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PERSONAL IDENTITY IN ŚĀṄKARADEVA'S PHILOSOPHY

Adrija Acharyya

Introduction:

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva (1449–1568), the saint-philosopher of Assam, developed a distinct school of *Vaiṣṇava* thought known as *Ekaśaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma*. Although he did not compose a systematic philosophical treatise in the classical style, his hymns, translations, devotional texts, and institutional practices constitute a rich philosophical worldview. Within this worldview lie clear assumptions about human nature, selfhood, and personal identity. While classical Indian philosophy often debates the essence of the self—e.g., *Nyāya's* substantial *ātman*, Buddhism's *anātman*, Advaita's nondual Brahman—*Śaṅkaradeva's* devotional monotheism places personal identity within the framework of bhakti, ethical transformation, and relationship with *Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa*.

Now to have a look into the theory of personal identity in *Śaṅkaradeva's* philosophy, we need to first have a look into the theories of personal identity.

The problem of personal identity concerns what it means for a person to remain the same individual over time despite continuous change. From birth to adulthood to old age, almost everything about a person transforms—memories fade, physical features shift, beliefs evolve—yet we still say that it is “the same person.” Philosophers aim to identify what underlies this persistence. Is it the body, the soul, memory, psychological continuity, or is personal identity itself an illusion? This essay explores major theories of personal identity, the thinkers central to each view—especially Locke, Parfit, and Olson—and the most significant arguments for and against each position.

Main Theories:

1. Bodily Continuity Theory/Animalism
2. Soul Theory
3. Psychological Continuity Theory
4. Cerebral Continuity Theory
5. Reductionism

In Bodily continuity theory, a person remains the same as long as the same human body or biological organism continues. Identity is tied to physical continuity. Consciousness or memories may change, but the person remains the same if the body persists. The body is the “carrier” of identity. It is

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simple and intuitive — everyday identification uses bodies. It matches biological understanding of living organisms and avoids tricky psychological questions about memory or personality. American philosopher Eric Olson is the supporter of this theory who argued for animalism and said that, humans are fundamentally animals, not minds or souls. ¹

The core idea of soul theory of personal identity is that, identity is preserved by the same immaterial soul continuing to exist. The soul is what makes a person the same over time. Physical or mental changes do not affect identity, as long as the soul is the same. It explains dramatic psychological changes (e.g., amnesia). It also fits religious and spiritual beliefs as it supports belief in an afterlife. Greek philosopher Plato considered the soul (psyche) an eternal, incorporeal essence determining behaviour, central to personal identity. ²

The main idea of psychological continuity theory is that a person remains the same if they can remember past experiences. English philosopher John Locke defined identity as continuity of consciousness, not the body or soul. If we remember having an experience, then we are the person who had it. It emphasizes what feels important: our experiences and memories and explains moral responsibility. We are responsible only for what we remember doing. It also accommodates psychological importance such as self-awareness, character etc. ³

The modern version of psychological continuity theory states that identity is preserved through a chain of overlapping psychological connections such as memories, beliefs, personality traits, desires, intentions and reasoning skills. A direct memory is not required — it is enough that earlier and later stages are connected through intermediate stages. It is more realistic than Locke's memory theory as it handles normal psychological changes — identity evolves but stays connected. It fits moral and psychological intuitions as we care about our mind, traits, personality. Philosophers like Derek Parfit and Sydney Shoemaker are supporters of this theory.

The Brain Theory (sometimes called the Brain-Based Criterion or Cerebral Continuity Theory) claims that a person remains the same over time if the same brain—or the same crucial parts of the brain responsible for consciousness and psychological functions—continues to exist. We are identical to the organ that supports your mental life and that identity “follows the brain.” The brain is the seat of consciousness. Our memories, personality traits, beliefs, and emotions depend on brain structures. Psychological continuity depends on brain continuity. Damage, disease, or alteration in the brain can dramatically change a person's psychological identity. If your brain is transplanted into another body, we strongly tend to think you go with your brain, not your old body. This contrasts with the Body Theory,

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where identity stays with the body. It matches contemporary neuroscience as modern science locates the self and consciousness in brain activity. The organism or body is less relevant to psychological continuity.

