PART 3: THEMES OF SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA HINDU THEOLOGY

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6) PARABRAHMAN

Returning to Svāminārāyaṇa's formulation of 'jñāna' from Vac. Loyā.7, we find not only how the other entities contribute to the understanding of God, but also an indication of the aspects of God that constitute that theological knowledge. As a reminder, that summary is as follows:

> A jñānin is one who singularly serves God manifest before the eyes – who eternally has a form – realising him as transcending Prakṛti-Puruṣa and Akṣara, and as being the cause and support of all. Such understanding constitutes jñāna, and such jñāna leads to ultimate liberation.

Thus, in effect, true knowledge of God constitutes the knowledge of:

1. God as manifest before one's eyes
2. God as eternally having a form
3. God as transcending Prakṛti-Puruṣa (i.e. māyā) and Akṣara (also known as Akṣarabrahman or Brahman)
4. God as the cause and support of all

This corresponds neatly to the four aspects of knowing God traditionally used within the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya known simply by the following four terms:

1. Pragaṭa ('manifest')
2. Sākāra ('with form')
3. Sarvopari ('supreme')
4. Kartā ('doer')

These four broad terms, though in a slightly different order[87], will provide the framework for the four main themes under which aspects and characteristics of Parabrahman can be grouped to aid in a coherent, systematic exposition of the nature of God as found within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition. It is not a strict framework, and there will inevitably be some overlap and double-berthing between the aspects of God's nature, but all of the most important aspects have been covered and hopefully without too much repetition. As perhaps with any intellectual endeavour, the framework itself is not as important as the ideas it supports and contains.

6.1) Absolute Essentiality of Knowing God

Before we delve into a detailed exposition of the nature of Parabrahman, it would be useful to begin with a brief understanding of the absolute essentiality of knowing God's nature as held within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition. While the need for God within a theological system may seem obvious, this emphasis on *knowing* him is significant and will prove helpful when discussing Akṣarabrahman, mukti (especially when relating 'knowing' and 'doing'), and also later when returning to the salient features of Hindu theology in general.

We can gather from the brief introductions to the Vacanāmrut and Svāmīnī Vāto provided in Part 2 that their principal subject is God, and that their prime

[87] On this occasion, the order is insignificant. Besides, English syntax has not allowed the order from the original Gujarati to be retained in the translation.

objective is what can be called 'applied theology' leading to liberation. Unsurprisingly, we find a strong and direct link between knowing God and liberation in both of these theological texts. For example:

> The knowledge of God's nature and the knowledge of God's greatness are the two extraordinary means to liberation (Vac. Gaḍh. I.57).

> The cause of liberation is resolute faith[88] in God (SV 1.307).

In the above reference from Vac. Loyā.7 as well, after providing a formulation of jñāna, Svāminārāyaṇa is quick to conclude that "such jñāna leads to ultimate liberation." This follows from the other śāstric statements cited in that discourse mentioned earlier:

> Ṛte jñānān na muktih |
>
> There is no liberation without jñāna (Hiranyakeśiyaśākhā Śruti[89]).

and

> Tam eva viditvā'timṛtyum eti nānyaḥ panthā vidyāte'yanāya ||
>
> Only by knowing him does one pass beyond death; there is no other path for attaining [liberation] (SU 3.8).

Such 'jñāna', or knowledge of God, is often used synonymously in sampradāyic literature with terms such as 'niścaya' (resolute faith) or 'svarūpaniṣṭhā' (literally, 'conviction of [God's] nature'), and upāsanā, i.e. worship and faith informed by correct theological understanding, reiterating that 'knowing God' is

[88] Such unassailable faith is necessarily informed by and "coupled with the knowledge of God's greatness" (Vac. Gaḍh. I.56, Gaḍh. I.72, Loyā.3 and Var.12).

[89] This is a non-extant Vaiṣṇava text, but the phrase is attributed to it in the *Setumālā* commentary on the *Harivākyasudhāsindhu* at 115.7.

not the mere accumulation of cerebral data concerning the Divine – 'knowing *about* God' – but a deep and personal theological endeavour leading to an intimate and everlasting relationship.

For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. I.56, Muktānanda Svāmī asks a question about how one can form an abiding conviction that the ātman is distinct from the non-ātman, i.e. the physical body, senses, mind, etc. He queries that, even after learning about this within the religious community from sermons and scriptural reading,

> why does the blissful jīvātman still associate with the senses, mind, etc. while engaged in the worship and remembrance of God and thereby become miserable due to the influence of disturbing thoughts?

Svāmināràyaṇa prefaces his reply with the following emphasis on upāsanā:

> Some become accomplished yogis, some become omniscient, some become devatās, and thus attain countless types of greatness, including the highest state of enlightenment. All this is achieved on the strength of the upāsanā of God, but without upāsanā, nothing can be accomplished.

He then goes on to reply to the original question by explaining that the distinction between ātman and non-ātman cannot be realised by mere study of scriptures or personal resolve, but only by faith in God informed by correct theological knowledge. "In fact," Svāmināràyaṇa reinforces, "no spiritual endeavours can be fulfilled" without such faith (Vac. Gaḍh. I.56).

It is upāsanā, then, above all else, which leads to and fulfils all other spiritual endeavours.

This is explained further in sermon 6.294 of the Svāmīnī Vāto, where Guṇātītānanda Svāmī is asked a question by an unnamed devotee but one who clearly has a sound familiarity of the Vacanāmrut's teachings. The inquirer asks:

> One finds in the Vacanāmrut that sometimes the power of surrendering to God is propounded, whereas sometimes dharma, sometimes detachment from the world, sometimes realisation of the self as ātman, or sometimes ātma-realisation has been cast aside. With so many endeavours propounded in so many statements, please tell me one thing within which all spiritual endeavours are subsumed and one can attain the highest liberation.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī replied:

> If one has upāsanā and the highest faith in God, then all else will follow from that (6.294).

In three other key sermons, which we shall return to again later, Svāminārāyaṇa reiterates the same point.

> When you firmly understand the nature of God as such, you will encounter no obstacles on the path to liberation. However, without such firm understanding of the nature of God, one will never be able to overcome one's weaknesses, regardless of however much one renounces [worldly objects] or the number of fasts one observes....
>
> A person [with such a firm understanding of God] has nothing left to accomplish; he is fulfilled and has reached the culmination of all spiritual endeavours. If one has such a firm belief in the nature of God, then even if a slight flaw remains in the observance of the vows of non-egotism, non-avarice, non-lust, non-taste or non-attachment, there is still nothing to worry about. Conversely, if any deficiency remains in understanding the nature of God, then in no way will one ever be redeemable. Therefore, one should attempt to

understand this profound principle by any means within this lifetime (Vac. Gaḍh. II.13).

A person who has such a conviction of God [as explained yesterday in Vac. Gaḍh. II.13] will not attain an ill fate – even if some small deficiency remains in him. In fact, ultimately, he will definitely attain the nirguṇa state. But a person without such a conviction of God – even if he is a sincere renunciant and is vigilantly striving to eradicate lust, anger, avarice, etc. – will not be able to eradicate those vicious natures by his efforts alone. Ultimately, he will become impure and be consigned to naraka.

Therefore, whoever realises such jñāna of God, even if he has only a feeble intellect, should still be regarded as possessing much intellect. On the other hand, if he has not realised such jñāna of God, then even if he has much intellect, he should still be known as having no intellect (Vac. Gaḍh. II.14).

One who has known God in this way [as perfectly divine when manifest on earth as he is in his transcendental abode] can be said to have known God perfectly. For him, māyā can be said to have been eradicated. One who realises this is called a jñānin and an accomplished devotee.... On the other hand, if one who has doubts in realising God in this way [i.e. perfectly divine], then even if he is a perfect celibate of the highest order and a great renunciant, securing liberation would still be extremely difficult for him (Vac. Pan.7).

In all three examples, Svāminārāyaṇa is unequivocal in emphasising not only the absolute need to know God for liberation, but also the utter uselessness of everything else if one does not know God perfectly.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī similarly emphasises both the need for complete theological knowledge, i.e.

If there is any deficiency in upāsanā, one might attain other pleasures but will not be redeemed of the miseries of entering the womb [i.e. the cycle of births and deaths] (SV 5.73),

as well as the pre-eminence of this knowledge above all other religious endeavours:

> However much one may have endeavoured otherwise, if one does not have proper upāsanā, then one will not be liberated (SV 5.126).

In another sermon, he uses the following nuptial simile to make the same point:

> The conviction of God's nature and the realisation of his greatness are like the groom [whereas] all endeavours are like the wedding guests (SV 1.298).

Just as the guests at a wedding would be rendered purposeless if there was no bride or groom – indeed, there would be no wedding – similarly, without the full knowledge and conviction of God's nature, all other religious endeavours would be useless; there would be no theology.

In yet another typically laconic sermon, Guṇātītānanda Svāmī similarly emphasises the primacy of theological knowledge above all other endeavours:

> God is the 'one' and religious endeavours are all 'zeros' (SV 5.192).

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī means that while religious endeavours are important and necessary, if they are not preceded by a correct theological understanding of God, they will be as worthless as a long string of zeros lacking the digit '1' in front of them. Just as the '1' gives value and meaning to all the zeros, it is God who gives value and meaning to all other religious endeavours and brings them to fruition. The knowledge of God, then, must be prioritised so that it is first and foremost among all endeavours.

Going even further, Gunātītānanda Svāmī adds:

> He who has a firm conviction of the nature of God has accomplished all spiritual endeavours; he has nothing left to achieve (SV 1.123).

Svāminārāyaṇa similarly explains that after knowing God, not only is there nothing else to know but there is also nothing else to achieve.

> A person who has realised the form of God perfectly has nothing left to realise.... Time, karma and māyā are incapable of binding a person who has developed in his heart such firm faith coupled with an understanding of God's greatness. Therefore, he who realises God perfectly in this way has nothing left to achieve (Vac. Gaḍh. I.63).

These statements echo some of the famous Upaniṣadic proclamations about 'knowing the one by which all can be known' (e.g. CU 6.1.3 & MuU 1.1.3).

Together these statements from the Vacanāmrut and Svāmīnī Vāto emphasise the primary importance and absolute indispensability of knowing God within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, especially in relation to other theological understanding and religious practices (sādhanā). As a summary, then, knowledge of God is:

- Foundational – all religious practice and theological understanding must be grounded in the knowledge of God
- Central – all religious practice and theological understanding revolves around the knowledge of God
- Apical – the aim and culmination of all practice is to know God as fully as possible

6.2) SARVOPARI: God as Supreme

Ontologically, Parabrahman is the highest, most transcendental entity. As the term 'sarvoparı' – literally, 'above all' – suggests, no other being or thing can ever surpass him in any way whatsoever. The Upanıṣads proclaim:

> Puruṣān na param kiñcit |
>
> There is nothing greater than Puruṣa [i.e. Puruṣottama or Parabrahman] (KaU 3.11).

> Yasmāt param nāparam asti kiñcit |
>
> Beyond whom there is nothing at all (SU 3.9).

> Nātaḥ param asti |
>
> There is nothing greater than [Parabrahman] (PU 6.7).

Other terms apart from 'para' and 'parama' (supreme or best) which describe Parabrahman's preeminent position include 'uttama' (highest or best), 'utkṛṣṭa' (best), 'śreṣṭa' (best), and 'kāṣṭā' (ultimate).

Superlatives such as 'supreme' or 'best' invite two questions, however. Firstly, 'Best among whom?'; and secondly, 'Best at what?'. As we look to expound upon the supremacy of Parabrahman in this section, specific aspects of his supreme nature have thus been grouped into two sets broadly corresponding to these two questions. The first set deals with topics which show Parabrahman's transcendence over other entities. How exactly is he greater than all other beings and things? We answer this through the following topics:

- Parabrahman, the one without second
- Parabrahman, the sovereign Lord and Master of all realms
- Parabrahman, the Soul of All
- Parabrahman the Avatārin, the cause of all avatāras
- Parabrahman as Akṣarātīta (greater even than Akṣarabrahman)

The second set of topics deals with the transcendence of God in his own mode of being. In these, we shall be exploring some of Parabrahman's most important inherent qualities and seeing how they are the best they could possibly be. Of course, while Parabrahman has infinite qualities and each one of them is infinitely excellent, for the purposes of our study, we shall limit our focus to seven aspects of his limitless nature: Parabrahman with respect to time, space, knowledge, power, splendour, bliss, and virtues.

6.2.1) Superiority of Parabrahman Over All Others

We begin to expound upon Parabrahman's supremacy by examining his position in relation to the other entities.

6.2.1.1) One Without Second

In all senses of the term, Parabrahman is unique. He is one and one of a kind, quite literally in a class of his own; *sui generis*. But that in and of itself does not make him supreme, for this description also applies to Akṣarabrahman. In fact, in being fundamentally distinct from the other four entities – remember that there is nothing outside of these five metaphysical categories – and singular in quantity

within this category (if it can be called that), Parabrahman is of course going to be 'unique'. But by virtue of his infinite greatness, power, charm, auspicious qualities, etc., no other entity can even approximate him – neither his nature (svarūpa) nor his divine attributes (guṇa)[90]. They are – and he is – limitless and matchless.

As in Upaniṣadic statements, such as at CU 6.2.1, which proclaim the highest Truth[91] as being 'eka' (one) and 'advitīya' (without second), we find a similar emphasis in the Vacanāmrut on both the uniqueness and peerlessness of God. Citing this phrase, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

> Only God is like God; no one can become like him. The Vedic verse 'ekam evādvitīyam Brahma' also explains that God alone is like God. This is the principle of all of the scriptures (Vac. Loyā.13).

Elsewhere, Svāminārāyaṇa straightforwardly explains:

> There is only one form of God. This God is extremely powerful and no one, including Akṣara, is capable of becoming like him. This is an established principle (Vac. Loyā.4).

> In fact, only God is like God; no one else can even compare to him (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

[90] A brief note here might be necessary: Svāminārāyaṇa does not distinguish between 'svarūpa' and 'svabhāva', translated by Carman as essential nature and inherent nature, respectively (see especially chapter 6 in his *The Theology of Rāmānuja*) when referring to God. In fact, we hardly see 'svabhāva' being used for Parabrahman or Aksarabrahman in the Vacanāmrut or Svāmīnī Vāto. Hence, 'God's svarūpa' throughout has been translated as 'God's nature' without distinguishing, if even possible, between his essential or inherent forms. 'Guṇas' such as loving compassion, mercy, auspiciousness, charm, etc. are referred to as his divine characteristics or attributes.

[91] Note that according to the Svāminārāyana-Bhāṣya, the term 'sat' at CU 6.2 is denotive of both Brahman and Parabrahman. See the chapter on Aksarabrahman for a fuller discussion.

This also echoes the proclamation of the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad:

> Na tat-samaścābhyadhikaśca dṛśyate |
>
> No one/thing is found to be on par or greater than him (SU 6.8).

In the last documented sermon of the Vacanāmrut, where Svāminārāyaṇa again reiterates the singularity and uniqueness of God, we also find his a parsimoniae argument for a monotheistic system.

> Only God is like God. Many have attained qualities similar to his by worshipping him, yet they certainly do not become like God. If they did become like God, this would suggest the existence of several Gods. As a result, the governance of the world would not remain orderly. One God would say, 'I will create the world,' while another God would say, 'I will destroy the world.' One God would say, 'I will make it rain,' while another would say, 'I will not.' One would say, 'I will instil human instincts in animals,' while another would say, 'I will instil animal instincts in humans.' A stable state would not be possible in this situation. But see how orderly everything functions in the world! There is not even the slightest irregularity. Thus, the governor of all activities and the lord of all is one God. Not only that, it seems that no one can ever challenge him. Therefore, God is definitely one, and no one can become like him (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

Svāminārāyaṇa alludes at the beginning of this statement to those liberated, accomplished souls who have attained qualities similar to those of God. How this is possible and what these qualities are will be discussed in detail in the section on Mukti, but it is important here to reiterate that this in no way challenges or undermines God's greatness. For example, even when Svāminārāyaṇa goes as far as in Vac. Gaḍh. III.37 to say,

> A devotee in the abode of God who has attained attributes similar to God also possesses a form similar to that of God,

he immediately goes on to clarify:

> Nevertheless, that devotee is still a mukta, and God is, after all, Puruṣottama. Indeed, God is supreme among everyone and is fit to be worshipped by everyone. He is also their master. No one, however, can fathom the greatness of that God. He has a divine form, is nirguṇa, and is worthy of being meditated upon. In fact, that form of God is such that a person who meditates upon him becomes nirguṇa himself (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

Similarly, in another sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa explains that by the grace of God, devotees may rise to the ranks of Śukadeva and Nārada, or become like Brahmā and Śiva, or may even become like Akṣara (i.e. aksararūpa, fully enlightened).

> However, no one is capable of becoming like Śrī Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa (Vac. Kār.10).

Thus, the outright greatness, supremacy or uniqueness of Parabrahman is never challenged or undermined. Ontologically, essentially and characteristically, Parabrahman is one, matchless and unsurpassable. He is supreme.

6.2.1.2) Sovereign Lord, Owner and Controller

A recurring motif found in the Vacanāmrut conveying Parabrahman's infinite supremacy is a description of him as the 'King of all kings' or 'Lord of all lords' reigning over the entire universe. For example, in an extended explanation in Vac. Pan.4, Svāminārāyaṇa begins:

> That God is the Great King of all kings [mahārājādhirāj], he is surrounded by countless divine luxuries and countless divine attendants, and he is the lord [pati] of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas.

Then, perhaps to help his village audience grasp this rather esoteric concept, he literally brings it 'down to earth' with an analogy to which they can relate.

> For example, suppose there is a great world-emperor whose kingdom stretches from where the sun rises to where it sets.... So powerful is this world-emperor that it is not possible to count the villages in his empire, as they are innumerable. Nor can the chiefs of these villages be counted, as they too are innumerable. Furthermore, the countless chiefs of those villages come to his court to make requests. The emperor's money, property, pleasures, palaces and wealth are also countless. Similarly, God is the king of the kings of countless villages in the form of brahmāṇḍas.
>
> Moreover, the chiefs of those villages in the form of brahmāṇḍas are Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. Just as in one village one chief is senior and the whole population of that village bows before him and follows his command, and just as the chief in turn bows before the king, similarly, in each brahmāṇḍa, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva are superior, and the others in that brahmāṇḍa, that is the devas, demons, humans, seers and prajāpatis of that brahmāṇḍa, worship them and follow their command. But Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva in turn worship Puruṣottama Bhagavān and follow his command.
>
> Furthermore, all of the Brahmās, Viṣṇus and Maheśas of all of the brahmāṇḍas pray to God, 'Mahārāja! Please have compassion on us and visit our brahmāṇḍa' – just as the chief of a village requests the world-emperor, 'Mahārāja! I am poor. Please visit my house. I shall serve you to the best of my ability.' In the same way, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva pray to that God: 'Mahārāja! Please have mercy upon us and grace us with your darśana; do visit our brahmāṇḍa.' Only then does God assume a body in that brahmāṇḍa (Vac. Pan.4).[92]

A number of points emerge from this description. Firstly, Svāmināràyaṇa adds an important element to the understanding of God as 'world-emperor' – as not just

[92] The same analogy is given in Vac. Gaḍh. III.39, wherein Svāmināràyana emphasises the utter insignificance of the brahmāṇḍas Parabrahman rules over in relation to his infinite supremacy.

> God is the Lord of the lords of countless brahmāṇḍas. However, the brahmāṇḍas over which he reigns as lord are insignificant [compared to him]....
>
> Within each brahmāṇḍas there are Brahmā, Visṇu and Śiva, as well as the pṛthvi with its seven dvīpas, seven oceans, Meru, and Lokāloka and other mountains. The brahmāṇḍas also contain the 14 realms, the eight barriers, and many other things. God is the lord of countless such brahmāṇḍas. For example, one can realise the eminence of an emperor of the world, even though his villages can be counted. But the eminence of God is much greater because even those countless brahmāṇḍas are insignificant to him. So then, of what significance can the beings of those brahmāṇḍas be before God? Of no significance at all; they are utterly insignificant (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

lording over a vast dominion of land and wealth, but having subjects over whom he reigns. He is not merely a landlord, but indeed the sovereign emperor.

