

## Book Review

# Ādiśaṅkara: Finite to the Infinite

written by Dr. Prema Nandakumar

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*In a significant sense, culture is tradition, and tradition is memory. It so happens that, when memory is weak, we are not able to recollect the tradition and the culture that remains behind it. As Radhakrishnan puts it, 'the duration of this memory depends on the continuous appearance of creative personalities.' The advent of Śaṅkara has helped us to revive our memory of the past and thereby to get at a clear understanding of the philosophy of Advaita.*

- [Dr. N. Veezhinathan, in his introduction to the Complete Works of Sri Sankaracharya published by Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady]

The book entitled, Ādiśaṅkara: Finite to the Infinite written by Dr. Prema Nandakumar is yet another *appearance*, a memoir on Śaṅkarāchārya that begins by discussing the foundations of Indian civilisation built on spiritual grounds. It eulogizes the Vedic lore that taught generations of men the importance of living with detachment and searching for the eternal truth, and gives a detailed description of dharma, propounders of Vedic and non-Vedic traditions and literature besides portraying the role of philosophers in national integrity.

The second and third chapters are a beautiful account of Śaṅkara's ancestry. The severe penance of childless and agonised Āryāmba and Śivaguru and the birth of a child as a result of the divine intervention, indecisiveness on Śaṅkara's date and the exact period Śaṅkara spent in Melpazhur Mana. In author's own words, '...however, the importance of the date of Śaṅkara recedes to the background when we proceed to envision his ministry in putting a check to the enemies of sanātana-dharma'. The chapter also deals with a few legend and miracles in Śaṅkara's life.

Chapter four presents Śaṅkara as a boy from a scholarly household, extraordinarily brilliant as a student and was soon getting into the groove of being a perfect Brahmin in charge of his house and household deity, a young Ācharya of infinite promise. Śaṅkara's desire to take sannyāsa and his mother's reluctance followed by a description of fourfold āśramas, history of sannyāsa and budhism, the legends that tell the tale of Śaṅkara taking sannyasa and his setting out in search of a guru.

Śaṅkara's search for a Guru is presented with the charm of a narrative in the following chapter. It also is a brave account of the ground reality, the then political conditions and widespread anarchy. Śaṅkara arrived on the banks of Narmada and found Gōvindapāda, the disciple of Gaudapāda and joined the impeccable lineage which begins with Parāśara. The greatness of Śaṅkara and all the places he visited were given vivid description. The text also deals with the knowledge of the self and explains the meaning of the four mahāvākyas, besides colourful depiction of several legendary tales.

His mission was to cleanse the evils that had crept into the Vedic religion. Śaṅkara moved to Varanasi. Disciples were drawn towards him as by a magnet. They would serve him with immense devotion and thereby serve sanātanadharmā in the course of their glorious stay on this earth. The first to come was Sanātana. Then Hastāmalaka and the rest would join him from several places during his pilgrimage mentioned in this sixth chapter of the book.

India was gradually going under foreign hands and the destruction of Hindu culture was imminent. For many, it was the inevitable fate that awaited India to get the much needed exposure to come out from the shackles of several social evils, superstitions and prejudices of caste and creed. The seventh chapter also maps Śaṅkara's route and historic notes about his temple worship, consecration of images and penance. This portion of the text also has a learned description of his philosophy and mentions several salient features of his Bhāṣyam and the path of the soul after it leaves the body. Śaṅkara's own

words on the Gītā cited and a detailed exposition on his Gītābhāṣyam shows Dr. Prema's diligence in providing first-hand reference. There is an erudite and authentic exposition of Vedantic texts. Śankara had taken up his mission when the Vedic stream faced a triple attack; Islam from an alien land and Jainism and Buddhism from within. The poetic ending of the chapter was charming enough to make the reader envision the spiritual traveller now descending from the Himalayas into the plains, very much like the lion that had hibernated in its cave during the rainy season and was now stepping out in its regal glory.

