

The Historical Development of Advaita Vedānta Philosophy

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Abstract

Advaita Vedānta is a big idea in Indian philosophy. It says that everything is one, and that one true thing is called Brahman. The world we see and experience every day is considered to be an illusion, or māyā. This present study looks at how this idea of Advaita Vedānta developed over time. It examines important ancient books like the Upanishads and the Brahma Sutras, and also the writings of important thinkers like Śaṅkara. By comparing Advaita Vedānta with other philosophies, the study shows how the school of thought was formed, how it branched out, and how it competed with other schools of thought. The roots of Advaita lie in the *Upaniṣadic* scriptures, with early *Vedāntic* synthesis by *Bādarāyaṇa* in the *Brahma Sūtras*. *Śaṅkara* (8th century CE) systematized Advaita through rigorous commentary, solidifying its metaphysical and epistemological foundations. Post-*Śaṅkara* developments led to two major interpretive schools: the *Bhāmatī* and Vivaraṇa traditions. *Advaitins* further refined logic and responded to critiques from dualist and theistic schools. In the 19th–20th centuries, Advaita *Vedānta* saw a revival, notably through figures like Swami Vivekananda, integrating modern scientific and nationalistic thought.

The enduring relevance of Advaita *Vedānta* lies in its philosophical depth and adaptability. From ancient metaphysical inquiry to modern spiritual discourse, *Advaita* continues to influence global religious and philosophical thought. This historical overview highlights its resilience and ongoing evolution in the face of intellectual and socio-political change.

Key words- *Advaita, Śaṅkara, māyā, Vedānta, Brahman, jñāna, Indian philosophy*

Introduction

Advaita Vedānta, which literally means "non-dual end of the Vedas," is commonly held to be the most far-reaching and philosophically subtle school of *Vedānta* in Indian intellectual tradition. It teaches the basic teaching of non-duality namely that the ultimate reality is lord *Brahman*—pure, infinite, unchanging consciousness—and the empirical world, with its diversity and seeming dualities, is a creation of *māyā*, or illusion. In Advaita's view, the personal self is not finally distinct from *Brahman*; instead, through knowledge, one comes to see their fundamental oneness with the Absolute.

Advaita Vedānta has its roots deep in the ancient Vedic and Upaniṣadic literature, where initial meditations on the nature of the self and ultimate reality were first formulated. These philosophical ideas were subsequently synthesized and systematized by *Bādarāyaṇa* in the *Brahma Sūtras*, the first attempt at codifying *Vedāntic* thought. Yet *Ādi Śaṅkara*, during the 8th century CE, clearly founded *Advaita* as a consistent and disciplined school of philosophy in his commentaries on the *Upaniṣads*, *Bhagavad Gītā*, and *Brahma Sūtras*. He stressed the illusory character of the world and the non-dual nature of reality.

In the post-Śaṅkara period, Advaita Vedānta evolved through a rich tradition of scholastic inquiry and commentary. The establishment of the Bhāmatī and Vivaraṇa traditions marked important commentarial developments within the school, each advancing distinctive interpretations of key Advaitic doctrines. Concurrently, Advaitin philosophers participated in sustained polemical and dialectical engagements with competing philosophical systems, particularly Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita, Buddhism, and Nyāya, contributing to the systematic articulation and consolidation of Advaita metaphysics and epistemology. In the contemporary world, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries, *Advaita Vedānta* witnessed a resurgence due to colonialism, the emergence of science, as well as nationalist movements, with Swami Vivekananda and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan being the leaders responsible for disseminating its philosophy both within India as well as internationally.

Vedas and Upaniṣadas

The roots of Advaita Vedānta can be traced to the Ṛgveda and find their fullest expression in the Upaniṣads, especially in statements such as “*Ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*”. Truth is one, sages call it by various names – *Ṛgveda*ⁱ. The Upaniṣads elaborate this mystical unity through expressions like “*Sarvam khalvidam Brahma*”ⁱⁱⁱ. All this is indeed *Brahman* –The early Upaniṣadic seers did not present a systematic philosophy but a vision of spiritual unity realized through contemplation and direct insight. These intuitive realizations would become the metaphysical axioms of *Advaita Vedānta*. The emphasis was not on ritual but on Self-realization *Atma-jñāna*, that gradually set *Vedānta* apart from the earlier *karma-kāṇḍa* of the Vedasⁱⁱⁱ

