



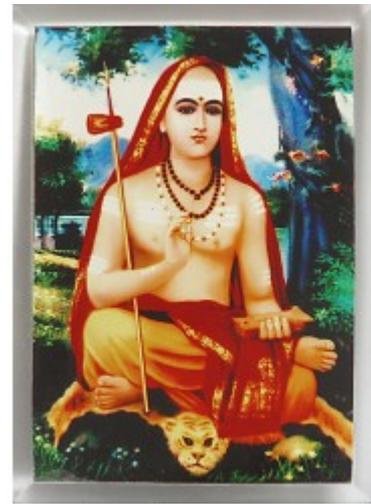
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**Adi Shankacharya
The Saviour of Hinduism**

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Adi Sankaracharya, the incarnation of Lord Shiva, descended on the mortal plane some 2500 years ago to rescue the pristine glory of Sanatana Dharma from the abyss of spiritual corruption it had been forced to.



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ADI SHANKARACHARYA

The advent of Sankara



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LORD DAKSHINAMURTHY

India is the cradle of spiritualism. Whenever spiritualism has been put on the backburner for faux religious practices to take precedence, the divinity has manifested itself to revive the same and prevent subversion. Lord Dakshinamurthy, in deference to the supplications of seers and Devas, agreed to take birth in this world to exorcize the Sanatana Dharma.

The present Indian state of Kerala had been chosen for the divine play. An erudite Brahmin, Sivaguru resided in the village of Kaladi along with his wife Aryambal. Their lives were steeped in the devotion of lord and serving of the poor. The couple observed austerities for 48 days at Trichur's Bhagwan Vadakkunathan temple for a child. Lord Shiva granted them an audience and demanded whether the couple wanted a bevy of mediocre children or a highly intelligent son whose life span would be short. The couple left the decision to the lord itself. The pleased Shiva himself appeared in the womb of Aryambal. In circa 788 AD, the village of Kaladi by the side of

the river Periyar, was blessed with the future Jagatguru (preceptor of the world) Shankara. The child was named Sankara meaning the giver of prosperity. The visitors were awestruck by the resplendence of the new born.

The growing years

Everyone who came in contact with Sankara was behind himself with joy and surprise at his remarkable intelligence and compassion. The boy started his academic journey at the age of 3 and was subjected to the holy thread ceremony in the fifth year, after which he proceeded to Gurukul to learn scriptures. He was a prodigious child and was praised as 'Eka Sruti Dara' i.e. one who can keep in memory anything that has passed his eyes once. His father left him for the heavenly abode when he was just 4. The practice of Brahmacharya stipulated going from home to home for seeking alms. The glimpses of his divinity started manifesting during his learning years. It was Dwadasi and Sankara knocked on the door of a poor lady for alms. The lady was destitute of any food item except an Amla fruit, which she gladly handed over to him. Her selflessness stoked Sankara's compassion who composed the 'Kanaka Dhara Stotram' in praise of Goddess Lakshmi to seek her blessings for the poor lady. Goddess Lakshmi granted him an audience and lavished golden coins upon the lady.



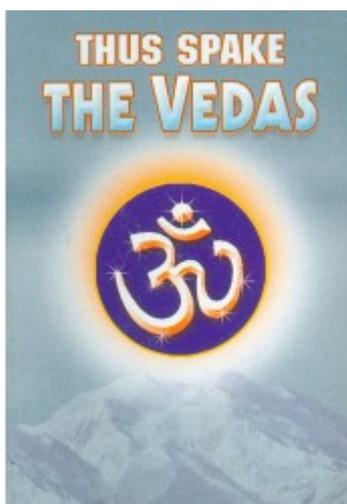
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GODDESS LAKSHMI

Initiation into Sanyasa

Sankara had a noble mission to complete. He was reminded of the same by a group of enlightened beings who convinced him of the greater purpose of his life. Sankara decided that the time was ripe to embrace Sanyasa and spread the teachings of Sanatana Dharma across the land. To inject fresh lease of life in the drooping spiritualism, he devised a plan to seek the permission of his mother. It thus happened that a crocodile clutched his leg while taking bath. Aryambal rushed to the spot and frantically started calling for help. Sankara suggested that if his mother releases him to embrace Sanyasa, his life might be saved. The reluctant mother, finding no other alternative, acceded to the request.

