



IS SANKARA A PHILOSOPHER, THEOLOGIAN OR A SOCIAL REFORMER?

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In the history of Indian philosophy the place of Sankaracharya is both permanent and high. He is gifted with extra-ordinary intelligence, a deeply penetrating mind, critical insight, logical reasoning, philosophical analysis, religious purity, sublimity of renunciation and profound spirituality. His contribution to Indian philosophy and to Vedic religion and culture is unparalleled. The credit of establishing Advaita Vedanta as a sound philosophical system goes to Sankaracharya. He was a champion of knowledge and he dedicated his life to selfless service (*nishkama karma*) and devotion to God (*bhakti*). Hence his life can be considered as an ample proof that selfless service and devotion may go well with spiritual enlightenment (*jnana*). Although he disclaimed originality, he wrought a revolution in the minds of men, the salutary effects of which can be felt even today. This was made clear by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan when he stated "His philosophy stands forth complete, needing neither a before nor an after...whether we agree or differ, the penetrating light of his mind never leaves as wherever we were."¹ He thus set a model in thinking and exposition which subsequent philosophers in India have striven to follow. Here in this paper our attempt is to discuss whether Sankara is a Philosopher, theologian or a social reformer. Many attempts were made to unravel this issue among the Indian and Western scholars. The discussion seems to be relevant since it is possible for us to place him in all the above said heads.

Sankara appeared on the firmament of Indian thought at a time the country was caught in a great churning process- politically, socially and culturally. It was such chaotic atmosphere that Sankara brought his life giving philosophy of the Non-dual Brahman of the Upanishads. He never claimed for himself any kind of originality for his teachings. His originality was in reinterpreting the great traditions of the country to suit the conditions of the time.

Works of Sankara

Sankara's writings show great intellectual power, logical precision and emotional profundity. If it is asked what the greatest contribution that Sankara has made is, the answer would be the exposition of the true import of the scriptures through his various commentaries and many books. It is not definitely known how many books he had written, but it is said that it is more than one hundred and fifty. To read through these books even once, it would take a number of years. To study them, even whole life time will not be sufficient. This was made clear by Prof. Namboothiri when he mentioned



that, "...too little has been said and much has been left out of the unfathomable depth and unmeasurable vastness of Sankara's ocean of knowledge. Yet there is one consoling thought: to experience the salinity of the vast ocean we need only a drop on our tongue."²

The works of Sankara can be broadly classified into these sections. 1. Commentaries (*Bhasyas*). They are commentaries on the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and the *Brahmasutra*. They together form the *Prasthanatarya* and Sankara's *bhasyas* serve as a guide, a golden key, unlocking for us the vast treasure chambers of wisdom contained in our scriptures. These three works form the cornerstone on which the whole edifice of Hinduism stands. 2. Books dealing with the fundamental concepts of Vedanta (*Prakarana granthas*), *Vivekachoodamani*, *Atma-bodha*, *Tattvabodha* etc are some of the *Prakarana granthas*, and 3. Meditation verses (*Stotras*) His *stotras* invariably consisted of prayers to grant one the true light of knowledge and discrimination and to save one from the wheel of birth and death- thus setting forth an ideal to be pursued by the students.

Sankara as a theologian:-

Sankara was not only a great thinker and noblest of Advaitic philosopher, but he was essentially an inspired champion of Hinduism. This was rightly pointed out by Swami Chinmayananda when he wrote, "An exquisite thinker a brilliant intellect, a personality scintillating with the vision of Truth, a heart throbbing with industrious faith and ardent desire to serve the nation, sweetly, emotionally, and relentlessly logical, in Sankara the Upanishads discovered the fittest spiritual general."³ Such a powerful leader was needed at that time when Hinduism had been almost smothered within the entanglements of the Buddhist philosophy.

