone is the means to liberation\*, while action (\*karma) and devotion (bhakti) are supportive disciplines. This redefined the epistemological foundations of Indian thought, privileging direct realization over ritual performance.

## 7.4 Cultural and Literary Impact

Śaṅkara's hymns, such as Saundaryalaharī and Bhaja Govindam, enriched Sanskrit literature with a unique blend of devotion and philosophy. They became part of India's cultural fabric, recited by saints, scholars, and lay devotees alike. His verses also inspired countless later poets and saints, both within and outside the Advaita tradition. For example, in Saundaryalaharī (verse 27), he combines poetic beauty with metaphysical insight:

**त्रयीं देवीं ध्यामः त्रिभुवनजननीं त्र्यम्बकां त्रिगुणेशीं  
त्रयायां तद्वैगुण्यां त्रिभुवनमथनीं त्र्यधिप्रत्यगात्मानाम् ।**

This illustrates how Śaṅkara's hymns function simultaneously as spiritual meditation and literary ornamentation.

## 7.5 Socio-Political Impact

Śaṅkara's interventions had political implications as well. By unifying the religious identity of India under Vedic authority, he strengthened cultural cohesion at a time when Buddhism and Jainism had fragmented the intellectual landscape. His emphasis on Vedic orthodoxy restored confidence in Hindu traditions, ensuring their resilience against decline.

## 8. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with Śaṅkarācārya's works has been immense, spanning centuries and cultures.

## 9. TRADITIONAL COMMENTATORS

Śaṅkara's immediate disciples, such as Sureśvarācārya, Padmapāda, and Toṭaka, wrote sub-commentaries (ṭīkāś) that clarified and elaborated his Advaitic teachings. Sureśvarācārya's Bṛhadāraṇyaka Vārttika is especially notable for expanding on Śaṅkara's insights.

## 10. CONCLUSION

Ādi Śaṅkarācārya stands as one of the greatest intellectual and spiritual architects of Indian civilization. His unique synthesis of \*metaphysical clarity, \*\*religious inclusivity, and \*\*cultural creativity\* revitalized the Indian knowledge system at a crucial juncture in history.

He demonstrated that philosophy is not mere speculation but a direct path to liberation, as evident in his declaration:

**न हि ज्ञानेन सदृशं पवित्रमिह विद्यते।**

(Bhagavad Gītā 4.38)

No purifier exists in this world equal to knowledge.



By rooting spirituality in direct knowledge (aparokṣānubhūti), Śaṅkara gave primacy to inner realization while also acknowledging the value of devotion and ritual as preparatory aids. His writings combined razor-sharp logic with poetic beauty, bridging the gap between \*śāstra\* (scripture), \*tarka\* (reason), and \*bhakti\* (devotion).

The institutions he founded ensured the continuity of Vedic tradition and Vedāntic study. His system of pañcāyatana pūjā minimized sectarian tensions, affirming the underlying unity of diverse deities and practices. His hymns ensured that philosophy was not confined to scholars alone but accessible to common people through devotional expression.

In the broader Indian knowledge system, Śaṅkara's influence may be summarized in th

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