

To the followers of Advaita philosophy, Bhagavadpāda Āchārya Śaṅkara is an institution. What he achieved in a short span of 32 years' life, may take a number of years to merely read, a whole lifetime to barely study, and series of lives to realize and experience the great principles. A great thinker and noblest of Advaitic philosophers, Āchārya Śaṅkara was essentially an inspired champion of Hinduism.

Śaṅkara propagated his Advaitic philosophy at a time when Hinduism was being asphyxiated by the fascinating entanglements of the Buddhist philosophy. Hindu society was in total disarray: decadent, leaderless and disunited. The intellectual disintegration was so complete that India was divided into a number of sects with literalists, ritualists, nihilists and iconoclasts who were ready to tear and destroy all that was sacred and ancient. The society was infested with religiously sanctioned heinous practices. The uncultured and uneducated mass of people embraced Buddhism, while neither appreciating nor living up to the great and noble ideals preached by Lord Buddha.

Śaṅkara was born about 12 centuries ago at Kalady, a remote village on the banks of the river

Periyar in Kerala. His parents, Śivaguru and Āryāmbā, were devotees of Lord Śiva. He was initiated into study at the age of three. Shortly thereafter, he lost his father. Āryāmbā performed the ritual of upanayanam, the investing with the sacred thread, and sent him to a gurukula (residential school). It is said that Śaṅkara composed the first book, *Bālabodha-saṅgraha*, at age six. Shortly thereafter, with the consent of his mother, he renounced the material life and became a *sanyāsī*. The great rishi Govindapāda, who lived in a cave on the banks of the river Narmadā near Omkāranātha, initiated him into Brahavidyā and taught him for three years. During their first encounter, upon guru's enquiry as to who he was, Śaṅkara sang a hymn:

"I am not earth, nor water, nor fire, air, or space, nor a combination of all these which are within the realm of change, but the One Changeless Śiva am I. ..."

Thus he described his true identity with the Supreme reality in verses which are now known as Daśa-Śloki. As a student he wrote a commentary (bhāṣya) on the Vishṇu Sahasranāma.

On completion of his study at Omkāranātha, Śaṅkara proceeded to Kāśī (Banaras). While meditating on the banks of river Ganges,

he pronounced the doctrine:

Brahman, the ultimate All, is the only Reality; the only means to lead us to the goal of Realization is to overcome all sense-attractions.

Many became his disciples, one of whom later became known as Padmapāda. The learned pundits of Kāśī conferred on him the title of Āchārya, meaning the teacher. Thereafter he came to be known as Śaṅkarāchārya, while only 12 years old.

In Kāśī, on a chance encounter with a chāṇḍāla, an untouchable,

Śaṅkarā-chārya saw in him none other than the Absolute and bowed low to him, addressing him as a guru. There he composed five verses, Manīṣā Panchakam, saying there is no distinction in Pure Existence-Consciousness-Bliss, i.e. Brahman.

From Kāśī he journeyed to Badrikāśrama, where he re-established a temple of Lord Nārāyaṇa. During his four years at Badrikāśrama, he