Reductionism is fundamentally different from all other identity theories. It challenges the very idea that personal identity is a deep or factual matter. British philosopher Derek Parfit argued that there is no deep, metaphysical “self.” A person is not a single, unchanging entity. Instead, a person is a collection (bundle) of mental and physical events that occur over time. What continues from moment to moment is psychological connections, memories, character traits, intentions and personality patterns. Identity is not an extra “fact. It is just a convenient label for a complex stream of psychological events. What matters for survival is psychological continuity, not numerical identity. Even if strict identity fails (e.g., duplication cases), continuity can still matter.

Indian philosophy presents diverse theories of personal identity. *Vedāntic* schools ground identity in an eternal *ātman*, while *Nyāya* treats the self as a permanent substance. *Sāṃkhya* identifies the self with *puruṣa*, pure consciousness. Jaina philosophy accepts an eternal *jīva* whose true nature is obscured by karma. In contrast, Buddhism rejects any permanent self, interpreting the person as a momentary flow of mental and physical aggregates. *Cārvāka* materialism equates identity with the physical body. Thus, Indian philosophy ranges from strong essentialism (Advaita, *Nyāya*) to radical anti-essentialism (Buddhism), offering one of the world’s most comprehensive debates on the nature of the self.

***Upaniṣads*⁴: The *Ātman* as the True Self**

The *Upaniṣads* present one of the earliest Indian reflections on identity. To them, *ātman* is unchanging, eternal, pure consciousness. The physical body changes. Thoughts, memories, feelings change. But the witnessing consciousness does not change. Thus, personal identity is grounded not in psychological continuity but in the unchanging *ātman*, identical with Brahman. *Personal identity = deepest metaphysical Self, not the empirical person.*

Advaita Vedānta (Śaṅkara)⁵: Non-dual Self

Śaṅkara radicalizes the *Upaniṣadic* view. Only *ātman* or Brahman is real (*satya*). The body, mind, ego (*ahañkāra*) are *mithyā* (dependent reality). The empirical person (*jīva*) is a superimposition (*adhyāsa*) on pure consciousness. *Personal identity = pure consciousness (ātman), not the shifting psychological or physical elements.* Thus, identity is absolute, not relative.

Viśiṣṭādvaita (Rāmānuja)⁶: Self with Qualities

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While accepting *ātman*, Rāmānuja rejects Śāṅkara's strict non-dualism. The self is real, distinct, and has attributes (self-awareness, agency). The self is eternal but dependent on Brahman. A person retains individuality even in liberation. *Personal identity = eternal individual soul with real qualities.*

Dvaita (Madhva)⁷: Pluralism of Selves

Madhva holds a strong realist view. Souls (*jīvas*) are eternally distinct. Differences between God, souls, and matter are real. Personal identity is permanent individuality. *Personal identity = eternally distinct self with its unique nature.*

Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika⁸: A Permanent, Substance Self

Nyāya is deeply interested in epistemology and metaphysics. The self (*ātman*) is a permanent substance. Qualities such as memory, desire, pleasure, knowledge arise in the self. Continuity of memory proves a persistent self. *Personal identity = a persisting substance that owns psychological states.* This view is similar to Western substance theories of identity.

Sāṅkhya-Yoga⁹: Puruṣa as Pure Consciousness

Sāṅkhya distinguishes between: *Puruṣa* = pure, inactive consciousness and *Prakṛti* = mind, body, ego. *Personal identity is grounded in the unchanging puruṣa.* Psychological experiences belong to *prakṛti* and do not define the self. Thus, identity is metaphysical, not psychological.

Buddhism: No-Self (Anātman) Theory¹⁰

Buddhism offers the most radical critique. There is no permanent self. A person is a bundle of five skandhas (body, feelings, perception, mental formations, consciousness). Identity is momentary, fluid, and constructed. Buddhists argue that, what we call a "self" is only a convenient label for a causal stream of events. Memory continuity does not require a permanent self. *Personal identity = causal continuity without a permanent essence.*

Jaina Philosophy: Many-Sided Souls¹¹

Jainism accepts a soul (*jīva*) but interprets it uniquely. The soul is eternal, individual, and real. It possesses infinite qualities (consciousness, bliss), obscured by karmic matter. Liberation removes karmic particles, revealing the true identity. *Personal identity = eternal jīva with potential omniscience.*

Cārvāka: Materialist View

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The *Cārvākas* deny soul or afterlife. Consciousness arises from the body like intoxicating power from alcohol. When the body dies, consciousness ends. *Personal identity = physical body + consciousness produced by the body*. No continuity beyond this life.

