

Sringeri – Sustaining a Civilisation

By

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Abstract

गुशब्दस्त्वन्धकारः स्यात् रुशब्दस्तन्निरोधकः ।

अन्धकारनिरोधित्वात् गुरुरित्यभिधीयते ॥ १६॥

The syllable *gu* means darkness, the syllable *ru*, he who dispels them, because of the power to dispel darkness, the guru is thus named.

— *Advayataraka Upanishad, Verse 16*

Gurus have played a pivotal role in India since ancient Vedic times and have been responsible for the preservation and continuity of various schools of Sanatan Dharma. It is only through a Guru can one learn the scriptures to gain higher spiritual knowledge and find the Ultimate Truth, or moksha. Gurus could be either male or female (known as *Gurvis*). The *Guru Parampara* has produced numerous towering gurus over the ages.

One of the greatest has been Adi Shankara, an intellectual giant. The level of wisdom and knowledge he showed at a very early age made him a shining light for humanity. He was a prodigal child and an extraordinary scholar with almost superhuman capabilities. At the age of twelve, he took *sanyas* and left his home; at the age of thirty-two, he left his body. In those twenty years, he crisscrossed India three times, debated numerous scholars, and in between produced thousands of pages of profound literature (*Bhasyas*). He was the principal

exponent of Advaita Vedanta and established four *Peethams* across India to preserve and propagate Sanatana Dharma and Advaita Vedanta. The primary *Peetham* was at Sringeri.

The fact that these *Peethams* have continued to flourish with the changing times, without any break, shows the vigor and the rigor of the movement started by Adi Sankara.

Keywords

Peetham, India, Sringeri, matha, temple

Introduction

Cradled amidst the mesmerizing Shringa Giri hills of the Western Ghats on the banks of River Tunga in Chikkamagaluru district, tower the imposing ancient temples of Sri Sharadamba and Sri Vidyashankara. They mark the center of the Dakshinamnaya Sringeri Sharada Peetham, foremost of the *mathas* founded by Adi Sankara in the 8th century CE (this dating has been questioned later in this article). “Sacred vibrations of this place awaken your dormant spiritual nature,” say devotees who visit Sringeri regularly.¹

The name Sringeri is derived from *Rishyashringa-giri*, a nearby hill believed to be the location of the hermitage of Rishi Vibhandaka and his son Rishyashringa. In an episode in the *Balakanda* of the Ramayana, Vasishtha narrates how Rishyashringa brought rains to drought-stricken Romapada, a neighboring kingdom. It was during this period that Dasharatha, King of Ayodhya, invited Rishyashringa to officiate in the yagna named *Putrakameshti*, by which he was blessed with four sons, Sri Rama, and others.

Origins and History

A *matha* is more than an ashram. It is the home of a pre-eminent spiritual leader, a theological seminary and training school for priests, a library of rare texts, and often, has ancient temples.

The period of Adi Sankara's birth was an age of unrest and strife characterized by spiritual and intellectual bankruptcy and also political and social discord. Religious thought based on the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Epics, and the Puranas, was seriously challenged by atheism, agnosticism, and nihilism. Sanatana Dharma was in danger due to *vamachara* or tantric practices of the debased offshoots of the originally pure Jain, Buddhist, and Shakta cults.ⁱⁱ

Adi Sankara selected the site because when he was walking along the Tunga River, he saw the unusual sight of a cobra spreading its hood to provide shade to a frog from the sun while it was in labor pain. He was told this place was sanctified with the rare phenomenon of all animal species living in perfect harmony. Sankara intuited this must be the home of Sri Sharadamba. An institution was thus born, and Sringeri became a rejuvenating source for Sanatana Dharma, integrating various Hindu sects.



Image 1: View from across Tunga River

The *Madhaviya Sankara Digvijayam* describes that Adi Sankara then invoked the Divinity of Knowledge, Sri Sharada, and consecrated a sandalwood *murti* of Sri Sharadamba on a Sri Chakra which he carved on stone.

The Acharya appointed his prime disciple, Sri Sureshwaracharya, who was Maṇḍana Miśra in his *purvashrama*, as the first Acharya of the Peetham. Since then, the Peetham has been

blessed with an unbroken *Guru Parampara*, a galaxy of spiritual masters and *Jivanmuktas*. The disciples see in them the radiance of Sri Adi Sankara Himself.

