CHAPTER II

LIFE AND WORKS OF ŚAṆKARĀCĀRYA
Chapter II
LIFE AND WORKS OF ŚAṆKARĀCĀRYA

Life

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya was the brightest star in the firmament of India’s intellect. As a versatile genius his greatness was titanic and he became universally acclaimed as a great thinker, writer, scholar, philosopher, orator, debater and organizer. The impact of his personality and erudition was felt all over the country. His intellectual eminence was recognized even during his life time.

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya was the son of Śivaguru and Aryāṃba, a wealthy Nampūtiri Brahmin couple. He was born about 8th century A.D in the Kaipilli Illam at Kālady, a village which has become famous by his birth. Śaṅkarā’s parents were pious religious minded and lived the ritual ordained life of a Brahmin householder. In their early days they were not blessed with children, hence they went on a pilgrimage to Śivakṣetra at modern Trichur and worshipped Śiva. Their wish was accomplished and in due course Śrī Śaṅkara, supposed to be an incarnation of Lord Śiva was born. Śaṅkarācārya lost his father very
early. Therefore the duty of looking after him was left to his mother. After the formal *Upanayana*, Śrī Śaṅkarācārya studied the four *Vedās*, six *Darśanās*, Patañjali’s *Yogasūtras*, various *Kāvyās* and *Purāṇās* in the *gurukula* method.

After completing his early education at the age of 8\(^{\text{th}}\) year, Śrī Śaṅkarācārya accepted the life of a sage and he became a disciple of Govinda *Bhagavadpāda*, the greatest philosopher of India.

By the age of sixteen, Śaṅkarācārya completed his studies. His preceptor thereupon asked him to proceed to *Vāraṇāsi* for expounding his *Vedāntic* doctrine which was his mission of life. He was impressed with mystery and importance of life, and had an early vision of the beauty of holiness. Before he learned the way of the world, he rejected them and became a *Sannyāsin\(^2\)*. But he was no passionless recluse. The pure flame of truth burned within him. He wandered for a teacher from place to place.

According to the traditional accounts, he met, in the course of these tours, Kumārila and Maṇḍana Miśra, who later became his disciple under the name of Sureśvarācārya. The story of his entering dead body of Amaruka shows that he was an adept in logic practices. He established four mutts or monasteries, of which the chief is the one at Śringeri in Mysore Province. The others are those at *Puri* in the East, *Dvāraka* in the west and *Badarīnāth* in the Himālayās. In open
defiance of the rules which govern the order of Sannyāsins, Śaṅkara performed the funeral rites of his mother, and thus incurred the serious opposition of his community. He died at Kedārnāth at the age of thirty two.

According to tradition, Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, the disciple of Govindapāda, lived a brief life of thirty two years, but in this time he constructed one of the most important schools of Philosophy in India. By reflectively thinking about Śruti, he formulated the non-dualistic (Advaitic) school of Vedānta. Further, Gaudapāda’s Advaitic vision and doctrines greatly influenced him, to establish the philosophy of Non-duality. Śrī Śaṅkara assimilated some of the good points of Buddhism also. This Advaita school of Śrī Śaṅkara can be seen as one of the highest peaks of Indian spirituality; because it is a point at which previous Vedic philosophy culminates and is also an inspiration to most later thought.

Works of Śaṅkarācārya

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya is the most famous exponent of Advaita Philosophy. Śaṅkara is India’s representative man. Even after more than a thousand years the manifold effects of Śaṅkara’s gigantic impact are palpable everywhere. Śaṅkara lived for just thirty two years. But, during the brief span, he did the work of several long lives. His message is the eternal message of India.
Śaṅkara wrote many outstanding works. Śaṅkarā’s style of writing reveals a relentlessly logical mind. His language combines lucidity with directness. It is generally simple unconvoluted and direct. His style of interpretation is inimitable and words to him were slaves. It is estimated that Śaṅkara is the author of more than four hundred works\(^3\). The bulk of his works and the most significant of them were the commentaries on the ten principal *Upaniṣads*, the *Brahmasūtra* and the *Bhagavadgītā*. These are from the glittering diadem of Śaṅkarā’s intellectual achievements in the field of *Vedānta*. Traditionally Śaṅkarā’s works may be classified into three major groups:-