This paper explores the basis of personal identity in *Śaṅkaradeva*'s philosophy, focusing on four themes: the metaphysical nature of the self (*ātman*), the moral-psychological dimension of personal identity, the relational identity rooted in devotion, and the communal identity of the bhakta within the *Ekaśaraṇa* order. The objective is to show that *Śaṅkaradeva* offers a multi-layered concept of personal identity, integrating metaphysical continuity, moral responsibility, spiritual transformation, and social belonging.

Metaphysical Foundation of Personal Identity: The Nature of the Ātman :

1. The Ātman as Eternal and Distinct from the Body

Śaṅkaradeva follows the broader *Vaiṣṇava* tradition in affirming the eternality and individuality of the soul. In texts such as the *Bhakti-ratnākara*, *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, and his Assamese rendering of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, he consistently contrasts the changing, perishable body (*deha*) with the unchanging, imperishable *ātman*.¹²

He writes, for example, that the body is “*dṛśya*” (that which is seen), while the soul is the seeing subject (“*draṣṭā*”). This parallels the *Bhagavad-gītā*'s description, which *Śaṅkaradeva* frequently paraphrases and embeds in his verses. The soul, being unborn, undying, and immutable, provides the continuity necessary for personal identity across time.

2. Individuality of the Soul

Unlike Advaita *Vedānta*, which dissolves individuality in Brahman, *Śaṅkaradeva* upholds the real individuality (*jīva-bheda*) of each soul. For him, the *jīva* is not illusory; it is a real, eternal entity whose individuality is valid and meaningful. This individuality is what makes bhakti—personal, loving devotion—possible.

Śaṅkaradeva strongly criticizes theories that deny the reality of individuality. He does not accept the notion that liberation means merging into an undifferentiated Brahman (*nirguṇa-brahma-laya*). Instead, liberation means eternal participation in God's blissful presence (*Vaikuṇṭha*), where individuality remains intact.¹³

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3. The Soul's Dependence on God

Although the soul is eternal and real, it is not independent. *Śaṅkaradeva's* thought resonates with the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* and Bhagavata schools in affirming the soul's inseparable dependence (*śeṣatva*) on God. The self is defined not by autonomy but by being a part and servant of *Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa*.¹⁴

Thus, metaphysically, personal identity rests on:

1. Eternal individuality
2. Distinctness from the body and mind
3. Ontological dependence on God

This framework establishes the fundamental continuity of the person across past, present, and future lives.

Psychological and Moral Dimensions of Personal Identity :**1. The Mind and Its Modifications**

While the soul is the unchanging core, human experience is mediated by the mind (*mana*), intellect (*buddhi*), and ego (*ahaṅkāra*). *Śaṅkaradeva* describes the mind as restless and susceptible to passions, desires, and delusions, echoing the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

Personal identity at the practical level is shaped by:

vāsanā (past impressions)

karma (past actions and their effects)

samskāras (psychological tendencies)

Although these are not the essence of the self, they determine how individuals experience the world and shape their moral character. In this sense, personal identity in *Śaṅkaradeva's* philosophy has a strong moral dimension.

2. Karma and Accountability

Śaṅkaradeva does not reject the doctrine of karma. Instead, he reinterprets it through a bhakti lens: while karma binds the soul, devotion can transcend karmic bondage.

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Because the *ātman* is eternal and continuous, it carries the moral consequences of its actions across lifetimes. This moral continuity reinforces the notion of personal identity: the same person who acts is the one who experiences the fruits of those actions, even across births. ¹⁵

3. Transformation Through Bhakti

Śaṅkaradeva views personal identity not as static but transformative. Bhakti reshapes the inner character, purifies the mind, and redirects consciousness toward God. A person becomes truly themselves when they realize their essential nature as a servant and devotee of *Kṛṣṇa*.

Thus, personal identity includes not only metaphysical and psychological continuity but also moral and spiritual development.