The Upaniṣads form the scriptural foundation of Advaita. Several Mahāvākyas (great sayings)



succinctly express its central doctrine:

- Tat Tvam Asi - *That Thou Art*^{iv}
- Aham Brahmasmi - *I am Brahman*^v
- Prajnānam Brahma- *Consciousness is Brahman*^{vi}
- Ayam Ātmā Brahma - *This Self is Brahman*^{vii}

The distinction between the empirical--*vyāvahārika* and the absolute -- *pāramārthika* levels of truth is already implicit in these texts. For instance, while the world appears pluralistic and dynamic, the *Upaniṣads* declare that this is a veil over the one indivisible reality—*Brahman*^{viii}

Bādarāyaṇa,

The first attempt to systemize the philosophical vision of the *Upaniṣads* was made by *Bādarāyaṇa*, through the *Brahma Sūtras*. These aphorisms are terse and cryptic, demanding interpretative commentary. Nevertheless, the *Brahma Sūtras* attributed to the development of diverse Vedāntic traditions, including Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Dvaita Vedānta^{ix}. This ancient text, also known as the *Vedānta Sūtras*, is a systematic and aphoristic treatise that synthesizes and explains the teachings of the *Upaniṣads*. Its primary goal is to establish the ultimate reality, *Brahman*, as the sole and supreme truth and to provide a logical framework for understanding the relationship between *Brahman*, the individual soul, and the material world.

The text is structured into four chapters, each addressing a specific aspect of this profound philosophy. The first chapter, "*Samanvaya*" or "harmony," seeks to harmonize the various and sometimes seemingly contradictory statements found in the *Upaniṣads*. It meticulously demonstrates that all these texts, regardless of their superficial differences, ultimately point to the same ultimate reality: *Brahman*. *Badarayana* meticulously analyzes various *Upaniṣadic* passages to prove that *Brahman* is the origin, sustenance, and dissolution of the entire universe. This chapter firmly establishes *Brahman* as the intelligent and material cause of the cosmos, rejecting any alternative theories of creation.

The second chapter, "*Avirodha*" or "non-contradiction," defends the philosophy of the *Brahma Sūtras* against rival philosophical schools. *Badarayana* engages in a rigorous debate with other systems of thought, such as *Samkhya*, *Vaisheshika*, *Buddhism* and *Jainism*, demonstrating the logical inconsistencies and shortcomings of their doctrines. He artfully refutes their arguments and reinforces the supremacy of the *Upaniṣadic* teachings. This chapter is a masterpiece of philosophical polemics, showcasing the intellectual depth and logical precision of the *Vedantic* tradition.

The Third chapter, "*Sadhana*" or "the means," is dedicated to the practical aspects of spiritual practice and the path to liberation. It outlines the various disciplines and virtues necessary for a spiritual seeker to attain the knowledge of *Brahman*. This chapter discusses topics such as the importance of renunciation, the role of meditation, and the significance of devotion. It also delves into the nature of the individual soul, its journey through different states of existence,



and the ultimate goal of merging with *Brahman*. *Badarayana* explains that through a combination of ethical conduct, self-control, and intense spiritual practice, one can transcend the limitations of the ego and realize true identity as *Brahman*.

The fourth and final chapter, "*Phala*" or "the fruit," describes the state of liberation and the ultimate destiny of the realized soul. It paints a vivid picture of the blissful and eternal state of a person who has attained the knowledge of *Brahman*. This chapter discusses the different types of liberation, the state of a liberated person while still alive - *Jivanmukta*, and the ultimate destination of the soul after the death of the physical body. It concludes by affirming that the knowledge of *Brahman* is the only means to transcend the cycle of birth and death and attain the ultimate state of eternal bliss.

In short, *Badarayana's Brahma Sutras* is a small but detailed masterpiece that systematically arranges and interprets the central principles of the *Upanishads*. It is a work of profound philosophical and spiritual meaning, offering a rational and potent system for comprehending the nature of existence, the means to freedom, and the definitive goal of human existence. Its aphoristic form and deep wisdom have stimulated numerous commentaries and remain a source of profound study and reflection for those learning *Vedanta*.