1. The *Bhāṣyās* - The commentaries on *Brham Sūtras*, *Upaniṣads* and *Bhagavadgītā*.

2. The *Prakarṇa Granthās* - Simple manual of practical Advaita *Vedānta*.

3. The *Stotrās* - Hymns and meditation verses.

**1. The *Bhāṣyās* (commentaries)**

\[ 	ext{सूत्रासं वर्ण्यते यत्र पदे: सूत्रानुसारिभि:} \\
\text{स्व पदानित च वर्ण्यते भाष्यं भाष्यविदो विदुः।} \]

That which describes the meaning of the *Sūtrās* (aphorisms) by means of words that will fit in (with the *sūtrās*) and explains one’s own stand point is what is called *Bhāṣya*\(^4\).
The commentaries constitute the major part and are models in style and arrangement. The important commentaries are those on the Brahmasūtrās, the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavadgītā. These three canonical works form the cornerstones on which the edifice of Hinduism stands. They are together called ‘Prasthāna-traya’, or the three great institutions.

Śaṅkara is an ideal commentator. Bhāṣyās are the golden keys to enter into the vast treasure chambers of wisdom. Śaṅkara’s Upaniṣadic language is mystic in style and cannot be understood by literally translating them. The brief remarks introducing each of the sections of the text commented upon are of great help to an intelligent understanding of the passages. The connection of the preceding and the succeeding passages is shown in every instance to facilitate a correlated grasp of the subject. Alternative explanations are suggested where they are to be reasonable and necessitated. Fundamental propositions are stated in brief, wherever necessary.

Śaṅkara is never verbose. He chooses the right word and expresses the maximum of thought in the minimum of words. The force and vigor of his expressions clarity and depth of thought reveal the Master. The method generally followed is that of a dialogue in the form of questions by an intelligent and earnest student and answers to
clear his doubts. Thus the whole subject is threshed out and made easy to understand in all aspects. The sturdy independence of Śaṅkara is revealed by the fact that there is no maṅgalācaraṇa or invocation to God in the beginning of most of his works.

The commentaries serve to provide a consistent interpretation of the scriptural texts from the perspective of Advaita Vedānta. The commentaries are famous as ‘Prasthānratraya Bhāṣya’. It deals on Śruti, Śmṛti and Sūtras.

Śruti - The Upaniṣads

Śaṅkara wrote commentaries on ten major Upaniṣads. He clearly explained the Advaitic truth contained in them on firm foundation. Śaṅkara interpreted Upaniṣads in accordance with his own doctrine establishing the supremacy of knowledge. It is believed that Śaṅkara commented upon Śvetāśvetara and Nṛsiṁha Tapaniya Upaniṣads.

Śmṛti - The Bhagavadgītā

The Bhagavadgītā is an integral part of the Mahābhārata which is a classical exposition of the meaning of the Vedās. The most ancient commentary of Bhagavadgītā is Śaṅkara’s Śaṅkarabhāṣya. His commentary starts with the eleventh verse of the second chapter, in which Śaṅkara emphasises the role of knowledge in bringing liberation.
Comparing the various views of the other commentators he gives clear exposition of his own views.

**Sūtras - Bādarāyaṇaś’s Brahmasūtra**

*Sūtras* literally mean the aphorisms or short pithy sayings which thread together various ideas. It includes a commentary on Vyāsā’s *Brahmasūtras*. It is a most important work of scholarly expositions. Here Śaṅkara has analysed and criticised the ten prevailing schools of thought and established the ultimate truth as *Advaita*. Śaṅkara’s commentaries on the ‘*Brahmasūtra*’ and ‘*Bhagavadgītā*’ are considered to be the most powerful exposition of the *Bhāṣyās*. It has been explained before *Brahmasūtra* as the metaphysical essence of the *Vedic* teaching which has also been expounded by the *Upaniṣads*. It is believed that Vyāsā was the first to complete and explain the *Brahmasūtra*.