The search for a radiant Guru ensued. Once, when he was moving by River Narmada, he observed that the raging river was ready to inundate the banks. He invoked his divine powers to encapsulate the tempestuous waters in his Kamandal, which he subsequently released in a safe spot on the river. The ascetic, Sri Govinda Bagawathpathar caught sight of this celestial play and became his preceptor.



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THUS SPAKE THE VEDAS

Sankara learnt about the cryptic teachings of the Vedas from Sri Govinda. Advaita, meaning oneness, was the theme of learning. Everything, sentient and insentient, is the manifestation of the Lord and the soul is an inseparable element of the super-soul. Sri Govinda commanded Sankara to spread this essence of the Vedas everywhere to trigger resuscitation of the lost spirituality.

Visit to Varanasi

The fragrance of the pristine knowledge soon attracted a bevy of spiritual seekers. His disciples grew in number. Sanandhyaya, one of the disciples, was once having the clothes of his preceptor dried on the other side of river's bank when Sankara called out for them to see an exigency. Sanandhyaya, got to his feet and started rushing towards the Guru with clothes oblivious of the fact he may get drowned in the river. Sankara's grace came to his rescue and wherever the person placed his feet on the water, a lotus materialized keeping him from drowning. Such implicit faith in the grace of Guru earned him the sobriquet 'Padma Padar' or the lotus feet.

Upon reaching Kasi, Sri Sankara started walking towards the Vishwanath Temple to pay his obeisance to Lord Shiva. Suddenly, an untouchable and his consort came across his path. The disciples bristled at him commanding him to make way for the Guru and stay at a safe distance. This evoked a snigger from the untouchable who mockingly said to Sankara 'According to your principle of Advaita, which you practice, all the souls are same as God. How do you ask me to go? How am I different from your preceptor? What you say is unreasonable. How can I go away from myself?' Such illumined language made Sankara realise that it was Lord Shiva himself accompanied by his consort who had come to test the depth of his Advaita understanding. He bowed down before Shiva and started propitiating him with the 'Manisha Panchakam' sloka. Lord granted him an audience with Devi and blessed him profusely.



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LORD SHIVA

Arguing with Vyasa Muni

Sri Sankara had penned Brahmasutra Bhashyam, the commentary or enunciation the Brahmasutra created by the sage Vyasa. In his 16th year, Sankara was confronted by an infirm Brahmin who was Vyasa Muni in disguise. Sri Sankara watched in awe as the old

man intelligently argued and the discussion went on for days with the end not in sight. As the arguments moved ahead, Sankara gained further insights into the Brahma Sutras and he realized that Vyasa himself had granted him an audience to reinforce his hold on the cryptic sutras. But, Sankara was red faced realizing that he was impudent enough to argue with the creator sage. However, Vyasa eased him out of this discomfiture by stating that his appearance was to establish and uphold the validity of the Bhashyam of Sankara. He blessed Sankara with another 16 years of life during which he would take the Advaita philosophy to the pinnacle of glory and common acceptance.

Meeting with Mandana Mishra

Sri Sankara came to know that a man of great learning, Mandana Mishra, lived in the town of Mahismati and adhered to the Karma Mimansa way of devotion. His eagerness to meet such a great soul took him to Mandana's doorsteps. The house was locked from inside as Mandana was busy performing certain rituals inside his home. He invoked his powers and crossed the physical barrier to gain entry into the house. Such trespassing infuriated Mandana who bristled at Sankara. Sankara took this insult in his stride and lovingly suggested the uselessness of such rituals to Mandana Mishra. Mandana, however, was impressed by the intelligence and incisiveness of Sankara and entered into spiritual discussions with him after seeing the rituals through. Sankara expressed the need of a judge to adjudge the winner in the debate. Mandana Mishra's wife, Sarasawani was requested to act as a judge.