Secondly, these subjects include īśvaras such as Brahmā, Viṣnu and Maheśa – used in the plural by Svāminārāyaṇa to emphasise that he is talking about multiple brahmāṇḍas over which Parabrahman reigns – who themselves are "chiefs of the brahmāṇḍs" yet "poor" in comparison to "the Great King of all kings". The utter supplication presented in their prayer to Parabrahman, beseeching him to grace them with his audience, cements his position of paramount sovereignty.

That these authoritative īśvaras – themselves worshipped and obeyed – worship and obey Parabrahman adds a third and important message to be drawn from the analogy. Yes,

> God is very powerful; even the devas such as Brahmā and others live under his command (Vac. Gaḍh. II.66),

so of course the less powerful and even more insignificant jīvas should also obey Parabrahman. But to impress that this is more than fearful compliance, Svāminārāyaṇa adds that the īśvaras *worship* Parabrahman, for he is eminently worthy of their highest reverence and adoration.

> Indeed, God is supreme among everyone and is fit to be worshipped by everyone (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

And indeed, his subjects do accord Parabrahman their highest reverence, adoration and humility – subjects who are themselves some of the most exalted, powerful and holiest of all the worlds.

> Even the great such as Brahmā, Śiva, Lakṣmījī, Rādhājī, Nārada, Śuka, the Sanakādika, and the nine Yogeśvaras apply the dust of God's holy feet upon their heads. They put asıde all of their self-importance and constantly offer devotion to him (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

What is also notable from the excerpt of Vac. Pan.4 is the use of the term 'pati'. Svāminārāyaṇa adds this to the list of others terms he uses to signify God as the overlord. Other instances include, for example:

> This God is the lord [pati] of all abodes such as Brahmamahola, Goloka and Śvetadīpa, etc. and the lord [pati] of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas... (Vac. Gaḍh. I.59).

> God is the lord [pati] of Goloka, Vaikuṇṭha, Śvetadīpa, Brahmamahola... (Vac. Gaḍh. I.56).

Etymologically, 'pati' literally means protector, from the verb-root 'pā', to protect, but is more generally used for lord, master or husband. In thus portraying Parabrahman as a lord of an estate or head of a household, it provides another nuance useful in understanding him within this continuing, multifaceted theme, as not just an owner or ruler but also a provider and protector, especially when 'pati' is used alongside other terms such as 'rājādhirāj' and 'niyantā'.

The term 'pati' in the sense of husband also takes on a special theological significance when considering Parabrahman's relationship with the finite beings (jīvas and īśvaras). It implies a sense of mutual love, faithfulness and

commitment characteristic of marriage while also providing the sense of God being the provider and protector as head of the house (at least in the context of early nineteenth century India when the Vacanāmrut was delivered). Moreover, Svāminārāyaṇa repeatedly talked about devotees being 'wedded' to God with singular devotion akin to the love and fidelity of a pativratā wife, literally 'one whose husband is her vow' (Vac. Sār.14, Loyā.2, Loyā.11, Gaḍh. II.1, Gaḍh. II.5, Gaḍh. II.62, and Gaḍh. III.16).

These latest statements from the Vacanāmrut provide yet another insight into Parabrahman's sovereignty. His dominion stretches not just across the territory of the brahmāṇḍas – still 'worldly' in scope – but even across the superior abodes of the other avatāras, i.e.

> God is the master of all abodes – Vaikuṇṭha, Goloka, Brahmamahola, etc. (Vac. Gadh. I.60),

thereby further establishing an even higher superiority for him.

In other sermons, Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to establish Akṣaradhāma as the highest, most transcendental, and most blissful among the various distinct abodes. While this will be discussed with śāstric excerpts in the chapter on Akṣarabrahman[93], it is important to note here that Svāminārāyaṇa also establishes Parabrahman as the presiding lord of Akṣaradhāma (sometimes also referred to as Brahmadhāma, Brahmaloka, Brahmapura or Brahmamahola). For example:

[93] Chapter 7.4.2.

> The form of God within that light is called the essence of the ātman, Parabrahman or Purusottama.... He is the lord of Akṣaradhāma (Vac. Gaḍh. II.13).

Again, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

> The master of countless millions of such Virāṭa-Puruṣas [the administrative heads each brahmāṇḍa] is Puruṣottama Bhagavān – whose abode is Akṣara. Within that abode, countless millions of such brahmāṇḍas float like mere atoms in each and every hair of Akṣara. Such is the abode of God. In that abode, Puruṣottama Bhagavān himself resides eternally with a divine form (Vac. Gaḍh. I.63).

Being the sole, undisputed overlord of the highest realm, again, reinforces Parabrahman as the highest of the highest, the highest among all.

In many other statements similar to those above describing Parabrahman as the supreme lord over a vast realm, we invariably find reference to him also being the niyantā (from prefix 'ni' with verb-root 'yam', meaning to restrain or to control).

> He is the lord [pati] of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, the king of kings [rājādhirāj], the controller [niyantā] of all, the antaryāmin of all... (Vac. Loyā.18).

This offers an understanding of Parabrahman as being not just a ruler in the sense of exercising authority, but actually controlling affairs over whatever he rules. He does this by being the 'antaryāmin' – the inner-controller – dwelling within everything that he controls. It is a much more involved and intimate relationship.

This connection between Parabrahman's controllership, lordship and supremacy is brought together in Vac. Gaḍh. III.38:

> This manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān before your eyes is the controller of all, including Akṣara. He is the Lord of all lords [īśvarnā paṇ īśvara].... He reigns supreme (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

So vast and authoritative is this control, Svāmināràyaṇa explains, that

> without that God's wish, not even a blade of grass is able to flutter (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

Elsewhere, when describing the six different levels of resolute faith, Svāmināràyaṇa adds that a person with the third level of faith

> understands God to be the all-doer, the supreme lord, and the experiencer [enjoyer (bhoktā)] of everything. Such a person realises that whatever actions take place in the world are the result of God, who is immanent within all beings as their controller (Vac. Loyā.12).

Of course, as the sole ruler reigning supreme over all the worlds, Parabrahman himself is wholly autonomous and independent, for he is, as we have seen already, one and without second. This idea gains further force in the sense of God being the soul of the intelligent and material world, and will be expanded in the following discussion on Śarīra-Śarīri-Saṃbandha[94]. Together, however, this brings to light a striking resonance with similar descriptions of Parabrahman found in the Vedāntic texts. For example, the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad states:

> Tam īśvarāṇām paramam maheśvaram
> Tam devatānām paramam ca daivatam |
> Patim patīnām paramam parasatād
> Vidāma devam bhuvaneśam īdyam ||

[94] 6.2.1.3.

> He who is the Supreme Great Lord of all the lords, he who is the highest Deity of all deities, the Supreme Master of all masters, may we know that God, the adorable lord of the universe (SU 6.7).

> Na tasya kaścit patir-asti loke
> Na ceśita naiva ca tasya lingam |
> Na kāraṇam karaṇādhipādhipo
> Na cāsya kaścij janitā na cādhipaḥ ||
>
> Of him there is no master in this world, no ruler over him, nor even a distinguishing mark [by which he can be inferred]. He, the Overlord of the overlords of all the sense organs, has no cause, no progenitor, nor overlord (SU 6.9).

Whether described as the King of all kings, the Lord of all lords, the world-emperor, master or 'pati', the sense is that Parabrahman is not just a minister conferred with some governing powers over a particular jurisdiction (who in every other sense, though, would still be a person like any of us), but also the owner of his vast realm. This affords a more personal, invested relationship between the owner and the owned, the proprietor and the property. It also means, importantly, as Carman, too, notes, that God rules not only out of his superior powers, in the sense of overpowering or suppressing his subjects, but by right over what belongs to him.[95]

Furthermore, it is not as if Parabrahman has usurped the realm from some other rival lord. He has created it himself and he is its very cause, the cause of all causes[96], making him even more so the rightful ruler of the entire universe. The complete statement from Vac. Gaḍh. III.38 is actually thus:

[95] *Theology of Rāmānuja*, p. 157.

[96] See section 6.3 below on God as Kartā (agent) and Kāraṇa (cause).

> This manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān before your eyes is the controller of all, including Aksara. He is the Lord of all lords and the cause of all causes. He reigns supreme (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

And because Parabrahman's rule is so eminently right, appropriate and blissful, the devotees find their greatest joy and fulfilment in being ruled by him *as* a part of the property of the Great Lord. Indeed, they feel privileged and indebted to have been accepted as such, their worth now having been exalted on account of their owner's own status, just as an otherwise ordinary and inexpensive object suddenly becomes invaluable and priceless having been used or owned by a global celebrity. To so serve their master marks the culmination and fruition of all the devotees' devotional praxis.[97]

This feeling of awe, elation, honour, gratitude and fulfilment on the part of the devotees of God is expressed most vividly in the many thousands of devotional songs composed by the poets of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya. Svāminārāyaṇa, too, hints at these emotions when he explains how a realised devotee would feel at being merely in the presence of God and his community.

> 'I am extremely fortunate in that I am able to stay in the presence of these sādhus.' If [a devotee] understands this, then he will experience awe all day and night and will sway in an ocean of bliss throughout the day (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

From master, ruler and owner of the universe, this relationship is brought to an even more intimate and a more spiritual climax with Parabrahman as its very soul.

[97] More about the Master-Servant relationship (svāmisevakasambandha) will be covered in the chapter on Mukti. See 11.2.4.

6.2.1.3) Soul of All Beings and Things

A key doctrine of the Viśiṣṭādvaita School of Vedānta is Śarīra-Śarīri-Saṃbandha – the analogous body-soul relationship between the universe and God. The belief is: just as the physical body is to its soul, so is the world to God. And vice versa: just as the soul is to its body, so is God to the world. An almost identical doctrine can be found within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.[98]

In narrating the nature of Parabrahman, Svāminārāyaṇa often drew upon this relationship to explain that God was the 'omni-soul' (Sarvātman) or 'super-soul' (Paramātman) of the entire world:

> God is the soul [ātman] of all (Vac. Loyā.7).

> That very God is the soul of countless brahmāṇḍas (Vac. Gaḍh. II.17).

In one particular sermon, he also mentions the world as being the body of Parabrahman.

> The nirguṇa form of God... is the soul of all of the elements such as earth, water, etc.; it is the soul of Pradhāna-Puruṣa, which are higher than those elements; and it is the soul of pure Puruṣa and Prakṛti which are themselves higher than Pradhāna-Puruṣa; it is the soul of even Akṣara who is higher than them. All of these constitute the body of God (Vac. Kār.8).

[98] Svāminārāyaṇa respects and pays tribute to Rāmānuja for his many contributions to Hindu devotional thinking. As the founder of another Hindu theological system, Svāminārāyana also states that he finds Rāmānuja's theistic ideas more agreeable than that of Śankara's strict monism in which 'Brahman' is propounded as an impersonal reality, without form and attributes. See Vac. Loyā.14.

Then in Vac. Sār.10, Svāminārāyaṇa brings this to an individual level, citing an expression of what a correct understanding of this doctrine would be:

> 'Just as the soul resides in the body, God resides within my soul. My soul is the 'śarīra', and God is the 'śarīrin' of my soul.'

But how exactly is God the soul of all these beings and things and how are they his body?

Svāminārāyaṇa asks this question himself to his audience in Vac. Gaḍh. I.64. He begins with an objection to including the ātman (i.e. jīva) and Akṣara as the body of God. His point is that a body (śarīra) – even by its etymological meaning (from 'śīr', to decay), i.e. that which decays – is normally expected to be that which undergoes modifications and which ultimately perishes, whereas the soul is immutable and imperishable. So while identifying Parabrahman as the soul is agreeable because he is immutable and imperishable, it is not so when considering ātman and Akṣara as his body, for they do not decay and perish, because they, too, are immutable and eternal.

> How, then, can that ātman and Akṣara be described as the śarīra of God?

The paramhansas offer their answers, but cannot fully satisfy Svāminārāyaṇa. And so he continues:

> Allow me to answer. All finite sentient beings [ātman, i.e. jīvas and īśvaras] and Akṣara constitute the body of Puruṣottama Bhagavān in that they are pervaded, dependent and powerless. In what way? Well, by means of his antaryāmin powers, God pervades all finite beings and Akṣara, whereas they are the pervaded. He is independent, whereas all finite beings and Akṣara are supported by God and dependent upon him. Furthermore, he is extremely

> powerful, whereas all finite beings and Akṣara are utterly powerless before him. In this way, God is the embodied soul [śarīrī] of both all finite beings and Akṣara, and they both are the body [śarīra] of God.

In his explanation, Svāminārāyaṇa picks on three pairs of terms to define the body-soul relationship, where a body is not just a physical vessel which is born and which grows, decays and eventually dies, but, more broadly, that which is empowered by, pervaded by and dependent on a sentient being within. This makes even jīva, īśvara and Akṣara – and everything in between, i.e. māyā in all its myriad forms – the 'body' of Parabrahman for they are totally empowered by, pervaded by, and dependent on him.

Continuing his elucidation of the relationship between God and the other entities, Svāminārāyaṇa adds:

> Furthermore, [Puruṣottama Bhagavān] is the inspirer of both the finite souls and Akṣara, is independent from them and is their controller. He also possesses all spiritual powers. He is greater than even Akṣara, which is greater than everything (Vac. Gaḍh. I.64).

Svāminārāyaṇa substantiates these points in Vac. Loyā.7 by citing from various classical sources. He begins by quoting the Taittirīya Āraṇyaka of the Yajur Veda:

> Antaḥpraviṣṭaḥ śāstā janānām sarvātmā |
>
> The omnisoul, entering within, is the controller of all beings (3.11),

and ends with passages from BU 3.7 (of the Mādhyandina recension), famously known as the Antaryāmī Brāhmaṇa:

> Yasya pṛthivī śarīram yaḥ pṛthivīm antaro yamayatyeṣa ta ātmā'ntaryāmyamṛtaḥ |...

> Yasyātmā śarīram ya ātmānam antaro yamayati sa ta ātmā'ntaryāmyamṛtaḥ |
>
> He, whose body is earth and who controls it from within, is your soul, the immortal inner-controller (3.7.7)...
>
> He, whose body are the souls and who governs all souls from within, is your soul, the immortal inner-controller (3.7.30).

Collectively, from the excerpts above, we can arrive at the following summary of the role and characteristics in the relationship between Parabrahman and the other entities:

Parabrahman	**Other entities in relation to Parabrahman**
Extremely Powerful / Empowering	Extremely Powerless / Empowered
Independent	Dependent
Pervading	Pervaded
Controller	Controlled
Inspirer	Inspired
Support(er)	Supported

As the soul, then, Parabrahman becomes the very life-source of the entire universe, the cause for its existence and the ontic ground (ādhāra) upon which it can function. Just as a physical body perishes once separated from its soul, so, too, the world of spiritual and physical things cannot survive even momentarily

without Parabrahman. Even if alive, the body is wholly incapable of doing anything without the will, knowledge and strength of the inner self. As the Kena Upaniṣad and Aitareya Upaniṣad both confirm: Parabrahman is the Self (ātman) of the self (jīva) – the ear of the ear, the eye of the eyes, the mind of the mind,... [KeU 1.2] – by which it can see, hear, smell, speak and taste [AU 3.1].

In the same way, the entire world is totally dependent on Parabrahman to enliven it and bring it to action. Even then, those actions are controlled by Parabrahman. Svāmināràyaṇa states, for example, in Vac. Gaḍh. III.37:

> Indeed, God is the very life of all jīvas. Without him, those jīvas are not capable of doing anything or indulging in anything.

Svāmināràyaṇa emphasises this utter dependence of the other entities on Parabrahman in a way that describes him as their 'ādhāra' or support, the fundamental Being underlying all beings, the ultimate reality undergirding all things. He says, for example:

> It is God who supports the entire earth along with its mobile and immobile forms of life (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

> That manifest form of God before the eyes is such that he is the support of both the eight material elements [earth, water, etc.], which are pervaded, as well as of the spiritual element that pervades therein [i.e. the souls] (Vac. Loyā.7).

> He [God] is the support of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas (Vac. Gaḍh. II.53).

> What is God like?... He is Parabrahman, beyond Akṣara... and the support of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas (Vac. Amd.4).

In Vac. Gaḍh. I.72, Svāmināŕāyaṇa draws together Parabrahman as the soul with Parabrahman as the support as integral to one another:

> Just as God is the soul of 'kṣara' [i.e. māyā and all finite beings][99], he is also the soul of Akṣarabrahman, who transcends Prakṛti-Puruṣa. With his own powers, God supports both kṣara and Akṣara, yet he himself is distinct from them both.

This last statement leads us to an important clarification necessary in this discussion, one that Svāmināŕāyaṇa provides elsewhere as well. A natural corollary of the body-soul relationship is that in being so closely associated with imperfect and mutable objects, Parabrahman will assumed to be contaminated by their mutations and imperfections. However, Svāmināŕāyaṇa was sure to include in his description above that while Parabrahman is the soul of all that is perishable and imperishable, "he himself is distinct from them both." So, just as the distinct self is not affected by the imperfections of the body it ensouls, neither, too, do the imperfections of māyā, etc. affect God who ensouls those entities. He makes this absolutely clear, with specific reference to the body-soul relationship, in Vac. Kār.8. In continuing the statement cited earlier, Svāmināŕāyaṇa explains using a material example to explain the metaphysical:

> Just as the jīva is subtler, purer and of greater luminosity than the body, in the same manner, compared to all of the other entities, God is much more subtle, pure, unaffected and luminous. For example, space pervades the four material elements – earth, water, etc. and it remains unaffected by those four elements; the influences of those four elements do not affect space. In fact,

[99] While 'ksara' literally means perishable, it is translated traditionally here to include all finite beings, i.e. jīvas and īśvaras, whose bodies perish in every lifetime during transmigation. In fact, it is evident that Svāmināŕāyaṇa means more than the literal meaning of 'perishable' and 'imperishable' in this passage by his use of 'Aksarabrahman' rather than just 'aksara'. Furthermore, this translation also maintains semantic consistency with verses such as BG 15.16 which distinguishes 'ksaraḥ sarvāṇi bhūtāni' from the 'kūtastha' (immutable) Akṣara.

> despite dwelling in those four elements, space remains absolutely unaffected. In the same way, Puruṣottama Bhagavān dwells in all as their soul. Despite this, he is absolutely unchanged and untainted, and he maintains his own unique characteristics.... In this manner, being extremely subtle, extremely unaffected, extremely pure, extremely untainted, extremely luminous, and possessing tremendous, divine powers is the nirguṇa aspect of the form of that God.

Using the body-soul analogy again in Vac. Gaḍh. II.17, Svāmināràyaṇa firstly states that Puruṣottama Bhagavān is the 'soul of all souls' before immediately adding,

> but he is still immutable; the mutations of māyā and other mutable objects, etc. do not at all affect [literally 'touch'] Puruṣottama Bhagavān.

He then goes on to say:

> In fact, if the mutations of the gross, subtle and causal bodies do not affect a person who has realised himself as the inner soul, what can be said about them [māyic mutations] not affecting [literally 'touching'] Puruṣottama Bhagavān? Therefore, God is indeed immutable [nirvikārin] and untainted [nirlepa].

The Kaṭha Upaniṣad at 5.11 provides a reference to this clarification, describing Parabrahman as the "one inner soul of all beings" (eka... sarvabhūtāntarātmā) and yet who is "not sullied by the misery of the worlds" it ensouls. Why? Because Parabrahman is "bāhya" (literally, 'outside' of everything) as well, i.e. it is still inherently different and ontologically distinct from all the other entities. The mantra itself provides an example. It explains that this is like the sun who is the inner 'eye' of the whole world (by providing light with which seeing is made

possible), yet it is not affected by the outer defects and impurities of any individual eye.[100]

In further distancing God from any of the undesirable corollaries when describing him as the soul, Svāminārāyaṇa also mentioned in Vac. Gaḍh. I.64 that he is "independent". He seems to have in mind that while the physical body is necessary for the soul to experience and enjoy (and also suffer), the same is not true for Parabrahman. He does not need the jīvas, īśvaras, māyā or even Akṣara for anything. He can survive absolutely alone, independently, autonomously. In taking this important difference to the highest possible degree, Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Loyā.13:

> Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa is... extremely powerful.... If he wishes, he can eclipse all of the liberated souls of Akṣaradhāma by his own divine light and prevail alone. Also, if he wishes, he can accept the devotion of the liberated souls and reside with them. He can eclipse even Akṣara, in the form of the Akṣaradhāma in which he dwells, and preside alone independently. If he chooses, he is capable of supporting the countless liberated souls by his own lordship, without even needing Akṣaradhāma.... [T]hrough his own lordship, God reigns as supreme (Vac. Loyā.13).

