



## Adi Shankaracharya: The Architect of Pilgrimage Tourism in India

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### Abstract

*Travel in the past was not an easy task. There are numerous historical records which show that danger from dacoits, illness and wild animals were major resistance to travel from one court to another. Yet, there was a man of action during the time of 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century who not only traveled from north to south and east to west to all major places of then India, but also propounded such a system of travel and tourism in which people have to travel throughout the country in all four directions to complete their sacred journey. He was none other than the great Indian philosopher, popularly known as Adi Shankaracharya. He was also a great thinker of scientific outlook. The focus of present paper is to access his personality as an architect who wove such a web of Indian pilgrimage tourism system which attracts the people from every nook and corner still today.*

**Keyword:** Shankara, Mutt, Travel and Tourism, Pilgrimage, India.

### Introduction

Even with the most modern and fast moving means of transport, automobiles, railway trains and aero plane and all the facilities and amenities that go a long way in making travel both quick and comfortable, how many of us have seen the whole of India? There is a vast network of roads and railways lines with numerous bridges and tunnels which enables us to cross thick forests, high mountains and turbulent rivers with ease and make any part of the country readily accessible, but how many of us have visited the four corners of our country?

This query may prove rather embarrassing to most of us even in this 21<sup>st</sup> century for the simple reason that, in nine cases out of ten, the answer is likely to be in the negative. Yet, there had been a great man, not ten or twenty years but about twelve hundred years back when there were none of things mentioned above, who traversed the length and breadth of this vast country on foot in a very short span of life, this great traveler was the greatest Sanskrit scholar and philosopher that the country has produced. He is well known to all by the name of Adi Shankaracharya.

The life of Shankara was spent as a wandering *Sanyasin* of the highest order (parivrajak) who wandered the country breaking geographical barriers, who had transcended all distinctions of caste, color and creed, all these travels were made with the object of preaching and teaching his philosophy of monism. He attracted big crowds wherever he went and held discussion with eminent erudite of his age. He traveled all over India from Kashmir and Badri in the north to Kerala and Kanchi in the south and from Assam in the east to Dwarka in the west. This he did, not in the days of travel facilities of the 21<sup>st</sup>

century but in the dark days of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century when the only means of locomotion was walking or the bullock cart.

He was not only a wandering Sanyasin of the highest order but the founder of Pilgrimage tourism in India. Besides making number of efforts to enrich this type of tourism, he also established the pilgrimage sites of Badarinath, Puri, Dwarka and Rameshwaram in each of the four directions of India i.e. the North, the East, the West and the South respectively. Based on these pilgrimage sites, which hold regional uniqueness Shankara made a religious law to visit these places by a Hindu at least once in his lifetime. Thus, the system of pilgrimage tourism (popularly known as Chaar-dhaam yatra) which he founded, have bound together the whole of India by a deep sense of cultural unity.

**Objective:** The present study has certain research objectives. They are as follow: i. To present the life of Shankara as a life of travel till his end, ii. To analyze the works of Shankara as an instrument for developing and promoting Pilgrimage Tourism in India, iii. To conclude the life of Shankara who truly deserve to be called as an architect of Indian Tourism.

### Methodology

The study is generally exploratory in nature with historical context and is based on the secondary data. The secondary data was collected from various sources of publications such as books, journals, Research articles and online data sources.

**Review of Literature: Dr. C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer:** within the short compass of thirty and odd year, Shankara travelled throughout India and demonstrated his marvelous organizing capacity by the establishment of mutts in all the four quarter.

**Harprakash (1993):** even in those days with very few facilities, Shankara traveled widely all over India. He covered practically all the important places in the country in all the four directions. He sent his disciples wherever he himself couldn't go.

**AL Basham** in his famous book 'The Wonder that was India' states that in 9<sup>th</sup> century, the great theologian Shankara traveled the length and breadth of India.

**Romila Thapar:** the mutts were established at Badrinath in Himalaya, Puri in Odisha, Dwarka at west coast and Sringeri in south. These places were those where pilgrims used to visit in large number.