Sankara has developed a number of *stotras* or hymns in praise of Gods and he has written *Bhasyas* or *prasthanatraya* which forms the basis on which the whole of Hinduism is based. Hence he was an inspiration to our country as a reviver of the glorious Hindu culture. He was not an exclusive *Saivate* or *Vaishnavite* or *Sakta* and yet he stood out to be the best among *Saivates*, *Vaishnavaites* and *Saktas*, thus setting a model for the respective groups for the correct method of worship. One of the very first tasks of Sankara was to promote religious harmony among the Hindus. As we saw earlier, he sought to unite them on the basis of the principle of unity which is Advaita. This was made clear by Prof. Victor George when he stated that, "Sankaracharya was not to be a critic by denying the personal God and worship but interested to establish unity among the systems. His mission is not to bring quarrel among various theological systems but to see that a spirit of unity prevails. He interpreted the theology of the Upanishads and preached it for the benefit of humanity, as people are misguided with false doctrines."⁴ Temples and places of pilgrimage play a great role in Hindu religious life. Sankara visited most of them, and imparted sanctity wherever necessary, by correcting wrong ways of worship, by putting a stop to sacrifices that involved violence to living beings. Sankara also established monastic centers or mutts in the different parts of the country. He also charged his principal disciples to head



them so that each become a centre of Advaita tradition. Of the several mutts the most important are Badri, Dwaraka, Jagannath and Sringeri. He erected the edifice of Advaita and established four monasteries as centers of religious teachings and missionary work. These mutts, to this date, are sources of light and wisdom to millions of Hindus. It was envisaged that the spiritual welfare of the whole country would be looked after by these four mutts from their centers in east, west, north and south. The monks and *bramacharis* belonging to each mutt were enjoined to make a special study of one of the four Vedas along with all the scriptural literature in general. So we can say that Sankaras's vision of establishing mutts was to radiate India's ageless message of *Sanatana dharma* from various strategic points. It is in this context that we think Sankara is referred to as a theologian.

But he who condemns Sankara as a mere theologian whose faith is pinned to the Vedas must be either hopelessly ignorant of Sankara-Vedanta or be himself nothing less than a prejudiced dogmatic. Sankara never accepted the *sruti* blindly. It is only because he fully knows that *sruti* is the result of the highest realization of the ancient sages, that he builds Advaita on the firm foundation of Vedas. Now let us have brief look into the basic teachings of Sankara's advaita.

Sankara as a philosopher:-

All search of knowledge originates in our instinct of curiosity. It becomes so insistent in some persons that they make it their life's mission and they become philosophers in the technical sense of the term. Philosophy signifies a natural and necessary urge in human beings to know themselves and the world in which they live in and have their being. Hence philosophy is defined as the interpretation of man and nature and their relation towards each other. In this sense, philosopher is a person who is always seeking to find answers to the ultimate questions regarding the world. As Sankara discussed such ultimate questions and found his own answers to them, he may be regarded as a philosopher in the right sense of the term. Again, the orthodox and heterodox systems of Indian thought, though distinct in their origin and general spirit, exhibit certain common features like epistemology, metaphysics and ethics. All these elements can be clearly seen in the thought of Sankara and so also he may be considered as a philosopher. In this part of my paper we are highlighting that aspect of Sankara by giving a brief look into his Advaita System.

The philosophy of Sankara is sublime and unique, highly inspiring and elevating. It commands the admiration of the whole world. Indian philosophy has always come to be identified with Sankara's Advaita philosophy. The quintessence of Sankara's philosophy was stated by himself in half-a-verse:

*'Brahma satyam jagan mithya
Jeevo brahmaiv naparah'*

'Brahman, the Absolute, alone is real; this world is unreal (*maya*); and the *jeeva* or the individual soul is not different from Brahman.' The Upanishadic terms Brahman and atman indicates the highest Reality, which is non-dual. Supreme Brahman is *nirguna*, *nirvisesha*, *niraakaara*, that is, without the *gunas* or attributes, formless,



without any special characteristics, immutable, eternal, and non-agent. Brahman is above all needs and desires; it is always the witnessing subject; it can never become the object as it is beyond the reach of the senses. It is non dual or one without a second. The Absolute, the Existence (*sat*), Consciousness (*cit*), and Bliss (*ananda*) form the *swarupa* of Brahman. Brahman is not an object as it is *adrsya*, beyond the reach of the eyes. Its nature cannot be defined in terms of any categories; hence the Upanishads declare: *neti, neti*- not this not this. This does not mean that Brahman is a negative concept, or a nonentity or contentless void. It is all-full, infinite, changeless self-existent, self-delight, self-knowledge and self-bliss. It is the essence of the knower. It is the Seer (*drshta*), transcendental truth (*turiya*), Silent Witness (*sakshi*).

