

# Bhagavatpada Sankara and *Dasanami* Tradition

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**S**ankaracharya's contribution to *Sanatana Dharma* is revolutionary. Every aspect of Hinduism, every sacred place and temple in India bears his imprint. Hinduism owes to this great sage its very continuation to this day.

Sister Nivedita paid a glowing tribute to him: "Western people can hardly imagine a personality like that of Sankaracharya. We contemplate with wonder and delight the devotion of Francis of Assisi, the intellect of Abelard, the virile force and freedom of Martin Luther and the political efficiency of Ignatius Loyola. But who could imagine all these in one person?"

As a *Smarta*, I grew up closely aligned to the *Sankara parampara*. But I began to comprehend his omniscience and impact only after journeys to the Himalayas, the *Kumbh*

*Mela*, Hardvar, and the various assignments I have undertaken for *Hinduism Today*, Hawaai, over the years.

Perhaps this was because of the difference between the approaches of North and South India to Sankara's teachings. The South stresses on *Jnana*, which, given the high philosophy in his teachings, limits its reach to an elite, intellectual minority. The North emphasises *Bhakti*, making his teachings universal in their appeal, transcending all barriers, as Sankara sought it to be.

## **All-round Obeisance**

The numerous *sannyasis* and Nagas I spoke to never failed to commence a conversation without offering obeisance to Sankaracharya, and speak about him at length with

pride and devotion. They all belong to the *Dasanami sampradaya*, which Sankara established.

Sankara's achievements are not limited to the philosophical realm alone. He traversed the entire expanse of India thrice re-moulding, reorganising and propagating *Sanatana Dharma* by restoring the primacy of the scriptures over ritual. He established *mathas*, temples, *gurukulas* and bastions of the Hindu faith that flourish even to this day.

### **Vibrant Contribution**

Sankara's pioneering effort in organising *sannyasis* into the *Dasanami* order is one of his most vibrant contributions. Before the establishment of the *Dasanami sampradaya*, *tantric* sects were dominant. Uniting the diverse and chaotic masses of ascetics into organised groups was no easy task; Hindu religion was fragmented and fractured owing to frequent skirmishes between Buddhism, Jainism, *Tantric* and *Vaidik* sects.

Sankara institutionalised the celibate *sannyasi* culture through four *Amnaya mathas*, many subsidiary *maths* and the *Dasanami parampara*. He restructured the *sannyasin* orders, organising them into ten traditional paths to reach Godhead, and gave each of them a unique title – Sarasvati, Tirtha, Aranya, Bharati,

Ashrama, Giri, Parvata, Sagara, Vana and Puri.

The four monastic headquarters were established to unify the groups of *sannyasins* and bring them under the banner of *Vedic Dharma*. The *Dasanami* sects were placed nominally under one of the four *Mathas*, but maintained their independence. To propagate and uphold the scriptures, Sankara assigned one *Veda* to each of the four *Mathas*, and one *Upanishad* to each of the *Dasanamis*. The *maths* also served to facilitate the wandering ascetics.

The *Dasanami sanyasins* are divided into two categories— staff holders (*dandadhari*s) and non-staff holders (*paramahamsas*). Another functional categorisation of *Dasanami sadhus* are *astradhari*s (weapon holders, militant ascetics) and *sastradhari*s (scripture holders, learned ascetics). The militant *sannyasis* are recruited from all ten orders, and are known as *Naga sannyasis*. The *Naga* headquarters is known as *Akhada*.

### **Restructure of the Order**

Sankara restructured the *sannyasa* order by freeing *sannyasis* from all ritualistic sacrifices, orienting them towards the scriptures by allocating them *Vedantic* disciplines connected with

the *Upanishadic* texts, advocating renunciation (*Vairagya*) and mendicancy (*Parivrajaka*), stressing upon the fourfold practice of discrimination (*viveka*), detachment (*vairagya*), moral code (*sat-sampatti*) and liberation (*moksha*), and most importantly, creating a strong hierarchy and a strict *guru-parampara* to be followed to ensure that these precepts were enforced.

The guru, whilst initiating a pupil into *sannyasa*, carefully chooses one of the ten titles based on the physical and mental disposition of the disciple. The title is a constant reminder to the *sannyasi* to seek God through the path prescribed by his guru.

*Dasanami sannyasis* preserve their *guru parampara* fastidiously. “The *Dasanami* title not only carries a customised meaning to it but also holds a strong message of the fundamental duty that the *sannyasi* has to perform,” says octogenarian Shantananda Puri Swamiji of Vashistha Guha in Rishikesh.