**Early life and preparation for his comprehensive tour to India:** According to Dr. S. Radhakrishnan and many other hagiographical and historical writers, Shankara was born in 788 A.D. in a small village named Kalady situated on the bank of the river Purna in Kerala. Maxmuller and Prof. Macdonell also hold the same date. That, he flourished in the first quarter of the 9<sup>th</sup> century is also the opinion of Prof. Keith. His father's name was Shivaguru, a Nambudri Brahmin and his mother's Aryamba. Both were ardent devotees of Lord Shiva<sup>1</sup>. Believing that he was born because of the grace of Lord Shiva his parents named him Shankara. Unfortunately his father expired when he was only three years old and he was brought up by his mother. Shankara was a precocious child. He was gifted with the sharp intellect and a remarkable memory. In his childhood, his mother used to narrate stories from the epics and the puranas. These, the child Shankara would memorize within no time. At the age of five she sent him to a *Gurukul* where he made rapid progress in his studies of the Vedas and other scriptures. After two years, he returned home with a very wide vision of life. It is worth noting that even at the tender age of eight; he had a spiritual bent of mind. Deeply impressed by the intellect and learning of Shankara, King Rajashekhar of Cochin offered him riches and a position of honor at his court. The spirit of renunciation was however, so dominant in Shankara that he politely declined. Neither riches nor honor nor family life held any attraction for him. The pursuit of knowledge was the mission of his life and for that he had chosen a life of asceticism<sup>2</sup>.

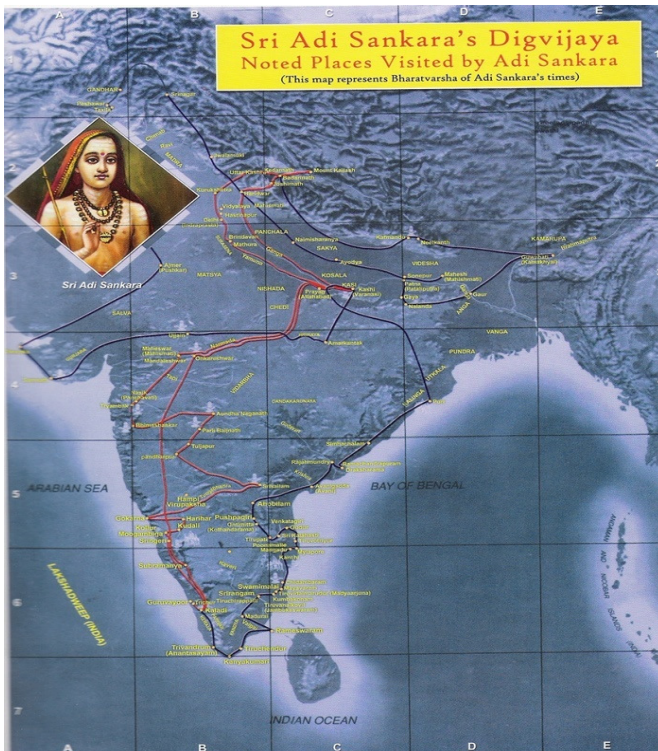
His mother, a widow with Shankara as her only son, naturally enough wanted him to marry, have a family and take care of her during her old age. One can well imagine the reaction of his mother when he told her his intention to take the life of asceticism (sanyasa) and sought her permission. She was stunned and after recovering from the initial shock, she declined to agree. According to the shastras, a Hindu could not take to sanyasa unless his mother gave her free consent. Thus, he was in a quandary. Legend, however, tells us that a peculiar situation came to his rescue. Once in the river Purna Shankara was taking bath when a crocodile grabbed his leg and began to pull him inside. At this time, he thought to die as a sanyasi, so

he called his mother and asked for permission to take sanyasa. Seeing the son's life in danger, the mother reluctantly gave him permission. Only then, it is said, did the crocodile release his leg from its jaws<sup>3</sup>. Now Shankara was free to take sanyasa, he, however consoled and assured her that he would come to see her whenever she was in need. He then took her blessings and left home in search of a Guru. Wandering about, he reached the asharam of Sri Govind Bhagavatapad, the chief disciple of Sri Gaudapad on the bank of river Narmada. Deeply impressed by Shankara's spirit of renunciation, his quest for knowledge and his sharp intellect, Sri Govind Bhagavatapad readily accepted him as his disciple. He stayed in the asharam for three years. Fully satisfied by the progress made by his eminent disciple, Sri Govind conferred on him the title of Acharya. Thus, Shankara became Shankaracharya at the age of eleven. His guru then asked him to go to Kashi (Varanasi), it was because if anyone wanted to propound a new system of thought or start a new movement, he had to go to Varanasi and acquit himself creditably there in the assembly of learned scholars<sup>4</sup>. Shankaracharya was now ready to proceed the city of Varanasi.

**Travels of Shankara to various parts of India:** Shankara covered practically all the important places of the country in all the four directions. He sent his disciples wherever he himself could not go. Although, it is worth noting that Shankara himself didn't write about his travels or the times but for a student of tourism, however, much of the details and reconstruction of Shankara's journey appears to be based on biographical accounts compiled by some of his disciples.