**Prakaraṇagranthās**

*Prakaraṇagranthās* or the philosophical treatises provide various methodologies to the students to understand the doctrine. Śaṅkara had written *Prakaraṇa Granthās* to establish his doctrine. Popular among the *Prakaraṇa Granthās* composed by Śaṅkara are Viveka Chūḍāmaṇi, Ātmabodha, *Tattva-bodha*, *Pañcīkaraṇa*, *Vākya-vṛtti*, *Aparokṣānubhūti*, Upadeśasāhasṛi and Prabodha Sudhakara.
Besides being a brilliant scholar, Śaṅkara was also a class poet. His *Stotras* to the various Gods and Goddesses reveal the devotional side of his nature. In Śaṅkara’s religious lyrics, we can find the clues to his personality. In these, we find that his style of writing is sharply at variance from his *Vedāntic* works. His hymns invariably consist of the prayer to grant one the true light of knowledge and discrimination and to save one from the wheel of birth and death. The devotional hymns or *stotras* are rich in poetry and piety, the glory of the deity and serving to highlight the helplessness of the devotee. Śaṅkara was not an exclusive Śaivite or Vaiṣṇavite or Śākta. Śaṅkara while doing his work took meticulous care to remove false notions and superstitions which plagued their respective paths. Thus Śaṅkara proved himself to be a master in all fields of knowledge and practice, whether *Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism, Śakti cult, Tantra, Mantra* or *Yoga*.

Śaṅkara presented ‘boquets’ of meditation verses for regular recitation, reflection and meditation. A good many hymns have been composed by him, while a good many have been attributed to him. Famous in this category are ‘Ānanda Lahari’, ‘Govindāśṭaka’, ‘Dakṣiṇāmūrti-Stotra’, ‘Dasa-Ślokī’, ‘Sat pad’, ‘ Maneṣā pañcaka’ and ‘Sivabhujāṅgaprayāgā’.
The Greatness of Śaṅkarabhāṣya

The Bhagavadgītā is a unique book for all ages. The teachings of the Gītā are broad, universal and sublime. The Gītā summarizes the essential teachings of Vedānta and presents them in a popular manner. That’s why Gītā has become the scripture of the vast masses in this country. There are countless commentaries on the Bhagavadgītā at the present day. Among the commentaries on the Gītā, Śaṅkarabhāṣya became the most authoritative one.

From the commentary of Śaṅkarācārya it is clear that he believed that the Gītā had the same prestige and glory as the Upaniṣads. Śaṅkarabhāṣya, more than even Śaṅkara’s commentaries on the Upaniṣads and the Brahmaśūtrās, has aroused heated controversy among commentators, interpreters, and thinkers the entire world over. ‘Svami Vivekananda’ conveyed great admiration for this smashing work of Śaṅkarācārya. To quote his own words from his lecture on ‘Vedānta in all its Phases’: ‘The great glory of Śaṅkarācārya was his preaching of the Gītā. It is one of the greatest works that this great man did among the many noble works of his noble life the preaching of the Gītā, and writing the most beautiful commentary up on it. And he has been followed by all founders of the orthodox sects in India, each of whom has written a commentary on the Gītā’\(^{10}\).
Śaṅkarā’s central standpoint is the identification of Jīvaḥ and Brahman, and the illusoriness of the world. He evaluates the different disciplines of spiritual life, such as Karman, Yoga and Bhakti, laid down for the pursuit of Truth. In many chapters Śaṅkara gives his reflections on Karmayoga.

_Bhagavadgītā_’s message is universal, practical, strengthening, and purifying. The great _Upaniṣads_, which expound a science of human resources, a great science of human possibilities, have found their practical orientation in the _Gītā_. We have to study this _Bhāṣya_ as a science of human development and fulfillment.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. CPG - P. 14
2. Ibid - P. 28
3. STM - P. 45
4. TTS - P. 49
5. PTB - P. 6
6. SS - P. 194
7. Ibid - P. 17
8. ACIP - P. 22
9. IP - P. 33
10. SVV - P. 45