

Mahatmas of India

Hindu religious leaders

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India is a land of great spirituality with a variety of religious scriptures. The oldest of them are the Vedas which form the main foundation of the religious life and philosophical outlook of the Hindus.. Several sages, saints and seers have written commentaries on these and other religious scriptures like Brahma Sutras, Bhagawad Gita, Vishnu Sahasranama, Some of them have also participated in serious religious discourses and established convincing faith in their own philosophies. Some have translated the original Sanskrit scripts into local languages adding their own commentaries and lyrical poems. All these have become the main guidelines for the Hindu way of life throughout the years that followed and fulfilled the social needs of the time. Indian history reveals hundreds and thousands of such highly religious luminaries also known as Mahatmas but in the following paragraphs only a few of the great religious leaders, like Acharyas, Saints, Sages, Mystics, and Godmen who have made long standing impact on Indian culture and way of life have been mentioned with only brief descriptions of their lives and philosophies.. More names may be included in any future revisions of this chapter

SRI Adi Sankaracharya

Adi Sankaracharya (which means the first Sankaracharya) was born at a time when the religious life in India was in a state of flux and great confusion. Scholars estimate his birth to be sometime between 1st century B.C. to 788 A.D. He was born in Kalhadi village on the banks of river Alway (Purna) in Kerala to pious parents as a gift of Lord Shiva. Hence he had high spiritual powers right from his birth He was an infant prodigy who mastered all scriptures even before his eighth year His father died when he was quite young and with the permission of his mother he took to Sanyasa (ascetic order) with the promise that he will always be by her side whenever she desired. He went all the way to Narbada river and chose his own Guru, Govinda who not only foresaw the greatness of Sankara but blessed him to write commentaries on Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita etc. He advocated the Advita philosophy (Non-dualism) which in away means that Creator and Creation are one and the same. He saw God Power in everything and everywhere. With the help of four disciples established four Mathas (Religious centres) in four corners of India at Jyothirmath (North) Puri (East) Dwaraka (West) and Sringeri (South). The successive heads of these Mathas are also known as Sankaracharyas even today. Adi Sankaracharya traveled all over India on foot twice or thrice, consecrating many shrines, participating in religious discourses and defeating many misinterpreters of Vedas, Thus he revived Hinduism. He wrote several poems songs, and religious treatises which created spiritual awakening and guided welfare of the people of India. Many miracles happened in his dealing with various situations which confirmed to his followers and other people his spiritual greatness and the existence of God He was spending some time in the Himalayas, when he heard that his mother was on death bed in South India. He suddenly presented himself before her in her last moments which itself was a great miracle and performed the last rites even though Sanyasis were not supposed to do so. He became to be recognized as Jagat-Guru (World Teacher) and was so recognized by many westerners also He died quite young before he reached forty

SRI Ramanujacharya (1017-1137)

Although born in Brahmin community, he was initially initiated by a non-brahmin guru, Goshti Purna by a special Mantra for human salvation. Ramanuja against the wishes of his guru, proclaimed the Mantra in a temple so that all people can be benefited by the same. irrespective of caste and creed. He was against

all orthodoxy of his family. He sent away his wife to her parents house and took Sanyasa. He then wanted to become disciple of Yamuna (also known as Alvander) the great Bhakti Acharya of Srirangam in South India.. But before he reached the place the master's body was laid for cremation . However Ramanuja noticed three fingers of the Guru clenched and wanted to know the reason, He was told that it was the wish of the master before his death that Ramanuja should write commentaries of Bhagawat gita, Brahma Sutra and Vishnu Sahasranamam and extol the glory of Vishnu and the path of Bhakti Accordingly Ramanuja expounded the great philosophy which later came to be known as Visishtadwita. And succeeded the Guru He postulated that Soul, Matter (Body) and God are distinct but the former two are inseparable from God. and may be referred as his attributes. Many poet saints known as Alwars in South India created a new wave of devotional life with miracles and Divine grace .They worshiped only Vishnu thus creating a distinction between Saivites (Devotees of Siva also called Nayanmars)and Vaishnavites (Devotees of Vishnu) .Vaishnavites strongly believe in rituals as religious paths for ultimate Bliss and thus Ramanuja can be said to have bridged the gulf between philosophy and religion, by his great devotion to God and deep love for mankind. He is reported to have lived the full span of human life, one hundred and twenty years, and just before his end he had summoned all his disciples and reported to have given them several injunctions for propagating amongst his followers