It was in obedience to the wish of his guru that Shankara proceeded first of all to Kashi (Varanasi). The city was both a place of pilgrimage and a very important center of learning. After reaching Varanasi, Shankara took bath in the holy Ganges and prayed at the temple of Sri Vishwanatha. Chidvilasa tells us that the king of Varanasi wished that Shankara should stay with him and be his spiritual guide but he declined the offer. From Varanasi Shankara proceeded to Prayag (Allahabad)<sup>5</sup>. Here he took bath in the Triveni and prayed to God for the welfare of the world and of his mother. He also met with Kumarila Bhatt, the champion of Purva-mimamsa school of thought. Shankara then left for Mandana's place called Mahishmati (in present day Bihar) where he defeated Mandan Misra and his wife Bharati in a debate and converted them to his own views.

Shankara proceeded on his triumphal tour across the Deccan and come to South India. He continued his journey and visited many religious places like Gokarna, Harihar as well as Mookambika. On the way, while passing by a village called Sri Baligrama<sup>6</sup>, it is said that he cured a Brahmin son who had been a deaf mute by birth. Later on, this boy came to be known as Hastamalaka.



Source: www.kamakoti.com (see table 1.1)

**Figure-1**  
**Map of the places visited by Shankara**

In the course of their wandering (Pativrajak) life, Shankara and his disciples arrived at the head water of the river Tunga<sup>7</sup>. On the north bank of this river lay the old village of Sringeri. It was here that he established his first Mutt, the famous Sringeri Mutt and built a temple to Goddess Sharada. During this time Shankara knew instinctively about his mother's last days of life. She died shortly after he reached to her. Then he himself completed the cremation of his mother and returned to Sringeri. After settling the affairs at Sringeri he left for Rameshwaram. During a way to Rameshwaram, he is said to have established a number of mutts, notably those at Puri and Kanchi. He then reached Rameshwaram by way of Chidambaram, Vaideeswarnkoil and Srirangam<sup>8</sup>. Shankara visited many other holy places of south India like Tiruvanaikkaval, Kanchipuram, Tirupati, Tiruchendur etc.

After making the necessary arrangements for his work in the south, Shankara set out toward the north of India. On his way he halted at Ujjain, and then proceeded to Dwarka in Gujarat where also he established a mutt. Continuing his journey along the Ganges, he proceeded to Kamarupa, the modern Assam<sup>9</sup>.

Shankara then toured to Kashmir region. People of this region greeted Shankara enthusiastically after ascending the Sarvajna Peetham – The throne of omniscience<sup>10</sup>. After reaching Srinagar, he gave discourse in the Shiva temple situated on the

top of about 300 meters high hill overlooking the Dal Lake. Both the hill and the temple have since named after Shankaracharya. He also visited the holy cave temple of Amarnath. From Kashmir he went to Badari and here again he established a mutt and a temple. At last, Shankara proceeded to Kedarnath, where he lost body consciousness in the year of 820 A.D.

**Major points which make him an architect of Indian Tourism:** Shankara had an untiring zeal for travel. He covered practically all the important places in all the four directions i.e. North, South, East and West. It is worth noting that no where he did feel as stranger nor was he treated as such. He set up four mutts at places of pilgrimage at the four corners of India – one at Sringeri in the south, another at Badarinath in the north, third at Dwarka in the west and fourth at Puri in the east and under their jurisdiction he covered the whole country<sup>11</sup>. He charged his chief disciples who were installed as the head of these mutts. One of the important purpose of establishing these monasteries in the four corners of the country was to make the people tour the whole country on pilgrimage and know the people of various parts of the country with all their variety of language, customs and manners. He created a cultural consciousness among the people and strengthened it.

Shankara was not merely a theoretician but a very practical and excellent organizer. An example of his organizing capacity can be given by the fact that there were numerous wandering monks all over the country. He organized them into ten monastic orders, called the *dashanami sampradaya*, under the designation – *tirtha*, holy place; *asrama*, retreat; *vana*, forest; *aranya*, forest; *giri*, mountain; *parvata*, mountain; *sagara*, ocean; *sarasvati*, the name of a river, also of the goddess of learning; *bharati*, goddess of learning and *puri*, city and inspired them with the mission of uplifting the country out of the morass of moral corruption and degeneration. It was the duty of such monks to travel and work in the cities and towns, hills and forests and in places of pilgrimage and sea coast under the headship of four mutts<sup>12</sup>.