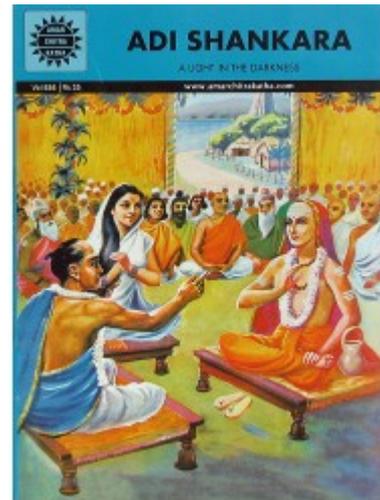


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SARASWATI

Saraswani or Bharti was an incarnation of the Goddess of knowledge, Sarawati. It is said that the revered sage Durvasa once chanted the Vedas in front of Brahma and his wife before a large congregation. In the course of recitation of Vedas, a small mistake was committed by Durvasa which called forth a snigger from Devi Sarasvati. This infuriated Durvasa who cursed Sarasvati and said that she would have to take birth in the world. In fulfilment of the curse, Sarasvati has taken birth as Mandana Mishra's wife.

Saraswani was no ordinary lady and possessed extreme intelligence and profound knowledge. The discerning lady understood soon that Sankara was the incarnation of Lord Shiva. But, she was reluctant to announce the defeat of her husband. She advised wearing of a garland of flowers by each of the competitor and whichever garland droops first, the corresponding wearer would automatically be declared loser. Sankara won. Mandana Mishra had to acknowledge the futility of the rituals and decided to embrace the life of an ascetic. He proceeded to abandon his house.



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**ADI SHANKARACHARYA IN DEBATE WITH
MANDANA MISHRA WITH SARASWANI AS
THE REFEREE**

FROM THE COMIC BOOK

ADI SHANKARA

Once Mandana was comprehensively defeated, Bharti interposed and invited Sankara for a spiritual debate. Sr Sankara initially objected to the idea of entering into a debate with a woman. This made her quote instances wherein women have entered into controversies. Sri Sankara appreciated the vehemence of her argument and started debating with her which continued uninterruptedly for 17 days on a trot. Bharti made references from various Shastras but ultimately discovered her helplessness in front of the mountainous intellect of Sankara. She intended to vanquish Sri Sankara by resorting to the science of Kama Shastra.

Sankara requested Bharti to provide him a month's time to adequately prepare for the debate in the context of the science of Kama Shastra which was accepted by Bharti. Sankara proceeded to Varanasi. He invoked his Yogic powers for separation of his astral body from the physical one. He discarded his physical body and instructed his disciples to take care of the same which has been holed up in a big tree. He next entered the lifeless body of King Amaruka, who had breathed his last and was about to be subjected to funeral rites. The King sprang up from his funeral pyre and his subjects started rejoicing at this stunning incident. It was soon realized by the queens and ministers of the king that the revived person was altogether different from the dead king in terms of qualities and thoughts. They could feel the fact that the soul of a learned ascetic had entered the mortal body of the king. Messengers were dispatched to scout for the dead body of a human which might have been preserved in deep forests and lonely caves so as to burn the same when found. The queens were of the opinion that by burning the body of the great soul, they could enjoy the company of the king for prolonged period.

Sankara was enjoying the company of his queens to acquire the experience of love. The all-powerful Maya made Sankara forget about his promise of returning to the original body as done to his disciples. The disciples started hunting for him. They came to know about the miraculous resurrection of King Amaruka. Without losing a moment, they hastily proceeded to the capital of the king and had an interview with him. They also recited a few philosophical songs which at once resuscitated the memory of Sri Sankara. The disciples at once proceeded for the place where the physical body of Sankara was kept hidden. They reached the spot to discover that the messengers of the queen had detected the physical body and was about to burn the same. At that very moment, Sri Sankara's soul entered the original body of the mendicant. He implored Lord Hari to help

him out. A downpour followed which doused the flames and the physical body of Sankara was saved.