SRI Madhvacharya (1199-1278)

Born to a religious parents in Konkan, and initially known as Vasudeva studied Vedas under an ascetic Guru called Achyuta Preksha... But he differed from his master in interpretation of the scriptures and succeeded him as an Acharya and came to be known as Madhvacharya. His philosophy came to be known as "Purna Pragna darsana" later defined as Dwita philosophy or Dualism as contrary to the philosophy of Adi Sankaracharya. His philosophy is also referred as pluralistic theism, thus making a clear distinction between God, Soul and Body (Matter). He toured most parts of India and gathered many adherents to his faith. He enshrined Bhagawan Krishna at Udipi. He prescribed many rituals for daily life and for worship o for disciplining one self and seeking blessings of God. He composed and sang many stotras to emphasise his philosophy and which are sung by many of his followers.

SRI Vallabhacharya(1479-1531)

Born and abandoned one day as dead 1479, in the forests of Champaranya in the present day Chattisgarh in India, he was found alive the next day, surrounded by a ring of flames and so he is generally considered as incarnation of Fire God. By the age of twelve he completed study of Vedas, Puranas etc at Varanasi. and was acclaimed by many as a great scholar. At the age of twenty-five he was invited by Krishna Deva Raya of South India to participate in discourses relating to several systems of Hindu philosophies then in vogue.. He differed from the views of others declaring that God, Man, and Nature are identical but remained separate like sparks of an Eternal Flame. He was finally declared winner by the king himself. He initiated a path of devotion (Bhakti) which came to be known as Pushtimarg.(Complete and sincere) or Nirguna Bhakti His philosophy came to be known as Suddha Advita (pure non-dualism or monoism) to emphasis that God is both immanent and transcendent without the concept of Maya. .He personified his God as Krishna with several Leelas (Acts of wisdom and action). As a contemporary of Chaitanya Maha Prabhu , they complimented each others role , one by complete immersion in Love of God Krishna and the other as Acharya the preacher of a new philosophy. Sri Vallabhacharya gave a new message, a new hope, and a new pattern of devotional life when India was passing through separate tendencies due to diverse sects, foreign creeds, social upheavals, and political domination by rulers belonging to alien faiths. Thus he earned a permanent place in the evolutionary history of Spiritualism in India. In 1531 he gave his final advice to his two sons to have complete faith in Lord Krishna and then at the sacred river Ganga he is reported to have taken the holy water into his hands when a flame like Divine glow appeared around his body and he disappeared

Bhagawan Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886)

Ramakrishna was considered as a Divine Messenger who preached the ideals of Hindu religion through wit and wisdom. Born in a poor family at Kamarpukur in Bengal, and known by the name of Gadadhar Sambhuchandra, he was called to be a priest at the age of 17 in a newly erected temple of Kali at Dakshineswar. His extreme devotion to Goddess Kali developed to consider Her as Mother. When he was 24 he was compelled to marry a young girl of six years old. But he used to consider her as Goddess Mother Kali and she also recognized that Ramakrishna had no physical ailments but suffered from spiritual ecstasy in the worship of Kali. About 1864, a monk named Thotapuri initiated him into the order of Sanyasis and named him Ramakrishna. Under the blessings of Kali he remained a Sanyasi (a state of what is called Nirvikalpa Samadhi) for many years. He was preaching universal brotherhood without distinguishing between caste or creed of individuals. He believed in unity of all religions. Of all his devotees and disciples Swami Vivekananda became the mouthpiece of his philosophy and a world-wide organization as Ramakrishna Mission came into existence. The Mission has published many books in English on various topics related to Hindu religion and Advaita philosophy.

Swami Vivekananda : (1863-1902)

Swami Vivekananda was the foremost disciple of Ramakrishna. He was earlier known as Narendra Babu, a graduate of Calcutta University. When he came in contact with Ramakrishna, there were several incidents to test each other's spiritual powers and finally through Divine grace they became attached to each other. He was the first monk from India to have visited United States of America, and started bridging the gulf between Western Science and Eastern religions and amalgamating them into one perception for a righteous living. He was also a great patriot and worked hard for uplifting the poor in India. His message to youth of India was to always be brave and fearless. He started Ramakrishna Mission and established several centers both in USA and UK. He expounded the philosophy of Vedas to the Western audiences in such convincing and lucid manner that several people became his ardent followers, foremost among them was Margaret Noble (1867-1911) who was later called sister Nivedita.

