

INDIAN ICONS

THE STORY OF THREE GREAT SONS OF INDIA

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ADI SANKARA



Adi Sankara is credited with reviving Sanatana Dharma or Hinduism as is known in the western world. After the advent of Jainism and later Buddhism, which got the patronage of many kings such as Ashoka, Sanatana Dharma had reached a low ebb. People were very confused about which religion to follow. After several centuries of decline of Hinduism, Adi Sankara came like a breath of fresh air. He went around the entire country, often by foot. He defeated many scholars around the country in debate. Even though his life was very short, he made such an impact that the Hindu religion got a new lease on life. People thronged to follow him and his teachings all over the country. Given below is a short summary of his life and times.

Birth and childhood: Sankara was born to the Nambudri brahmana couple, Sivaguru and Aaryamba, in a little village called Kaaladi in Kerala. The couple had remained childless for a long time, and prayed for children at the Vadakkunnaathan (Vrshaachala) temple in nearby Trichur.

Lord Siva is said to have appeared to the couple in a dream and promised them a choice of one son who would be short-lived but the most brilliant philosopher of his day, or many sons who would be mediocre. The couple opted for a brilliant, but short-lived son, and so Sankara was born.

Sankara lost his father when quite young, and his mother performed his upanayana ceremonies with the help of her relatives. Sankara excelled in all branches of traditional vedic learning. Some miracles are also reported about the young Sankara. As a brahmachari, he went about collecting alms from families in the village. A lady who was herself extremely poor, but did not want to send away the boy empty-handed, gave him the last piece of amla fruit she had at home. Sankara, sensing the abject poverty of the lady, composed a hymn (Kanakadhaara stotram) to Sri Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, right at her doorstep. At once, a shower of golden amlas rewarded the lady for her piety.

On another occasion, Sankara re-routed the course of the Poorna river, so that his old mother would not have to walk a long distance to the river for her daily ablutions.

Sanyasa: Sankara was filled with the spirit of renunciation early in his life. Getting married and settling to the life of a householder was never part of his goal in life, though his mother was anxious to see him as a grhastha. As if to fulfill his father's dream, when Sankara was only 7 years old, he was crossing river, a crocodile caught hold of his leg. Sankara sensed that he was destined to die at that moment, and decided to directly enter the fourth Ashrama of sanyasa right then.

Per Hindu religion, a person who enters sanyasa starts a new life. This kind of renunciation is called Apat sanyasa (or renunciation at the time of danger). The crocodile released him when he thus mentally decided to renounce the world.

Sankara decided to regularize his decision by going to an accomplished guru. To comfort his anxious mother, he promised that he would return at the moment of her death, to conduct her funeral rites, notwithstanding the fact that he would be a sanyasi then.

Sankara then traveled far and wide in search of a worthy guru who would initiate him and regularize his vow of sanyasa, till he came to the banks of the river Narmada in central India. Here was the Ashrama of Govinda Bhagavatpada, the disciple of Gaudapaada, the famous author of the maandukya kaarikas. Sankara was accepted as a disciple by Govinda, who initiated him into the paramahansa order of sanyasa, the highest kind of renunciation. Seeing the intellectual acumen of his disciple, Govinda commanded Sankara to expound the philosophy of Vedanta through commentaries on the principal Upanishads, the brahmasutras and the Gita.

Sankara took leave of his guru and traveled to various holy places in India, composing his commentaries in the meantime. At this time, he was barely a teenager. He attracted many disciples around him, prominent among who was Sanandana, who was later to be called Padmapada.

In this period, Sankara wrote commentaries on Badaraayana's brahmasutras, the various Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. These commentaries, called bhashyas, stand as the pinnacles of Indian philosophical writing,

In addition to writing his own commentaries, Sankara sought out leaders of other schools, in order to engage them in debate. As per the accepted philosophical tradition in India, such debates helped to establish a new philosopher, and also to win disciples and converts from other schools. It was also traditional for the loser in the debate to become a disciple of the winner. Thus Sankara debated with Buddhist philosophers, with followers of Sankhya and with purva mimamsakas, the followers of vedic ritualism, and proved more than capable in defeating all his opponents in debate.

Sankara then sought out Kumarila Bhatta, the foremost proponent of the purva mimamsa in his age, but Bhatta was on his deathbed and directed Sankara to his disciple. Mandana Misra.

Sankara's debate with Mandana Misra was unique. The referee at the debate was Mandana Misra's wife, Bhaarati, who was herself very well-learned, and regarded as an incarnation of Goddess Sarasvati. At stake was a whole way of life. The agreement was that if Mandana Misra

won, Sankara would consent to marriage and enter into life as a householder, whereas if Sankara won, Mandana Misra would renounce all his wealth and possessions and become a sanyasi and disciple of Sankara.

The debate is said to have lasted for whole weeks, till in the end, Mandana Misra had to concede defeat. Mandana Misra was ordained as a sanyasi by the name of Suresvara. He was to become the most celebrated disciple of Sankara, writing vaarttikas to Sankara's bhashyas on the Yajurveda Upanishads, in addition to his own independent texts on various subjects.