To remember, this section is serving to present a theological understanding of God as found within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition. This body-soul doctrine is useful in that regard, especially when reconciling texts which may identify other things as 'the highest' or 'God', etc., so that a consistent doctrine of God's nature can be preserved. Technically, everything can be denoted as being 'God' because the soul within everything is Parabrahman, and it is usual, as with people, to

[100] KaU-SB 5.11, p. 154. See BG-SB 13.31 and 13.32, p. 290 for similar analogies, and also the Ubhayaliṅgādhikaraṇa at BS-SB 3.2.11-25, pp. 291-302 for more on this discussion.

identify the distinct body by the name of the person (the living entity within). In Vac. Loyā.7, for example, Svāminārāyaṇa explains why even anna (food), manas (the mind), vijñāna (knowledge) and ānanda (bliss) have been described as 'Brahman' in various Vedāntic texts[101].

> Even those things have been called Brahman because God is the cause of all and the supporter of all. However, they are all the body [śarīra], and their soul [śarīri] is the manifest form of Śrī Kṛsṇa Puruṣottama.

This doctrine is also brought into sharp use by the Bhāṣyakāra on several occasions in the commentaries of the Prasthānatrayī. For example, in commenting on the famous Upaniṣadic text

> Sarvam khalv-idam Brahma |
>
> All this is verily Brahman (CU 3.14.1),

he writes:

> It is because Paramātman is the controller and soul of everything that statements placing him in identical predication [sāmānādhikaraṇya] with other things can be reconciled.[102]

Similarly, when explaining another famous Upaniṣadic statement,

> Tat tvam asi (CU 6.8.7),

the Bhāṣyakāra writes:

> Both the terms 'tat' [that] and 'tvam' [you]... are placed in identical predication because 'tat' pervades, controls and is the very soul of the entire sentient-insentient world, including 'tvam'.[103]

---

[101] Such as in chapter 2 (the Anandavallī) of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad.

[102] CU-SB 3.14.1, p. 132.

[103] CU-SB 6.8.7, p. 278.

The Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya similarly employs the defining characteristics of a soul provided by Svāminārāyaṇa in responding to the debate in the Ananyatvādhikaraṇa of the Brahmasūtras at 2.1.14-21. The objection raised at the beginning by the Nyāyists is that there is difference between Parabrahman (along with Akṣarabrahman[104]) and the world of sentient (jīvas and īśvaras) and insentient (māyā and its various mutations) things, and so Parabrahman cannot be the cause of the world. The Sūtrakāra argues that a correct reading of the Upaniṣads reveals that there is in fact non-difference (ananyatva) between Parabrahman and the world, and so there can be no objection to him being its cause. In defence of this, the Bhāṣyakāra opens with an explanation of causes and effects (which we shall see in more detail when discussing Parabrahman as Kartā) before going on to conclude the debate thus:

> So this has been established from this discussion, that even though Brahman and Parabrahman are ontologically distinct from Mūla-Prakṛti [māyā] and all her mutations – which are characterised as being insentient – and jīvas and īśvaras – which are eternally associated with Mūla-Prakṛti [though] characterised as being sentient – by virtue of being their cause, their inner-dweller, their controller and their support, [i.e.] their body [śarīri], they [Brahman and Parabrahman] are non-different [from them].[105]

Parabrahman thus undergirds, pervades, empowers and controls – indeed, he enlivens – the entire universe, all the while remaining totally distinct from and unaffected by any of the imperfections of the entities he ensouls. This body-soul

[104] Note that throughout, both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman are explained as the cause of the world, though Parabrahman is the cause of Aksarabrahman as well. For a full discussion, see chapter 7.3.5 on Akṣarabrahman's role in the origination, sustenance and dissolution of the universe.

[105] BS-SB 2.1.21, p. 173.

relationship again affirms the outright supremacy of Parabrahman in relation to all these other entities.

6.2.1.4) Source of All Avatāras

Being superior among all māyic objects and finite beings is one thing, but perhaps a sterner test of Parabrahman's supremacy would be in seeing how he stands in relation to the other 'Gods', or avatāras.

Avatāravāda, the doctrine of God manifesting (or 'descending') on earth in human or other form, is a familiar feature of most theistic Hindu traditions. However, a closer study of the Vacanāmrut, Svāmīnī Vāto and other theological and historical texts of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya reveals that this doctrine takes on a more nuanced form within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology. Perhaps one of the most striking features is that the avatāras are considered to be not of Parabrahman directly, but of īśvaras. That is, Parabrahman and the avatāras are ontologically distinct.

How, then, is Parabrahman related to the avatāras? Svāminārāyaṇa explains this in Vac. Gaḍh. II.9, an important sermon for understanding the supremacy of God. He begins by saying:

> Let us talk about God.

He then continues:

> The path of jñāna should be understood in such a way that one does not malign the nature of God in any way....

With this emphasis of developing an accurate understanding of God's nature, Svāminārāyaṇa states precisely the belief that a devotee should have.

> One should also intensely maintain the strength of conviction in God's form, i.e. 'I have attained the very form of God who reigns supreme, who forever possesses a divine form, and who is the avatārin, the cause of all of the avatāras.'

In part conclusion, he reiterates this point with greater force a little later in the sermon, this time adding a stern note of warning as well.

> Therefore, one should realise the manifest God that one has attained to forever possess a divine form and to be the avatārin, the cause of all of the avatāras. If, however, one does not realise this, and instead realises God to be formless or like the other avatāras, then that is regarded as committing blasphemy against God.

What is clear from these words is that Parabrahman is *not* the same as the other avatāras. Rather, he is their cause. The term Svāminārāyaṇa uses for Parabrahman in this context is 'avatārin' – attaching the 'in'[106] suffix in the sense of 'belonging to'[107] – meaning 'lord or master of the avatāras'.

That the avatāras are ontologically distinct from Parabrahman will hopefully become clearer when expounding upon īśvara and the process of creation in the subsequent chapters on īśvara and māyā, respectively[108]. Immediately, though, it will be useful to cite a dialogue from the Svāmīnī Vāto which explains this

[106] *Aṣṭādhyāyī* 5.2.115.

[107] *Aṣṭādhyāyī* 5.2.94.

[108] See especially sections 9.3 and 10.2.3.

oṇtological distinction more explicitly with the help of various analogies.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī once asked in an assembly:

> How should one understand the distinction between the avatāras and the avatārin?

Someone answered:

> Like that of an actor and his character.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī corrected:

> No, that is not how the avatārin is distinct from his avatāras. Rather, one should understand the distinction as like that between a king and his minister, an archer and his arrow, the moon and the stars (SV 6.33).

The thrust of Guṇātītānanda Svāmī's examples seems to be two-fold: firstly that the two sets of analogues are different from each other, i.e. the king, archer and moon are different from the minister, arrow and the stars; and secondly, that the former are more powerful than the latter. Importantly, he rejects the analogy of the actor and his character, which would imply that it is Parabrahman himself who directly transforms into the avatāras.

But this then leads to the question that if Parabrahman is indeed ontologically different from the avatāras, how can the avatāras be said to be 'avatāras of God'? Moreover, if the avatāras are ontologically īśvara, how, then, can they be said to be divine, since we learned at the beginning that even īśvara as a category was 'below' or within māyā?

Both questions can be answered conjointly by understanding more closely the relationship between the avatārin and the avatāras.

In an extensive discussion in Vac. Gaḍh. II.31 about Virāṭa Puruṣa (sometimes called Vairāja Puruṣa), the first being and 'executive administrator' of each created brahmāṇḍa, Svāmināràyaṇa reveals:

> It is said in the scriptures[109] that the avatāras emanate from that Virāṭa Puruṣa.

Svāmināràyaṇa then clarifies that only when Parabrahman (referred to in that sermon as Vāsudevanārāyaṇa and Vāsudeva Bhagavān) 'enters' into Vırāṭa Puruṣa can avatāras be possible.

> It is when Vāsudevanārāyaṇa resides in Vırāṭa Puruṣa... that there are said to be avatāras.

Conversely,

> When that Vāsudeva Bhagavān withdraws himself and separates from Virāṭa Puruṣa, then it is not possible for an avatāra to emanate through Virāṭa Puruṣa alone.... In fact, when Vāsudeva the over-soul had not yet entered him, that Virāṭa Puruṣa was not even capable of performing any of his own activities.

And yet because of this special 'entering' by Parabrahman, Svāmināràyaṇa adds:

> Thus all those avatāras are Vāsudeva Bhagavān's only.

What Svāmināràyaṇa seems to be emphasising from this sermon is three things:

- firstly, all avatāras actually emanate from Virāṭa Puruṣa;
- secondly, this emanation is only possible when Parabrahman enters into Virāṭa Puruṣa; in fact, without Parabrahman, Virāṭa Puruṣa is incapable of doing anything;

[109] E.g. BP 1.3.5.

– and thirdly, because of Parabrahman's special presence in Vīrāṭa Puruṣa, the avatāras can be said to be emanating from Parabrahman.

The technical term used to describe Parabrahman's presence in Vīrāṭa Puruṣa for the emanation of avatāras is 'anu-praveśa' – literally, 're-entering' – signifying a specific empowering presence of Parabrahman above and beyond the blanket antaryāmin presence in all things and beings. Svāmināràyaṇa explains this in more detail in Vac. Pan.7 with the help of two more analogies:

> In whomever that Puruṣottama Bhagavān 'enters' for the purpose of fulfilling many types of tasks, he eclipses that entity by his own divine light and he himself reigns preeminently through that entity. Moreover, in whomever he resides, he suppresses their own light and manifests his own divine light – just as when fire enters iron, it suppresses the quality of coldness and the black colour of the iron and exhibits its own quality; or like when the sun rises, the light from all of the stars, the moon, etc. merges into its own light, and only the sun's light remains. In the same way, in whomever God 'enters', he overpowers their light and exhibits his own divine light to a greater degree. Then, after completing the task for which he had 'entered' that entity, he separates from it. Thereafter, the other entity remains as it was before. Thus, the additional powers that that entity appeared to have should be known to actually be Puruṣottama Bhagavān's powers. In this way, the manifest form of Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa is the cause of all.

It is this empowering presence of Parabrahman which makes him the cause of the avatāras; which allows the avatāras themselves to be called 'avatāras of God', and therefore be fully divine for their tasks on earth and venerable by all others;

and which also helps reconcile statements which speak of avatāras 'emanating from Puruṣottama' or God 'assuming' the form of various avatāras.[110]

As he who empowers, inspires and divinises the various avatāras across the countless brahmāṇḍas, Parabrahman is further established as the supreme reality among all.[111]

6.2.1.5) Transcending Akṣara

As might be apparent from the discussions so far on Parabrahman's supremacy, Svāminārāyaṇa repeatedly describes Parabrahman in relation to Akṣarabrahman. For example:

> There is only one form of God. This God is extremely powerful and no one, including Akṣara, is capable of becoming like him (Vac. Loyā.4).

> Puruṣottama is the soul of all, yet no one up to and including Akṣara is capable of becoming as powerful as him (Vac. Kār.8).

Similarly, in Vac. Kār.10, Svāminārāyaṇa begins a list of beings that a devotee of God may become like by the grace of God. He begins with Brahmā and Śiva before moving onto sages such as Śukadeva and Nārada. Then, after including other realised souls, he ends:

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[110] For a full scholarly discussion of this and other related topics, drawn extensively from a wide range of theological and historical sources, see Shrutiprakashdas's *Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāymā Avatār-Avatārī Nirūpaṇ* (521 pages with charts and appendices).

[111] The 'descent' or manifestation of avatāras is well-narrated in Hindu texts such as the various Pūrāṇas, and well-explained in technical texts such as the Bhagavad-Gītā (see especially 4.7-8 et al).

For the extraordinary event of Parabrahman the avatārin himself manifesting on earth in human form, see section 6.5 below on Parabrahman as pragata ('manifest').

> Or he may even become like Akṣara [i.e. akṣararūpa, fully enlightened]. However, no one is capable of becoming like Śrī Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa.

It is as if Akṣarabrahman is the highest benchmark by which to measure Parabrahman, but one which he still surpasses.

In other sermons, Svāminārāyaṇa states the greatness of Parabrahman in relation to Akṣarabrahman more directly. In Vac. Gaḍh. I.64, for example, he clearly states:

> Puruṣottama is greater even than Akṣara, who is greater than all else.

This seems to be a direct translation of the phrase at MuU 2.1.2:

> Akṣarat parataḥ paraḥ |

While a fuller discussion of this Upaniṣadic passage along with the relevant commentaries will be covered in the following chapter on Akṣarabrahman[112], it is sufficient to simply note here the Bhāṣyakāra's comment in relation to Parabrahman.

> In this way, Akṣara is greater than all the jīvas, īśvaras, māyā and akṣaramuktas [released souls in Akṣaradhāma]... And with Paramātman being greater [para] even than such a great Brahman by virtue of being his ruler, master, inspirer, support, soul, etc.... it is fitting that Paramātman is also called 'Parabrahman' [literally, 'greater-Brahman'].[113]

[112] See section 7.1.

[113] MuU-SB 2.1.2, p. 260.

In another comment, the Bhāṣyakāra explains why the adjective "great" (mahantam) found in verse 2.22 of the Kaṭha Upaniṣad is appropriate in qualifying Parabrahman. He writes:

> Greater than Prakṛti [i.e. māyā] and its effects, all jīvas and īśvaras, countless emanations such as Matysa, Kaccha, etc., and countless akṣaramuktas who are brahmarūpa, is Akṣarabrahman. Greater even than Akṣarabrahman – by totally pervading it, being its master, and being worshipped by it – is Parabrahman, who by his nature, virtues, powers, etc., is great, indeed the best [utkṛṣṭa].[114]

In a similarly ascending style, Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. I.63 how to understand God's greatness. He begins with the important statement, cited earlier as well:

> A person who has realised the nature of God perfectly has nothing left to realise.

He then continues, using a familiar analogy:

> Please listen as I now explain the method of realising this; hearing which, one develops unfaltering faith in God.
>
> Firstly, one should realise the greatness of God. To illustrate this, consider the analogy of a great king. If even his servants and maids stay in seven-storey mansions, and their gardens, horses, carriages, ornaments, and other such luxuries make their houses appear as majestic as Devaloka, then imagine how majestic the palace and its luxuries of that king must be. Similarly, consider the realms of the lords of this brahmāṇḍa – Brahmā and the other devatās – who follow the commands of Śrī Puruṣottama Bhagavān. If there is no limit to those realms and their opulence, then how can one possibly comprehend the extent of the opulence of Virāṭa Puruṣa from whose navel Brahmā was produced? Furthermore, the master of countless millions of such Virāṭa Puruṣas is Puruṣottama Bhagavān – whose abode is Akṣara. Within that abode, countless millions of such brahmāṇḍas float like mere atoms in each and every hair of Akṣara. Such is the abode of God. In

[114] KU-SB 2.22, p. 118.

> that abode, Puruṣottama Bhagavān himself presides eternally with a divine form.... So, if this is the greatness of Akṣara, how, then, can one possibly comprehend the extent of God's greatness? One with faith understands God's greatness in this manner (Vac. Gaḍh. I.63).

"So, if this is the greatness of Akṣara, how, then, can one possibly comprehend the extent of God's greatness?" By this conclusion, Svāminārāyaṇa seems to imply that, ultimately, the most accurate description of Parabrahman's unfathomable greatness can be only that he is greater even than Akṣarabrahman. In fact, in several sermons of the Vacanāmrut, Svāminārāyana uses the term 'Akṣaratīta' – transcending Akṣara – to qualify Parabrahman, even when other topics are under discussion. These include Vac. Gaḍh. I.31, Gaḍh. I.42, Gaḍh. I.51, Gaḍh. I.66, Gaḍh. I.78, Sār.5, Gaḍh. II.13, Gaḍh. II.18, and Gaḍh. II.31.

In other sermons, Svāminārāyaṇa brings the supremacy of Parabrahman over Akṣarabrahman into focus by way of other aspects of God's nature. For example:

> The God present within this Satsaṅga fellowship... is the King of all kings of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, and the cause even of Akṣarabrahman (Vac. Amd.6).

> Parabrahman Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa is... the cause, support and inspirer of even Brahman (Vac. Gaḍh. II.3).

> This manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān before your eyes is the controller of all, including Akṣara (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

> The nirguṇa form of God... is the soul of even Akṣara (Vac. Kār.8).

> [Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa] can eclipse even Akṣara... and preside alone independently (Vac. Loyā.13).

Svāmināràyaṇa thus describes Parabrahman's greatness by explaining that he is:

- greater than all, even Akṣarabrahman
- the cause of all, even Akṣarabrahman
- the support of all, even Akṣarabrahman
- the inspirer of all, even Akṣarabrahman
- the controller of all, even Akṣarabrahman
- pervasive within all, even Akṣarabrahman
- the soul of all, even Akṣarabrahman
- independent from all, even Akṣarabrahman

This not only serves to mark Akṣarabrahman as being exceedingly great, it also, indirectly, indicates him as one who also causes, supports, inspires, controls, pervades, ensouls, and is independent.

Here, the use of "even" ('paṇ' in Gujarati) and "including" in the above excerpts is especially instructive. It reveals Akṣarabrahman as an otherwise unsurpassable extreme – the highest of the high, the greatest of the great. But such is the extraordinary greatness of God, that he transcends even that. He is, quite simply, Akṣaratīta. In other words, Akṣarabrahman provides the fulcrum with which to fully understand Parabrahman, and it is to Akṣarabrahman that we shall turn after completing this exposition on Parabrahman.

*

So far, in attempting to understand the nature of Parabrahman, we have been looking at the first of four aspects, his supremacy, i.e. Parabrahman as Sarvopari. Within that, the discussions of Parabrahman as the one and without second, the supreme lord and master, the soul of the entire world, the cause of the avatāras, and, now, as greater even than Akṣarabrahman, have been primarily concerned with his supremacy in relation to others, i.e. who is he greater than and how.

We now move on to understanding his greatness on its own terms.

6.2.2) Limitless Greatness of Parabrahman's Own Being

Svāminārāyaṇa makes it a point to repeatedly establish God's greatness by emphasising that it is unfathomable. For example, the reference earlier from Vac. Gaḍh. III.37 includes the statement:

> No one, however, can fathom the greatness of that God.

Similarly, in Vac. Kār.8 Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

> No one is able to fathom the limit of [God's] greatness.

In both sentences, the Gujarati – "koi pār pāmtā nathi" – literally translates as 'no one can reach its end (or limit)'. This raises the question: Is God's greatness really without limit, or is it simply beyond the grasp of our limited human comprehension? That is, is it actually limitless or just incomprehensible, unfathomable?

Svāminārāyaṇa seems to argue that God's greatness truly is without limits, and therefore unfathomable. He begins one of his discourses by asking the assembly the following question:

> A devotee of God leaves his body, becomes brahmarūpa, and reaches the abode of God. Thereafter, what is the difference between that devotee and God, whereby the master-servant relationship between them still remains? After all, that devotee of God then becomes independent, just like God. He also becomes free from the shackles of time [or death (kāla)], karma and māyā – just like God. Therefore, what difference remains so that the master-servant relationship is maintained? This is my question.

It is an important question in the discussion of God's uniqueness and uncompromising supremacy, and we shall revisit it when discussing liberated souls, but here we can note what Svāminārāyaṇa reveals more specifically about Parabrahman's nature. After the audience's replies to his question were unable to fully satisfy him, he said:

> The answer is as follows: To the extent to which a devotee of God has realised God's greatness – that 'God possesses this many powers; he possesses this much splendour; he is the embodiment of bliss;' and so on – that devotee attains charm and powers to that same extent when he leaves his body and goes to the abode of God. Despite this, that devotee still feels God's majesty, by way of his powers, splendour, etc., to be much greater. He then realises, 'God has granted me just as many divine powers and as much splendour as I had realised in him. Yet, God's divine powers and splendour appear to be totally limitless. Like me, countless others have also attained qualities similar to that of God, yet, no one is capable of becoming like God.'

And why is no one capable of becoming like God?

> Because not even Śeṣa, Śāradā, Brahmā or the other devatās – in fact, not even the four Vedas – can fathom the vastness [pārne pāmtā nathi, literally, 'cannot reach the end'] of God's greatness, his virtues, his actions, his birth, his power, his splendour, his

> blissful nature, or his countless other redemptive characteristics (Vac. Gaḍh. II.67).