Śankara's conquest of other philosophical opponents such as Kumarilabhaṭṭa and his Mimāmsa theory were attempts to spread the message of Advaita mentioned in the eight and ninth chapters. Kumarilabhaṭṭa's sense of guilt for betraying the Buddhists made him commit the dreaded penance, self-immolation by sitting in a pit filled with ignited husk. Dr. Prema's courage to say that 'men used to commit religious suicide here' is noteworthy. From Kumarilabhaṭṭa Śankara gets instructions to defeat Maṇḍana Miśra and his wife Ubhayabhāratī. The beautiful description of his meeting with Maṇḍana and their debate and subsequent defeat of Maṇḍana, who then takes to the path of Śankara are awe inspiring. Śankara visited various temples with the purpose of regulating the practises of worship and inspiring the common man to the higher reaches of knowledge and from there to liberation. His mastery over India's mythological past and absolute command over Sanskrit prosody gave birth to gem-like hymns that have stood the test of time.

History with all its awe inspiring details is found in the tenth chapter entitled, Bases for Sanātana Dharma which is interwoven with beautiful stories, such as the cobra providing shade with its hood to a frog that was in the throes of giving birth to its toads. Establishing of various Maṭhas, posting of pontiffs, ṣaṅmata sthāpana (founding six systems of faith) and national integration plan of Śankara as envisioned by Dr. Prema and her narrative style are at their peak in this chapter.

His return to Kālady mentioned in the following chapter talks about Āryamba's natal home, Melpazhur Mana. Śankara asked Sureśwarāchārya (Maṇḍana Miśra) to write a commentary on his Bhāṣya. Sureśwara was very happy, though he humbly said it would be a difficult assignment for him. But Śankara's other disciples cast doubt on Sureśwara's ability and put forth the names of eminent scholars. However hurt Sureśwara, his work entitled Naiṣkarmyasiddhi is never succeeded by any other work and is still the primer of Advaita. Śankara went on establishing Matha's for the upliftment of sanātana dharma. And finally, he came back to Kālady from his long spiritual pilgrimage and there is a heartrending depiction of his last meeting with his mother, Āryāmba.

Śankara's spiritual journey through out the length and breadth of India inspired him to compose a number of stōtrās. Most of them were sung in praise of the presiding deity of those places he visited. These stōtras depict devotion, and they are also endowed with endless poetic beauty. The twelfth chapter, A Spiritual Odyssey, also mentions several historic incidents happened in then India. Author's historic sense while describing the foreign invasions and rivalries of Indian kings amongst themselves shows the amount of research gone behind in finding out the details, not only textual but also scientific, as she quotes S. Padmanabhan of Tamil Nadu Council of Historic Research.

There is some sort of physical and material uniqueness among the Europeans and the Westerners in terms of their territorial integrity etc. whereas, India has a colossally divergent lot of populus in every state. It is the undercurrent of spirituality and the Sanskrit language that act as a common thread to unite the people. Yet, swinging over to different degraded practises had been rampant. In a bid to clean the Vedic pathways, he reminded the pañcāyatana worship to the followers of the Smṛti, and popularised the tenets of ṣaṅmata. He cleared the wrong notions held about various sacrifices and

clarified the symbolic representation of the idea behind such practices, and curbed the onslaught of protestant religions like Buddhism and Jainism. Śankara's understanding of the then society is relevant even today. To quote the author, 'Hinduism, that had rejected one-sixth of its population as untouchables, was admittedly victimizing human rights. This was another area from where there was an understandable exodus towards the non-Vedic religions'. So he set to organise the sannyāsins in the pattern of Buddhist saṅgha. Having given the major sub-religions of the Vedic path the ṣaṅmata designation, Śankara proceeded to organise the Daśanāmi sannyasins. Śankara's call was that these ascetics were beyond caste and thus in one stroke the Ācharya was able to reject caste-ism and untouchability at least in one group of society. Thus we can see a great integrator at work. The chapter also provides several interesting episodes and stories. Śankara was at the apex of his spiritual glory now, and the news came to him that the throne of omniscience in Kashmir still is awaiting a scholar from South to open its Southern portal. It was to this Kashmir, the citadel of learning, that Śankara came with his disciples to gain the final seal of approval from Goddess Sārada. And then, there is a brilliant description of the beauty of Kashmir. Thus, the thirteenth chapter deals with Śankara's ascending the Sarvajñapītha.

Following chapter is on the commentatorial tradition which has the twin purpose of expanding and elaborating the encapsulated information for the sake of the ordinary men while safeguarding the information in the most concise form for the learned. This tradition existed well before Śankara. Yet, the commentaries of Śankara on the prasthānatraya are unique in many ways. Dr. Prema brings to our dismay the breathtakingly superhuman versatility of Śankara in his Bhāṣyas by plentiful quotes. Also, Śankara's works like the Sanatsujātiyam etc. have been so lucidly explained by her.