He has also composed numerous beautiful stotras (hymns) of a philosophical and realization nature as well as those in praise and glorification of the different forms of the lord (deities), and even of holy rivers and cities. They exhort men and women to visit themselves to these cities. This was one of the ways in which he gave support and fillip to all genuine efforts of promoting pilgrimage tourism. Reference may be made of the 'effulgent' lingas (Jyotirlingas), twelve in number and situated all over the country. It is believed that Shankara was a man who recognized these jyotirlingas along with their location. The location of these shrines is given in another prayer called Dwadasa Linga Sthavam<sup>13</sup>. Further he said to have also recognized the Kumbh, the congregation held at Prayag (Allahabad) once in twelve years.

**Table-1**  
**List of the places visited by Shankara**

| Sr. No | Place            | Sq. No | State (presently) | Sr. No | Place          | Sq. No | State (presently) |
|--------|------------------|--------|-------------------|--------|----------------|--------|-------------------|
| 1.     | Ahobilam         | B5     | Andhra Pradesh    | 42     | Mahur          | B4     | Maharashtra       |
| 2.     | Avanigadda       | C5     | Andhra Pradesh    | 43     | Nasik          | B4     | Maharashtra       |
| 3.     | Draksharama      | C5     | Andhra Pradesh    | 44     | Triambak       | B4     | Maharashtra       |
| 4.     | Gudur            | C5     | Andhra Pradesh    | 45     | Tuljapur       | B4     | Maharashtra       |
| 5      | Ramachandrapuram | C5     | Andhra Pradesh    | 46     | Puri           | D4     | Odisha            |
| 6      | Simhachalam      | C5     | Andhra Pradesh    | 47     | Ajmer          | B3     | Rajasthan         |
| 7      | Tirupati         | C5     | Andhra Pradesh    | 48     | Pushkar        | B3     | Rajasthan         |
| 8      | Venkatagiri      | C5     | Andhra Pradesh    | 49     | Kanchipuram    | C6     | Tamilnadu         |
| 9      | Kamakhya         | E3     | Assam             | 50     | Kumbakonm      | C6     | Tamilnadu         |
| 10     | Gaya             | C3     | Bihar             | 51     | Madurai        | B6     | Tamilnadu         |
| 11     | Mahismati        | D3     | Bihar             | 52     | Mangadu        | C6     | Tamilnadu         |
| 12     | Nalanda          | D3     | Bihar             | 53     | Mayavaram      | C6     | Tamilnadu         |
| 13     | Pataliputra      | D3     | Bihar             | 54     | Mylapore       | C6     | Tamilnadu         |
| 14     | Sonpur           | D3     | Bihar             | 55     | Ontimitta      | B5     | Tamilnadu         |
| 15     | Delhi            | B2     | Delhi             | 56     | Pandhaspur     | B5     | Tamilnadu         |
| 16     | Dwarka           | A4     | Gujarat           | 57     | Poonamalleee   | C5     | Tamilnadu         |
| 17     | Somnath          | A4     | Gujarat           | 58     | Rajamundry     | C5     | Tamilnadu         |
| 18     | Kuruksheetra     | B2     | Haryana           | 59     | Srirangam      | B6     | Tamilnadu         |
| 19     | Jwalamukhi       | B2     | H.P.              | 60     | Swamimalai     | C6     | Tamilnadu         |
| 20     | Amarnath         | NA     | J.andK.           | 61     | Triuchandur    | B6     | Tamilnadu         |
| 21     | Srinagar         | B1     | J.andK.           | 62     | Tiruchirapalli | B6     | Tamilnadu         |
| 22     | Parli Bijnath    | B4     | Jharkhand         | 63     | Tiruvanaikoil  | B6     | Tamilnadu         |
| 23     | Gokarna          | B5     | Karnataka         | 64     | Tiruvidaimar   | C6     | Tamilnadu         |
| 24     | Hampi            | B5     | Karnataka         | 65     | Tiruvotriyur   | C5     | Tamilnadu         |
| 25     | Kollur           | B5     | Karnataka         | 66     | Ayodhya        | C3     | Uttar Pradesh     |
| 26     | Kudali           | B5     | Karnataka         | 67     | Kashi          | C3     | Uttar Pradesh     |
| 27     | Pushpagiri       | C5     | Karnataka         | 68     | Mathura        | B3     | Uttar Pradesh     |
| 28     | Sringeri         | B5     | Karnataka         | 69     | Naimisharanya  | C3     | Uttar Pradesh     |
| 29     | Subrahmanya      | B5     | Karnataka         | 70     | Prayag         | C3     | Uttar Pradesh     |
| 30     | Chidambaram      | C6     | Kerala            | 71     | Vrindavan      | B3     | Uttar Pradesh     |
| 31     | Guruvayur        | B6     | Kerala            | 72     | Gaur           | D3     | West Bengal       |
| 32     | Kaladi           | B6     | Kerala            | 73     | Badrinath      | C2     | Uttrakhand        |
| 33     | Sri kalahasti    | C5     | Kerala            | 74     | Haridwar       | B2     | Uttrakhand        |
| 34     | Trichur          | B6     | Kerala            | 75     | Joshimath      | C2     | Uttrakhand        |
| 35     | Trivandrum       | B6     | Kerala            | 76     | Kedarnath      | C2     | Uttrakhand        |
| 36     | Amarkantak       | C4     | Madhya Pradesh    | 77     | Neelkanth      | D3     | Uttrakhand        |
| 37     | Mandaleshwar     | B4     | Madhya Pradesh    | 78     | Uttarkashi     | B2     | Uttrakhand        |
| 38     | Omkareshwar      | B4     | Madhya Pradesh    | 79     | Peshawar       | A1     | Afganistan        |
| 39     | Ujjain           | B4     | Madhya Pradesh    | 80     | Kathmandu      | D3     | Nepal             |
| 40     | Aundha nagnath   | B4     | Maharashtra       | 81     | Taxila         | A1     | Pakistan          |
| 41     | Bhimashankar     | B4     | Maharashtra       | 82     | Mt. Kailash    | C2     | Tibbet            |