The *akhadas* are an important entity in the *Sannyasa* order. An *Akhada* can have *sannyasis* with different *Dasanami* titles; they are not unique to an *Akhada*. The relationship between different *Dasanami sannyasis* and the different *akhadas* is cordial. *Akhadas* are

intensely possessive of Sankara and the *Dasanami* tradition. “It is the Sankara *parampara* that binds us together irrespective of the title we carry,” says one of the *sannyasis* of Niranjani Akhada.

Sankara’s role in unifying Indian *sannyasis* cannot be underestimated. “Imagine what the *Sannyasa* tradition would have been today, if Sankara had not given the *Dasanami* tradition,” avers elderly scholar Balaji.

An organiser *par excellence*, Sankara’s every action had a purpose. His foresight and vision created institutions that are pillars of Hinduism even today. When I asked Aashish Mishra, a journalist at Hardvar, “What was expected of a *sannyasi* after he is elevated to Mahamandaleshwar?” he replied, “What more can present day *sannyasis* do, when everything has already been done by Sankaracharya? They only need to earnestly follow the path laid out by him.”

### Meaning of Titles

Sankara explained the meaning of the titles unambiguously in his work *Matha Aamnya*. Here’s a brief glance into the *Dasanami* orders.

*Aranya*--one who lives in a forest completely detached from mundane

affairs, forsaking the material world, yet experiencing bliss of living in a mystical garden. He possesses Supreme happiness of merging with the Divine and is duty bound to spread it.

*Ashrama*--a monk living in a hermitage and thus freed from botheration of wandering; he has cast away the bonds of *kama* (desire), *krodha* (anger), *lobha* (greed), *moha* (delusion), *mada* (pride) and *matsarya* (jealousy) and attained steadfastness and dispassionateness. He is duty bound to propagate conquest of desires, attachment and worldly attractions.

*Bharati*--Carrying the treasure trove of learning, he forsakes all worldly burdens. Carrying the weight of Absolute knowledge, he transcends worldly sorrows. He is duty bound to propagate all *vidyas*, *tarka*, *tantra* and *Jnana*.

*Giri*--steadfast like a mountain, he lives on the lofty peaks in seclusion away from people. Practicing the *Gita* perennially, he cultivates firm, dignified and dispassionate intellect with lofty ideals. "He has to internalise his *sadhana* for universal good and has to live in seclusion," interprets Shantananda Puri Swamiji.

*Parvata*--one who resides at the foothill of the mountains in *samadhi*

state, with the power to perfectly discriminate between Truth and falsehood. He has realisation of exalted ideals with steadfast knowledge of the transient nature of the world.

*Puri*--one who is full of the knowledge of *Brahman*. One with perfect (*sampoorna*) spiritual prowess. He is perpetually immersed and installed in Absolute Bliss and Perfection. He is duty-bound to be completely engaged in *Jnana* and is not to mingle with the external world.

*Sagara*--one who has dived into the depths of the ocean of knowledge and collected the gems of Truth. He has to go in-depth into philosophical matters and his duty is to spread this knowledge of wisdom.

*Sarasvati*--one who is greatly learned and adept in *yoga*, one with his knowledge of *pranayama*, has mastered *Vedic* intonation and has proficiency of the *Vedas*. He specialises in music and propagates *jnana* of the fine arts.

*Tirtha*--One who bathes in the confluence of the three rivers of knowledge and seeks realisation of the Truth through *maha vakyas*, such as *Tattvam Asi* ("Thou art That), with the constant aim of unraveling their hidden meaning.

*Vana*--One who has transcended all the snares of desires, unshackled from the worldly ties and lives quietly in the interiors of deep forests. "His *sadhana* is internalised to merge with the Supreme for *loka kalyana* (Universal good). He is not permitted to interact with people

and lives in seclusion," avers Swami Shantananda Puri

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<b>Matha</b>	<b>Appellation</b>	<b>Sampradaya</b>
Dwaraka Peetha	Tirtha, Ashrama	Kitavara (freedom from tendencies hurtful to creatures)
Sringeri Sharada Peetha	Sarasvati, Bharati,	Bhurivara (Freedom from desire for worldly treasures)
Puri Peetha	Vana, Aranya	Bhogavara (Freedom from desire for enjoyment)
Jyotirmatha	Giri, Parvata, Sagara	Anandavara (freedom from desire for sensual pleasures)