Bhagawan Ramana Maharshi (1878-1950)

At the foot of a hill known as Arunachal in Tamil Nadu there is an old Siva temple with an idol known as Tejo Linga (Radiant Linga). Every year during the annual festival in the month of Karthik (November-December) a beacon of light is lit to remind people to pursue the light of Knowledge. Once a teenager by the name of Venkatraman, the second son of his parents, and normally very fond of sports and good studies, was overwhelmingly attracted towards the beacon. He left his home and all belongings and spent rest of his life at the site of the hill for about fifty five years, spreading the concept of "self-knowledge". He was later to be known as Bhagawan Sri Ramana Maharshi. People always used to observe radiance around him and enjoy peace and enlightenment in his presence. His main plank of preaching was that one should know oneself thoroughly to remove all ignorance and reach the Goal of Life. This is based on the famous Vedic statement "Tatvamasi" meaning "That thou art" which engulfs the entire Truth of the nature of Creator and Creation. There were many miracles in his life but no special significance was attached to any of them. He had a soft and distinct voice, but somewhat frail body. In his last years he developed a painful tumor with shooting pain but it was a miracle to attending doctors how he calmly bore the same, and how he was cheerfully giving audience to his devotees, as if the body did not belong to him. One evening in April 1950, people saw a bright light speeding away from his body and he was found dead. Later a shrine was erected over his Samadhi and several devotees visit the same every year.

Swami Dayanand Saraswathi: (Arya samaj)

Swami Chinmayananda.: (Chinmayananda Mission)

Swami Sivananda;(Divine Life Society)

Tulsidas (1532-1624)-

Although born in a family of great Vedic scholars he became virtually an orphan in his young age and lived in a temple of Hanumanji and became a disciple of Pandit Naraharidas from whom he learnt much of Vedas and mythology. He was greatly interested in Bhajans and discourses and traveled widely with his Guru At Chitrakut he is supposed to have the vision of Ram and Lakshman .He wrote in Avadhi (Hindi dialogue) his famous Ram Charit Manas which is also known as Tuls Ramayan. which teaches the principles of right living and valid even in these days. He also wrote several devotional lyrics of which Hanuman Chalisa is the most famous and sung by devotees all over India.

Thyagaraja (1767-1847)

He was a great devotee of Bhagawan Rama and composed many songs in praise of Him .He was a great scholar in Sanskrit, astrology and Telugu .All his songs were in Telugu set in Carnatic style and sung by many people with great fervour His ancestors were of Andhra origin but settled in Tiruvayur in Tamil Nadu To commemorate his works and his famous songs and Kritis, music festivals are organized every year in Tiruvayur and well known musicians and celebrities from all over India participate. Similar festivals are also organized in many cities of Andhra and Tamil Nadu. In India

Chaitanya Maha Prabhu (1486-1534)

He was born In Bengal and became a great proponent of devotion to Radha and Krishna. He was also known as Gaurang due to his light, radiant golden complexion. At a very early age he became expert in Sanskrit grammar and Hindu philosophy. Throughout his life he defied caste distinction and preached Love and Devotion to Radha and Krishna . He composed the most popular Bhajan Mantra “ Hare Ram Hare Ram, Rama Rama Hare Hare; Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare” He lived all his later part of life in Puri and is said to have disappeared in in 1534 in the temple of Tota Gopinath. Many of his followers believe he was the incarnation of Radha-Krishna combine. A great movement is currently spreading in many parts of the world under the name of ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) ,with groups of people singing, dancing, and chanting the above Bhajan Mantra and spreading Love and Devotion to Krishna

Sant Tukaram (1608-1649)

He was born in a village called Dehu on the banks of a river Indrayani in Maharashtra He inherited the family rights of collecting money from traders but he and his family suffered a lot due to famine in his area and cheating by others. He then wrote poetic compositions called Abhangs in praise of his family deity Vothoba and which had greatly influenced the Marathi literature Tukaram realized that singing and chanting of God’s glory was the ultimate source of human liberation. His followers believe that at his age of about forty eight, he was taken away bodily to heaven as only his cymbals, rug and tambura (musical instrument he was playing) were found floating in the river without the body. Even today he is the most popular saint of Maharashtra.

There are many more whose names will be added in due course when material becomes available: