Before we come to the treatment of the original contribution of Sri Śankaracārya to the Vedānta Philosophy it will not be improper if a very brief reference is made to the past history of the Philosophy, which will enable us to know what actually existed before Śankaracārya could contribute anything.

My main purpose of writing the first Chapter is to show the seeds of Kevala Advaita Vedānta in the Rgvedic age and how those seeds have developed in subsequent Vedantic literature and has taken the shape of particular system called the Advaita Vedanta. All these ideas have been put together and systematised by the great Śri Śankaracārya.

He was one of the greatest logicians, dialecticians, argumentators, poets, preachers, teachers and profound thinkers. He had to fight with the great forces namely Buddhism and Jainism, when Brahmanism was going down and was slowly loosing its ground. Varnāśramadharma was on the brink of dissolution. He was an incarnation of Śiva. He re-established the Vedic religion, Varnāśramadharma and propagated the Vedic religion throughout India.

Thus he brought the cultural and religious unity, seen even today, people do remember him by his pithas and disciples. He was the greatest exponent of religion. He has criticised all the major systems of philosophy and proved that there is only one ultimate principle i.e. Brahman. He has established mathas and
maintained the discipline in Society.

**The Significance of Vedanta.**

The term 'Vedanta' is often understood as Advaita Vedanta or ŚaṅkaraVedānta but not as Viśistadvaita or Suddhadvaita or Dvaitadvaita, in its true sense, because Śaṅkaraścārya is the originator of Advaita while all the other Acaryas made some modifications and alterations in Śaṅkaraścārya's system and propounded their own views. But the term Advaita except that of Madhva is common in all Sampradayas. It gives the outlines to all five main schools of Vedanta. Therefore my main idea is to show that the Advaita is the source of inspiration to all later Acaryas viz., Ramānuja, Niṃbārka, Madhva, Vallabha and Caitanya. Śaṅkaraścārya is the founder of the Advaita Vedanta. Therefore, I am going to show how he has evolved the system of the Advaita Vedanta.

The Vedanta Philosophy stands for Śaṅkaraścārya's system alone, because no other Acaryas were born by that time. Therefore, people understood him thoroughly. If we follow the Philosophy of Sankaracarya very well then we can understand the Philosophy of other Acaryas easily, because Śaṅkaraścārya was the greatest logician who had mastered the Vedas, Upanisads, Smrties and Darsanas.

*A Short History of Advaita Vedanta:*

We can gather the idea about Śrī Śaṅkaraścārya's contribution to Vedanta Philosophy by taking a bird's eye view of the position of Vedānta, before Śrī Sankaracarya came in the field.
and then comparing it with various works of Śaṅkaraḥārya, thereby setting out what new things the Āchārya teaches in them. This would be his contribution to the Vedanta Philosophy.

His views are further developed and explained by his disciples and followers like Suresvara, Padmapāda, Hastāmalaka and Ānandagiri. But those views peculiar to them are to be considered as post Śaṅkarite's and they also are likely to be useful in drawing a line of demarkation showing where Śaṅkarāchārya ended his doctrines and where the thread was taken up by his successors.

The literature earlier than Śaṅkarāchārya in the field of Vedānta is very vast indeed and the earliest work is the Rgveda Samhitā, as in the case of many other cultural, religious and philosophical ideas in India. The four Vedic Samhitās together with the various Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and the Upaniṣads attached to them are not strictly speaking the Vedānta.

The real ideas of Vedanta are embodied in the Upanisads and in all its spheres. It is not fully found in the Samhitās and the Brāhmaṇas. But some philosophical points may be traced in those texts.

The Upaniṣads represent the highest water mark of Indian Philosophical speculation. In this way it is the last word on Indian Philosophy. Thus the Upaniṣads are called the Vedānta in the double sense viz. (1) They come at the end (Anta) of old Vedic literature; chronologically after the Upaniṣads. The Vedic period came to an end and the Sūtra period began. Thus the Upaniṣads represent the very end of the Vedic literature. (2) Because the philosophy embodied in the Upaniṣads, speaks in the highest terms about all the pervading element which sustains the Universe, namely
the Brahman. Therefore that is the limit to which the human intelligence has gone so far in the world in the realm of philosophical speculation. In this sense the Upanisads are the Vedānta.

All the later writers on the Vedanta, in India have satisfied themselves either by writing commentaries on and explanations of the Upanisads or in trying to systematize them regarding the ideas propounded in the Upanisads. The Upanisads have all along been considered divine as they formed the part of the Srutis or the Vedas, and the great Philosophers like Śaṅkarācārya and others also have satisfied themselves by writing Bhāṣyas i.e. commentaries on them, the small works on the different topics of Vedanta called as Prakarana Granthas such as —

Viveka Chūḍāmaṇi, Ātmabodha, Upadeśa Sāhasrī, Sataśloki, Daśasloki, Vākyavṛitti, Sarva Vedānta Siddhānta Sāra Sangraha, Saundarya Laharī, Sanat Sujātiya Bhāṣya and Atmānātmā Viśiṣṭa; Adhīyatma pāṭala, Vivaraṇam Viṣṇusahasranamabhaṣyam and Laghuvalya Vṛtti are written with a view to explaining the ideas of the Upanisads and not to contradict what is said therein.

