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The philosophy of life in the stotra literature of Sri Shankaracharya

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Abstract

The Stotra literature of Sri Shankaracharya offers a profound synthesis of devotional fervor and philosophical depth, providing a comprehensive vision of life that is both spiritually enriching and practically applicable. Shankaracharya, a seminal figure in Advaita Vedanta, composed numerous hymns (stotras) that praise various deities while encapsulating core Vedantic teachings. His stotras emphasize the ultimate reality of Brahman, the illusory nature of the world (maya), and the essential unity of the individual soul (jiva) with Brahman.

Through his hymns, Shankaracharya communicates that true fulfillment and liberation (moksha) are achieved through a combination of devotion (bhakti), knowledge (jnana), and ethical living. Works like the Dakshinamurti Stotram and Bhaja Govindam illustrate his teachings on non-dualism (Advaita), urging individuals to transcend material attachments and realize their inherent divinity. These stotras are imbued with poetic beauty and are designed to be accessible to all, offering practical guidance for self-realization and moral integrity.

Moreover, Shankaracharya's stotras address the psychological and emotional needs of devotees, providing solace and inspiration. By venerating deities like Vishnu, Shiva, and the Divine Mother, his hymns foster a deep sense of spiritual connection and inner peace. Overall, the Stotra literature of Sri Shankaracharya stands as an invaluable testament to a holistic approach to life, harmonizing devotion, wisdom, and ethical conduct in the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment.

Keyword: Devotional fervor, philosophical depth, vedantic teachings, Brahman, maya, fulfillment and liberation, material attachments, inherent divinity, poetic beauty, self-realization, inner peace

Introduction

In the creation of comprehensive Sanskrit stotra literature, Acharya Shankara adorns the foremost position among the greatest poets. The stotra literature of the Acharya has made many into poets and has prepared numerous scholars of Vedanta. Filled with the essence of devotion, brimming with poetic beauty, and kindling the dawn of wisdom, his stotra literature is renowned far and wide.

In the stotra literature of the Acharya, the principles of life are conveyed in a manner accessible to the common people, detailing the practices necessary for self-upliftment. The philosophical teachings, imbued with poetic style, provide a refined vision of life. In summary, it is a confluence of poetry, Vedanta, and life philosophy. Such a synthesis can only be seen in the literature of the Acharya.

Adi Shankaracharya, who incarnated in the 8th century when Sanatana Dharma was under threat from adversaries, re-established Sanatana Dharma on a firm foundation. Within his short lifespan (788-820 CE) of 32 years, he composed extensive commentaries on the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and Brahma Sutras, and traveled throughout India to teach these principles. He preached the essence of comprehensive philosophy encapsulated in the dictum

ब्रह्मसत्यं जगन्मिथ्या जीवो ब्रह्मैव नापरः ।

"Brahman is the only reality, the world is illusory, and the individual soul is not different from Brahman."

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The scriptures declare that only that which is eternal and immutable is true, which is Brahman. That which is mutable and impermanent is not true. Therefore, the world is not true like Brahman, as it does not remain uncontradicted through all times. It is only pragmatically true and is false only to the enlightened one. To ordinary people, it appears as true. Similarly, although Brahman-consciousness is the same as the life-consciousness in all beings, due to ignorance, its true nature is not known. Essentially, he taught that life itself is Brahman.

Acharya Shankara, who is revered as the proponent of the six systems of worship (Shanmatha), followed the divine (Bhagavad Gita) saying –

यो यो यां यां तनुं भक्तः श्रद्धयार्चितुमिच्छति |

तस्य तस्याचलां श्रद्धां तामेव विदधाम्यहम् ॥ भगवद्गीता-७-२१

(Whichever form a devotee desires to worship with faith). Accordingly, he composed stotras (hymns) that cater to the preferences and devotional sentiments of Vaishnavas, Shaivas, Shaktas, and other worshippers. These stotras serve as beneficial guidance to all devout individuals, resonating with the heartfelt emotions of adherents from all faiths.

The stotras composed by Shankaracharya for the upliftment of the world are regarded as mantras due to his ascetic prowess and divine influence.