Fifteenth chapter is on Śankara's works, especially the prakaraṇas which are Vedantic primers. The chapter quotes Sri Aurobindo who himself used several tools like exegesis, poetry, philosophical discourses, and translation to meet a variety of situations, contexts and various levels of consciousness. So vast and varied are Śankara's works, while his commentaries on the prasthānatraya are the natural spaces for eminent scholars, the Vedantic primers act as unfailing facilitators for the students of Vedanta. The great Advaitin sings melodiously and composes like a master-poet, masterpieces of devotion. Tatvaboḍha, Ātmaboḍha, Vivekachudāmaṇi, Prabodhasudhākara, Upadeśasāhasrī, Aparokṣānubhūti, Praśnottararatnamālika, Dṛḡḍṛṣyaviveka, are just a few names of his works to mention in this genre. Available commentaries on important works are also mentioned.

Śankara's works, especially the stōtras and devotional works with a summary on their content is the subject matter of the last chapter entitled, The Nectar of Devotion. The salient and touching verse of the chosen work is quoted which inspires the reader to fetch the original. This also is an inspiration to learn the Sanskrit language, since the beauty lies in the original. A conscious attempt throughout to bring in Tamil apparent and the mention of Nāyanmars and Aḷvārs etc. shows the author's love for Tamil. Mention of Śankara getting inspiration from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Nāyanmārs and Aḷvārs serves twin purpose, that the author invariably mentions them and their date to show that they were of definite past and inspired Śankara, though they used Tamil but Śankara, Sanskrit. And the comment that Tamil has got changed and specialised training is required to understand the *Saṅgha* Tamil where as Sanskrit remains intact with its pristine chastity is another inspiration to learn Sanskrit. Several stōtras extolling Mother Goddess and Śankara's visit to various śaktipīthas and reinstating the samayāchāra worship to replace the degenerated vāmachāra form have been eloquently mentioned. This also resulted in the birth of the splendid stōtra literature. Although the inner meaning is elusive for the common man at many places in the quoted stōtras, the bhakti rasa is overflowing, which may be treated as an attempt to bring in steadfastness in the practitioner and to instil faith in him in his

onward march towards perfection. Nirvāṇāṣṭakam, Śataślōkī, Kanakaḍhārāstotram, Śrīgaṇeśabhujangam, Mohamudgaram, Bhagavanmānasapujastotram, Śivānandalahārī, Kālabhairavaṣṭakam, Dakṣiṇāmūrthistōtram, Maṇikarnīkāṣṭakam, Gangāṣṭakam, Yamunāṣṭakam, Annapūrṇāṣṭakam, Laḷitāpāñcharatnam, Saundaryalahārī are just a few names of his works to mention in this genre. The chapter also gives details of available commentaries on important works. The translation of Ekaślōki is brilliant enough to draw out the truth about the self. The beauty of poetry, as explained by the author, is unsurpassed in the sixty sixth verse of Saundarya Lahārī wherein Saraswatī is depicted as embarrassed who keeps aside her Vīna, as though the sweetness of the voice of Mother Goddess seems to cast ridicule on it. It even brings out the historically important elements such as the Drāvida śīśu mentioned by Śankara in the seventy fifth verse, which is believed to have mentioned about Tirujñānasambandhar. Dr. Prema Nandakumar's acumen in academics and her historic sense are evidenced from the comparison of different genre of literature. Śankara's poetic fancy and diction are so scintillating that even the author is seen swayed by the external beauty and surface level description of stories amid Advaitic thoughts.

For the most part, this work is anchored in Mādhava Vidyāranya's Śankaradigvijayam. Even the titles of chapters are captivating and they are so organized as to be progressive that there could not be a more simple way of delineating events in Śankara's life. There is a narrative charm throughout the work. The book is edited by Prof. R. Balasubramanian. It has a brief but informative forward. The text ends with elaborate notes, the places Śankara visited during his digvijaya with maps, bibliography and index of important names etc. This is a handbook not only every philosopher and aspiring philosophy student should have but also a monument that every Indian should have on his book shelves from its blessed author, Dr. Prema Nandakumar.

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