Relational Identity: The Bhakta's Relationship with Bhagavān :

1. Identity Through Divine Relationship

One of the most distinctive contributions of *Śaṅkaradeva* is the idea that personal identity reaches its fulfillment through a relationship with God. In *Ekaśaraṇa*-Dharma, the devotee takes “refuge in the One,” meaning that the devotee defines their selfhood entirely in relation to *Kṛṣṇa*. ¹⁶

This relational identity is built upon:

Śaraṇāgati (complete surrender)

Nāma-smaraṇa (recitation of God's name)

Dāsyā-bhāva (sense of servitude)

The individual becomes who they truly are by aligning their will and consciousness with divine love.

The most distinctive aspect of *Śaṅkaradeva*'s theory is that the “Self” is defined by its role as a servant. In the *Kīrttana-ghoṣā*, *Śaṅkaradeva* frequently employs the phrase “*Kṛṣṇara kiṅkara*” (servant of *Kṛṣṇa*).

“Thou art the Lord and I am Thy servant; this is my true identity.” (Literal sentiment from the hymns). This “relational identity” replaces the worldly “I” (*ahaṅkāra*) with a “devotional I.”

2. Love (*Prema*) as Personal Identity

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Śaṅkaradeva emphasizes *prema*, divine love, as transformative. Love alters the very orientation of the self. Instead of defining oneself through material attributes—caste, wealth, bodily identity—a person becomes identified through their love for *Kṛṣṇa*. This is a radical re-centering of identity.

The *Kīrttana-Ghoṣā* repeatedly stresses that worldly identities are unstable and misleading, while identity rooted in devotion is eternal –

“*bhakatara hṛdi mai kanro |*

bhakati bine moka nedenkho ||”

3. Bhakti as the Essence of Being

For *Śaṅkaradeva*, devotion is not simply one activity among others; it is the very essence of human existence. Because the soul is inherently related to God, its identity naturally expresses itself through bhakti. The more one realizes this, the more one’s true identity manifests. In *Kīrttana-Ghoṣā*, it is clearly said that –

“*jñāne nāhi pāve darśana |*

bhakatitehe pave nārāyaṇa ||”

Communal Identity: *Ekaśaraṇa* and the Collective Self :

1. The Community of Devotees

Another crucial dimension of *Śaṅkaradeva*’s philosophy is the collective identity of the bhakta within the *Ekaśaraṇa* community.¹⁷ His establishment of Satras and Namghars created institutional structures where identity was shaped through:

1. collective singing (*nāma-prasaṅga*),
2. shared ethical norms,
3. egalitarian participation, and
4. communal worship.

Thus, personal identity is not merely an internal or individual matter—it is formed within a collective spiritual context.

2. Egalitarianism and Rejection of Caste-Based Identity

Śaṅkaradeva famously rejected the rigid caste divisions of his time. Spiritual identity, he argued, is open to all—regardless of birth or status. In doing so, he replaced birth-based identity with devotion-based identity.

“*harira bhakata sarvva samāna |*

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nāhi jāti kulara abhimāna ||"¹⁸

This represents a profound redefinition of personhood: a person is not who society says they are but who they are in the eyes of God.

3. Identity Through Ethical Living

Ekaśaraṇa-Dharma prescribes a simple moral code: truthfulness, compassion, humility, and non-violence. A person is known by their conduct, not their ritual status. This reinforces the idea that personal identity is intertwined with ethical character and devotional practice.

Synthesis: The Integrated Self in Śaṅkaradeva's Thought :

The synthesis of personal identity in Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy suggests that a person is not a fragmented collection of experiences, but a layered entity that finds resolution in divine service. At the foundational level, Śaṅkaradeva establishes a Metaphysical Persistence that sharply contrasts with Western Animalism. While thinkers like Eric Olson argue that our identity is tied to our biological life as an organism, Śaṅkaradeva posits the *jīva* as an eternal substance. This soul provides a "numerical identity" that remains constant despite the radical biological shifts of birth, disease, and death. Unlike the *Advaita* view where this individual identity eventually vanishes into the Absolute, Śaṅkaradeva insists on the soul's permanent individuality, ensuring that the person who begins the journey of devotion is the same person who eventually attains the bliss of *Vaikuṅṭha*.