Saguna Brahman and *nirguna* Brahman are not separate or two Brahmans. The same Brahman appears as *saguna* Brahman for the worship of the devotees; it is the same Truth from two different points of view. *Nirguna* Brahman is the highest Brahman from transcendental view point (*paramathika*); the *saguna* Brahman is from the relative view point (*vyavahaika*). The Supreme Truth is that Brahman which is non-dual and relation less. To Sankara this world is only relatively real (*vyavaharika satta*). He advocated *vivarta-vada*, the theory of phenomenal appearance or superimposition (*adhyasa*). Just as snake is superimposed on the rope in the twilight, this world and body is superimposed on Brahman or Atman or Supreme Self. If we get knowledge of the rope, the illusion of the snake in the rope will automatically vanish. Similarly, if we get knowledge of Brahman or the imperishable, the illusion of the body and the world will disappear. When *avidya* or the veil of ignorance is destroyed through knowledge of the eternal, when *mithya-jnana* or false knowledge is removed by real knowledge of the imperishable, we shine in our true, pristine, divine, splendor and glory.

Atman is the same as Brahman. It is Pure Consciousness. It is the Self which is the Self-luminous and which transcends the subject-object duality and the trinity of knower, known and knowledge, and all the categories of the intellect. This Self can never be denied, for the very idea of denial presupposes it. It cannot be doubted, for all doubts rest on it. All assertions, all doubts, all denials presuppose it. He who knows Brahman becomes Brahman. Everything is relative and therefore ultimately unreal. The self alone is not relative. It is, therefore, self-proved.

The principle that makes for the phenomenal appearance of the world is Maya. It has significance only from the relative (*vyavaharika*) stand point and not from the stand point of Absolute. Maya or *Avidya* is not pure illusion. It is not only absence of knowledge. It is also positive wrong knowledge. In fact it is indescribable. Brahman is the ground on which the world appears through Maya. When right knowledge dawns the essential unity of the *jiva* with the *Paramatman* is realized and Maya or *Avidya* vanishes.

Jiva is a blend of the self and the non self. The *jiva* in its true character is 'Saksin' or witness which represents pure consciousness. It is characterized by *swaroopajnana* whereas the empirical self or *jiva* is characterized by *vrittijnana*.



According to advaita, soul is not created. Only its empirical outfit is created and what happens at death is the change of this empirical outfit. Human experience is distinguished into three states namely waking, dreaming and deep sleep. The true self transcends all these three stages. It is known as the *turiya* or the fourth.

The only way of realizing Brahman is *jnana*, and in order to attain this *jnana* and the supreme realization of the Absolute, a four-fold path is prescribed: *viveka*-right discrimination; *vairagya*-detachment from the sensory attractions, leading to the extinction of desires; *sama dana*, *uparati*, *titiksha*, *Samadhi* and *sraddha*-calmness, self control, detachment, endurance, creative concentration and faith,; and, above all, *mumukshutva*- the sustained urge to attain liberation and the resolute will to shed human limitations and realize the Absolute in life. *Bhakti* or devotion is only a step to secure the grace of God, which would obliterate the distinction between the aspirant and God; and so is *karma*, actions without attachment, which bring purity of mind and which lead to the higher state of *jnana*.

We can observe that the advaita of Sankara, in its different aspects, is an attempt to follow out the Upanishadic idea of the unity of all existence to its logical conclusion. According to Chandradhar Sharma, "One may or may not agree with Advaita; one may freely choose any other school of Vedanta or any other system of philosophy as more satisfactory; but one cannot logically deny that Shankara's interpretation is the correct interpretation and Advaita is the central teaching of the Upanishadic philosophy."⁵ With all its defects and excellence it stands in the history of human thought as the most consistent system of monism.