After twelve years at Sringeri, Sankara continued on his mission to establish three more *mathas* covering the four corners of India (Dwarka, Joytir matha and Govardhana matha) for the sustenance and propagation of Sanatana Dharma in the country.

A fifth *matha* at Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu was also established by Adi Sankara. The fact that these *Mathas* have continued to flourish to this day without break shows the vigour of the movement started by Adi Sankara.

Sringeri Matha was patronized and protected by kings, irrespective of their religion and political leanings. The *matha* was also granted the privilege to collect taxes from certain villages for its upkeep. The Muslim ruler, Tipu Sultan once wrote: “We need your Divine presence for our lands to prosper with timely rains and harvest and for the good health of people.” The Peetham was also supported by other non-Hindu rulers, including the Adil Shahis of Bijapur, Hyder Ali, and Nizam, and later the British commissioners, Lord Cubbon and Bowring.

Sringeri – A Place of Learning

Besides being a spiritual centre, Sringeri was also a seat of traditional learning owing to the presence of Sri Sharada and the erudition of the Acharyas. They were instrumental in bringing forth commentaries on the Vedas and in further expounding the *Bhashyas* of Adi Shankaracharya. The Acharyas also wrote independent works besides producing hymns underlining their ardent devotion to the non-dual Supreme worshipped in multifarious forms. The Peetham thus came to be regarded as the *Vyakhyana Simhasana* – the Throne of Transcendental Wisdom.

Dating Adi Shankaracharya’s Birth

Most literature states that Adi Shankaracharya was born in 788 CE, a narrative by European scholars. Until the British came to India, Indian history used the *Yudhishthira*

yuga or *Salivahana saka* and not the Christian Era to record dates. Many datings suffered when dates were converted between the eras. Irrespective of the dates, one unquestionable fact is Adi Shankaracharya's establishment of four distinct *peethas*. Their traditional lineage lists (*guru-parampara*) mention the names and usually the dates of each successive pontiff of that particular *matha*. The list of the Dwarka *Peetha* in the West gives the birth date of Sankara as 2631 of the *Yudhishthira era*, corresponding to 509 BCE. The list of the Kanchi *matha* gives the date 2593 of the *Kali Yuga era*, also corresponding to 509 BCE.ⁱⁱⁱ It is significant that two different lineage lists from two widely separated *mathas*, having 77 and 68 successors respectively, both go back in an unbroken line to 509 BCE.

There is also epigraphic evidence supporting the date of 509 BCE for Sankara's birth. The copper plate inscription addressed to Sankara by King Sudhanvan of Dwarka, dated 2663 of the *Yudhishthira era* corresponds to 477 BCE, the year of Sankara's death. Since Sankara died at the age of 32, this correctly places his birth in 509 BCE.

Had Sankara been born in 788 CE, Christian teachings would have been prevalent in his native land (Kerala) where the first Christian roots in India took place much earlier. Adi Sankara traveled the country to debate non-Vedic scholars, and definitely, he would have challenged Christian teachings if they existed. There is no mention of Christianity in any of his works.

See also: Government wrong on Adi Sankara's birth year: Kanchi seer

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/government-wrong-on-adi-shankaras-birth-year-kanchi-seer/article7908827.ece>

Temples of Sringeri Matha

Sringeri is home to a number of historic temples. Of these, Sri Sharadamba Temple, Sri Vidyashankara Temple, and Sri Malahanikareshwara Temple are the most prominent.

The entrance to the complex through the 127-foot *Rajagopuram* leads to a large paved area housing the temples of Sri Sharadamba and Sri Vidyashankara.

Sri Sharadamba Temple

Sri Sharadamba, the presiding deity of Sringeri, is the incarnation of Devi Sarasvati who came to earth in the form of Sri Upaya Bharathi, representing the combined powers of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, and of Durga, Lakshmi and Sarasvati.^{iv}

The ancient temple has a glorious history that begins with an unpretentious shrine with the sandalwood *murti* of Sharada over the Sri Chakra. Subsequently, in the 14th century, Sri Bharati Krishna Tirtha and Sri Vidyananya had a temple built in the Kerala style and installed the present golden *murti*.

Sri Sacchidananda Shivabhinava Nrisimha Bharati raised the present granite structure and Sri Chandrasekhara Bharati consecrated the new temple in May 1916. The *maha mandapam* has large stone pillars exquisitely carved with deities like Durga, Raja Rajeshwari, and dvârapalakas.



