



Clarification on the Proposed “Adi Sankara Chair” at Columbia University

Sringeri Vidya Bharati Foundation USA Inc., (SVBF) is a non-profit, tax-exempt Corporation registered in the State of New Jersey, USA.

This note clarifies the facts relating to a recent video circulating on YouTube. This is about SVBF’s plans to establish the “Adi Shankara Chair in Columbia University” in the year 2014/15. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Columbia University and SVBF was initiated but *the MOU was never signed*.

We present here a brief factual background of SVBF in establishing the “Adi Sankara Chair.”

1. SVBF has established four shakhA matthas” (branches for each of the four vedas) in the four directions of USA (East, North, South, and West), under the aegis of Dakshinamanaya Sri Sharada Peetham, Sringeri. In addition, one is set up in Canada.
2. SVBF offers College Education Scholarships for youths to encourage them to learn & memorize Geeta, write essays and speak on the content of Gita in front of reputed scholars.
3. As an affiliate of Dakshinamnaya Sri Sharada Peetham, Sringeri, SVBF wants the youths growing in USA to learn about Adi Shankara and His teachings as part of their education and that was the main motivation for planning the “Adi Shankara Chair”.
4. In that process the youth can get exposure to other branches of our Sastras, namely, Tarka, Nyaya, Vyakharana, Mimamsa, History etc., and other disciplines.
5. The incumbent Chair Professor would be a reputable Vedantic Scholar, knowledgeable of Adi Shankara’s philosophy, to teach courses at Columbia University. In this regard,
 - a. No MOU was signed either by SVBF or Sringeri Mutt on this proposal
 - b. Prof. Sheldon Pollack was only a facilitator to introduce us to the Columbia Team on discussions regarding the proposal and not a candidate for the Chair.
 - c. The proposal aimed to establish this Chair under the Philosophy curriculum of the University
 - d. The University would only consider the Chair under the MESAAS – (Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies) branch, which was not suitable to us.
 - e. SVBF wanted to be part of the Advisory Board in selecting the Chair, and the right to veto if the candidate does not meet SVBF’s objectives.

As the discussions did not converge, SVBF dropped this proposal in then itself.

Now that this proposal is dropped, we end our discussions on this subject.

For the benefit of the reader, some other facts of interest are given below.

Other facts of interest regarding the proposal of the Adi Shankara Chair:

- Sringeri Vidya Bharati Foundation USA Inc. (SVBF) proposed to establish the “Adi Shankara Chair/Professorship for Advaita Vedanta” for study and research of the teachings of Adi Sankara and Hindu Philosophy in general, in 2014.
- After considering a few Universities in the USA, SVBF chose to engage in dialogue with the Columbia University in New York.
- A Senior Trustee of the Board who was instrumental in establishing another Chair in Columbia, enabled the contacts in the University to help us with the proposal.
- He identified Prof. Sheldon Pollack, a Professor of South Asian Studies and a scholar in Sanskrit, to facilitate the discussions with the faculty of the University.
- The members of staff of the University engaged in discussions with the members of the Board of SVBF regarding the proposal.
- Certain elements of the proposal were identified such as the amount SVBF will pay and the matching grant from the University, terms of payment, functions of the Chair etc.
- Using the information, a Memorandum of Understanding – MOU – was drafted as a working document, till both the parties would reach an agreement on the proposal.
- This information was shared by one Senior Trustee with a friend as a “done deal” since the financials were agreed; however, the other aspects of the MOU were still in progress, like the curriculum, the qualifications of the incumbent, title of the incumbent, in which department this would fit in etc. etc.
- Mr. Rajiv Malhotra came to know of this initiative through his contacts and He had also published blogs etc. highly criticizing the initiative.
- He also attempted to reach the Chairman of SVBF through a common friend and Trustee of SVBF, Mr. Ravi Subramanian.
- We had a phone conversation on August 24, 2014, which he summarized in an email and agreed to meet in person on September 8, 2014
- A meeting was organized with Mr. Malhotra & his friend in the office of the Chairman of Sri Guruvayurappan Temple (SVBF Chairman is the Chairman of that Temple also), along with fellow Trustees of SVBF, on September 8, 2014.
- The meeting was very productive and cordial. During the meeting, Mr. Malhotra was asked whether he was against this proposal, for which he said “no”.
- He added, if we could wait for some more time since he was planning to do a “poorva paksha” of Prof. Sheldon Pollack & the “kshetra analysis on the Columbia Mattha “-University. He would share his findings with us once ready.

- We agreed since we could benefit by this analysis and told that we were not in any hurry and would like to consider all aspects.
- He also made some good suggestions – such as, establishing the Chair in the Department of Philosophy and also to include a “Refund clause” in the MOU if Columbia is not able to conform to the requirements outlined in the MOU.
- Other criteria included in the draft MOU were:
 - a. The incumbent should be very conversant with Sanskrit and be able to speak fluently
 - b. Should have knowledge of Tarka, Vyakharana, Mimamsa and Advaita Vedanta
 - c. Should have learnt from a Guru from the Vedanta Lineage to provide ongoing guidance
 - d. Should comply with the required traditional lifestyle as a role model for students etc.
- Following these and many other exchanges of views, the meeting was over with prasadam.
- Mr. RM sent me an email thanking us for the hospitality and captured the discussions in a nice summary and copied Dr. VRG, other Trustees of SVBF & his friend who attended.
- He also said that he planned to go to Sringeri between September 26-28. We wished him well and asked to let us know when he would be in Sringeri.
- Everything ended very well up to this point. Then there was no communication with him.
- We continued our discussions with Columbia and went on iterating the draft with many changes, which ultimately did not reach the stage of an agreement due to many unresolved pending issues. Therefore, the whole idea was dropped completely and in toto.
- In the meantime, we learnt about Mr. RM’s visit to Sringeri, darshan of Acharya and meeting with Dr. VRG etc, from Dr. VRG.
- After some time, we were informed by a friend that there was already a book published in January of 2016, “The Battle for Sanskrit” which included discussions on the Adi Shankara Chair and elements of the “poorva paksha’ of Prof. Pollack & the “kshetra analysis” of Columbia, which he offered to share with us then, but never shared.
- We chose not to react as the proposal was closed and of no relevance and consequence.
- We saw a recent YouTube clip on this same matter and fail to understand why this is being brought out after about 10 years, when the proposal itself was dropped then itself.
- As this YouTube clip is going viral, we thought that we should set the record straight with our reflections by drawing attention to the facts and we end the issue here.

- Sri Adi Shankaracharya's works and teachings on Advaita Philosophy belongs to the whole humanity and no one can give away a 'right' to anyone to set a narrative as one wishes. The four Amnaya Peethams established by Sri Adi Shankaracharya Himself are the best institutions to guide humanity about the Advaita philosophy.
- There are profound scholars of Advaita philosophy who would have headed the Chair had it fructified and not any linguist who merely has knowledge of Sanskrit. Different points of view on this philosophy do exist to this day which are being countered in debates and seminars. Therefore, the argument of marginalizing the Sanatana Dharma through this act or of saving the legacy of Sri Adi Shankaracharya is itself fundamentally flawed.