Sri Sankara returned to the house of Mandana Mishra. He took over the old debate and provided satisfactory answer to the entire array of questions posed by Bharti. Saraswani was forced to admit the intellectual superiority of Sri Sankara and embraced for herself an ascetic style of life.

Mandana Mishra offered all of his accumulated property to Sri Sankara as a gift. Sankara got it distributed to the poor, famished and destitute. He accepted the discipleship of Sankara. Mandana embraced the holy order of Sanyasa and was given the name of 'Sureswara Acharya' who went on to become the first Sankaracharya to take charge of the Sringeri Math. In Sringeri, Bharti is still worshipped.

Establishment of Sharada Peetham

Sri Sankara accompanied by Mandana Mishra and his wife proceeded towards Karnataka's Sringeri region which is lapped by river Tungabhadra. While the party made their way ahead, Sarasawani suddenly stood still in the sands of the river. It dawned on Sankara that Sarawani was in no mood to move any further. Sankara established a seat for Saraswani to preach the nectarine of Advaita. The seat of Sharad or Sharada Peetham thus came into being. Sharada peetham was the very first Math to be established by Sankara. He directed that the tutelary head of the Math will be known as Sankaracharya. The lineage of disciples will follow.

Death of Sankara's mother



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VENKATESHWARA

During the course of stay in Sringeri, Sankara divined that his mother would soon breathe her last. Sankara while seeking her permission to be initiated into Sanyasa had promised her that no matter what, he would be by her side on her deathbed. He at once proceeded for Kaladi and started comforting her ailing mother. Aryambal was beside herself with joy at the presence of her son. Sri Sankara started praying to God Venkateshwara who materialized in person and showered his blessings on Aryambal. Sankara carried out the funeral rites of his mother weathering the protests of the residents of Kaladi who were of the opinion that a Sanyasi cannot exercise the right of doing the last rites of his mother. He paid no heed to oppositions and himself carried his mother's body to the pyre and lit it ablaze.

Preaching Advaita

Once he was done with the last rites of his mother, he carried out extensive tours of India and started transforming people of other faiths into the Advaitites. A number of temples across the country which were in dilapidated state were revived by him. He summoned his powers to establish a melange of Yantras in these temples to seek the blessings of the goddess. His peregrinations continued and in the course of it, he reached Karnataka's Mukambi which had been enveloped in religious fragrance. A wretched Brahmin came to Sankara accompanied by his deaf and dumb son and lay prostrate before him. Sankara inquired of the boy about him and the impaired boy opened his mouth for the very first time. The boy replied that he was not the body, but the super soul who resides in his

body. This elated Sankara who took him as his disciple and named him Hastaaamalakan meaning amala in hand (He had gifted the boy with an amla).

Sri Sankara continued with his wanderings across the country preaching the essence of Advaita to the spiritually starved populace. He was accompanied by 3 chief disciples, namely Hastaamalaka, Padmapadar and Sureshwarar (the spiritual name embraced by Mandana Misra) on his mission to irradiate the people.

Sri Sankara never shied away from exposing his disciples to the most intense of spiritual training. One of his disciples was Giri. He would observe silence regularly while Sankara discoursed on the cryptic concepts of Advaita and would never have any doubts clarified. Other disciples took him to be a dumb fellow who was not fit for their dignified company. It thus happened that one day Giri was late for the discourse session and Sankara along with other disciples awaited his arrival. Finally, Giri arrived and broke his silence to rattle off eight mesmerizing slokas which he had composed on his own. All other disciples who held Giri in low esteem were ashamed. The slokas are the famous Thotaka ashtakam and Giri was accordingly renamed as Thotakar by Sankara.