So not only is God's greatness – indeed God himself in so many ways – beyond the reach of the relatively meagre intellect and perception of mere humans, but also beyond those of Śeṣa, proverbially the voluble orator with a thousand mouths; of Śāradā, the most adept scribe of the gods as well as a prolific writer; of Brahmā and the gods themselves, with their expansive knowledge, skills and lifespan; and even of the Vedas, the divinely inspired repository of all spiritual knowledge. All of them fail miserably in adequately comprehending and communicating God's divine nature. In another sermon also, Svāmināràyaṇa reiterates:

> Even Śeṣa, Śāradā, Brahmā and other devatās are unable to fathom the extent of [God's] greatness. In fact, even the Vedas describe his glory as 'Not so; not so [neti, neti]'[115] (Vac. Gaḍh. II.53).

Yet this still only serves to raise the bar of God's nature. Admittedly, it is so high that even all these immensely competent beings and sources of knowledge fall short of it. Nevertheless, it does not conclusively establish that there are no limits to God at all. Svāmināràyaṇa thus goes on to say in Vac. Gaḍh. II.67:

> In fact, God himself does not reach the limits of his own greatness.[116] Thus God, by all of his powers, is beyond all limits.

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[115] A fuller interpretation of this Vedic phrase according to the Bhāṣyakāra is 'Not this much, not this much', implying that God is not fully describable.

[116] If God can perfectly know all that there is to know, then if he himself knows his own greatness to be without limits, then it must follow, as Svāmināràyaṇa asserts in the subsequent sentence, that God is beyond all limits.

Svāmināràyaṇa seems to be echoing here a verse from the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa [10.87.41], which he also cites at Vac. Loyā.10. It forms a part of the Vedastūti, where the Vedas are extolling God. The verse reads:

After employing an analogy of the ocean, a common device in Hindu literature for describing limitlessness, Svāminārāyaṇa again concludes:

> God's greatness is extremely endless; there is no way in which it can either increase or decrease (Vac. Gaḍh. II.67).

By thus stating that there can be no further increase in God's greatness, let alone any decrease, Svāminārāyaṇa consolidates the belief that God's greatness is indeed infinite, not just unfathomable or incomprehensible.

By earlier mentioning "his virtues, his actions, his birth, his power, his splendour, his blissful nature, or his countless other redemptive characteristics", Svāminārāyaṇa provides a clue in this sermon to understanding what this infinite greatness entails, or in other words, ways in which God is infinite. Adapting, expanding and simplifying these for our purpose of expounding God's nature, we shall now very briefly cover seven of these limitless aspects of Parabrahman as they are described in Svāminārāyaṇa theological texts. These seven aspects are: God's infinity or unbounded nature with regards to Time, Space, Knowledge, Power, Splendour, Bliss and Virtues. That is, how he is unbound by time and space, and has infinite knowledge, power, splendour, bliss and virtues.

> Even the masters of the higher realms [i.e. devas such as Brahmā] cannot fathom your glory [literally, reach your end], because you are endless. [In fact,] neither do you yourself [reach your own end]. Indeed, in your each and every hair, countless brahmāṇḍas accompanied with their barriers fly simultaneously at immense speed, like mere specks of dust flying in the air. Even the Śrutis, describing you as 'neti neti' [i.e. indescribable and limitless], ultimately perish in you [i.e. fail to extol your complete glory].

6.2.2.1) Time: Nitya

When initially delineating the five metaphysical entities of the Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta school, we noted that Parabrahman is one of the five entities which is eternal (nitya), i.e. without beginning (anādi) as well as without end (ananta). Svāminārāyaṇa says specifically of God, for example:

> Puruṣottama is eternal [nitya] (Vac. Loyā.14).

We also noted that another term used to explain eternal existence is satya, meaning 'truth' or 'being', implying that God truly exists and is actually characterised by existence.

> God's form is supremely true [parama satyasvarūpa] (Vac. Pan.7).

Svāminārāyaṇa bring God's existence together with time to explain:

> The form of God is true [satya] at all times (Vac. Loyā.4).

That is, God exists at all times and, by the Vedāntic definition of 'satya', he is trikālābādhita, totally unaffected by the three forms of time – the past, the present and the future. As Svāminārāyaṇa declares:

> Time devours everything except God; that is to say, time's powers are incapable of affecting God (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

So not only does God exist at all times, he exists as he is at all times, because he is immune to the ravaging affects of time. In other words, God is forever immutable.

> That God remains as he is during the time of creation, sustenance and dissolution of the cosmos; i.e. he does not undergo any changes like worldly [māyic] objects do (Vac. Kār.7).

Apart from time, there are other ways as well in which God's immutability might be challenged, especially when he assumes a human form, so this important discussion will be covered more fully in the section on Parabrahman as Pragata (manifest)[117]. However, since Svāminārāyaṇa mentioned 'birth' among the list of God's limitless aspects in Vac. Gaḍh. II.67, it will be relevant and useful to cite here from Vac. Pan.7.

> The phases of childhood, youth and old age apparent in God, as well as his birth and death, are all perceived due to his yogic powers [yoga-māyā]. In reality, God remains exactly as he is....
>
> One who is said to have perfectly realised the nature of God understands God to be eternal and imperishable – absolutely unchanging.

Svāminārāyaṇa thus explains that God, despite taking birth even, remains totally outside the otherwise inescapable influence of time; he is unborn, unchanging, and undying.

In another sense, God is not only unaffected by time when he enters the world or is immanent within it, he is also *beyond* time in his eminently distinct, transcendental self. This is a topic that we can discuss together with the following section on space.

6.2.2.2) Space: Sarvavyāpaka

To say that God is unbound by space is to mean that God exists everywhere (simultaneously); he is never just is one place and not in another place (at that

[117] See especially section 6.5.2.2.

same time), nor is there any place where is not. That is to say, God is omnipresent.

Svāminārāyaṇa often describes Parabrahman as being all-pervasive (sarvavyāpaka), i.e. that his existence pervades all entities, as, for example, we saw in the discussion on God being the soul of the entire universe [Vac. Gaḍh. I.64].

However, Svāminārāyaṇa makes it a point to add that God pervades everything by his special indwelling powers, as not just their witness but as their inner controller – the antaryāmin.

> So, in fact, there is only one Puruṣottama Bhagavān, and it is he who enters all and resides in them as the antaryāmin (Vac. Gaḍh. I.41).

While this consolidates the ideas of Parabrahman being the sovereign king ruling over his entire dominion and the inner self pervading all that he ensouls, it also has another important outcome, for if God "enters all", as stated above, it follows that he must also be distinctly somewhere else from where he enters from. Svāminārāyaṇa is indeed keen to point out that this inner-dwelling within all is by Parabrahman's extraordinary 'yogic powers' (variously called yoga-śakti, yoga-māyā and yoga-kalā), because in fact, he still has a distinct and definite form of his own forever present in his abode.

> God possesses a definite form in his Akṣaradhāma, but through his antaryāmin powers, he pervades the jīvas (Vac. Kār.4).

Drawing upon the sovereign theme again, Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises in Vac. Gaḍh. II.64 that Parabrahman never abandons this transcendental form even while being able to be present everywhere else.

> Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa Puruṣottama is the sovereign ruler and is eternal. He is forever present on his throne in his Akṣaradhāma....
>
> Śrī Kṛṣṇa Bhagavān forever dwells within that abode. But despite being present in Akṣaradhāma, he also grants darśana to whomever, wherever and in whichever way it is necessary. He speaks to whomever it is necessary to speak to and even touches whomever it is necessary to touch. Just as an accomplished yogi [siddha-puruṣa] can, while remaining in one place, see for thousands of miles and hear talks from thousands of miles away, similarly, despite being in his Akṣaradhāma, God also reveals himself in the countless millions of brahmāṇḍas wherever there is a need to be revealed. Nevertheless, he himself is still always present in his Akṣaradhāma. The fact that he remains in one place and yet reveals himself in infinite places is due to his yogic powers [yoga-kalā].

He then goes on to conclude:

> To thus remain in one place and at the same time to appear in infinite places is itself God's pervasive form by way of his yogic powers. But unlike space, he does not pervade without possessing a form (Vac. Gaḍh. II.64).

Svāminārāyaṇa thus explains in Vac. Var.13 as well that Parabrahman is sarvadeśin (in all places) while eternally being ekadeśastha (situated in one place). This is how, he argues, that scriptural statements describing God as 'sarvagata'[118], 'vibhū'[119] or 'vyāpaka'[120], etc. should be interpreted.

> So, even though the scriptures describe God as pervasive, he actually possesses a definite form. In those scriptures, he is

[118] E.g. SU 3.21.

[119] E.g. BU 6.3.4.

[120] E.g. KaU 6.8.

> described as pervasive in the sense that using his own powers, he appears to all while still residing in one place. But he is not pervasive in the sense of being formless like space. So, in reality, God eternally possesses a form. It is that God with a definite form, who, while always residing in Akṣaradhāma, appears in countless millions of brahmāṇḍas (Vac. Var.13).

Svāminārāyaṇa reiterates this several times throughout the Vacanāmrut to avert what he believes is the grave blasphemy of misunderstanding God as pervading all and existing only formlessly, that is, without having a distinct, definite and eternal transcendental form in his abode.

That Parabrahman can be within all and yet distinct, and conversely, distinct yet within all, is another idea relevant here and important in Svāminārāyaṇa's theology that needs to be noted. He uses the terms anvaya (immanent, existing concomitantly within all) and vyatireka (transcendental, existing distinctly alone), respectively. For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. I.78, Svāminārāyaṇa states:

> [Puruṣottama Bhagavān] is distinct [vyatireka], yet is immanently present within everything [sarvamā anvaya], and while being immanent, is still distinct from everything.

Again, in Vac. Var.7 he explains:

> God's form is such that he is immanent within māyā and yet, at the same time, he still exists as distinct.

This also accounts for, as we saw above in the section about God as the soul of all entities, how Parabrahman can, despite being immanent within all, remain unaffected by the imperfections of all that he is immanent within. Svāminārāyaṇa

explains, for example, in Vac. Gaḍh. II.10 while drawing upon an analogy of the material elements:

> Space pervades earth, water, light and air – there is not even a single atom that is devoid of space – yet the mutations of earth, water, etc. do not affect [literally 'touch'] space at all. In the same manner as space, no māyic flaw can affect [literally 'touch'] Puruṣottama Bhagavān.

Parabrahman is thus immanent in all only while having an eternally transcendental form entirely distinct from everything else. But by being present in everything everywhere, even while having such a distinct form, ensures that Parabrahman is unbound by the confinements of physical space. Furthermore, when we expound upon Parabrahman's distinct form in more detail in the section on Sākāra, we shall see that since he transcends all physicality, it is not possible to 'measure' him by any physical measurements. Hence, physical boundaries do not apply to Parabrahman even in his distinct [vyatireka] form in Akṣaradhāma. In all ways, he is spatially limitless.

6.2.2.3) Knowledge: Sarvajña

Closely related to God being unbound by time and space is the idea that God has unlimited knowledge, for if God can be in all places at all times, and he is a conscious (knowing) being, it follows that God can always know everything from everywhere. Svāminārāyaṇa affirms this in Vac. Jet.5, for example, by revealing that God knows

> everything... all happenings from the three times – the past, the future and the present.

In Vac. Gaḍh. II.53 he describes this more vividly.

> God sees [knows] all of the jīvas and īśvaras who dwell in the countless millions of brahmāṇḍas as clearly as he sees a drop of water in his palm.

Svāmināràyaṇa's primary emphasis from this statement seems to be that God's knowledge is always complete, perfect, and effortless. Additionally, because "all of the jīvas and īśvaras... in the countless millions of brahmāṇḍas" are infinite in number, knowing them all perfectly means God's knowledge is also infinite in measure.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī elaborates on what such infinite knowledge means by citing a phrase from the Pañcarātric Pārāśarya Saṃhitā (3.20):

> Yo vetti yugapat sarvaṃ pratyakṣeṇa sadā svataḥ |
>
> He who simultaneously knows everything as if before his eyes, always and independently,... (SV 3.15).

This all follows, of course, because Parabrahman is indeed a conscious, knowing being. Svāmināràyaṇa describes God as "paramacaitanya", the supreme conscious being [Vac. Pan.7], and confirms in Vac. Gaḍh. II.17:

> He who realises God's nature to be replete with pure consciousness, free of māyic elements, is correct in his understanding.

The extra emphasis applied with "supreme" on God's consciousness is perhaps to distinguish him from the other spiritual beings (Akṣarabrahman, īśvaras and jīvas), for they, too, are caitanya, i.e. composed of and characterised by consciousness. And since each of the jīvas and īśvaras is also a knower (jñātā)

within its own field of scope, Svāminārāyaṇa often calls the soul of the finite being the 'kṣetrajña' – literally, 'knower of the field'. For Parabrahman, however, Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises that his knowledge is far superior to that of any other conscious being. He declares:

> Puruṣottama Bhagavān is the kṣetrajña of all kṣetrajñas (Vac. Gaḍh. II.17).

This relates back to Parabrahman being the inner soul of everything (antarātman or sarvātman), of even the knowing beings, including Akṣarabrahman. But by using a term explicitly denotative of a knowing agent – literally, 'the knower of all knowers' – rather than simply 'the ātman of all ātmans', Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises that, just as God is 'the Lord of all lords', he is the sole supreme knower. In fact, the body-soul relationship in this context also helps to confirm God as the supreme all-knower. Just as the jīvātman (soul of a finite being) pervades its entire body and is the source of consciousness throughout the body, allowing it to know (feel, see, hear, etc.) – that is to say, the soul is the knower of its entire body – in the same way, God, as the soul of the entire universe, pervades it and is the source of all consciousness throughout the universe; he is the knower of everything because he ensouls everything. It is in this sense also that the Upaniṣads proclaim Parabrahman as

> the ear of the ear, the mind of the mind, verily the speech of speech, the breath of the breath, the eye of the eye... (KeU 1.2).

Commenting on this verse, the Bhāṣyakāra elaborates on how it applies to Parabrahman – 'the divine, supremely conscious inspirer of the inert senses and mind, etc.' – (and not the finite soul within), citing also from Vac. Gaḍh. I.65

where Svāminārāyaṇa describes God's "jñānaśakti".[121] This is Parabrahman's supreme cognitive power which allows all beings to know, and, along with his icchāśakti and kriyāśakti, to also will and act.

> When a jīva enters the state of deep sleep [suṣupti], it becomes inert like a slab of stone and retains no type of consciousness.... When a jīva enters such a state, God awakens it from unconsciousness through his 'jñānaśakti' and makes it aware of all things.

So it is the supremely conscious Parabrahman

> by whom one sees, by whom one hears, by whom one smells odours, by whom one utters speech, and by whom one recognises the tasteful and distasteful (AU 3.1).

Earlier, we had also noted how Svāminārāyaṇa stressed that those rare accomplished yogis who become omniscient only do so "on the strength of the upāsanā of God" [Vac. Gaḍh. I.56]. As the bestower of knowledge to infinite beings, and even omniscience to some, it is evident again that God himself has infinite knowledge and is indeed omniscient.

Furthermore, the Bhāṣyakāra adds another layer of meaning to KeU 1.6-9 when he explains that Parabrahman does not need inner faculties or cognitive organs to know, as bound souls need the mind, eyes, ears, etc. This is because his knowledge is "sadā svataḥsiddha" – always self-accomplished or independent.[122]

[121] KeU-SB 1.2, p. 34.

[122] KeU-SB 1.6, p.40.

By drawing together these as well as some previous and other corollary ideas (some of which will be elaborated later), we are able to arrive at a basic overview of God's omniscience within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology. God having infinite knowledge means that:

- Gods knows everything there is to know
- God knows everything perfectly
- God knows everything immediately
- God knows everything simultaneously
- God knows everything continuously
- God knows everything directly, 'as before his eyes', not by inference, analogy, testimony or any other means
- God knows everything independently; he does not require any senses, organs or mental faculty for cognition
- God knows everything effortlessly; he does not need to exert himself in any way to know anything
- God's knowing is always fruitful and meaningful; it is never useless

6.2.2.4) Power: Sarvaśaktiman

In many ways, several of the aspects of Parabrahman's nature discussed so far are also aspects of his powers. We have already seen, for example, Svāminārāyaṇa talking about God's "antaryāmin śakti", the power to dwell within everyone and everything as their inner-controller; his "jñāna-śakti", "iccha-śakti" and "kriyā-śakti", allowing finite beings to know, will and act; or his other yogic powers (various called yoga-śakti, yoga-māyā, yoga-kalā), for

example, to exist distinctly within his transcendental abode and yet be immanent throughout the universe.

When discussing Parabrahman as the avatārin, the cause of the various avatāras, we also saw how he, by his 'anu-praveśa' (special 're-entering') of Virāṭa Puruṣa, empowers selected īśvaras to become a divinised avatāra.

Before that, we learned that Parabrahman is the soul of the entire universe. He not only pervades all that he ensouls, but also supports, empowers and inspires it.

Going back even further, we looked at Parabrahman as the sole sovereign master, owning and ruling over his realm, the entire universe. The term used by Svāminārāyaṇa to denote Parabrahman's lordship was 'aiśvarya', which is also used synonymously with powers associated with his lordly rule, i.e. supreme and divine powers.

Ahead, as we expound upon Parabrahman as the all-doer (sarvakartā) and all-cause (sarvakāraṇa), especially in his relation to the material creation, it will become apparent that these, too, are powers of Parabrahman.

So in this sense, all of these are a part of Parabrahman's extraordinary, godly powers.

Svāminārāyaṇa also speaks more generally about these powers. For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. I.64, Puruṣottama Bhagavān is described as being "replete with all lordly powers" (sakala aiśvarya sampanna), which in fact are "innumerable" (asankhyāt) [Vac. Loyā.1], "infinite" (anant) [Vac. Gadh. III.37], and "extremely limitless" (atiśay apār) [Vac. Gaḍh. II.67]. Furthermore:

> Puruṣottama Bhagavān is the master yogi [or Lord of Yoga (yogeśvara)] and the treasure store of all yogic powers [yogakalānā nidhi] (Vac. Loyā.4).

In Vac. Sār.4, Svāminārāyaṇa adds:

> After all, God is extremely powerful; whatever he wishes, occurs (Vac. Sār.14).

Svāminārāyaṇa indicates here – as we saw with God's power to know all things – the absolute effortlessness with which Parabrahman applies his power of conation. By his mere will do all things happen. There is no exertion on his behalf whatsoever.

A text that deserves particular mention in this discussion of Parabrahman's powers is Vac. Loyā.13. We have seen parts of it earlier in describing God's independence over and above all other entities. An earlier portion of that same excerpt reads:

> Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa is the all-doer, the cause of all, the controller of all; he is extremely attractive, extremely radiant, and extremely powerful. He possesses the powers of kartum, akartum and anyathā-kartum (Vac. Loyā.13).

What are these three powers? Literally, they mean that Parabrahman is '[able] to do', '[able] to not do', and '[able] to do otherwise'. While the first already establishes him as powerful enough to do (kartum) everything, the second answers questions of his undiminished overall authority over his own laws and even over powers he may have devolved to the īśvaras. For example, if something is destined to happen by way of the law of karma, or if an īśvara has determined something to happen in the brahmāṇḍa over which he is presiding, Parabrahman, by his akartum śakti, can prevent it from happening, i.e. to not-do it (akartum).[123] This is his inviolable superiority and independence at work, for it is only by his command in the first place that the īśvaras are administrating their assigned realms, though one must hasten to add that Parabrahman rarely overrules the īśvaras or the law of karma in this way. The final power, anyathā-kartum śakti, is even more rarely wielded – in fact, never. It implies a superlative power by which Parabrahman can do absolutely anything, including even the outright impossible. Svāmināràyaṇa gives a hint of this in Vac. Sār.14:

> By his will, that which is inert can become conscious, and that which is conscious can become inert (Vac. Sār.14).

It must be stressed again that this is a *potentiality* of Parabrahman – he is *able* to do this – but one that he never actually exerts in a way that would disturb the normal flow of reality.[124] It is, rather, to stress the absolute omnipotence and complete authority of Parabrahman; he has unlimited powers, each to an

[123] See also Vac. Gaḍh. II.21, discussed in more detailed in the following section on Kartā, Parabrahman as the all-doer.