Sankara as a social reformer:-

The age which saw the advent of Sankara was a dark period of unrest and strife. The country was divided into a number of principalities which had very little in common between them. The land had no religious master, and the population drifted without a goal stagnating in innumerable sects, each championing its own narrow, limited view point to the exclusion of all others. India was thus going through great intellectual, spiritual and social turmoil. It was into such an age of fuming confusion, chaotic intellectual anarchy and social decadence that Sankara was born. This was pointed out by Jawaharlal Nehru when he wrote, "Adi Sankara strove hard to synthesize the diverse currents that were troubling the mind of India of his day and to build a unity of outlook out of that diversity. In a brief life of 32 years, he did the work of many long lives and left such an impression of his powerful mind and rich personality on India that is very evident today. He was a curious mixture of a philosophy and a scholar, an agnostic and a mystic and a poet and a saint and in addition to all this, a practical reformer and an able organizer".⁶ A lot is known of Sankara as a philosopher but a very few is known about 'the Sankara' as a social reformer. The more we learn to adore him not as a divine incarnation but a sincere man inspired to serve the country through his philosophy and reconquer the nation from its slavery to alien ideologies, the more we shall successfully pay our tribute to our own culture. This part of our paper is an attempt in that direction to see Sankara as a social reformer rather than a



philosopher or theologian.

Sankara who was imbued with a divine compassion which exerts in the direction of providing enlightenment to the ignorant and suffering humanity blossomed as a moral leader, a mentor of mankind and a spiritual ruler of the world. By advocating the path of knowledge (*jnana-marga*) Sankara has liberated man from rituals and sacrifices. This is something that affected the social life of the individual and society.

To Sankara we owe the true conception of *Swaraj*. He realized that the unity of India cannot be based on any kind of political kinship. So by establishing the four religious monasteries in the four corners of India, Sankara had visualized the national integration and solidarity of the country. In his article 'What we owe to Sankara', Satchidananda Murthy remarks that "Sankara's missionary zeal and his establishment of monasteries influence the national leaders and political thinkers to conceive national integration and oneness of the people".⁷

Again, Sankara has brought out a revolution by introducing the *Sadhana catustaya* as the only four prerequisites to learn *Brahmavidya*. He made it possible that caste and occupation are not criterion for *brahmavidya*. He also went against the *dharmasastra* view of life of going through all the four life stages to become a *sanyasin*. He became a *sanyasi* straight away from the life of *brahmacharya*. Also he performed the funeral rite of his mother as per her wish when he was a *sanyasin*. Here we find in him appealing to reason rather than blindly following the *sruti*. He was of opinion that reason must be our guide if it contradicts with *sruti* because reason is much nearer to our experience. Thus we find in Sankara's life many instances where there was a triumph of wisdom and reason with reference to human values against the conventions. Swami Vivekananda, continuing this line of thinking, developed out of the main positions of Sankara's philosophy the demand for equality of human beings. Starting from the upanishadic sentences of '*tat tvam asi*' and '*aham brahma asmi*', the metaphysics of Vedanta was turned by Swami Vivekananda towards the social aspects of society. Thus we see that Vivekananda on the basis of Sankara's philosophical concept developed a thorough humanist social philosophy responding to the demands of his time.

The aim of life, according to Sankara, is beyond what is achieved through life. Again, even after the realization of the ultimate end, the liberated person does not leave society or the world, nor becomes interested in it. Sankara's life itself is a glaring example of this fact.

Even though in the transcendental level, Sankara has negated all dualism, it does not mean that dualism of right and wrong is as truer as all other dualism in the pragmatic level. Before the achievement of liberation, he says man must have due consideration for the right and wrong. Hence there is enough place for it in Sankara's philosophy. But after liberation is achieved such a consideration becomes superfluous because the liberated person realizes the Brahman. Attainment of liberation transforms all his life. By the transformation, the moral values are even more glorified and spiritualized. This gives a new inspiration, energy, peace and stability in practical life.



Thus the ultimate end in Advaita philosophy is beyond right and wrong but instead of negating them, it leads to them ultimate fulfillment.

Sankara's system is unmatched for its metaphysical depth and logical consistency. It destroyed many old dogmas, not by violently attacking them but by suggesting something more reasonable and practical. Sankaracharya sought to clean the Vedic philosophy of obscurities and inconsistencies, and thereby making it both comprehensive and acceptable to the people at large. He thus resurrected the India of the ages and reawakened India's national genius. By means of his remarkable clearness, his supreme wisdom, and his profound spirituality he has so stamped himself upon Vedanta that it has remained the paragon of Indian philosophy and has given solace to the sorrowful heart of a large segment of mankind.

To conclude the discussion it may be pointed that Sankara was a theologian as well as a philosopher who tried his level best to bring about social reforms in the country through the Advaitic philosophy of unity and oneness. This was essential during his period. It is this unity based on ethical and spiritual values, revitalized by Sankara that help us to stand in good stead even today.

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