Image 2: Sri Shardaamba Temple



Image 3: Sri Shardaamba Temple- The Presiding Deity

Sri Vidyashankara Temple

The Sri Vidyashankara Temple, adjacent to the Sri Sharadamba temple, was built in the year 1338 CE in commemoration of the pontiff Sri Vidyashankara, by Sri Vidyaranya who was the patron-saint of Harihara and Bukka, the founder-brothers of the Vijayanagar empire. The temple was probably built on an earlier Hoysala site as it combines Hoysala (Chalukya) and Vijayanagar (Dravida) architectural features. The granite temple is an architectural marvel. On the western side is the *garbhagriha* with a large black stone Shivalinga, known as *Vidyashankara Linga*, with Vidya Ganapati on one side and Durga on the other side. On the other three sides of the *garbhagriha* are shrines to Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara with their consorts.

In the eastern half of the structure is a large *mandapa* with twelve pillars (*rashi stambhas*), marked by the twelve signs of the zodiac. In front of each pillar is carved a huge

Vyala mounted on a crouching elephant. Inside the open mouth of the *Vyalas*, the stone has been skilfully removed leaving a ball that can be rolled behind the teeth, but not taken out.

The main interest astronomically is the *navaranga* with its *rashi stambhas*, whose unique aspects have been commented on by famous archaeologists:^v

“Each of these twelve *pillaikkals* bears the image of a sign of the zodiac or *rashi* after which the pillar itself is called. It is said that sunlight falls in the early mornings upon the appropriate *rashi* pillar, during each of the twelve months of the solar year, through one of the three openings in the order of the twelve solar months ... The floor itself is marked by shadow lines in conformity with the Sun’s movement around the twelve *rashi* pillars.” (Srinivasan, 1976: 35).

In other words, the *navaranga* is devised as a calendrical device. These were unique innovations of the Vijayanagara school where master craftsmen combined astronomy and architecture to produce this marvel.

The outer walls are elaborately sculpted and display 60 sculptures, making the temple a museum of sculpture and iconography.