[124] See also Vac. Gaḍh. III.39, where Svāmināràyaṇa explains the chaos that would result if there were more than one God.

unlimited degree, allowing him to do everything and anything he so wills, by his mere will.

6.2.2.5) Splendour: Sarvasundara

In the upcoming section on Parabrahman as Sākāra, we shall be looking at in detail how Svāmināràyaṇa describes God's divine, human-like form and the stress he lays on understanding it as such. Here, though, as we continue to follow the list of aspects of God's limitless nature mentioned by Svāmināràyana in Vac. Gaḍh. II.67, we come now to briefly understand the nature of God's splendour (sundaratā) or charm and beauty (rūpa).

Svāmināràyaṇa describes Parabrahman as "exceedingly beautiful" (ati rūpavān) [Vac. Loyā.13] and "extremely arresting" (atiśay manohar) [Vac. Gaḍh. II.13], going further in Vac. Loyā.18 to say:

> God is so handsome that he puts even millions of Kāmadevas to shame (Vac. Loyā.18).

Svāmināràyaṇa draws upon the attractiveness of the Hindu deity of love, a conventional exemplar of allure and charm in Hindu literature, and multiplies it millions of times over to impress upon his audience the overwhelming excellence of God's attractiveness, before which even those innumerable Kāmadevas feel utterly insignificant and humbled.

But in fact, Svāmināràyaṇa acknowledges, even such hefty comparisons are inadequate, because

> the beauty of God cannot be found anywhere else (Vac. Pan.3),

and

> the beauty [or form] of that God is such that it cannot be compared to any other object in this brahmāṇḍa – up to and including everything from Brahmā, etc. to the smallest blade of grass [brahmādika sthamba paryanta] (Vac. Pan.4).

This is, of course, as Svāminārāyaṇa had explained earlier in the Vac. Gaḍh. II.67 sermon, because Parabrahman's splendour is "extremely limitless" (atiśay apār).

6.2.2.6) Bliss: Sarvasukhamaya

For Svāminārāyaṇa, an important aspect of Parabrahman's nature is his blissfulness. He elucidates and emphasises it in various ways in several of his sermons, making it deserving of a closer look as we seek to understand Parabrahman's unlimited-ness and supremacy within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.

In Vac. Pan.1, Svāminārāyaṇa qualifies Parabrahman as "formed of bliss" (sukharūpa), and in Vac. Pan.7 as "formed of extreme bliss" (atiśay sukhasvarūpa). In Vac. Gaḍh. III.27, Gaḍh. III.28 and Gaḍh. III.39, he also describes God as being "replete with bliss" (sukhamāyā).

Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to explain the nature of this bliss more extensively in sermons such as Vac. Sār.1. He states there:

> If one were to gather all of the sensorial pleasures[125] of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, even then it would not equal even one millionth of a fraction of the bliss which is present in just one pore of God.

And so, Svāmināràyaṇa suggests in the same sermon, one should be ready to

> utterly discard all of the sensorial pleasures of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas to see [darśana] God for just one second even.

In another sermon, Svāmināràyaṇa implies that one need not even see God. By merely closing one's eyes and contemplating on his form,

> that bliss cannot be found even in a kingdom consisting of the 14 realms (Vac. Var.16).

In other words:

> Before the bliss of the form of that God, the sensorial pleasures of this realm and the higher realms pale into insignificance (Vac. Loyā.18).

In reiterating that Parabrahman's bliss is far superior to anything else that a person could ever attain, Svāmināràyaṇa often draws upon a common analogy. For example, he states:

> Consider the following analogy: An extremely wealthy man enjoys a great variety of food at home. Then, after finishing the meal, he throws a leftover piece of rotlo [unleavened millet bread] to a dog. In this case, the leftover piece of rotlo can be considered utterly inferior, and the various delicacies that the wealthy man enjoys can be considered to be full of pleasure. In the same way, God has given the countless jīvas of the brahmāṇḍas the sensorial pleasures. But they are inferior like the piece of rotlo thrown to the dog, whereas the bliss of God himself is far superior (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

[125] Throughout, "pañcaviśaynu sukh", literally, pleasures derived from the subjects of the five senses, i.e. sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches, has been translated as 'sensorial pleasures' for brevity and simplicity. Where only "pañcaviśay" or "viśay" is used, this is translated more generally as 'sense-objects'.

In Vac. Pan.1, Svāminārāyaṇa extends this analogy to beyond the pleasures available to ordinary people.

> Compared to the bliss of God, the pleasures of Brahmā and others are like that of a poor man who begs with an earthen vessel at the door of a rich householder (Vac. Pan.1).

Svāminārāyaṇa's point from this is not to degrade the devatās to the level of paupers and beggary, but rather to stress the utter superiority of God's bliss and, in turn, inspire devotees away from this high-though-ultimately-finite happiness to instead the highest, infinite bliss of Parabrahman. Elaborating upon the above, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

> For example, a wealthy merchant may have had trees planted on both sides of a road to provide shade. He may have had water fountains constructed. He may also have had almshouses and guesthouses constructed. He does all of this for the poor.... It is obvious that compared to those [amenities], the luxuries in the merchant's own home must be far greater. Similarly, God has created happiness for Brahmā and others; so it is obvious to an intelligent person that, compared to those, the bliss of his own abode must be far superior. An intelligent person, then, can infer that there is an extreme abundance of bliss in the abode of God. As a result, the alluring sensorial pleasures become repulsive to him (Vac. Pan.1).

So superior is this bliss of God's abode compared to the pleasures of the other paradisiacal realms that

> it is said in [the Mahābhārata's] Mokṣa-Dharma[126] that the realms of the other devatās are like naraka [i.e. hell] compared to the Akṣaradhāma of God (Vac. Sār.1).

In reality, though, the bliss in God's abode is simply incomparable.

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[126] Ete vai nırayāstāta sthānasya paramātmanaḥ (Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva 191.6) |

> The bliss experienced by the devotees of God residing in that abode is such that it cannot be compared to any other type of bliss in this brahmāṇḍa (Vac. Pan.4).

Yet, to provide some sort of indication at least of its superiority, Svāminārāyaṇa adopts a style reminiscent of the famous Ānanda-Mīmāṃsā found in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad's Ānandavallī [2.8.2]. He explains in Vac. Pan.1:

> The happiness of humans exceeds the happiness of animals; and the happiness of a king exceeds that; and the happiness of devatās exceeds that; and the happiness of Indra exceeds that; then Bṛhaspati's happiness, then Brahmā's, then Vaikuṇṭha's. Beyond that, the happiness of Goloka is superior, and finally, the bliss of God's Akṣaradhāma is vastly superior (Vac. Pan.1).

Later in the same sermon, he adopts another ascending series to reassert his point.

> For example, a paisa is worth more than a cowry, and a rupee more than that; a gold coin is more valuable than that, and a cintāmaṇi [wish-fulfilling stone] is more valuable than that. Similarly, the bliss of God in his abode is vastly superior to wherever there are sensorial pleasures (Vac. Pan.1).

But apart from being superior in quality, how else is God's bliss different from the worldly pleasures? Firstly, Svāminārāyaṇa explains,

> the bliss of God is imperishable (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

But more than being just everlasting, it also absolutely fulfilling.

> Even if one experiences it for only a moment, the person who is engaged in worship feels, 'I've enjoyed the bliss of God in samādhi for thousands of years.'... On the other hand, even if one indulges in māyic pleasures for a long time, ultimately one feels as if it was momentary (Vac. Var.9).

Svāminārāyaṇa adds in the same sermon that God's bliss is "infrangible" [akhaṇḍa], and similarly in Vac. Gaḍh. II.10, that it is "unshakeable" [acala]. That is, nothing is able to disturb its fullness and consistency.

While reiterating that "whereas the worldly pleasures... are all perishable, the bliss related to God is everlasting", Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to explain in Vac. Gaḍh. II.1 another significant way in which the two differ.

> Sounds contain only pleasures related to sounds; the pleasures of the other four types of sensorial pleasures cannot be found in sounds. In the same way, only the pleasures of touch, and no other sensorial pleasures, can be found in touch. Similarly, only the pleasures of sight exist in sights. The same applies for tastes and smells in that only their own respective pleasures exist, but all types of sensorial pleasures cannot be experienced in just one sensorial object. On the other hand, in God, all pleasures exist simultaneously. Thus, even if a devotee only sees [God], he still feels totally fulfilled. Similarly, touch and other types of contact with God also make his devotees feel totally fulfilled.

Similarly, in Vac. Gaḍh. III.27 he reiterates:

> The pleasures associated with sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch are all found to co-exist in one place – the blissful and divine form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān. When we have the darśana of that form of God, we can enjoy the bliss of that beauty, as well as the bliss of the other four types of sense pleasures, i.e. sounds, touch, etc. That gratification occurs simultaneously. With worldly objects, however, when one indulges in one sense pleasure, one receives the gratification of only that sense, but not of the others. Thus the pleasures of worldly objects are found separately. Moreover, those pleasures are insignificant, perishable and ultimately the cause of extreme misery. But in God, one enjoys the bliss of all of the senses simultaneously. That bliss is extremely divine [mahā alaukika; literally, 'greatly non-worldly']; it is eternal and imperishable.

Svāminārāyaṇa thus describes the bliss of Parabrahman as supreme in quality and limitless in extent; totally fulfilling, consistent and unending.

But as inferior, limited, incomplete, unstable and transient as the worldly pleasures may be, Svāmināràyaṇa explains their source, too.

> Whatever happiness related to the sense-objects is apparent in this world – be it for animals, humans, devatās, spirits, etc. – it is due only to some association with God and when coupled with dharma (Vac. Pan.1).

When arguing the case for Parabrahman in the Brahmasūtras' Ānandamayādhikaraṇa [1.1.13-20], this point helps answer the question of whether the jīvas or īśvaras can also be understood as being ānandamaya, or 'replete with bliss'. The Sūtrakāra ends the objections with the following aphorism:

> Asmin-nasya ca tad-yogam śāsti |

The Bhāṣyakāra explains it thus:

> While the jīvas, īśvaras, etc. may have some association with bliss [ānandayoga], they cannot be said to be full of bliss [ānandamaya], for their bliss is totally dependent on the bliss of Paramātman, since he is their controller [śāsti], and it is he who is replete with supreme bliss [paramānandamaya].[127]

In the commentary for TU 2.7.2, which closely follows the passage from where the above adhikharaṇa is drawn, the Bhāṣyakāra further adds:

> Paramātman is the essence, i.e. the very form of superlatively limitless bliss [anavadhīkātiśayānandarūparasamūrti]. The jīva or īśvara who worships this essence – Paramātman, the Lord of Akṣara – becomes blissful, i.e. is surrounded by supreme bliss [paramānanda]. Thus, to desire divine, limitless supreme bliss from anywhere apart from this Lord of Akṣara, who is composed of bliss and is replete with bliss, is as futile as to wish milk as sweet

[127] BS-SB 1.1.20, p. 43.

> as nectar from the wattle of a goat[128]. Thus, only he [Paramātman] should be worshipped. This is the [gist of the] instruction.[129]

So, all that is pleasurable in the world is due to God's presence and influence,

because, after all,

> God is the repository of all forms of bliss [sukhamātranā rāśi] (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

As if echoing the Upaniṣadic instruction from above, Svāmināràyaṇa concludes

and declares in Vac. Gaḍh. II.56:

> The essence of all scriptures is simply this: God is the sole source of supreme bliss and the supreme essence of everything. Excluding God, all other objects are absolutely insignificant and utterly unsubstantial.

As a summary then, we have the following table:

[128] This is a common example used in Hindu literature to exemplify futility, since the wattle of a goat, though resembling an udder, does not contain any milk.

[129] TU-SB 2.7.2, p. 382.

Bliss of Parabrahman	Enjoyment from Sensorial Pleasures
Vastly superior	Utterly inferior
Everlasting	Transient
Consistent	Unstable
Pure	Marred by misery
Immediately fulfilling	Eventually unfulfilling
All senses can be gratified simultaneously	Senses can be gratified only individually
Source of all other bliss	Source is Parabrahman

6.2.2.7) Virtues: Sakalaśubhaguṇasampanna

When describing the auspicious qualities that God possesses, Svāminārāyaṇa often draws from other Hindu texts. For example, in Vac. Var.10, he states:

> God assumes an avatāra on this earth in one of two forms – either in the form of a king or in the form of a sādhu. When he assumes an avatāra upon the earth as a king, he possesses the 39 characteristics [lakṣaṇa] of a king, and when he assumes an avatāra upon the earth in the form of a sādhu, he possesses the 30 characteristics [lakṣaṇa] of a Sādhu.

The 39 "characteristics" – or divine virtues – of God in a lordly manifestation are identified in the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa [1.16.26-28] as follows: (1) satya – truthfulness or benevolence to all beings; (2) sauca – [inner] purity, i.e. flawlessness; (3) dayā – compassion, i.e. intolerance of others' pain; (4) kṣānti – forbearance, i.e. tolerance of contempt from adversaries; (5) tyāga –

renunciation, i.e. forsaking of all things, including one's self; (6) santoṣa – contentment, i.e. free from restlessness; (7) ārjava – sincerity, i.e. congruence of mind (thoughts), speech (words) and body (actions); (8) śama – tranquillity, i.e. restraint of mind; (9) dama – self-control, i.e. restraint of outer sense organs; (10) tapas – austerity, i.e. contemplation upon the creation of the world; (11) sāmya – equality, i.e. equal behaviour with friends and foe; (12) titikṣā – endurance, i.e. withstanding of comforts and hardships; (13) uparati – abstinence, i.e. refraining from unnecessary activities; (14) śruta – learning, i.e. knowledge of the precise meanings of the scriptures; (15) jñāna – knowledge, i.e. knowledge useful in helping aspirants attain the desirable and avoid the undesirable; (16) virakti – disaffection, i.e. unattraction towards the pleasures of the sense-objects; (17) aiśvarya – power, i.e. control over all things; (18) śaurya – valour, i.e. boldness in battle; (19) tejas – brilliance, i.e. resistance to defeat; (20) bala – strength, i.e. power to govern all beings; (21) smṛti – memory, i.e. remembering of devotees' favours in their times of faltering; (22) svātantrya – independence; (23) kauśala – expertise; (24) kānti – lustre; (25) dhairya – fortitude, i.e. strength of mind in adverse times; (26) mārdava – suppleness, i.e. modesty; (27) prāgalbhya – courage; (28) praśraya – courtesy; (29) śīla – chastity, i.e. purity of character; (30) sahas – potency; (31) ojas – vitality; (32) bala – strength, i.e. power to support all things; (33) bhaga – excellence; (34) gāmbhīrya – profundity; (35) sthairya – stability; (36) āstikya – faith in God and scriptures;[130] (37) kīrti – glory; (38) māna – self-respect; (39) anahamkṛti – egolessness, i.e. humility.

[130] Remember that these qualities are, in effect, the characteristics of an ideal king, which God

Similarly, the 30 attributes of a Sādhu, which God perfectly adopts when he manifests as one, are distinguished in the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa [11.11.29-33] as follows: (1) kṛpālu – one who selflessly showers grace upon others; (2) sarvadehinām akṛtadroha – one who does not harm any living being; (3) titikṣu – one who remains equipoised in all situations, such as in the dualities of praise and insult, happiness and misery, hunger and thirst, etc.; (4) satyasāra – one whose strength comes from satya; (5) anavadhyātmā – one who is devoid of jealousy or other such vices; (6) sama – one who views others with equality; (7) sarvopakāraka – one who does only good to others; (8) kāmair-ahatadhī – one whose mind is not disturbed by engaging in sensorial pleasures; (9) dānta – one whose senses are restrained; (10) mṛdu –gentle-natured; (11) śuci – one with inner and outer purity; (12) akincana – one without any worldly desires; (13) anīha – one without any desires for worldly gains; (14) mitabhuk – one who eats in moderation; (15) śānta – one whose mind is restrained; (16) sthira – one who is equipoised; (17) maccharaṇa – one whose only refuge is God; (18) muni – one who has noble thoughts; (19) apramatta – one who is aware; (20) gabhīrātmā – one whose motives are beyond our understanding; (21) dhṛtimān – one who is patient even in testing circumstances; (22) jitaṣaḍguṇa – one who has overcome the six 'urges': thirst, hunger, grief, infatuation, old age and death; (23) amānī – one with humility; (24) mānada – one who can praise others; (25) kalpa – one who has the ability to speak for others' benefit; (26) maitra – one who does not deceive others; (27) kāruṇika – one who is compassionate without any selfish

assumes the role of when he manifests as a king.

motive; (28) kavi – one who fully knows the animate, the inanimate and God; (29) one who worships God; (30) one who has single-minded worship with the realisation of God in his true glory.

Svāminārāyaṇa also points out, though, that these or any other list is never exhaustive, for

> God possesses countless such redemptive virtues (Vac. Gaḍh. I.77).

Similarly, in an extensive list of appellations for Parabrahman describing various aspects of his nature, Guṇātītānanda Svāmī includes the following two: "Anantakalyāṇakāriguṇabhājana" and "Anavadhikātiśaya-ajahat-...guṇamohadhadi", meaning God is "a vessel of endless auspicious qualities" and "a superlatively limitless grand ocean of perfect virtues (literally, which cannot be discarded) [SV 7.2]. That is, it cannot be said that God has only certain virtues and not others, or that he has a virtue only to a certain degree; he has limitless virtues, each one to a limitless degree.

For Svāminārāyaṇa, this is what is meant when the scriptures describe God as "saguṇa", literally 'with attributes'.

But what about when they describe him as "nirguṇa" – literally, 'attribute-less'? He argues:

> When the scriptures describe God as being... nirguṇa, they are referring to the fact that he does not possess.... māyic attributes. In reality,... he possesses countless redemptive virtues (Vac. Gaḍh. I.66).

One such example of a śāstric description of Parabrahman as "nirguṇa" can be found at BG 13.31. The commentary on that particular word interprets it in consonance with Svāmināràyaṇa's explanation above, as "devoid of prākṛta [i.e. worldly] qualities".[131]

According to Svāmināràyaṇa theology, then, Parabrahman is saguṇa in that he is replete with infinite auspicious and redemptive qualities, and he is nirguṇa in that he is totally devoid of any māyic, evil or defiling qualities.[132] Together, it makes him perfectly virtuous and pure[133], the highest *summum bonum*.

*

Having thus covered Parabrahman as unbounded by time and space and having limitless knowledge, power, splendour, bliss and virtues, this completes the discussion of Parabrahman's limitless nature, and also Parabrahman as Sarvopari (supreme). We now move onto expounding another key aspect of Parabrahman, which in many ways further corroborates his supremacy.

[131] BG-SB 13.31, p. 290.

[132] Svāmināràyaṇa also gives another meaning to the ideas of 'saguṇa' and 'nirguṇa' in relation to the size of God's form. This shall be covered in Parabrahman as Sākāra. See section 6.4.3.1.

[133] More about Parabrahman as free from māyic influence and hence being divine (divya) is especially relevant to Svāminārāyaṇa in terms of God's human-like form, and so will be covered in more detail in the sections on Parabrahman as Sākāra (6.4) and Pragaṭa (6.5).

6.3) KARTĀ: God as Omniagent

In this section, we shall see, firstly, Svāminārāyaṇa's emphasis on understanding Parabrahman as sarvakartā – the all-doer or omniagent – before moving on to unpacking that term and seeing what exactly Svāminārāyaṇa means by it, i.e. what does God actually 'do'. Along the way, we shall encounter a number of challenges to this claim and the perfect nature of God as a result of his doership or divine agency. These we shall understand with their refutations as addressed in the commentarial tradition.

6.3.1) Emphasis on Knowing Parabrahman as the All-Doer

Some of Svāminārāyaṇa's most emphatic instructions to know the true nature of God concern descriptions of Parabrahman as sarvakartā, the 'all-doer'. These include, for example, a sermon when he was "seriously ill", though the illness itself seems to have done little to subdue his fervour in conveying what he believes is a key soteriological principle. He said:

> The jīva's liberation is attained only by the following understanding: 'All that happens is by the doing of the manifest form of Śrī Kṛṣṇa Nārāyaṇa, but nothing at all is done by any of time [kāla], karma, māyā, etc.' In this manner, understanding God alone to be the all-doer is indeed the supreme cause of liberation (Vac. Kār.10).