The greatest role played by Shankara to enrich pilgrimage tourism was the establishment of pilgrimage sites (chaar-dham) in each of four directions of India. Based on these pilgrimage sites, which hold regional uniqueness Shankara made a religious

law to visit these places by a Hindu at least once in his lifetime. This system of pilgrimage tourism is popularly known as Chaar-dhaam yatra. These four sites are as follow: i. Badarinath in the north of India (in Uttrakhand state), ii. Puri in the East (in

Odisha state), iii. Dwarka in the West (in Gujarat), iv. Rameshwaram in the South (in Tamilnadu)<sup>14</sup>.

Thus, the system of pilgrimage tourism which he founded, have bound together the whole of India by a deep sense of cultural unity.

#### Overview of four mutts as a futuristic plan of Shankara:

Shankara's futuristic vision is apparent in the establishment of four mutts to cover the entire country through inter unity travel and direct contact with people. The names of these mutts are as follow: i. Sringeri mutt in Sringeri town of Chikmagalur district of Karnataka state, ii. Sharada mutt at coastal city of Dwarka in Jamnagar district of Gujarat, iii. Jyotir mutt, close to pilgrimage town of Badrinath in Chamoli district of Utrakkhand, iv. Govardhan mutt in the city of Puri in Odisha state.

Establishing four mutts in the four corners of India along with temples, organizing a system of religious education and laws along with traveler monks, composing beautiful stotras for pilgrimage destinations this man of action left nothing untouched to enrich the pilgrimage tourism in India. He chose pilgrimage sites which were endowed with natural splendor and serenity. For example, he chose Puri in the east and Dwarka in the west; both are located on the shores of Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea respectively. He also chose Badrinath in the north and Sringeri in the south; both are located in the scenic mountains. Sureshwaracharya, who hailed from the north was placed in charge of the mutt in the south, while Totaka from the south was sent to Badri in the north. He made it mandatory that the Namboodri Brahmin from Kerala should perform Prayer at Badri, while the Brahmin from Karnataka was assigned for Puri. Likewise he ordained Maharashtra Brahmins for the temple of Rameshwaram. It is also worth noting that a priest who seeks to enter the sanctum sanctorum of Rameshwaram temple should first get deeksha from the head of Sringeri mutt.<sup>15</sup> This shows that what a broadminded he was when it came to leadership in matters of national interest.

#### Conclusion

Shankara was thus a great towering personality who, within the course of a short life of thirty two years, brought about a thorough revolution in the social life and thought of the country. There is a saying in Sanskrit, *muhoortam jwalitam Sreyo na chadhoomayitam chiram* – which means that it is better to live and shine for a moment (like lightning) rather than live a long but purposeless life and end in smoke. Shankara's life bears true testimony to this. He traveled every nook and corner of India and supported and strengthened the idea of oneness or Unity in Diversity. Most importantly, he laid the foundation of modern pilgrimage tourism through establishing mutts and the

associated temples in such a way that a pilgrim or a tourist has to cover whole of India to visit these sites. Thus, these great efforts made by Shankara could be said to be an integrating force which assimilated all sections of society. People of East, West, North and South came in contact with each other and paved the way of tourism in India for what he truly deserve to be called as an Architect of Indian Tourism.

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