Image 4: Sri Vidyashankara Temple Emanates Kknowledge

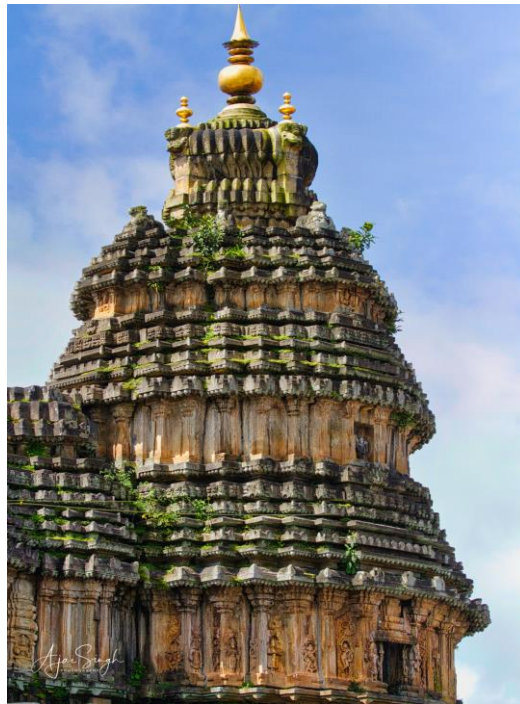


Image 5: Sri Vidyashankara Temple Shikhara



Image 6: Sri Vidyashankara Temple-A Veritable Museum of Iconography



Image 7: Sri Vidyashankara Temple-Eastern End

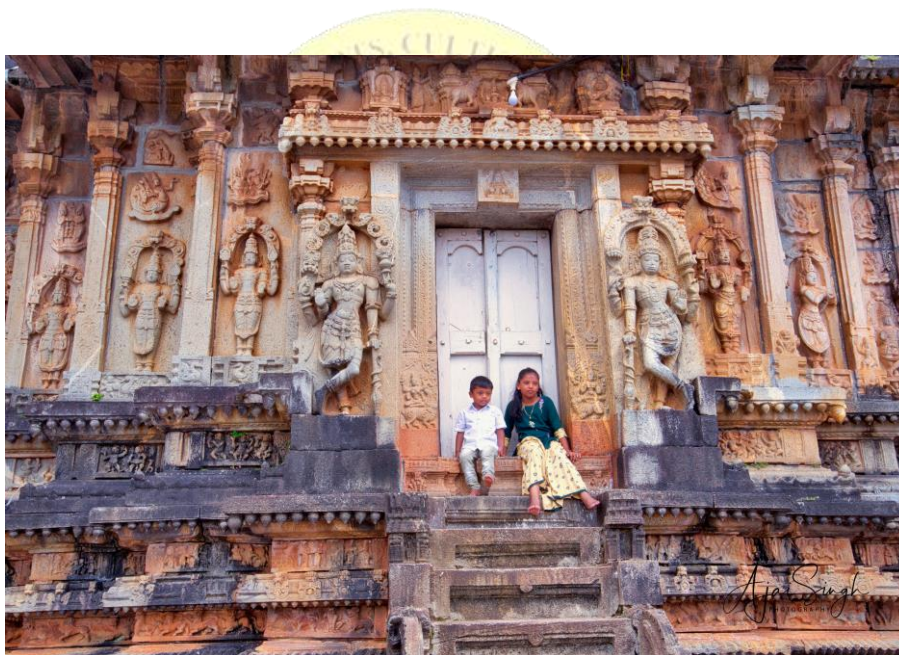


Image 8: Sri Vidyashankara Temple-Western End



Image 9: The Sri Vidyashankara Temple at Sringeri

Sri Malahanikareshvara Temple

Malahanikareshvara means “destroyer of the impurities of the soul.” This serene temple is located at the center of Sringeri town atop a small hill. The Linga is said to have been worshipped by Sage Vibhandaka, son of Sage Kashyapa. The Sthanbha Ganapati was created in stone by Sri Ahinava Narasimha Bharati (1599 – 1622 CE), the 24th Jagadguru, by drawing a figure of Ganesha with a piece of turmeric on one of the front pillars.



Image 10: Other temples at Sringeri-Torana Ganapati Temple

Conclusion

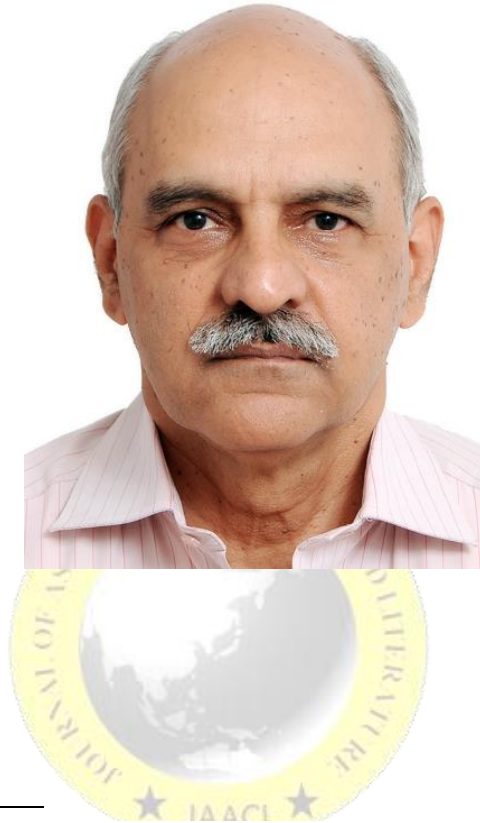
Sri Adi Shankaracharya appeared at a time when Sanatana Dharma was being challenged due to the spiritual and intellectual bankruptcy of the times. Shankaracharya reformed and revived Dharma and unified Bharat by walking across the region and spreading Vedic teachings. Central to his work was Sringeri, where he established the first *Peetham* or *matha*. The matha emerged as the pivotal institution dominating the social and economic life of India. Not only was it central to the spiritual life of people, but it was also central to their social and economic life. It is also a place where saints and meditational practitioners following the *dharmic* tenets reside around a temple, living a life of meditation, and quiet reflection, with the goal of self-realization.

About the Author

Brig A. P. Singh served in the Indian Army and after retirement, he has been following up on his interests in India's heritage and history. He is also an avid traveler, photographer, and blogger. He has given talks on India's heritage and knowledge systems at various forums. He

is the Editor of a strategic affairs journal, AGNI, which is published by the Forum for Strategic and Security Studies. Many of his articles have been published in various online portals, including the India Foundation.

His photo blog can be seen at <https://collectingmoments.in/>



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