Establishment of Mathas: Sankara continued to travel with his disciples all over the land, all the while composing philosophical treatises and engaging opponents in debate. It is said that none of his opponents could ever match his intellectual prowess and the debates always ended with Sankara's victory. No doubt this is true, given the unrivaled respect and popularity that Sankara's philosophical system enjoys to this day.

In the course of his travels, Sankara stayed for a long time at the site of the old Ashrama of the Rshis Vibhandaka and Rshyasrnga, in the place known as Srngagiri (Sringeri). Sankara stayed at Sringeri for twelve years. A hermitage grew around him here, which soon developed into a famous Matha (monastery). Suresvara was installed as the head of this new Ashrama. Similar Mathas were established in the pilgrim centers of Puri, Dvaraka and Joshimath near Badrinath, and Padmapada, Hastamalaka and Totaka were placed in charge of them. These are known as the Amnaaya Mathas, and they continue to function today. Their heads have also come to be known as Sankaracharyas, in honor of their founder, and revered as jagadgurus, or teachers of the world.

Meanwhile, Sankara heard that his mother was dying, and decided to visit her. Remembering his promise to her, he performed her funeral rites. His ritualistic relatives would not permit him to do the rites himself, as he was a sanyasi, but Sankara overrode their objections, and built a pyre himself and cremated his mother in her own backyard. After this, he resumed his travels, visiting many holy places, reviving poojas at temples that had fallen into neglect, establishing Sri Yantras at Devi temples as in Kanchipuram, and composing many devotional hymns.

Ascension of the *sarvajnapitha*: In the course of his travels, Sankara reached Kashmir. Here was a temple dedicated to Saarada (Sarasvati), the goddess of learning, which housed the *sarvajnapitha*, the Throne of Omniscience. It was a tradition for philosophers to visit the place and engage in debate. The victorious one would be allowed to ascend the *sarvajnapitha*. It is said that no philosopher from the southern region had ever ascended the pitha, till Sankara visited Kashmir and defeated all the others there. He then ascended the *sarvajnapitha* with the blessings of Goddess Saarada..

Sankara was reaching the age of 32 now. He had expounded the Vedanta philosophy through his writings; he had attracted many intelligent disciples to him, who could carry on the vedantic tradition; and he had established monastic centers for them in the form of Mathas.

His had been a short, but eventful life. He retired to the Himalayas and disappeared inside a cave near Kedarnath. This cave is traditionally pointed out as the site of his Samadhi.

True to the traditions of sanyasa, Sankara was a travelling monk, who covered the length and breadth of the country in his short lifetime. His fame spread so far and wide, that various legends are recounted about him from different parts of India. The true sanyasi that he was, he lived completely untouched by the fabric of society. So much so that even the location of Kaaladi, his birth-place, remained generally unknown for a long time.

The credit of identifying this village in Kerala goes to one of his 19th-century successors at Sringeri, Shri sacchidananda Sivabhinava narasimha bharati. Similarly, the credit of renovating Sankara's samadhi-sthala near Kedarnath goes to Sri Abhinava Sacchidananda tirtha, his 20th-century successor at Dvaraka.

QUIZ

1. Where was Adisankara born?
 - a. Sringeri
 - b. Haridwar
 - c. Kaaladi
 - d. Kanchipuram
2. Adi Sankara was an advocate of which religion?
 - a. Buddhism
 - b. Sanatana Dharma
 - c. Jainism
 - d. Islam
3. What event forced Adi Sankara to become a sanyasi?
 - a. He had promised his mother that he would become a sanyasi
 - b. He never became a sanyasi
 - c. He wanted to travel across India and win debates
 - d. A crocodile grabbed his leg and released him after he renounced the world
4. The Kanakadhara stotram was sung in praise of which god / goddess?
 - a. Lakshmi
 - b. Sarasvati
 - c. Siva
 - d. Durga
5. Who was Adi sankara's guru?
 - a. Gaudapada
 - b. Kumarila Bhatta
 - c. Govinda Bhagavatpada
 - d. Mandana Mishra
6. The sarvajna pitha is located in which place?
 - a. Kaaladi
 - b. Kerala
 - c. Bhadrinath
 - d. Kashmir
7. Where were the four mathas established by Adi Sankara?
 - a. Puri, Dvaraka Joshimath and Badrinath
 - b. Puri, Dvaraka Sringeri and Badrinath

- c. Dvaraka Sringeri Kanchipuram and Badrinath
 - d. Dvaraka Sringeri Kaaladi and Joshimath
8. Who among the following was NOT a disciple of Adi Sankara ?
- a. Padmapada,
 - b. Hastamalaka
 - c. Totaka
 - d. Kumarila Bhatta
9. At what age and where did Adi Sankara die?
- a. 32 in Kashmir
 - b. 60 in Kaaladi
 - c. 32 in Kedarnath
 - d. 60 in Sringeri