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Adi Shankaracharya's literary excellence in his stotras ad philosophy

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Abstract

Adi Shankaracharya (8th century CE), one of the most revered philosophers and theologians of India, is renowned for his Advaita Vedanta philosophy. However, his literary contributions extend beyond philosophical discourses to exquisite poetic compositions. His *stotras* (hymns) are not merely devotional expressions but embody remarkable linguistic, rhythmic, and philosophical depth. This paper explores the poetic excellence of Adi Shankaracharya, analyzing how his compositions seamlessly integrate Bhakti (devotion) with Jnana (knowledge). By examining key *stotras*, their structure, and their underlying philosophy, this study aims to demonstrate how Shankaracharya's literary brilliance enhances the spiritual and intellectual landscape of Hindu thought.

Keyword: Shankaracharya, demonstrate, linguistic

1. Introduction

Adi Shankaracharya, a towering figure in Indian philosophy, revitalized Sanatana Dharma through his Advaita Vedanta. Born in Kalady, Kerala, he mastered the Vedic scriptures at an early age and established monastic institutions (mathas) that continue to guide spiritual seekers. While his philosophical treatises, such as commentaries on the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*, and *Brahmasutras*, are widely studied, his poetic compositions receive relatively less scholarly attention. His *stotras*, composed in Sanskrit, showcase unparalleled linguistic craftsmanship, combining devotion with profound metaphysical insight. One of his disciples, Thotakacharya, lauded Shankaracharya's knowledge and poetic skills in the *Thotakashtakam*:

विदिताखिलशास्त्रसुधाजलधे

महितोपनिषत् कथितार्थनिधे ।

हृदये कलये विमलं चरणं

भव शंकर देशिक मे शरणम् ॥ (*Thotakashtakam*, Verse 1)

This verse portrays Shankaracharya as an ocean of scriptural knowledge, indicating that his mastery extended beyond philosophy to poetic expression. This paper investigates the literary merit of his *stotras*, classifying them into different types and analyzing their philosophical and aesthetic dimensions.

2. Literary Excellence of Adi Shankaracharya

2.1 Early Poetic Prowess

From an early age, Shankaracharya demonstrated extraordinary poetic and philosophical skills. His *Kanakadhara Stotram*, composed in honor of Goddess Lakshmi, exemplifies his poetic excellence. Composed extempore to alleviate the poverty of a devotee, this hymn reveals his command over Sanskrit and poetic imagery:

कमले कमलाक्षवल्लभे त्वं

करुणापूरतरङ्गितैरपाङ्गैः ।

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अवलोक्य मामकिञ्चनानां

प्रथमं पात्रमकृत्रिमं दयायाः ॥ (*Kanakadhara Stotram*, Verse 20)

Here, the plea for divine grace is articulated through intricate poetic techniques, including alliteration and metaphors, which enhance the emotional intensity of the verse. The interplay of simple yet profound language allows his hymns to resonate with both scholars and devotees. The Poetic Excellence of Adi Shankaracharya

1. Mastery of Linguistic Ornamentation

Adi Shankaracharya's poetry is distinguished by its use of *alankaras* (poetic devices), including:

- **Anuprasa (Alliteration):** Repetitive consonantal sounds enhance the beauty and musicality of his hymns.
- **Upama (Simile):** He frequently employs similes to draw comparisons between the divine and natural elements, making abstract concepts more accessible.
- **Metaphors and Symbolism:** His poetry is rich with metaphors that convey the essence of Advaita philosophy. For instance, in *Nirvana Shatakam*, he negates bodily and mental identifications to assert the unity of the self with Brahman.

2. The Union of Devotion and Metaphysics

Shankaracharya's compositions cater to both the spiritual seeker and the poetic connoisseur. His *bhakti* stotras express deep devotion, yet they subtly convey the essence of Advaita philosophy. For example:

- **Bhavani Ashtakam:** Though seemingly a hymn in praise of Goddess Bhavani, it implicitly highlights self-surrender and the dissolution of ego—an essential concept in non-dualism.
- **Saundarya Lahari:** A masterpiece that blends Tantra with poetic beauty, describing the divine mother with exquisite imagery while embedding esoteric spiritual principles.

3. Rhythmic Brilliance and Metrical Perfection

Shankaracharya's works employ various *chandās* (meters), such as:

- **Bhujangaprayata (Serpentine meter):** Used in *Subrahmanya Bhujangam*, where the lyrical flow mimics the movement of a serpent, symbolizing the awakening of *kundalini* energy.
- **Anushtubh and Trishtubh:** These meters, commonly found in Vedic hymns, lend a rhythmic cadence to his compositions, making them both melodious and profound.

4. Philosophical Depth Encapsulated in Simplicity

Despite the depth of his philosophy, Shankaracharya's poetry remains accessible. He employs:

- **Lucid yet profound expressions:** For instance, in *Annapurna Stotram*, he initially prays for material sustenance but ultimately requests wisdom and renunciation, subtly guiding the devotee toward higher spiritual aspirations.
- **Concise yet impactful verses:** *Dashashloki* summarizes the essence of Advaita in just ten verses, demonstrating his ability to distill complex ideas into compact poetic expressions.

5. The Aesthetic and Emotional Appeal of His Poetry

While Advaita Vedanta is often considered an abstract philosophy, Shankaracharya's poetry makes it emotionally resonant. His works evoke:

- **Compassion:** As seen in *Kanakadhara Stotram*, where he pleads for divine grace upon a poor woman.
- **Reverence and awe:** In *Ardhanarishwara Stotram*, where he beautifully describes the divine union of Shiva and Parvati, symbolizing the inseparability of Purusha (consciousness) and Prakriti (nature).
- **Renunciation and detachment:** *Bhaja Govindam* reminds seekers of life's transience and urges them to seek the eternal truth.

2.2 Classification of Shankaracharya's Literary Works

Shankaracharya's poetic works can be categorized into two major types:

1. Philosophical Treatises in Verse

- *Nirvana Shatkam*
- *Dashashloki*
- *Vivekachudamani* (though primarily prose, it contains poetic elements)

2. Devotional Hymns (Stotras)

- **Bhakti Stotras:** *Soundarya Lahari, Annapurna Stotram, Subrahmanya Bhujangam*
- **Vedantic Stotras:** *Moha Mudgara, Ardhanarishwara Stotram*
- **Pancharatna Stotras:** *Ganesha Pancharatnam*

Each of these categories reflects a fusion of poetic aesthetics with deep spiritual insight, making them invaluable literary treasures.

3. Poetic Structure and Metaphysical Depth

3.1 Advaita Philosophy in Verse

Shankaracharya's philosophical poetry, particularly *Dashashloki* and *Nirvana Shatkam*, encapsulates the core tenets of Advaita Vedanta. In *Dashashloki*, he negates all worldly attributes to establish the singular reality of Brahman:

न चातुर्ध्वं न छाधो न चान्तर्न लुभावं

न मध्यं न तिर्यं न पूर्वाऽपरा दिक् ।

विद्यव्यापकत्वादखंडैकरूपः

तदेकोऽवशिष्टः शिवः केवलोऽहम् ॥ (*Dashashloki*, Verse 5)

Here, the repetition of negations (*neti-neti*) refines the reader's perception, leading them beyond dualistic distinctions to the ultimate non-dual reality. The structural economy of these verses, coupled with their intense philosophical content, highlights Shankaracharya's genius in conveying complex ideas through concise poetic forms.

3.2 Devotional Hymns: The Union of Bhakti and Jnana

While Advaita Vedanta posits the illusory nature of the world (*maya*), Shankaracharya's *stotras* exhibit an ardent devotion to deities. In *Ardhanareeswara Stotram*, he celebrates the inseparable union of Shiva and Parvati:

प्रदीत्तरत्नोज्ज्वलकुंडलायै

स्फुर्नमहापन्नम्भूषणाय ।

शिवान्वितायै च शिवान्विताय

नमः शिवायै च नमः शिवाय ॥ (*Ardhanareeswara Stotram*, Verse 8)

This verse employs rhythmic repetition (*anvithaya*) to emphasize the complementary unity of the divine masculine and feminine. Through such hymns, Shankaracharya integrates devotion (*bhakti*) with knowledge (*jnana*),

suggesting that realization of the non-dual Brahman does not preclude devotional surrender.

3.3 Moha Mudgara: Philosophical Wisdom in Didactic Verse

The *Moha Mudgara* (Bhaja Govindam) presents Vedantic wisdom in a simple yet poetic format, cautioning against material attachments:

नलिनीदलगतजलमतिरलं

तद्भ्रज्जीवितमतिशयचपलम् ।

विद्धि व्याध्याभिमान प्रभावितं

लोकं शोकहतं च समग्रम् ॥ (*Moha Mudgara*, Verse 4)

Here, the fleeting nature of life is likened to a water droplet on a lotus leaf, a vivid metaphor that captures life's impermanence. By employing relatable imagery, Shankaracharya transforms abstract Vedantic concepts into accessible teachings.

4. Conclusion

Adi Shankaracharya's poetic compositions are masterpieces of Sanskrit literature, blending spiritual depth with linguistic elegance. His *stotras* are not merely devotional verses but vehicles of philosophical inquiry, inviting both intellectual engagement and emotional devotion. His ability to synthesize *bhakti* and *jnana* in poetic form underscores his literary genius, making his works invaluable to both scholars and practitioners.

Through his poetic expressions, he not only expounded Advaita Vedanta but also reinforced the cultural and spiritual fabric of Hindu tradition. His legacy, thus, endures—not only as a philosopher and theologian but also as a literary luminary whose verses continue to inspire seekers across generations.

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