In the course of his wanderings, Sankara reached a place called Thiruvaidaimarudur which is situated in Tamilnadu's Tanjore district. The presiding deity of the famous temple over there is Lord Shiva. The erudite Shiva Bhaktas of the temple were of the opinion that Shiva is the creator of the universe and that all human beings are abject creatures living at the mercy of the supreme lord. Under such circumstances, they were perplexed by the concept of Advaita preached by Sankara. They failed to agree to the concept of Sankara. Sankara requested them to set foot inside the temple. Once the team entered the temple's Sanctum Sanctorum, a thunderous voice proclaimed that 'Satyam is Advaita'. The succinct message was repeated three times. A hand in blessing mode appeared out of the Linga for confirming the truth. The erudite lot realized the truth and admitted to the principle of Advaita. The Brahmins accepted Sankara as their Guru. The Sankara Math established at Thiruvaimarudur still stands testimony to this divine play. There is a Shiva lingam from which a hand appears out.

The next stoppage in Sankara's journey was Tamilnadu's Thiruvanaikar, which fell in the Trichy region. The temple housed Goddess Akhilandeswari whose resplendence and fierceness caused tremendous consternation among the natives of the town. People who sought her audience in the sanctum sanctorum could not stand her ferocious looks. Sankara got 2 sets of earrings constructed for propitiating the Goddess. The earrings are known as Tatankam. The deity, pleased with the offering, shed here ferocity. The earrings can still be seen in Kanchi Math.

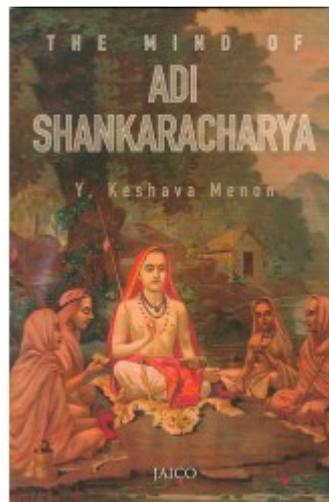
While in Tirupathi, Sankara vividly described the glory of Lord Venkateshwara through the eulogy 'Vishnu pathathi keshanta stotra'. The eulogy extols the Lord from his head to feet. Sankara got a yantra established over there to draw more people to this heavenly abode of the Lord. That day onwards, the number of people doing pilgrimage to this place increased manifold times and the trend still continues to this day.

In Srisailam, Lord Mallikarjunam is situated under the branches of Marutha tree with jasmine creepers abounding. When Sankara visited the place, his joy knew no bounds. The Shiva lingam at the tree's foot sent Sankara rolling into the realm of the divine. The ineffable joy that overwhelmed him as he communed with Lord made him compose the Sivanandalahiri sloka, which extols the virtues of the lord of the destruction. There is a dense forest called Hatakeshwaram in close proximity of Srisailam which was not frequented by human beings. An undaunted Sankara ventured into the forest and carried out stringent penance for a number of days. Kirakashan, a notorious Kapalika approached Sankara. Kapalikas are people who adhere to the left hand path of the tantra and reside in burial grounds and engage in the practice of animal or human sacrifice to accomplish supernatural powers called siddhis. The philosophy of Advaita was in stark contrast to the path embraced by these misguided kapalikas. Advaita called for compassion for all living beings which essentially requires shunning violence committed during sacrifice. He

pleaded with Sankara to offer his body as a human sacrifice for the lord of death, Mahakala. Sri Sankara at once acceded to his request and consented to go with him. Kirkashan was about to lop off the head of Sankara when Lord Narasimha materialized in the body of a lion and snuffed out the life of Kirakashan. While in Badrinath, Bhagwan Vishnu materialized before him and instructed him to retrieve his sculpture from the river Alaknanda and build a temple for the same. The temple came to be known as Badrinarayan temple which is a renowned pilgrim place of devout Hindus.