One of the earliest interpreters of *Vedānta* was *Bhartṛprapañca*, whose views are only known through *Śaṅkara's* refutations. *Bhartṛprapañca* offered a *realistic pluralism*, arguing for the reality of multiplicity alongside *Brahman*^x. His position was considered contradictory to the core non-dualistic insight of the *Upanishads*.

Another important pre-*Śaṅkara* Vedāntin was *Gauḍapāda*, the teacher of *Śaṅkara's* teacher *Govindapāda*. *Gauḍapāda's* *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā* is a foundational *Advaita* text that incorporates Buddhist terminology like *ajāti-vāda* (non-origination), asserting that the world has no real beginning and is a mere appearance.^{xi} Despite the similarity to *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, *Gauḍapāda* firmly anchors his doctrine in the *Upanishads* and maintains the self's absolute reality.^{xii}

Adi Shankaracharya: 788 - 820 CE

Ācārya *Śaṅkara's* authoritative exposition on the *Brahma Sūtras*, known as the *Śāṅkarabhāṣya*, serves as a influential contribution to the shaping of *Advaita Vedānta*. Written in the 8th century CE, this interpretative masterpiece engages systematically with the dense and terse aphorisms of *Bādarāyaṇa*, who aimed to bring together the divergent philosophical insights of the *Upanishads* into a coherent doctrinal system. Due to the highly compact and ambiguous nature of the *Brahma Sūtras*, they necessitate detailed commentary, and *Śaṅkara's bhāṣya* provided both a profound philosophical framework and a methodological lens that would steer Indian metaphysical discourse for generations to come^{xiii}

Śaṅkara's philosophical orientation is anchored in the conviction that *Brahman*—the highest truth—is singular -*advaita*, devoid of attributes -*nirguṇa*, and fundamentally identical with the



inner self -*ātman* of all beings. He asserts that the manifest universe possesses only a dependent or apparent reality- *mithyā*; it lacks independent existence and ultimately rests upon Brahman, the one ultimate reality. According to *Śaṅkara*, liberation is not the acquisition of something external or new, but rather the eradication of *avidyā* -ignorance, which obscures the essential unity between the self and Brahman. The renowned Upaniṣadic declaration-” *tat tvam asi*” captures this non-dual realization and is regarded by *Śaṅkara* as the core message of Vedāntic scripture^{xiv}.

Śaṅkara's hermeneutic approach is characterized by precision and structural clarity. He makes use of the classical *Adhikaraṇa* technique, where each *sūtra* or collection of *sūtras* is analyzed through a systematic inquiry encompassing: definition of a doubt, articulation of counter-arguments -*pūrvapakṣa*, and demonstration of the winning point of view - *siddhānta*. His interpretations are backed by three authoritative sources: *śruti* (revealed texts), *tarka* (logical reasoning), and *anubhava* (direct experience)^{xv}. Additionally, *Śaṅkara* employs the instructional method of *adhyāropa-apavāda* - initial superimposition followed by withdrawal or negation. This pedagogical strategy involves first explaining concepts using accessible, empirical terms and then retracting these preliminary notions to guide the student toward the non-dual truth.

A fundamental doctrine of *Śaṅkara*'s Advaita Vedānta is the identity of the individual self (*Jīva*) and Brahman (*Jīva-Brahma aikya*). According to *Śaṅkara*, the apparent distinction between the two arises from *Avidyā* (ignorance), which is beginningless and projects a sense of duality upon the essentially non-dual reality. While he does not reject the empirical existence of the world, he regards it as *mithyā*—neither absolutely real nor absolutely unreal. The world appears real at the empirical level but loses its independent reality upon the realization of Brahman, much like a dream that vanishes upon awakening. This appearance of multiplicity is explained through the concept of *māyā*, the power responsible for superimposing diversity upon the undivided Brahman. However, *māyā* does not possess independent existence; it is dependent upon Brahman and functions solely as a veil that conceals the ultimate truth of non-duality.