मननात् त्रायते इति मन्त्रः

Means that any word which, when contemplated upon, leads to our salvation, is considered a mantra. There is no doubt that Shankaracharya is the sole sage who integrated the qualities of poetry, the principles of Vedanta, and the vision of life with the universally uplifting properties of mantras. Observing his stotras, which are filled with poetic qualities and are both elegant and sweet, it becomes clear that despite being a supreme philosopher, Acharya also possessed the heart of a poet.

By composing devotion-focused stotras that combine profound spiritual content with delightful poetic beauty, he has made the comprehensive understanding of karma, devotion, and knowledge accessible to receptive hearts. Among Acharya's significant stotras is the Vishnu Shatpadi, which has about six commentaries. One of these was composed by Acharya himself, while another was created in accordance with the doctrines of Sri Ramanujacharya. This concise and clear stotra exemplifies a simple style. Here, one verse beautifully manifests both poetic elegance and the explanation of Advaita philosophy.

सत्यपि भेदापगमे नाथ! तवाहं न मामकीनस्त्वम् |

सामुद्रो हि तरङ्गः क्वचन समुद्रो न तरङ्गः ॥ श्रीविष्णुषट्पदी -३

Here, even though the distinction between the individual soul and Brahman ultimately disappears, I belong to you, but you do not belong to me. The waves belong to the ocean, but the ocean does not belong to the waves. The striking uniqueness of this analogy can be observed here. In the Achyutashtaka, the use of metrical verses composed solely of various names (of the divine) enhances the beauty of the shlokas.

अच्युतं केशवं सत्यभामाधवं माधवं श्रीधरं राधिकाराधितम् |

इन्द्रिरामन्दिरं चेतसा सुन्दरं देवकीनन्दनं नन्दजं सन्दधे ॥ अच्युताष्टकम् -२

Sri Shankaracharya had mastered the Vedas, Smritis, and Puranas thoroughly. Although the ultimate truth is that all beings are inherently of the nature of Brahman, due to the distinctions imposed by Maya such as time, karma, and space, in the worldly affairs characterized by differences, there can be extraordinary individuals and avatars who shine more prominently with divine qualities. However, the single foundational principle that supports social, moral, and political values such as non-violence, non-stealing, non-possession, truthfulness, and peace, is the understanding that the divine essence exists in everyone and everything.

All religious teachers have realized that there is no other way to cultivate this sentiment than by planting and nurturing it in the heart-lotus of devotion. The more the glory of the Lord is described in the scriptures, the more human moral confidence increases. As one contemplates upon the divine attributes, unethical tendencies diminish. Therefore, Adi Shankaracharya, who understood the ultimate benefits of devotion, renunciation, and knowledge, was not satisfied merely with writing commentaries or compiling philosophical treatises. Nor was he content with composing summary texts. For the benefit of common people, he also wrote various hymns in different styles.

In numerous hymns composed by Adi Shankaracharya, he visits the deities he encountered during his travels across India, including Rama, Krishna, Ganesha, Skanda, Vishwanatha, Kalabhairava, Narasimha, Annapurna, Ganga, Rajarajeshwari, Ambika, and others. While expounding the ultimate truth in a profound, comprehensive, and essence-filled manner, he has also taught through hymns such as Dakshinamurti Stotram, Kaupina Panchakam, Manisha Panchakam, Harimide, Vijnana Nauka, and Charpatapanjari, which are Vedantic in nature. These hymns are accessible to the masses and are laden with various literary elements mentioned in poetic treatises, embodying diverse sentiments and rhetorical figures. Additionally, works like "Soundarya Lahari" and "Shivananda Lahari" contain the secrets of mantra shastra, blended with devotion and poetic beauty, revolutionizing the realms of bhakti and poetic aesthetics. Moreover, hymns like "Bhaja Govindam, Sadhanapanchakam and Nirvanashatkam are divine Vedantic poems that elucidate the philosophy of life.

In their hymns, Adi Shankaracharya has clearly illustrated the conception of meaningful living based on poetic beauty intertwined with profound philosophical truths. They have elucidated the secret of a fulfilling life through spirituality. These hymns, unlike the works of other poets, are not composed for worldly recognition or gain. They are invaluable treasures of world literature, crafted solely for the upliftment of humanity. There is no doubt that their pursuit leads to the highest human endeavor and benefit.

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