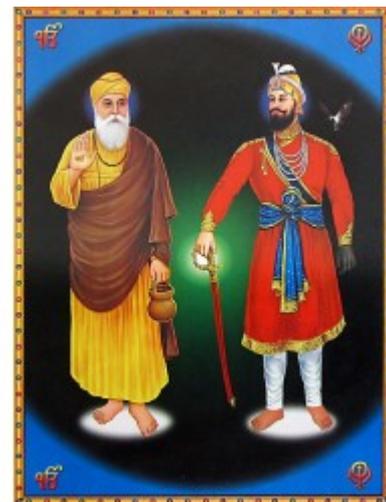
Sankaracharya's contribution

Adi Shankaracharya meticulously reinterpreted the scriptures of Hinduism, particularly the Vedanta and Upanishads. This profoundly influenced Hinduism which had been going through an abysmally low phase at that time. He salvaged the Sanatana Dharma from being lost in the woods of bigotry, superstitions, black



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THE MIND OF ADI SHANKARACHARYA



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GURU NANAK AND GURU GOBIND

magic, and chaos. Religion and philosophy of India were enveloped with ominous clouds of chaos. A number of sects with conflicting views sprang up such as Lokayathikas, Kapalikas, Shaktas, Sankhyas, Buddhas, Madhyamikas and Charvakas; each of which held a different view regarding the ultimate truth and stressed upon the superiority of ideas preached by them. It has been estimated that the total number of sects numbered to 72 and each sect was fighting the other one. The pristine land of India that once housed enlightened Rishis, Muni and Tapasvis was under the ominous veil of darkness.

Apart from renovating the scriptures, he got the Vedic religious practices rid of the excesses committed in the name of rituals. Desultory religious processes were consolidated and restructured into acceptable forms. He asserted the divine identity of mortals which frees one from the shackles of finite existence with an inflated ego. He proclaimed the truth of Brahman i.e. the same divine creator exists in separate bodies. The philosophy of Shankaracharya is founded on 3 levels of reality encompassing Brahman (paramarthika satta), empirical world of sentient and non-sentient beings (vyavaharika satta) and reality (pratibhashika satta). The cause of spiritual ignorance is visualizing the self in a place where the true self does not reside. Bhakti (unalloyed devotion to the supreme being), yoga (observance of physical practices to control the breath), and karma (carrying out the tasks as stipulated in the religious scriptures) are the ways for enlightening the intellect and accomplish purification of heart. His seminal works, which he had completed by the age of sixteen, can be classified in 3 different categories viz. the commentaries on Brahmasutras, Upanishads and Bhagvad Gita. They form the centre of Shankaracharya's perspective on non-dualism. The devotional poem, Bhaja Govindam in Sanskrit, penned to eulogize Lord Krishna and to underscore the futility of the birth and death cycle constitutes the core of Bhakti movement. He stressed upon the reality of the Brahman and negated the existence of phenomenal world terming it as illusory or unreal. One can get over the limiting ego and the concept of duality by intensely meditating on the concept of monism.

Shri Shankaracharya laid the foundation of four monastic centres in four distinct corners

of India under the supervision of his four principle disciples. The centres ministered to the spiritual needs of the ascetic community by staying within the teachings of Vedas. He identified ten groups for classification of friars to reinforce their spiritual strength. Each of the four Maths was aligned with one Veda respectively. The Maths are Jyothir Math at Badrinath in northern India with Atharva Veda; Sarada Math at Sringeri in southern India with Yajur Veda; Govardhan Math at Jaganath Puri in eastern India with Rig Veda and Kalika Math at Dwarka in western India with Sama Veda.

Sankara ascended the seat of omniscience after inviting Vedic scholars from all parts of India and answering their numerous questions. Sankara, by vanquishing all the religious opponents of his day, who belonged to no less than seventy two different schools, and establishing the superiority of the Vedic Dharma, had become the Jagadguru of all. Sri Sankara left for the heavenly abode in Kedarnath at the age of 32.

Sruti smṛti puraṇanaṃalayam karuṇalayam
Namami Bhagavatpadasankaram lokasankaram

I salute the compassionate abode of the Vedas, Smritis and Puranas known as Shankara Bhagavatpada, who makes the world auspicious.

Manisha Kumar, who is a ghostwriter and copywriter with over 10 years of experience. She loves playing golf, managing her home and freelance writing. With a background in Biology she also likes researching about medical related themes. [More from Manisha Kumar](#)

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