Śaṅkara also voices strong criticism of the ritualism endorsed by the *Mīmāṃsā* school. While the *Mīmāṃsakas* validate Vedic rituals as eternal and effective in securing heavenly rewards or liberation, *Śaṅkara* refutes this stance by arguing that ritual action cannot dispel *avidyā*. Since action presupposes duality implying a division between subject and object it is inherently limited in leading to the realization of non-dual truth. Instead, *Śaṅkara* prioritizes knowledge that emerges from deep inquiry and scriptural contemplation as the exclusive path to liberation. He also refutes the Sāṅkhya view that posits two independent realities—*puruṣa* and *prakṛti*—insisting instead that all plurality is just an apparent and not ultimately real.

It was hardly a passive explication that *Śaṅkara* produced. His *bhāṣya* is instead a living, critical philosophical treatise. He confronts rival readings directly and methodically takes them apart with a mix of scriptural and logical force. His clear argument and well-organized system came to general acclaim among *Advaitins* but also elicited vigorous counterarguments from



theistic *Vedāntins* such as *Rāmānuja* and *Madhva*. These philosophers wrote their own explanations of the *Brahma Sūtras*, rejecting overtly Śaṅkara's idea of nirguṇa Brahman as the supreme principle.

Śaṅkarabhāṣya has made a profound and lasting imprint upon Indian philosophy. It provided the structure for later Advaitic thinkers including *Sureśvara*, *Padmapāda*, *Vācaspati Miśra*, and *Vidyāranya*, affecting not merely metaphysical investigation but also epistemological, moral, and religious thought. Even today, *Swami Vivekananda* and *Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan* among others have borrowed heavily from *Śaṅkara's Advaita* to develop a spiritually compelling philosophy for modern India.

In short, *Śaṅkara's* commentary on the *Brahma Sūtras* is more than mere exegesis, but a revolutionary philosophical work. It combines rigorous argument, scriptural orthodoxy, and spiritual maturity to present a vision of existence based on non-dualism. By doing so, it set the stage for an intellectual current that still dominates Indian philosophy and also for its reception abroad.

Post-Śaṅkara Advaitins

After Śaṅkara, the tradition saw the rise of sub-schools and deeper analysis. Scholars split into two primary interpretive lineages: the Bhāmatī school and the Vivaraṇa school.

Sureśvara - 8th–9th century CE

Sureśvara authored key works such as- *Naishkarmya Siddhi* and the *Vārtikas* on *Śaṅkara's Brhadāranyaka* and *Taittirīya Upaniṣad Bhāṣyas*. Formerly known as *Maṇḍana Miśra*, a Mīmāṃsaka scholar became a direct disciple of *Śaṅkara*. He firmly held that knowledge alone without ritual action or formal renunciation is the immediate cause of liberation (*mokṣa*). While accepting the importance of karma and knowledge as preparatory disciplines, he emphasized that knowledge alone can truly liberator. *Sureśvara* opposed emerging ritualistic or dualistic interpretations and articulated *Śaṅkara's Advaita* in a style marked by clarity and intellectual rigor^{xvi}.

Padmapāda -9th century CE

Padmapada, one of the earliest *Śaṅkara's* disciples, wrote *Pañcapadikā*, a commentary on the first part of *Śaṅkara's Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*. He came up with the famous theory of *adhyasa* (superimposition) which attributes one of the properties of one of the entities to the other, like mistaking a rope for a snake. *Padmapada's* view of *māyā*, the *māyā* of *Brahman*, a kind of illusion, differs from believing it as an illusion. He thought it was a dependent power of *Brahman*, and therefore, not wholly unintelligible, but functional and real on the level where it appears. This perspective shaped the *Vivaraṇa* school's emphasis on universal ignorance as a cosmic principle^{xvii}.



Vācaspati Miśra - 9th century CE

Vācaspati Miśra, the renowned author of the *Bhāmatī*, an influential commentary on Śaṅkara's *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, made significant contributions to Advaita Vedānta while also engaging deeply with the philosophical traditions of Nyāya, Sāṃkhya, Mīmāṃsā, and Yoga. He is regarded as the founder of the Bhāmatī school of Advaita. In his interpretation, *avidyā* (ignorance) is conceived as an individual phenomenon associated with the *jīva*, rather than as a universal principle. Although beginningless, it is ultimately removable through true knowledge. Vācaspati acknowledged the importance of preparatory disciplines, including mental purification and ritual practices, as aids to spiritual progress; nevertheless, he maintained that liberation (*mokṣa*) is attained solely through *jñāna* (knowledge). In contrast to the Vivaraṇa tradition, which locates ignorance at a more universal level, the Bhāmatī school attributes it to the individual self. While remaining fundamentally faithful to Śaṅkara's non-dualistic framework, Vācaspati Miśra introduced several subtle yet significant modifications in both method and metaphysical interpretation^{xviii}.

Prakāśātman - 11th century CE

Prakāśātman Parts a commentary on Padmapāda's work, and it was crucial in shaping the doctrine of the Vivaraṇa school. He was a vigorous proponent of the doctrine of *mūlāvidyā* or "root ignorance" as the reason behind bondage and the manifestation of the cosmos. His epistemological position was closer to Śaṅkara's idealism but if the case of the ontology of ignorance was emphasized as real in the empirical world^{xix}. He defined the difference between direct -Aparokṣa and indirect knowledge, and in doing so, systematized *Vivaraṇa* thought and impacted scholars such as *Amalānanda* and *Vidyāranya*.

Madhusūdana Sarasvatī -16th century CE

Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, is one of the important figures in later Advaita, authored *Advaita Siddhi*, *Siddhāntabindu*, and a Gītā commentary titled *Bhagavad-Gītā-Gudhārtha-Dīpikā*. His *Advaita Siddhi* responded to the dualist criticisms of Vyāsātīrtha in *Nyāyāmṛta*, defending non-duality through rigorous dialectical argument. He is renowned for his integration of *bhakti* (devotion) with Advaita, his focus on the worship of Kṛṣṇa - an innovation at a time of strong sectarian divides. His works appealed to both rational thinkers and devotional practitioners, offering a rare conjunction of emotional depth and philosophical sophistication^{xx}.

Engagement with Rival Philosophies

Advaita did not evolve in isolation. It constantly responded to competing traditions:

- **Pūrva Mīmāṃsā** upheld the eternality of Vedic ritual and denied metaphysical speculation. Śaṅkara criticized its overemphasis on rituals without inner realization.
- **Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika** argued for realism, atomism, and the reality of external objects. Advaitins refuted these using **sublation theory** - *Apavāda*.



- Sāṅkhya and Yoga traditions maintain a dualistic distinction between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, Advaita Vedānta adopts many of their analyses of the mind and the process of liberation while rejecting their ontological dualism. Instead, it upholds the doctrine of non-duality, according to which Brahman alone constitutes the ultimate reality.
- **Buddhism**, especially **Madhyamaka**, had profound impact. *Gauḍapāda* adopted the *ajāti-vāda*, and Śāṅkara engaged with Buddhist idealism critically, accusing them of *nihilism*^{xxi}.

Modern Revival and Influence

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Advaita Vedānta underwent a revival amid colonialism, modern science, and nationalism.

- *Swami Vivekānanda*, disciple of *Sri Ramakrishna*, reinterpreted Advaita as a rational, universal philosophy, asserting the divinity of the soul and the unity of religions.
- *Ramana Maharshi* advocated a direct path to self-realization through *self-inquiry*, bypassing scriptural study and ritual.
- *Swami Sivananda*, and *Swami Chinmayananda*, established institutions that taught Advaita globally, combining traditional methods - *śravaṇa*, *manana*, *nididhyāsana* with modern pedagogy^{xxii}.

Today, *Advaita* influences spiritual movements worldwide, including non-duality teachings in the West, comparative religion, and consciousness studies. *Advaita Vedānta* is not merely a philosophical doctrine but a profound path of self-realization and metaphysical insight. From its origins in the Upaniṣadic quest for truth, through Śāṅkara's brilliant synthesis, to its ongoing global relevance, *Advaita* remains an enduring system of thought. It represents the Indian genius for unity in diversity, offering a vision of ultimate reality that transcends name, form, and doctrine.

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ⁱ Ṛgveda 1.164.46.

ⁱⁱ Chāndogya Upaniṣad 3.14.1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hiriyanna, *Essentials of Indian Philosophy*, p. 34.

^{iv} Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7

^v Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad 1.4.10



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- ^{vi} *Aitareya Upaniṣad* 3.3
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