

Satsanga with Sri Swami Vidadatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam

Bhaja Govindam - Introduction

This is a poem consisting of 31 verses composed by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya. He was a wise man, a great teacher, devotee and *karma yogi*. He appeared in India about 1200 to 1500 years ago at a time when the people were mired in confusions and misconceptions obtaining about religion and the scriptures. There were many schools of philosophy prevalent at that time and the common man was unclear about the teachings of the scriptures. There were also many distortions in the interpretations of the various rituals and stipulations of the scriptures, and the people were distressed by the many practices that involved the sacrifice of animals etc. Thus, at the time that Ādi Śaṅkarācārya appeared, a desperate situation obtained for the spiritual seeker and the confusion and desperation within, manifested in the behavior and conduct of the people.

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya is said to be an incarnation of Lord Śiva because in the short span of his life of 32 years his accomplishment was so phenomenal. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said of him, that what Śrī Śaṅkarācārya accomplished in one short life is much more than what many people would accomplish in many life times. While there are many legends about Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, as is the case with most of the ancient sages of India, there are not many historical facts available to us. We can only learn about him through his works.

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya's most important work is, of course, his commentary upon the Upaniṣads, the Brahma-Sūtra and the Bhagavad Gītā. This provided access to the knowledge contained in these basic texts of our culture. Until then, the teachings of the scriptures were not available to the common man because there were not many teachers who could unfold what the scriptures had to say. Śrī Śaṅkarācārya was a great teacher, who traveled along the entire country as many as three times, teaching the truths of the scriptures to the people. He conducted debates with learned people wherever necessary, in order to make them appreciate the true vision of the scriptures. Many of his opponents subsequently became his disciples. Thus, he had a large following in India among kings and scholars as well as ordinary people. Śrī Śaṅkarācārya can be credited with reviving the Vedic culture and Hindu tradition. If not for him, India would perhaps be different from what it is today.

Legend has it that he knew his native language, Malayālam, by the time he was two, and Sanskrit, by the age of three. By the age of five, he knew the Vedas, and completed all his studies at the *gurukulam* when he was seven. He took *sannyāsa* at the age of eight and by the time he was twelve, he had completed the study of all the scriptures like the Brahma-Sūtra and the Upaniṣads. Between the ages of 12 and 16, he traveled, wrote his commentaries, and taught his disciples. His life was supposed to end at 16, but it is believed that he was given another 16 years to live by the great sage Veda Vyāsa. Bhagavān Vyāsa is supposed to have come to Śrī Śaṅkarācārya in the guise of an old Brahmin and at the end of a lengthy debate blessed him with another 16 years of life. Sage Vyāsa apparently urged him to go around the country and spread the knowledge and therefore, the last 16 years of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya's life were spent in spreading this knowledge throughout India.

Background and Circumstances of Composition

There are legends relating to many of the hymns composed by Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, and there is a similar background to this composition. It is said that once, when Śrī Śaṅkarācārya was in Benares, he came upon an old pundit, a scholar, repeating the aphorisms of the grammarian Pāṇini. Śrī Śaṅkarācārya was moved that the scholar who was almost at the point of death was repeating the aphorism. He wondered whether the old man understood the value of this kind of accomplishment. He could see that the man was confused, and in the poem, addresses him as a *mūḍhaḥ*. A *mūḍhaḥ* is not so much a fool, as one who is lost or deluded.

A person who knows that he is lost will ask for the right way, and can then correct his path, but a person who is lost and unaware that he is lost goes about doing what he is doing, without knowing it. You can compare a deluded person to one who is intoxicated and does not know what he is doing, and has to be slapped back into consciousness or brought to his senses in a harsh manner. This old scholar thought that whatever he was doing was right. Seeing him, Śrī Śaṅkarācārya decided that it was necessary to draw his attention to the realities of life. In these 31 verses Śrī Śaṅkarācārya addresses the common man who imagines certain realities, unaware that he is pursuing something that is unintelligent.

Mūḍhamati means one whose mind is 'lost' as it were. The common man is lost in his life. It is as though Śrī Śaṅkarācārya is slapping us in order to bring us back into consciousness. There are certain realities of life to which we have

not been awake so far. He wants to awaken us from sleep, and perhaps, therefore, uses what may appear to be a harsh word, *mūḍhamate*.

This poem is known as the Bhaja Govindam because the first verse begins with the words, “*Bhajagovindam bhajagovindam*”. It was originally called the Moha Mudgara. A *mudgara* is a mallet or hammer, and *moha* means delusion. Delusion, like intoxication, requires to be dealt with firmly, and through these verses Śrī Śaṅkarācārya delivers some strokes of the mallet in order to rouse us out of delusion and restore proper consciousness to those of us who are lost in life¹.

¹ Transcribed and edited by Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.