The last sentence of this excerpt is worth seeing in its Gujarati. It reads:

> Ā rite Bhagavān-ne viśe ja ek kartā-paṇu samajvu e ja kalyāṇ-nu param kāraṇ che.

What is noticeable is the use of multiple accentuations – terms such as 'ek' ('one' or 'alone') and 'param' ('supreme') as well as two instances of 'ja' ('only',

denoting exclusivity or certainty) – which indicate the imperative need in Svāmināràyaṇa's mind for such an understanding as well as his own conviction of its truth. We see the same intensity and a similar array of certainty-stressing modifiers in another sermon, which he prefaces this time with śāstric corroboration.

> I have attentively listened to all of the scriptures which Vyāsajī has written regarding the attainment of liberation. The conclusive principle [siddhānta] prevalent in all those scriptures, and the only principle for the liberation of the jīva, is simply this: The sole 'doer' of this entire cosmos is God (Vac. Gaḍh. II.21).

In Vac. Gaḍh. I.37, Svāmināràyaṇa describes some salient attributes of a perfect devotee. He includes in the list of attributes key aspects of how that devotee correctly understands God's nature. Such a devotee

> realises that there is indeed no other 'doer' of this world besides that God.

When the topic moves to how a devotee in turn can develop "extraordinary love" (asādhāraṇ sneh) for God, Svāmināràyaṇa includes the same understanding, but with a little more detail.

> He should realise the lordship [aiśvarya] of God, i.e. 'This God is the master of Brahmamahola, Goloka, Śvetadvīpa and all of the other abodes. He is the master of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas and is the all-doer.' He should never believe Puruṣa, time [kāla], karma, māyā, the three guṇas, the 24 [māyic] elements, or Brahmā and the other devatās to be the doers of this brahmāṇḍa; instead, he should realise only Puruṣottama Bhagavān to be the doer and the inner-controller [antaryāmin] of all. Resolute faith in the manifest form of God before the eyes with such an understanding is the only way to develop extraordinary love for God (Vac. Gaḍh. I.59).

An important clarification needs to be made here: jīvas, īśvaras and Akṣarabrahman, by way of being sentient beings themselves, are also able to do, see, hear, enjoy, experience, etc.; that is, they too have individual agency. However, this is all due to Parabrahman – who pervades them, supports them, empowers them – without whom they would not be able to do anything. It is in this sense that Parabrahman alone is the *independent* doer of everything; the others are all doers, though not independently. Furthermore, even while Parabrahman is the all-doer, he does not necessarily intervene upon the actions of the jīvas and īśvaras; he allows the natural course of events and effects to unfold. As we shall see in their respective chapters, Parabrahman delegates power and authority to īśvaras and also allows jīvas the freedom to choose[134].

Equally emphatic as Svāminārāyaṇa's advocacy that God is the sole all-doer is his reproof of the belief that anyone or anything besides God could be this independent agent. When asked by a leading devotee about how God is pleased, he simply replied:

> If one does not malign God, then God is pleased.

Continuing, he said:

> Then you may ask, 'What does it mean to malign God?' Well, God is the all-doer of this world. However, if one does not understand him to be the all-doer and instead believes that it is time that is the all-doer of this world, or that it is māyā, or that it is karma, or that it is nature [svabhāva] that is the all-doer, then one is maligning God. This is because actually God is the all-doer. To ignore this and to claim that only time, karma, māyā and nature are the all-doers of this world is severe slander [ati droh] against God.

[134] See sections 8.2.2 and 9.2, respectively

Svāminārāyaṇa then drew upon a familiar analogy which also ties in God's supremacy with his omniagency. He said in direct response to the questioner:

> For example, you are the chief of your village. If someone does not acknowledge your status in the village, then he can be said to be your slanderer. Also, if someone does not accept the sovereignty of an emperor of the world, but instead accepts the sovereignty of one who is not even a king, then that person is known as a slanderer of the emperor.... So, to say that God is not the all-doer... and that time and others are the doers – not God – is indeed tantamount to maligning God (Vac. Var.2).

Svāminārāyaṇa adds a string of further admonishments in Vac. Kār.10, where he censures such a person as 'the worst of sinners', "worse even than one who has killed a cow, killed a Brahmin, associated with the wife of one's own guru, or maligned a true guru who is a knower of Brahman", and warns others to "not even stand in such a person's shadow" nor "even mistakenly listen to any words from such a person's mouth". "Why?" Svāminārāyaṇa asks.

> Because he believes time, karma, etc. to be the doers of everything, not God.

If we look closely at these statements above, what emerges from them is not so much Svāminārāyaṇa's insistence that God is the all-doer, but rather, more specifically, that it is *only* God who is the all-doer. Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises this by firstly reinforcing his statements in favour of God with such terms as 'only', 'alone', 'sole', and 'indeed' (often with 'ek' and 'ja' in Gujarati), and secondly, by explicitly naming that which should *not* be considered to be the independent all-doers, i.e. time (or kāla), karma, māyā, nature (svabhāva), etc. In the first text from Vac. Kār.10, for example, Svāminārāyaṇa also contrasts "*all*

that happens" as the doing of God alone, whereas "*nothing at all* is done by *any* of time, karma, māyā, etc." [emphasis added].

With this, Svāminārāyaṇa is implicitly countering the various non-theistic strands of thought which propound(ed) that all that happens is not by the will and strength of God, but, independently of him, by time in the inevitable unfolding of events in temporal succession; or as determined by the karmas of the individual beings which are capable of administering their own rewards and punishments but do not require an independent, omniscient, omnipresent grantor of the fruits of those karmas; or by simple illusion ['māyā'] because nothing besides the One or Nothingness is 'real' anyway; or by svabhāva ['inherent nature'], since all phenomena are naturally bound to happen anyway; or by the inert Pradhāna which is activated by the conscious Puruṣa.[135]

This very much resonates with the debates played out in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad in adhikaraṇas such as Īkṣatyadhikaraṇa [BS 1.1.5-12]. This is a

[135] Some of these ancient schools of thought are alluded to in the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad. When the sages ask,

> What is the cause? Is it Brahman? From where are we born? By what do we live? And on what are we established? (1.1),

they rhetorically suggest:

> Is it worth considering as the cause time, inherent nature, necessity [niyati], chance [ṛccha], the [māyic] elements, or Puruṣa? (1.2)

All these are rejected because they are inert and cannot be the cause of the spiritual. Nor is the individual soul possible as the cause, for it, too, is 'not in control' [anīśa] and 'subject to pleasure and pain' [sukhadukhahetu], i.e. it is not independent nor free of karma. Instead, the sages proclaim, the ultimate cause is

> God, the one, who rules over all these causes, from 'time' to 'the individual soul' (1.3).

relevant section to briefly see how the Bhāṣyakāra, based on Svāmināràyaṇa's conclusive statements (siddhānta), offers his exegetical argumentation on this topic. However, to appreciate that argumentation more fully, we shall first have to unpack what Svāmināràyana means by the term 'all-doer' and its other related terms.

6.3.2) Parabrahman as the All-Doer and All-Cause

When Svāmināràyaṇa insists that Parabrahman is the all-doer, what does he mean? What does Parabrahman actually 'do'?

A study of the Vacanāmrut reveals that Svāmināràyaṇa includes a number of aspects in the agency of God. As 'kartā', Parabrahman:

- Creates, Sustains and Dissolves
- Supports
- Controls
- Inspirers
- Empowers
- Permits
- Administers

We shall look at the first set of aspects in some detail, and then most of the others will follow collectively more briefly.

6.3.2.1) Parabrahman as Creator, Sustainer and Dissolver & Both Efficient Cause and Material Cause

In several sermons, Svāminārāyaṇa explains Parabrahman is responsible for the creation, sustenance and dissolution of the world. For example:

> Beyond that Akṣara is Akṣarātīta Puruṣottama Bhagavān, who is the all-doer – responsible for the creation, sustenance and dissolution of everything.... (Vac. Gaḍh. I.51).

> That greatness [of God] should be understood as follows: [Puruṣottama Bhagavān] is responsible for creating, sustaining and dissolving countless millions of brahmāṇḍas (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

> It is through God that everything mobile and immobile is created (Vac. Gaḍh. II.10).

> Thus God... is the creator, sustainer and dissolver of countless brahmāṇḍas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.35).

> It is God who is the creator, sustainer and dissolver of the world (Vac. Loyā.17).[136]

Strictly speaking, though, Parabrahman does not himself directly engage in the process of creation, sustenance and dissolution. As we shall see in more detail in the chapter on māyā and the 'evolving' of the physical world (jagat), it is Parabrahman's will (sankalpa) – working through Akṣarabrahman who then instructs an akṣaramukta and Prakṛti (i.e. māyā) – which initiates the entire creative process (utpatti-sarga). Nevertheless, it is also completely true to say

[136] In several other statements, we often find the word 'kartā' being used conjointly with 'hartā' – as 'kartā-hartā', literally, the 'doer-and-taker' – connoting, at a cosmological level, both the creative and terminative aspects of God's work, and by extension, everything in-between. At a personal level, individuals can understand God as both their 'giver and taker'.

that without Parabrahman there would be no creation, sustenance or dissolution, and hence, it is correct to describe Parabrahman as, *ultimately*, the creator, sustainer and dissolver.

Moreover, with māyā, the primordial material of which the world is composed, already existing – it is co-eternal with God – it is questionable how exactly God can have actually *created* anything new and so justifiably be called the 'creator'. Again, we shall be discussing this at its proper juncture in the chapter on māyā, but it is important to observe here that this is why Parabrahman is also emphasised as the 'kāraṇa', i.e. the *cause* of all things, including creation, rather than directly the 'creator'. Nevertheless, as we shall see with various analogies – such as the sculptor and his statue created from a boulder of stone – Parabrahman can still be properly understood as 'the creator'.

In this sense, Parabrahman is known as the efficient cause – the nimittakāraṇa – of the world, and we find Svāmināràyaṇa using the general term 'kāraṇa' for Parabrahman, often alongside 'kartā'. For example:

> What is that God like? Well,... he is indeed the cause of all causes ['sarva kāraṇnā paṇ kāraṇ'] (Vac. Gaḍh. III.31).

> One who is wise realises, 'God appears like a human, but, in fact, he is the cause of all and the doer of all; he is powerful (Vac. Loyā.2).

> Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa is the all-doer, the all-cause, the all-controller. He is extremely attractive, extremely radiant, and extremely powerful (Vac. Loyā.13).

In fact, in the first excerpt cited in this section, the complete sentence reads:

> Beyond that Akṣara is the Akṣarātīta Purusottama Bhagavān, who is the all-doer – responsible for the creation, sustenance and dissolution of everything – and the cause of all (Vac. Gaḍh. I.51).

However, with there being two types of causes – the effective cause as well as the material cause – which one does Svāmināràyaṇa mean? The answer is both; Parabrahman is the abhinnanimittopādānakāraṇa, the 'indistinct efficient and material cause' of the world.

With the above statements pointing to Parabrahman as the efficient cause of the world, others also point to him being the material cause as well. For example, the excerpt above from Vac. Gaḍh. I.51 immediately goes on to mention:

> A cause always pervades its effect, and simultaneously, also remains distinct from it. Thus, if one looks from the perspective of Puruṣottama Bhagavān – the cause of all – then nothing else appears to exist except Puruṣottama Bhagavān.

The causality intended here by Svāmināràyaṇa refers to the material cause, thus bringing together both causes in Vac. Gaḍh. I.51.

6.3.2.1.1) Some Challenges to Parabrahman's Omnidoership and Perfect Nature

But how can Parabrahman be the material cause of the universe? Does Parabrahman actually 'take the form of māyā' and *become* the physical world with its myriad objects that have names and forms? Surely not completely, for we have already learned that Parabrahman has a definite, distinct and transcendental form in his abode which he never forsakes. So then is it the case

that Parabrahman only partially becomes the visible world, still remaining in part in his transcendental form? But that would make him fragmentary, divisible and effectively mutable, whereas the śāstras, including the Vacanāmrut, proclaim Parabrahman to be nirañśa (whole, without parts), akhaṇḍa (indivisible), and avikārin (immutable) [e.g. SU 6.11; Vac. Pan.2]. The detractors raising these objections, as presented in BS 2.1.27, can be summarised as saying this: If you insist on Parabrahman being the material cause of the world, then you will either have to accept him as having parts or being without a distinct transcendental form.

This apparent theological dilemma is reconciled by the Bhāsyakāra by firstly resorting to śāstric revelation, insisting that that which is beyond the senses cannot have any other means of confirmation (śrutiśabdābhinnapramāṇa'mūlatvāt). 'If the Śrutis reveal Parabrahman as being the material cause as well as being whole, indivisible, immutable, etc., then who are we to argue?' is the reasoning.[137]

Elsewhere, additionally, two key doctrines that Svāminārāyaṇa has accepted are called into action to reconcile the problem. Firstly, that Parabrahman is the inner soul of the entire world. It is natural and right for him to pervade, control and empower his entire 'body'. However, this pervading is by his antaryāmi-śakti, or special yogic powers, allowing him to therefore be immanently present within all

[137] BS-SB. 2.1.27-28, pp. 177-79.

while actually being distinctly transcendental as well. For the task of creation, specifically, Parabrahman also 're-enters' (anu-praveśa) māyā and the various elements, overpowering their own identity and reigning supreme within them. It is in this sense that Parabrahman is said to 'take the form of māyā'.

The second doctrine concerns the view of causality adopted by Svāmināràyaṇa, which has as its starting point the satkāryavāda of the Sāṃkhya School. In brief, it is the belief that an effect is pre-existent in its cause as a different state (avasthāntara). In other words: states change; not substances created. So what one sees as 'new' is not a new or different substance, but merely the causal substance (i.e. the material cause) in a different state. For example, a gold chain is nothing but the gold it is made of in a different form; it is not a new substance apart from gold. At a cosmological level, then, creation is the changing of māyā – its causal substance – from its causal state (kāraṇāvasthā) to its effected state (kāryāvasthā). Conversely, dissolution is the opposite; the returning of māyā from its effected state (kāryāvasthā) to its original causal state (kāraṇāvasthā).

Now, since Parabrahman enters into māyā, controls it and empowers it – he is its very soul – he is thus said to be non-different (ananya) from māyā.[138] This being so, Parabrahman, as the material cause, does not have to change 'in substance' to become the effect which is the world, but only change states – from Parabrahman as māyā in its causal state to Parabrahman as māyā in its effected state.

[138] This was discussed in the section about Parabrahman as the 'Soul of All Beings and Things', with specific reference to the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad's Ananyatvādhikarana [2.1.14] that is being alluded to here.

Svāmināràyaṇa brings some of these points together in Vac. Loyā.2 when he explains:

> God, who is the cause of all, appears like a human being, yet by his yogic powers, he is able to create countless millions of brahmāṇḍas from his body [i.e. māyā] and is able to absorb them back into himself.

The famous Sadvidyā instruction to Śvetaketu by his father in the sixth chapter of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad also refers to this idea. As the Bhāṣyakāra explains, the opening –

> Sattveva saumyedam agra āsīd-ekamevādvitīyam |
>
> Dear son, in the beginning there was verily only this Being, one, without second (6.2.2) –

refers to Parabrahman as being the material cause, the primordial Being from which all springs forth. The immediately following verse,

> Tadaikṣyata bahu syām prajāyeyeti
>
> That [Being] thought [literally, 'saw'], 'Let me be many', 'Let me propagate' (6.2.3),

which indicates an intelligent being, establishes that primordial Being as also the efficient cause who wills, inspires and thereby initiates each new cycle of creation.[139]

The same two-fold representation of Parabrahman is made at TU 2.6.3-2.71 and AU 1.1.1 (and at BU 1.4.10 for Akṣarabrahman). All contain similar words to the

[139] CU-SB 6.2.1-3, pp. 252-58.

Sadvidyā instruction above, with the last being especially useful because it uses the term 'ātmā' instead of 'sat', i.e.

> Ātmā va idam eka evā'gra āsīt |.... Sa īkṣata lokān-nu srujā iti | Sa imān lokān asrujata |
>
> In the beginning there was only this one Self.... He thought [literally, 'saw'], 'Let me be create the worlds'. He thus created the worlds (1.1.1),

thus explicitly tying in Parabrahman's omnisoulship with his dual causality. In this way, Parabrahman is the material cause of the world, and, as its intelligent initiator, also the world's efficient cause. That is, he – though being one – is both the efficient and material cause of the world, the abhinnanimittopadanakāraṇa.

It is precisely because of this dual causality coming together in Parabrahman – by way of his being the inner soul of everything – that makes it possible for only God to be the sole and complete cause of the universe, and not anyone or anything else. This, at least, is the argument when objections are raised about the plausibility of other potential causes of the world, such as at BS 1.1.5 through to 1.1.12, which take their cue from the Chāndogya Upaniṣad verses cited above. In introducing the debate, the Bhāṣyakāra asks the question: What could be taken as the denotatum of 'sat' in these verses? That is, could time, karma, inherent nature, the inert Pradhāna of the Sāṃkhyans, or anything else be the omnicause?

This list of potential candidates includes all that Svāminārāyaṇa had explicitly and emphatically instructed against being the cause or agents of the world, as we saw earlier. Accordingly, then, the Sūtrakāra states:

Īkṣater-nā'śabdam (BS 1.1.5) |

No, the Bhāṣyakāra explains. That which is 'aśabda' – which does not have verbal testimony, or revelation, as its main means of proof, i.e. the Pradhāna of Sāṃkhya – cannot be the cause 'sat'. Why? Because 'seeing' is mentioned in the verse, and this seeing, preceded by will (saṅkalpapurvakeksaṇa), must be of an intelligent being only. This confirms that 'sat' can refer to 'Brahman', who is pure Being, and that 'Brahman' can be the efficient cause of the world.

Various contentions, counter-arguments and refutations follow in the characteristic style of a Brahmasūtra-adhikaraṇa, for example, debating on whether the 'seeing' is just a figurative expression or a real description, etc. The Sūtrakāra ends the debate by reverting again to śāstric revelation as emphasised at the opening:

Śrutatvāc-ca (BS 1.1.12) |

Because it is stated throughout the Śruti itself, the Bhāṣyakāra explains, that that same 'sat' was alone in the beginning, as stated at the start of the chapter, and, at the very end of the chapter, is also stated as being the soul of all this (aitadātmyam idam sarvam... sa ātmā [CU 6.16.3]), it means that that 'sat' is also the material cause of the world. It is wholly implausible for the inert Pradhāna or any of the others – time, karma, nature, etc. – to be both the material cause *and* the efficient cause, whereas, as shown, it is so revealed in texts that 'Brahman' is.

These same points are emphasised when a similar question was raised near the very beginning of the Brahmasūtras, even when some of the alternatives proposed are not inert concepts but sentient beings. After the opening aphorism instructs that an inquiry into 'Brahman' should be conducted, the Sūtrakāra goes on to define in this next aphorism,

Janmādyasya yataḥ (BS. 1.1.2),

that Brahman is 'that from which [occurs] the origination, etc. of this [world]'. But, the objectors argue, how can one be sure that it is 'Brahman' as God[140] that should be known, for cannot the term in this second sūtra also refer to the Vedas, or a Brahmin, or Brahmā the īśvara, or even a jīva or liberated soul? To prove that their question is valid, they cite several verses which indeed show 'Brahman' being used to mean the Vedas, etc. That being so, the Bhāṣyakāra states, it is impossible that any of the others can be the cause of the world. Why? Because the Vedas are a collection of words (i.e. inert), while Brahmins, Brahmā, other īśvaras, and jīvas, though intelligent beings, are themselves bound by māyā and a part of creation.[141] A mukta, who is liberated from māyā, is only ever involved in the process of creation by joining with Prakṛti (i.e. māyā) at the behest of Parabrahman, and even then, only once for the creation of one brahmāṇḍa only, not continuously for all the countless millions of brahmāṇḍas. Crucially, there is

[140] As stated earlier, we shall learn in the chapter on Akṣarabrahman that 'Brahman' here also denotes 'Akṣarabrahman'.