Building upon this metaphysical core, Śaṅkaradeva incorporates a Psychological and Moral Continuity that expands the boundaries of the Lockean "memory-based" self. For Locke, identity stretches only as far as consciousness can reach back into the past. Śaṅkaradeva, however, suggests that our identity is shaped by *samskāras* (subconscious impressions) and *karma* that persist even when conscious memory fails. This creates a moral-psychological bridge across lifetimes; the "person" is a continuous ethical project. Personal identity is thus not merely a snapshot of current mental states, but a long-term trajectory of the soul's refinement, where the "bundle" of habits and desires is gradually redirected toward the divine.

This internal persistence finds its ultimate meaning in Relational Identity. In many Western frameworks, the ideal self is the "Autonomous Self"—an independent agent defined by self-governance. Śaṅkaradeva flips this paradigm by arguing that the self is ontologically and functionally dependent on *Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa*. Through *dāśya-bhāva* (the sentiment of servitude), the devotee does not lose their

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identity; rather, they find their "true" identity. This aligns with a Relational Ontology, where who we are is defined by whom we belong to. By defining the self through *śaraṇāgati* (surrender), Śaṅkaradeva offers a solution to the ego-centric anxieties of identity: the "I" is no longer a lonely substance seeking to preserve itself, but a participant in a divine relationship.

Finally, this identity is solidified through Communal Embeddedness within the *Namghar* and *Satra* institutions. Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy moves personal identity from the private, meditative sphere into the public, egalitarian space. By stripping away caste-based and birth-based identifiers, he replaces "Social Identity" with "Devotional Identity." Here, the person is recognized as a *bhakta*—a member of a spiritual collective. This communal aspect ensures that personal identity is not just a metaphysical abstraction but a lived reality, reinforced through shared ethics and congregational worship. Ultimately, Śaṅkaradeva's vision of the person is a journey from the "false self" of the material ego to the "true self" as an eternal, loving servant within a community of equals.

Conclusion :

Śaṅkaradeva's concept of personal identity is rich, multi-dimensional, and deeply rooted in his devotional monotheism. At its foundation is an eternal, individual soul, distinct from body and mind, and dependent on God. Layered upon this metaphysical core are the psychological and moral dimensions shaped by karma and transformed through bhakti. At a higher level, personal identity becomes relational, defined not by worldly attributes but by one's devotion to *Kṛṣṇa*. Finally, Śaṅkaradeva situates identity within the community of devotees, where egalitarian ethics and collective worship shape a shared spiritual self-understanding.

Thus, in Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy, personal identity is ultimately the discovery of the soul's true nature as an eternal, loving, devoted participant in the divine life of *Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa*. It is a journey from ignorance to devotion, from self-centeredness to God-centeredness, and from isolated individuality to a shared spiritual community. This makes his view of personal identity both metaphysical and relational, individual and communal, ethical and devotional—an integrated vision of what it means to be a person.

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6. *Śrībhāṣya*.
7. *Anuvyākhyāna*.
8. *Nyāya-Sūtra and Vaiśeṣika-Sūtra*.
9. *Sāṃkhyakārikā and Yoga-Sūtra*.
10. *Anāttalakkhaṇa Sutta, Saṃyutta Nikāya - 22.59*.
11. *Umāsvāti, Tattvārthasūtra*.
12. “*deha nohe ātmā iṭo janibā niścaya |*
ātmā nāśa nāhi deha haya kṣaya ||
nāśa nāhi ātmāra nāśa haya dehara |
deha gaile ātmā thake anya dehara ||”
- Śaṅkaradeva, *Kīrttana-ghoṣā*.
13. *Ajāmila Upākhyāna*.
14. “*ahaṃkāra tyaji bhakata hore śuddha |*
jīvara svarūpa dāsatvata siddha ||
hari icchā bine jīvara nāhi śakti |
karma jñāna sakalo tomāra adhīna ||
tumiyei pitā mātā bandhu prāṇa |
tomā bine mai nāhi eko sthāna ||”
-Assamese *Bhorgeet*.
15. “*jīva naśvara nohe deha nāśe māntho |*
bhagavāna nāma lai tabe saṃsāra sāntho ||”
- *Ajāmila Upākhyāna*.
16. “*mai to tomāra dāsa, dāsavo dāsa |*

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tumi prabhu, mai adhama acetana pāṣāṇa ||”

- *Kīrttana-ghoṣā*, Dāsya-bhakti section.

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