

## [Ohio Conference Celebrates Shankara's 12th Century](#)

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# Ohio Conference Celebrates Shankara's 12th Century

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Imagine being able to turn the clock back 1,200 years, and, by a flight of fancy, finding yourself at some reputed seat of learning - Nalanda or Vikramasala - in the land which juts out from the foot of the snow-clad Himalayas and, watered by the mighty rivers which issue forth from its peaks, extends all the way south where its shores are washed by the waves of the three seas which commingle into a vast watery expanse.

Variously called Aryavarta or Bharata Desa, you would have learned that this land now called India was home to those in contemplative quest of Truth, those who sought experience of the nature of Ultimate Reality, and those others - itinerant teachers, peripatetic philosophers and wandering minstrels - who urged the masses to pay heed to what the sages, the saints and the jivanmuktas or liberated souls had to say about the mystery of Being.

You would have discovered, too, that while there was unity of purpose, there was anything but a unanimity of view or uniformity of opinion. You would, in fact, have been impressed by the vigor of debate, the variety of thought, the rigor of analysis and the freedom to disagree without being disagreeable, that was characteristic of scholarly activity in ancient and medieval Indian centers of learning.

It was a kindred situation which these two reporters encountered - no in some distant past nor in some remote land, but at Miami University at Oxford, nestling amidst the corn fields in the mid-western American state of Ohio. The occasion was the International Congress of Vedanta, a conference held from April 5 through 8 to celebrate the 1,200th anniversary of Adi Sankara, the great philosopher saint of India. Such diverse gifts did Sankara possess that he is remembered as a

philosopher and a poet, a savant and a saint, a mystic and a religious reformer and, having acquired an early vision of the beauty of holiness and renounced the ways of the world, as an exemplary sannyasin who accomplished his extraordinary mission during a short life - just 32 years.

The organizer of the conference and its moving force was S.S. Rama Rao Pappu, Professor of Philosophy at Miami University and a man of irrepressible enthusiasm and indefatigable energy. It is a tribute to the largeness of vision and catholicity of spirit of Miami University's administration that it chooses to sponsor and support ecumenical assemblies - a welcome evolution in this stronghold of conservative America.

One hundred and thirty scholars attended. They came from thirty states in the USA and from Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, India, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union and West Germany. The list of participants in the congress reads like a veritable "Who's Who" among authorities on Indian philosophy.

The wide range of their interests becomes apparent from such arcane and abstruse seminar topics as, "Was Wittgenstein a Reincarnation of Sankara?"; "Metonymic Reflections on Sankara's Concept of Brahman and Plato's Seventh Letter"; "Is the World also Brahman according to Sankara?" and "Vedanta and Modern Science: A Possible Reconciliation." It is impossible to even summarize what was discussed on this you the responses to a few issues which the participants felt central to their meeting.

The most important question which arose is whether the Hindu mode of thought can be called philosophical. The western view is that what passes for philosophy in India is actually soteriology - the study of spiritual salvation. The Hindu is not interested in knowledge for its own sake or in theory, so argues the West, and since the ultimate goal of the Hindu is some sort of liberation, all knowledge must subserve this final end. There is no such thing as pure theory or knowledge divorced from a goal.

The Hindu also argues that comparative distinctions between religion, philosophy, literature, science and politics - a favorite pastime among western philosophers -

are valid only for purposes of analysis. True philosophy must address the totality of human concerns and aim at maintaining the integrity of the human personality. Knowledge is whole and cannot be broken up into compartments. Hindu modes of thought can be and are as logical, argumentative and systematic as are the Western. There have always been free and unprejudiced thinkers in India from the Upanishadic and early Buddhist times down to the present. They believed philosophy must rise above and go beyond mere method and technique. It must lead to wisdom and insight.

The concept of the guru is central to Vedantic thought because the kind of saving knowledge which is sought is not book knowledge, it is the transmission of direct or intuitive experience.

Realization does not lead to the cessation of activity. Renunciation is not inaction. The jivanmukta engage in different kinds of activity - Ramana Maharishi remained silent, while Sankara employed all of his intellectual and organizational skills. Just because one did not choose to become a social do-gooder, he did not become a no-good fellow.

The ebullient Professor Pappu arranged a total of 41 sessions, including the plenary sessions, the several panel discussions, the informal luncheon addresses and the formal dinner sessions - an extraordinarily rich and sumptuous fare, all of which these two reporters could hardly taste let alone digest.

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