[141] While the jīvas and īśvaras are eternal, their bodies are composed of māyā, and, due to their karmas, pass through the cycle of birth, degeneration and death, only to be reborn again, due to those karmas. It is in this respect that they are considered a part of 'creation'. See the respective chapters on jīva and īśvara.

no way in which any of them can be *both* the efficient and material cause of the world as Brahman is.[142]

Even if Parabrahman is accepted as the efficient cause of the world, believing him to be the material cause as well poses serious and irredeemable challenges to his perfect nature, the objectors claim. Why? Because a causal substance is not dissimilar from it effect; a pot is similar to the clay from which it was produced or a piece of cloth from its threads, but threads cannot create a pot, nor clay a piece of cloth. So, since the world is composed of things that are inert, in flux, mutable, ordinary, sorrow-filled, sullied by the impurities of māyā, and always constituted of the three guṇas, how can it be that God is its material cause? The objectors are effectively saying: If you insist on Parabrahman being the material cause of the world, you will have to accept that he is no longer conscious, unchanging, immutable, divine, replete with bliss, pure, and forever triguṇatita (transcending the three māyic qualities – sattvaguṇa, rajoguṇa and tamoguṇa). Since the objectors know that this would be entirely unacceptable for the Svāminārāyaṇians, they assume that the Svāminārāyaṇians will inevitably have to concede that Parabrahman is not the material cause of the world.

The objectors bolster their case by pre-empting potential arguments and offering counter-arguments in advance.[143] But in response, the Sūtrakāra states:

Dṛśyate tu |

[142] BS-SB 1.1.2, pp. 12-14.

[143] BS-SB 2.1.4-5, pp. 159-61.

But it can be seen (2.1.6).

That is, there are examples – found both around us and mentioned in texts – that disconfirm the thesis that the effect is necessarily of the same nature as its cause. For example, hairs grow from a man, or as stated in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, "From space came air; from air, fire;" etc. (2.1.1). Space is without any of the tactile qualities found in air, nor does air have the visibility of fire. Thus, there is nothing inordinate in Parabrahman being the material cause and still being different in nature from the world and unsullied by all its imperfections. This is possible by way of him being the inner-pervader, controller, support, and soul of everything, including of māyā from which the world is composed.[144]

Svāmināràyaṇa explains this in Vac. Var.7 by further elucidating upon the concept of God as anvaya and vyatireka, that Parabrahman can still be immanent within or non-different from māyā as its soul and yet be wholly distinct from it in his abode. He says:

> The principle of anvaya-vyatirek is not that God has become half immanent within māyā and remains half distinct in his abode. Rather, God's form is such that he is immanent within māyā and yet, at the same time, he is distinct. God is not afraid, 'What if I enter māyā and thereby become impure?' Instead, when God associates with māyā, even māyā becomes like Akṣaradhāma [his abode]; and if he associates with the 24 elements [of creation], then they also become brahmarūpa [i.e. like Brahman].

So, there is no question of Parabrahman becoming imperfect. He can safely be the material cause of the world as well as its efficient cause.

[144] BS-SB 2.1.6, pp. 161-62.

Still, the objectors rise to question again, how can the efficient cause be the same as the material cause? It is unseen of in the world to have both as the same. The potter who makes the pot is always different from the clay with which he makes it. The Bhāṣyakāra argues that while that may be true on a worldly plane when dealing with a finite being, here, the creator is totally other-worldly (alaukika) and composed not of a finite body and qualities but is divine and infinite, with limitless powers and knowledge, and totally unbound by time and space. Moreover, being the inner soul of the entire world, he already pervades everything, supports it and empowers it. Thus, it is wholly appropriate and acceptable (if not entirely conceivable by finite minds) that Parabrahman is both the efficient and material cause of the world.[145]

The arguments continue along the same lines in adhikaraṇas of the first chapter of the Brahmasūtras as well as subsequent adhikaraṇas of the second chapter, dealing mainly with contestations – more often from the Sāṃkhya School – that anything other than 'Brahman' is the source of the world and hence the goal of knowledge. The winning conclusion from them all is that Parabrahman is irrefutably the cause of the creation, sustenance and dissolution of the world.[146]

[145] BS-SB 1.1.2, p. 15; CU-SB 6.2.3, p. 257.

[146] Two major objections still need to be contended with, which appear in consecutive adhikaranas in the second chapter of the Brahmasūtras. Firstly, regarding why Parabrahman would create the world in the first place, and, secondly, if he did, why he would make it so that it is an intermixture of happiness and suffering. These have been saved for when we discuss the nature of the manifest world in the chapter on māyā, allowing, also, a fuller appreciation of the argumentation after having covered a description of jīvas and īśvaras. See 10.2.2.

One doubt still remains, though. If Parabrahman is the all-doer, by whose wish and inspiration all things happen, do the consequences of those actions (i.e. karmas) return to affect him? Svāminārāyaṇa anticipates this question and answers it in a number of sermons. For example, in describing one of the six types of higher understandings regarding God, he includes in Vac. Loyā.12 that Parabrahman "does all actions and yet is akartā", i.e. is unaffected and unbound by those actions. In the same sermon as well as in Vac. Loyā.1 and Vac. Gaḍh. II.10, he adds the following analogy: just as all actions happen within space yet space is unaffected by them, similarly, God is totally 'untouched' or 'untainted' [nirlepa] by all these actions. There is no damage incurred to his perfect nature.

Understanding Parabrahman's role in the creation, sustenance and dissolution of the world, as both its efficient cause and material cause, helps explain what else he does as a part of and in addition to that role. Some of these aspects of his nature have already been covered at length in earlier sections dealing with his supremacy, as the ruling sovereign and inner-soul. Nevertheless, it will be necessary to revisit some of them again, albeit collectively and very briefly, in the context of Parabrahman's divine doership.

6.3.2.2) Parabrahman as Support, Controller, Indweller, Inspirer, Permitter, etc.

It is easy to limit our understanding of Parabrahman as being the ultimate creator of (each cycle of) the world. However, as is hopefully apparent from many of the excerpts quoted above, Svāminārāyaṇa stresses that Parabrahman is

just as much sustainer of what he creates as well as its eventual dissolver. In other words, the work of God is not over after the initial phase. Each brahmāṇḍa needs to be sustained – indeed, it needs to actually function – and this requires Parabrahman with all his ensemble of powers and providence to continue to play an 'active' role. Thus Parabrahman's work continues until the timely end of each cycle, and thereafter even, because each brahmāṇḍa is dissolved – not just destroyed – and 'returns' into māyā (with even māyā ultimately becoming dormant within Parabrahman). This same cycle is what each brahmāṇḍa passes through, and there are "countless millions" of such brahmāṇḍas.

Svāmināràyaṇa brings this incessant work of Parabrahman into focus – i.e. how he continues to be active in the world – in several sermons highlighting many of the powers or aspects of his nature already discussed earlier. For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. I.78, Svāmināràyaṇa describes Puruṣottama Bhagavān as

> by whose wish countless millions of brahmāṇḍas are created[1]; who, by his powers, supports these brahmāṇḍas[2]; who is distinct, yet is immanently present within everything, and while being immanent, is still distinct from everything; who dwells within each and every atom in his antaryāmin form just as he is in his manifest form[3]; without whose wish not even a blade of grass is able to flutter[4]; who is responsible for creating, sustaining and dissolving countless millions of brahmāṇḍas[1], and the pain and pleasure beings encounter therein[5]. All that God does is all that happens.

Svāmināràyaṇa is implying that incorporated into Parabrahman's sole-doership, apart from the fact that he 1) creates, sustains and dissolves everything (by his mere wish), is that he also 2) supports everything, 3) indwells within everything (even while being distinct), 4) controls everything, and 5) administers the fruits

of the karmas of all beings (as karmaphalapradātā). It reveals a God continuously and intimately involved with all that he creates, for he continuously and meticulously sustains it until and after its end.

A good hint of this intimate relationship between Parabrahman and his world is given by Svāmināràyaṇa with the phrase

> without whose wish not even a blade of grass is able to flutter (Vac. Gadh. I.78).

It not only reveals the total efficacy of God's power of control, but also that, in the end, it is by his will that even a blade of grass flutters. This becomes a recurring motif in the sermons of Svāmināràyaṇa and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī when discussing Parabrahman's doership, sometimes drawing upon a 'dry leaf' as the analogy. For example, in the Vac. Gaḍh. I.37 excerpt stated earlier, the complete statement reads:

> [An ideal devotee] realises that there is indeed no other doer of this world besides that God, and he also realises that without God, even a dry leaf cannot be stirred.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī similarly states:

> All that happens is the doing of my lord, but without him, no one is able to stir even a leaf (SV 1.88).

Parabrahman's absolute control as a part of his absolute doership and absolute causality extends over the most meagre of things to the otherwise most powerful and ubiquitous. In Vac. Gaḍh. I.62, for example, Svāmināràyaṇa states that a person with the "perfect conviction of the nature of God"

> realises that God is not like time, not like karma, not like nature, not like māyā, and not like Puruṣa. He realises God to be distinct from everything, as the controller of them all and the cause of them all (Vac. Gaḍh. I.62).

In every way, then, Parabrahman is the independent, pure and sole cause and controller of all.

In another sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa stresses the omniagency of Parabrahman by again placing him in direct relation to the very things which he has argued are not the doers of the world.

> It is God who is the inspirer of everything – of place, time, karma and māyā. It is he himself who allows the factors of place, time, etc., to be predominant. Thus, they are all dependent upon God... just as all the subjects of a kingdom are dependent on their king. Furthermore, in a kingdom, the minister and secretaries can only do as much as their king allows them to do; when the king does not allow it, they cannot do even the smallest of tasks. In the same way, the factors of place, time, karma and māyā can only do as much as God allows them to do; they cannot do a single thing against the wish of God. Therefore, only God is the all-doer.

What Svāminārāyaṇa accepts here is that place, time, karma, māyā, and many other factors may all have some influence over our complex world. However, he maintains, it is Parabrahman who inspires them all and *permits* them to operate. They do so, always within his laws and wishes. In other words, as the analogy Svāminārāyaṇa used suggests, Parabrahman still retains his impassable sovereign rule over everything. "Therefore", Svāminārāyaṇa concludes

> only God is the all-doer (Vac. Gaḍh. II.21).

Inevitably, we are coming to find that many of the aspects of Parabrahman's supremacy – as sovereign ruler, over-soul, support, inner-controller, etc. – are all re-emerging, meeting and overlapping in his doership. Indeed, the two affirm each other: he who is the sole doer of everything is the most supreme among them all; only the most supreme among all can be the sole doer of everything.

We now move on to understanding another aspect of Parabrahman, which, like his supremacy, is also inextricably tied with him being the omniagent and omnicause.

6.4) SĀKĀRA: God as Having Form

In his many descriptions of the nature of Parabrahman, Svāminārāyaṇa has spoken repeatedly and most decidedly about the actual form of God. He insists that Parabrahman is sākāra (literally, 'with form'), that he has an *eternally divine human form*. Each of these four terms is important for him, for while God is not formless, the form he has is human in shape though not composed of any māyic material, and so is divine and bereft of any of the limitations (pertaining to time and space), imperfections or impurities of māyā. This is always true for God, when he is forever present in his transcendental abode or immanent throughout the world, and even when he chooses to manifest on earth.

We shall look into each of these aspects of Parabrahman having a form and what that form is like, while also looking at the reasoning for it offered by

Svāminārāyaṇa and how potential charges against this belief have been addressed. First, though, as before, we shall learn of Svāminārāyaṇa's emphatic advocacy of what he believes is an imperative theological belief.

6.4.1) Emphasis on Knowing Parabrahman as Having a Form

We saw at the opening of the previous chapter that Svāminārāyaṇa stressed the need to know Parabrahman as the all-doer by explaining it as a soteriological requirement; to know God as kartā is essential for finite beings to secure liberation. A similar emphasis is applied when speaking of Parabrahman as sākāra. Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. III.36:

> The most extraordinary spiritual endeavour for liberation is to understand Puruṣottama Bhagavān, who is seated amidst the mass of brahmic light [brahmajyoti], as eternally having a form.

We also saw at the very beginning of this chapter the importance Svāminārāyaṇa lays on 'upāsanā' (worship informed by correct theological knowledge), without which, he said, "nothing can be accomplished" [Vac. Gaḍh. I.56]. In Vac. Gaḍh. I.40 he defines upāsanā almost entirely in terms of understanding Parabrahman being sākāra.

> Upāsanā can be defined as having a firm conviction that God eternally possesses a form. Even if a person becomes brahmarūpa, that conviction would never subside. Moreover, even if he happens to listen to any other texts propounding the view that God is formless, he would still understand God to always have a form. Regardless of what is mentioned in the scriptures, he would only propound that God has a form, never allowing his own upāsanā to be impaired. One who has such a firm understanding is considered to have upāsanā.

Such a person, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, "acquires qualities similar to those of God as well as countless other spiritual powers" (Vac. Gaḍh. I.64), so much so that "time, karma and māyā are unable to administer their power over him", and, besides God, "no one else has any authority over him" (Vac. Gaḍh. I.37). In fact, "ultimately, when he leaves his body, he will go to God's Akṣaradhāma and stay near God" (Vac. Gaḍh. II.9).

In further emphasising the power of knowing Parabrahman as having a form, Svāminārāyaṇa goes as far as to say in one sermon:

> If a person realises God to possess a form and is convinced of this, then even if he may happen to commit some sin, what is there to worry about? All those sins will be burnt by the grace of God and his jīva will attain God (Vac. Gaḍh. II.39).

Svāminārāyaṇa explains that no matter how grave a sin may be, it is always atoneable. Conversely,

> however, to realise God as being formless is a sin much graver than even the five grave sins. There is no atonement for that sin (Vac. Gaḍh. II.39).

Svāminārāyaṇa similarly admonishes in Vac. Gaḍh. I.71:

> Of all offences made against God, to denounce the form of God is a very grave offence. One should never commit this offence. One who does do so commits a sin more serious than the five grave sins.

Such an offence is so irredeemable, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, because it is tantamount to maligning God, something he has repeatedly warned against when working towards correct theological knowledge.

> The path of jñāna should be understood in such a way that one does not malign the form of God in any way. In fact, one should not worry if at some time or other one has transgressed God's commands, but one should never malign the form of God. If one does disobey God's commands, then one can still be freed from that sin by praying to God. However, there are no means of release for one who has maligned the form of God (Vac. Gadh. II.9).

Similarly, in the statement from Vac. Var.2 mentioned in the previous section, Svāminārāyaṇa used the example of undermining the sovereignty of a world-emperor and instead accepting the rule of someone else. In the same sermon, he also includes another aspect of the analogy.

> If one writes and distributes letters stating, 'Our king has no nose and ears; he has no hands or feet,' and thereby describes the king as being deformed even though he has a normal body, then he is also known as a slanderer of the king. Similarly, God is complete, with limbs, hands, feet, etc.; there is not the slightest deformation in any of his limbs. He eternally possesses a definite form. So, to say that he is... formless... is equivalent to maligning God.

What is the consequence of such a grave offence? Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

> A person may well be endowed with each and every virtue, but if he believes God to be formless – not possessing a definite form – then that is a grave flaw. So much so, that because of this flaw, all of his virtues become defective (Vac. Loyā.16).

More seriously, according to Svāminārāyaṇa, not only does one who misunderstands God as being nirākāra (formless) "not go to the abode of Puruṣottama Bhagavān" but instead "go to dwell in the realms of other devatās" (Vac. Gaḍh. II.9 & Vac. Gaḍh. I.37), he is "consigned to brahma-suṣupti", a state of impenetrable oblivion, "from which he never returns"[147] (Vac. Gaḍh. I.64). To

[147] This should not be confused with eternal damnation. Svāminārāyaṇa explains that, eventually, by God's extreme grace, such souls can still be redeemed in later lives if they seek the refuge

this, Guṇātītānanda Svāmī adds, rather strongly, that such a person will "endlessly suffer despair for countless eons but never be happy" (SV 3.16).

6.4.2) Reasoning for Why Parabrahman has a Form

Three major reasons can be discerned from Svāminārāyaṇa's teachings in the Vacanāmrut for why Parabrahman must have a form:

1. Śāstric consistency
2. Divine light must emanate from a Divine form
3. Only a sākāra Parabrahman can be resident in one place while pervading all places

We shall briefly cover each reason in turn.

6.4.2.1) Śāstric Consistency

Firstly, Svāminārāyaṇa draws upon śāstric revelation. He argues that to not believe Parabrahman as sākāra would be to contravene the truth of how he is described in the Śrutis (revelatory texts). Citing AU 1.1.1, Svāminārāyaṇa thus argues in Vac. Pan.7:

> If God did not have a form then what about the fact that the Śrutis have said that during ātyantika-pralaya [i.e. the beginning of a new cycle of creation], "Sa īkṣata", meaning, 'That God saw....' If God 'saw', then he had to have a form, possessing eyes, ears, and other organs.... Therefore, God has always had a form.

The argument is repeated in Vac. Gaḍh. I.45:

of God and earn his or the Guru's favour (e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.58, Vac. Gadh. II.45, Vac. Var.6, Vac. Var.7, Vac. Gaḍh. III.35).

> Puruṣottama Bhagavān eternally possesses a form.... The Śrutis also mention: "That God looked towards māyā." Now if God sees, does that mean that he has only a pair of eyes and nothing else? In reality, he does have hands and feet. This proves that he possesses a form.

Expectedly, the Bhāṣyakāra draws upon this when commenting on AU 1.1.1 as well as CU 6.1.3 and BU 2.1.5, all of which mention 'seeing', and also the Īkṣatyadhikaraṇa at BS 1.1.5. As an example, the comment at the beginning of the Aitareya Upaniṣad includes:

> "Īkṣata" refers to the thoughtful seeing of the Self to create.... Also, this mention of 'seeing' confirms that Paramātman has a divine form complete with divine senses and inner faculties [divyendriyāntaḥkaraṇasañyutadivyakalevara].[148]

But this then leads to the natural question of what to make of the other śāstric statements – which are all also equally true and revelatory – that literally describe Parabrahman as being "without body [aśarīra]" (KaU 2.22) or "without sound, without touch, without form" (KaU 3.15). More elaborately, for example, the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad states:

> Apānipādo javano grahīta paśyatyacakṣuḥ sa śṛṇotyakarṇaḥ
>
> Without hands and feet he moves and grasps. He sees without eyes, hears without ears (SU 3.19).

Svāminārāyaṇa anticipates this charge in Vac. Gaḍh. I.45 after he cited the 'seeing' śruti. He immediately goes on to say:

> Someone may claim that the Śrutis propound 'God is all-pervasive and perfect, without hands, feet, etc.' But those Vedic verses that

[148] AU-SB 1.1.1, p. 417.

> refute the hands, feet, etc. of God are actually refuting māyic hands, feet, etc.

He thus reconciles the apparent contradiction in texts by showing a correct way of carefully reading and interpreting them. What they are proclaiming, Svāminārāyaṇa maintains, is not that God has no form and is without eyes, ears, hands or feet, but that he has no *māyic* form and no *māyic* eyes, ears, etc. Thus, God certainly has a body, complete with all limbs and organs, but it is divine.

Svāminārāyaṇa accepts, though, that without such careful reading, these seemingly diametrically opposite śāstric statements can be confusing and could potentially lead to dangerously incorrect conclusions. He says in Vac. Gaḍh. I.66:

> When [God is] described as 'nirguṇa', the minds of the listener and the reader are baffled, and they draw the conclusion that God does not possess a form. This, however, is their misunderstanding.

Reiterating the need for careful scriptural reading and the correct conclusions it can lead to, Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to explain:

> Besides, the words of the scriptures cannot be [perfectly] understood by anyone except an Ekāntika Bhakta [i.e. the Guru]. Which words? Words such as: 'God is formless', 'universally pervasive', 'luminous' and 'nirguṇa.' On hearing such descriptions, a fool concludes that the scriptures describe God as being formless. On the other hand, an Ekāntika Bhakta realises, 'When the scriptures describe God as being 'formless' and 'nirguṇa', they are referring to the fact that he does not possess a māyic form or māyic attributes. In reality, his form is forever divine, and he possesses countless redemptive virtues.

"Therefore," Svāminārāyaṇa concludes,

> regardless of which scriptures are being read, if they describe God as being 'nirguṇa', one should realise that they are merely extolling the glory of God's form, but in fact, God always possesses a definite form.

Similarly in Vac. Kār.7 Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

> It is that very same God, who has a form and is divine, whom the Vedānta scriptures propound as being uncuttable, unpierceable, nirguṇa, and pervading everywhere. It is to dispel the māyic [i.e. incorrect] perception [of God] from the mind of the jīva that he has been propounded as being nirguṇa.