Thus the Upaniṣads are the first great mass of works and philosophical ideas which Śaṅkarācārya inherited and which he mastered during his early childhood. Later on he wrote magnificent Bhāṣyas on the ten selected Upaniṣads considered to be the most comprehensive and oldest of the lot. Ten Upaniṣads are considered to be principal and they are pre-Buddhistic.

The Upaniṣads that are held in high esteem as propounding superior mystic knowledge are: Isāṉavasya, Kena, Katha, Praśna
Mundaka, Mandukya, Chandogya, Brhadaranyaka, Taittiriya and Aitareya, to which is added the eleventh Svetasvatara. These Upaniṣads are generally regarded as authoritative.

Thus Saṅkarācārya mastered the philosophy embodied in the Upaniṣads and later tried to develop it by writing philosophical explanatory notes and essays on them. They represent most important contribution of Saṅkarācārya to the Vedānta philosophy. He is the greatest reformer.

It is true that many other writers on the Upaniṣads preceded him and Saṅkarācārya must have been familiar with the contributions of those predecessors. But their works are few and far between and some of them exist in only in names and few others have survived their oblivion as Saṅkarācārya treated a few of them in the Purvapakṣaṇ, viz. Samkhya, Yoga, Vaiṣesika, Bauddha, Jaina, Bhagavata and Pasupata. We shall consider these writers later on.

The most important next great writer on Vedānta from whom Saṅkarācārya was profited much. Definitely Sri Gaudapada Acarya held to be his paramaguru i.e. Guru's Guru.

Gaudapada Karikas on the Mandukya Upaniṣad is the only surviving work of this great Acarya. But the style and depth of arguments embodied in the Karikas are so high that which cannot be described. One can easily see that he must have written some other works also. But as the Vedānta literature makes no mention of any
other works of Gaṇḍapāda. Therefore we must be satisfied with the
Kārikās only. Śaṅkaraḥṣaṭṭha has written Bhāṣya on these Kārikās.

Another important work is Yogavāsiṣṭha i.e., Mahā Rāmāyaṇa.
The date of which is not thoroughly settled but from the style and
the Vedantic doctrines taught therein, one can say definitely that
work was written before Śaṅkaraḥṣāṭṭha.

Yoga Vasistha consisting of 32,000 Ślokas, is attributed to
the sage Vālmīki, the first poet to write in Sanskrit language.
Yoga Vāsiṣṭha of Vālmīki is full of poetic merits of the highest
order. We do not know anything about the writer. But on the perusal
of work one can say that he must have been a great philosopher as
well as a poet of a very high order. It is full of philosophical
ideas. His stories and descriptions of nature, his narration of
events, the various Alankāras used to make the work attractive
together with the delineation of various characters of men and
women and the skill displayed therein, leave no doubt that he was
one of the first class poets and a great Vedantic Philosopher.

The whole work consists of 32,000 verses in different
meters. It is divided into two parts viz. Pūrva Rāmāyaṇa and
Uttara Rāmāyaṇa - each part consists of several long chapters.
Swāmī Vidyārānya quotes many slokas from Yogavāsiṣṭha in his
Jīvan Muktiviveka.

In pūrva Rāmāyaṇa there are five chapters viz. Vairāgya,
Mumukṣu, Vyavahāra, Utpatti, Sthitī and Upasama. In Uttara
Rāmāyaṇa there is only one chapter called by Nirvāṇa, which is
divided into Pūrvārdha and Uttaraśāstra. He was one of the first
class poets and a great Vedantic Philosopher.
The state of Vedantic philosophy contained in this work represents an earlier stage than that of Śaṅkarācārya's writings. This induces us to place Śaṅkarācārya later than Valmīki's Yoga Vasistha i.e. Yoga Vasistha is earlier than Śaṅkarācārya. The Vedantic doctrines are called Akṣīavada and Drśti Sṛṣṭivada. Scholars differ in Yoga Vasistha as a post Śaṅkarite or prior or post Gaudapāda or prior or earlier than Bhartrihari? But we here take it for granted that it is certainly prior than Śaṅkarācārya. We will not enter into this discussion now. But we take it for granted that Yoga Vasistha is certainly prior than Śaṅkarācārya.

There were some Vedanta Acaryas who were predecessors of Śaṅkaracārya. It is called post Upaniṣad and Pre-Śaṅkara stage. The names of the Vedanta Ācāryas are as follows: Sabara, Upavarsa, Bodhāyana, Drāvidacarya, Guhadeva, Kapardin Bharuci, Brahmanandi Gaudapada Vrittikara, Bhartrhari Govindabhagavatpada. They have written master works on Advaita Vedanta.

Śaṅkaracārya had studied thoroughly all these great Vedanta works and translated them into actual practice and thus these works had inspired him to evolve Advaita Vedanta. Advaita ideas were there in the latent form. But he shaped them into a system i.e. Kevala Advaita Siddhanta. Therefore, Sri Śaṅkara salutes all the great teachers who handed down Brahma Vidya through generations.