Such a method of correct interpretation closely mirrors the harmonisation and refutation project of the Brahmasūtras' first and second chapters, respectively, where seemingly contradictory or inconsistent texts from the Upaniṣads are correctly read from within the tradition to arrive at conclusions (siddhānta) that are in consonance with its theology at large, and refute those of various objectors that are contrary to it.

For example, in the Sarvopetādhikaraṇa of the Brahmasūtras (2.1.31-32), the debate centres on the causality of 'Brahman'. The objection posed is that if the cause of the entire world is 'nirañśa' – i.e. whole, without parts – then it cannot be fully composed (sarvopeta) of eyes and other sense organs, etc. The Sūtrakāra replies that it can, because that is how he is described in revelatory texts, for example, having a mind and vital breath [CU 3.14.2 & MuU 2.2.7], being replete with all smells and all tastes [CU 3.14.2], and even possessing "beautiful eyes" [CU 1.6.6-7].

Yes, but, the objectors counter, we can also cite other statements – from the same revelatory source that you cite from – which describe that Being, the cause of the world, as completely the opposite. For example, the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad talks of

the cause as being "formless [amūrta]", "without vital breath [aprāṇa]" and "without mind [amanas]" (2.1.2), having no colour [avarṇa], no eyes or ears [acakṣuḥśrotra], nor hands and feet [apānipāda] (1.1.6). Therefore, the objectors continue, if, as you claim, Brahman fully comprises all sense organs, etc., then according to these statements, he cannot be the cause of the world. Instead, it should be Pradhāna, which is indeed formless and limbless, as described by these statements.

When posed with these two sets of directly opposing statements, the Sūtrakāra refers the objectors to the first sūtra on this topic – Īkṣater-nā'śabdam (BS. 1.1.5) – where it was conclusively proven that Pradhāna could not be the cause of the world precisely because the 'seeing' necessitates eyes and other parts of a fully formed being. The Bhāṣyakāra elaborates:

> That seeing is preceded by thought. This explicit mention of 'seeing' necessitates eyes, which in turn implicates all sense organs. Moreover, since thinking is a function of the mind, all inner faculties are also implied here. Since all of these are only associated with a conscious being, it is impossible for the inert Pradhāna [to be the cause of the world].... And these statements which proscribe organs, limbs, etc. do so only insofar as proscribing worldly [prākṛta] organs, limbs, etc., but they do not proscribe divine organs, limbs, etc.

"Otherwise," the Bhāṣyakāra importantly concludes, if these statements are not so reconciled,

> the Śrutis themselves would be guilty of the flaw of being contradictory [vyāhatavadana; literally, 'pounding its own face'].[149]

[149] BS-SB 2.1.31-32, pp. 181-83.

In Vac. Gaḍh. I.64, Svāmināārāyaṇa provides another explanation for why there are these two types of statements in the śāstras – some describing Parabrahman as having a form and others which describe him as being formless. It is to do with God's body-soul relationship with a world that is composed of both formless and formed things. He begins by explaining that Parabrahman ensouls the material objects of the world, which have various forms and are visible (hence called 'dṛśya'), and the souls of spiritual beings, which do not have a form and are therefore invisible but who are in fact the conscious seers (hence called 'draśṭā'). Thus,

> when referred to in the scriptures as the soul of dṛśya [the visible material world] – which has a form – that Puruṣottama Bhagavān is described to have a form, like the dṛśya. When referred to in the scriptures as the soul of draśṭā [the formless seers], he is described as formless. In reality, however, Puruṣottama Bhagavān is different from both the drśya, which has a form, and the formless souls.

6.4.2.2) Divine Light from a Divine Form

In the excerpts from Vac. Gaḍh. I.66 cited above, we saw Svāmināārāyaṇa explaining how to reconcile apparently conflicting texts which describe God as attribute-less (nirguṇa) or formless (nirākāra). He also provides in that sermon a second argument for why Parabrahman must have a form. He first refers to other texts which describe God as "being an immense mass of divine light", or, for example, as "replete with light [jyotirmaya]" (MuU 3.1.5), "the highest light [param jyotis]" (CU 8.12.3), "the light of all lights [jyotiṣām jyoti]" (BU 4.4.16).

Svāminārāyaṇa himself also often describes the form of Parabrahman being "extremely luminous [mahātejomaya mūrti]" (Vac. Gaḍh. I.45; also Vac. Gaḍh. I.63, Vac. Loyā.13, Vac. Pan.1) and having "the light of countless millions of suns" (Vac. Gaḍh. I.71; also Vac. Loyā.18).

However, Svāminārāyaṇa argues,

> if there is no form, then there can be no light either. Therefore, that light must definitely be from that form (Vac. Gaḍh. I.66).

Svāminārāyaṇa is asserting that since there is light, there must also be an effulgent source of that light, because light is not self-luminescent. This source is the divine form of God.

To bolster his argument, Svāminārāyaṇa adds what he believes to be axiomatic:

> Take, for example, the form of Agni [the deity of fire]. When flames emanate from his form, only the flames – not the form of Agni – are seen. A wise man, however, realises that the flames are definitely emanating from Agni's form. Similarly, water emanates from the form of Varuṇa [the deity of water]. Although only the water – not the form of Varuṇa – is visible, a wise man realises that the water emanates from Varuṇa's form. In the same way, having the intensity of a million suns, the divine light... is the light of Puruṣottama Bhagavān's form.

Svāminārāyaṇa makes the same point with the same and other similar analogies in Vac. Gaḍh. I.45 and Vac. Gaḍh. II.10.

The extreme intensity of this divine light emanating from God's form also helps explain why sometimes that form is not always visible. Seers are sometimes

overwhelmed or dazzled by its sheer brilliance and fail to reach the light's source, i.e. the actual form of God. Svāmināràyaṇa calls this a "breach of upāsanā" (Vac. Gaḍh. I.73), because that light does not mean, of course, that there is no source. On the contrary, he is saying; the divine light proves that Parabrahman – in some shape or form at least – is that source.

6.4.2.3) Immanent Yet Distinct

Svāmināràyaṇa's third argument for Parabrahman having a form concerns him being distinct (vyatireka) even while being immanent (anvaya) within all.

When discussing Parabrahman's limitless nature in being unbound by space, we learned that Svāmināràyaṇa was keen to point out that this all-pervasive inner-dwelling of Parabrahman was by virtue of his extraordinary yogic powers, because, in fact, he still has a definite form in his abode, which he never forsakes [e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.63]. Parabrahman is thus sarvadeśin (in all places) while eternally being ekadeśastha (situated in one place). He explains, for example, in Vac. Gaḍh. II.64:

> To thus remain in one place and at the same time to appear in infinite places is itself God's pervasive form by way of his yogic powers.

He immediately clarifies, however:

> But unlike space, he does not pervade without possessing a form.

The danger that Svāminārāyaṇa is trying to avert here is the misunderstanding that Parabrahman exists *only* as permeating everything, and therefore having no distinct, definite, transcendental form at all.

Again, in Vac. Var.13 he explains:

> So, even though the scriptures describe God as pervasive [vyāpaka], he actually possesses a definite form. In those scriptures, he is described as pervasive in the sense that using his own powers, he appears to be in all places while still residing in one place. But he is not pervasive in the sense of being formless like space. So, in reality, God eternally possesses a form.

Svāminārāyaṇa is using this concept of Parabrahman being immanent-yet-distinct to argue the case that he must therefore have some form.

> Besides, if God did not possess a form, then he could not... be said to reside in one location. Thus God eternally possesses a form (Vac. Gaḍh. III.35).

This is especially necessary for Svāminārāyaṇa because he also asserts that even the antaryāmin form of Parabrahman within every being should be considered to have a form.

> Moreover, despite the fact that Puruṣottama Bhagavān's brahmarūpa light, which pervades all jīvas and īśvaras as their antaryāmin, is formless, it should be considered to possess a form. This is because it governs the granting of the deserved fruits of karmas to all jīvas and īśvaras according to their respective karmas. This power of governing makes it function as if it possesses a form. Thus, that divine light should be considered to possess a form as well (Vac. Gaḍh. I.45).

According to Svāminārāyaṇa, then, if even the immanent form of Parabrahman is to be considered to have a form, it is of course necessary that his distinct form should also have a form.

6.4.3) Parabrahman as Eternally Having a Form

Svāminārāyaṇa explains in over twenty sermons that Parabrahman is 'sākāra'. For example:

> God, who is Puruṣottama, forever presides with a divine form in his Akṣaradhāma, whose divine light is comparable to that of millions of suns and moons (Vac. Gaḍh. I.71).

> In that Akṣaradhāma, Śrī Puruṣottama Bhagavān is present in an eternally divine form (Vac. Var.12).

> How does a true devotee of God understand God's greatness? He believes, 'God, who possesses a definite form, forever presides in his luminous Akṣaradhāma...' (Vac. Gaḍh. III.32).

> Therefore God indeed forever possesses a form... and is forever present in his Akṣaradhāma (Vac. Gaḍh. III.35).

What is important to note from such statements is that Svāminārāyaṇa invariably mentions Akṣaradhāma, the divine abode of God wherein he eternally resides, and includes the term 'sadā', translated as 'forever' or 'eternally'. Both serve to dispel the misconception that Parabrahman assumes a form *only* when he manifests on earth, but that in actual fact he is formless at all other times. Svāminārāyaṇa describes this problem in Vac. Gaḍh. I.66 as arising from a potential misreading of theological texts.

> The scriptures also state, 'A thorn is used to remove a thorn. Thereafter, both are discarded. Similarly, God assumes a physical body to relieve the earth of its burdens. Then, having relieved the earth of its burden, he discards that physical body.'[150] Hearing such words, the foolish are misled into the understanding that God is formless; they fail to realise the form of God as being divine.

Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises that Parabrahman always has a form, even when resident in Akṣaradhāma, and since he is forever resident in his abode, he always has a form. This is true even during the causal state of the universe. He clearly states:

> Even at the time of ātyantika-pralaya [final dissolution, i.e. before the beginning of a new cycle of creation], God and his [liberated] devotees remain in Akṣaradhāma with a divine and definite form enjoying divine bliss (Vac. Pan.7).

But it is not enough to know that God has a "divine and definite form". We need to – want to – know what that eternal form is like, for even objects such as pots and pans and creatures such as cows and horses have 'a form'.

6.4.3.1) Parabrahman's Human-Shaped Form

So what does God look like? This tantalisingly simple but audacious question is at the heart of many spiritual strivings and debates. Svāminārāyaṇa is unequivocal in his description: God is manuṣyākāra – human in shape.

[150] This is in reference to BP 1.15.34:

> Yayāharad bhuvo bhāram tām tanum vijahāvajah |
> Kaṇṭakam kaṇṭakeneva dvayam cāpīśituh samam ||

We saw earlier that to malign God was to deny him of this shape. Instead, Svāminārāyaṇa insisted,

> God is complete, with limbs, hands, feet, etc.; there is not the slightest deformation in any of his limbs. He eternally possesses a definite form. So, to say that he is... formless... is equivalent to maligning God (Vac. Var.2).

In Vac. Gaḍh. III.38 as well, Svāminārāyaṇa indicates a full normal human form by mentioning that God is 'dvibhuja' (two-armed). He states:

> The form of God in Akṣaradhāma and the form of the muktas – the attendants of God – are all true [satya], divine and extremely luminous. Also, the form of that God and those muktas is two-armed like that of a human being (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

He adds more detail about that two-armed form in Vac. Loyā.18, as if in answer to our very own question above.

> Then you may ask, 'What is the form of that God like?' I shall explain. God is characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss [saccidānanda], and possesses a form full of divine light. In every single pore of his body, there is light equivalent to millions and millions of suns. Moreover, that God is so handsome that he puts even millions of Kāmadevas to shame. He is the lord of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, the king of kings, the controller of all, the antaryāmin of all, and extremely blissful. Before his bliss, the pleasure of seeing countless beautiful women pales into insignificance. In fact, before the bliss of the form of that God, the sensorial pleasures of this realm and the higher realms pale into insignificance. Such is the form of God. That form always has two arms...

Anticipating a follow-up question about other extraordinary forms of God, he quickly clarifies:

> but by his wish, he may appear to have four arms, or sometimes to have eight arms, or he may even be seen as having a thousand arms (Vac. Loyā.18).

In addition, Svāminārāyaṇa also mentions the "holy feet" ['caraṇārvinda' or simply 'caraṇa'] of God in several other sermons (Vac. Gaḍh. I.71, Vac. Gaḍh. I.74, Vac. Loyā.13, Vac. Loyā.17, Vac. Gaḍh. III.4, Vac. Gaḍh. III.7, Vac. Gaḍh. III.9, Vac. Gaḍh. III.11, Vac. Gaḍh. III.13), often as being worshipped in Akṣaradhāma by "countless millions of liberated souls [akṣararūpa muktas]" (Vac. Gaḍh. III.31; also Vac. Gaḍh. II.25, Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

Earlier, we had also seen Svāminārāyaṇa's commitment to descriptions from other śāstric texts, which describe Parabrahman as 'seeing', and therefore arguing that God has eyes and indeed all other sense organs as well [Vac. Gaḍh. I.45 & Vac. Pan.7].

This is a fact not lost on the Bhāṣyakāra. When concluding the important debate at the first sūtra of the Īkṣatyadhikaraṇa, he writes:

> So, this [that 'seeing' and 'willing' can only be attributes of a conscious being] not only denies any denotation of the term 'Being ['sat']' – and thus world-causality – to the inert Pradhāna, it also establishes that that which is denoted by 'Being' – the cause of the world – has a form composed of a body with divine eyes, etc. and other faculties.[151]

Together, these statements create a strong, clear image of Parabrahman as having a fully formed, human shape, with two arms, feet, eyes and all other sense organs, etc.

[151] BS-SB 1.1.5, pp. 30-31.

Svāminārāyaṇa provides the most vivid vignette of all in Vac. Gaḍh. II.13, where he describes the "extremely luminous form of God" present within the "extremely luminous divine light" of his abode.

> The form is dark, but due to the intensity of the light, it appears to be rather fair, not dark. The form has two arms and two legs, not four, eight or a thousand arms; and its appearance is very captivating. The form is extremely serene. It appears like a human in shape and is youthful. Sometimes that form in the divine light is seen standing, sometimes sitting, and at other times, it is seen walking around.

Svāminārāyaṇa furthermore iterates that this human-shaped form is eternal; Parabrahman looks like a human when he manifests on earth, just as he does in Akṣaradhāma, even at the time of final dissolution.

> [A true devotee] understands that the manifest form of God which resides on this earth, and the devotees of God who remain in the vicinity of God, remain exactly as they are even during ātyantika-pralaya (Vac. Gaḍh. I.37).

Svāminārāyaṇa therefore describes this in Vac. Kār.8 as Parabrahman's "original form" [mūḷ svarūp]. We had cited an extensive excerpt from this sermon during the discussion of Parabrahman as the soul of the universe. In it, Svāminārāyaṇa describes Parabrahman's nirguṇa form as being "subtler than that which is subtle", because he ensouls and indwells all of the material elements and spiritual beings, including Akṣarabrahman. In the same sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa also describes Parabrahman's saguṇa aspect, as being 'extremely vast'; so vast, in fact, that

> before the vastness of Puruṣottama Bhagavān, countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, which are encircled by the eight barriers [i.e. earth, water, etc.], appear extremely minute, like mere atoms. Those brahmāṇḍas do not become smaller, but before the vastness of God

> they appear small. In this way, the extreme vastness of the form of God is the saguṇa aspect of God.

This leads Svāminārāyaṇa to anticipate a natural question:

> Then someone may doubt, 'In his nirguṇa form, God is subtler than the extremely subtle, and in his saguṇa form, he is more vast than the extremely vast. What, then, is the nature of the original form of God, who assumes both of these forms?'

He continues:

> The answer to that is that the manifest form of God visible in a human form is the eternal and original form of God. His nirguṇa and saguna aspects are the special, divine powers of that form.

Many of these points and earlier arguments are brought together by the Bhāṣyakāra in the conclusion of the Antasdharmādhikaraṇa [BS 1.1.21-22]. The debate hinges on the correct interpretation of the following Chāndogya Upaniṣad verse:

> Ya eṣo'ntarāditye hiraṇyamayah puruṣo dṛśyate hiraṇyaśmaśrur-hiraṇyakeśa āpraṇakhāt sarva eva suvarṇaḥ |
> Tasya yathā kapyāsam puṇdarīkam evam akṣiṇī tasyoditi nāma sa eṣa sarvebhyoḥ pāpmabhya udita... |
>
> That golden [i.e. brightly resplendent] Puruṣa, who can be seen within the Sun [Āditya], has a golden beard and golden hair. Everything is indeed golden to the tip of his nails. His two eyes are [beautiful] like red lotuses. His name is 'Up' ['ut'], for he has risen above all evil (CU 1.6.6-7).

The question is: Is that Puruṣa which dwells within the Sun a jīva, an īśvara, or Paramātman? The Sūtrakāra proclaims it to be Paramātman, "because of the virtues mentioned" in that verse; none of the others can be "above all evil", i.e. eternally untouched by māyā. The Bhāṣyakāra elaborates further on in the debate:

> Also, the objection that some śrutis – such as 'formless' [KaU 3.15], 'bodyless' [KaU 2.22], 'without hands and feet' [SU 3.11], etc. – propound the absence of form, limbs or body [in Paramātman] is quashed, because those verses only intend on refuting māyic limbs, body, etc. Hence also the prayer in the Īsa [Upaniṣad]: 'May I see your most auspicious form' [IU 16]. In this way, this here [verse from the CU] itself proves that Paramātman has a form. But that form is not any other form. As [the term] 'Puruṣa' explicitly resolves, that form is human in shape, complete with divine hands, feet, and all other limbs, etc. Furthermore, he is two-armed only. Having four arms and other [extraordinary anatomical features] is by way of his personal powers as called upon by some special reason; it is not permanent. Even though his youthful form is dark in complexion, he is described as 'golden' because of his immense divine light. In this way, he is seated upon his divine throne in his divine Akṣaradhāma. Without leaving this form, by his mere wish, and by his grace, he manifests [on earth] in human and other forms. Thus, on earth and elsewhere, he forever has a form. Even during final dissolution, untouched by time, he is resident in Akṣaradhāma seen by countless millions of akṣaramuktas, proving he has a visible form [then as well], as is mentioned in the topic on creation, 'In the beginning, there was only Self, like a puruṣa' [BU 1.4.1].[152]

Similarly, elsewhere in the Upaniṣads where 'Puruṣa' denotes Parabrahman – for example at MuU 3.1.3 and BU 2.3.6 – the Bhāṣyakāra is quick to summon this set of beliefs to reinforce that it alludes to a form which is human in shape and divine in nature. On commenting on the Īśā Upaniṣad phrase cited in the adhikaraṇa above, the Bhāṣyakāra explains the "most auspicious form [rūpam kalyāṇatamam]" as the

> forever not-this-worldly form complete with not-this-worldly powers, etc. residing in his divine Akṣaradhāma, and which is forever human in shape, with two arms and an attractive young frame, forever embellished with infinite sets of virtues replete with auspiciousness, full of infinite auspicious qualities, forever served by the human-shaped Akṣarabrahman and countless millions of

[152] BS-SB 1.1.21; pp. 45-46.

> akṣaramuktas who have attained his [Akṣarabrahman's] likeness, and is free of māyic qualities and divine.[153]

This universal yet personal form of Parabrahman becomes the basis, as we shall understand later, for the intimate, loving relationship that devotees are to enter into with God.

6.4.3.1.1) Dispelling Some Doubts about Parabrahman's Human-Shaped Form

As should be apparent from the statements cited above, a term that repeatedly features when Svāmināràyaṇa talks about the 'eternally human-shaped form' of God, is "divya", or divine. This is to dispel the doubt that if Parabrahman has a human form, then it will necessarily be flawed, sullied and limited by all the imperfections, impurities and limitations of human corporeality. By adding 'divine' in his descriptions, Svāmināràyaṇa is affectively saying: Parabrahman's form is certainly human in shape (anthropomorphic), but it is by no means human in nature or substance (anthropophysitic or -substantic). So while ordinarily human bodies are composed out of māyā, God's form is not.

> God's form is not like any other form that has been created out of Prakṛti [i.e. māyā], like that of other devas or humans (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

> [Puruṣottama Bhagavān] eternally possesses a definite form, which is not an ordinary, worldly [prākṛta] form (Vac. Gaḍh. I.66).

[153] IU-SB 16, p. 24.

In fact, Svāminārāyaṇa makes it a point to stress that God's form is totally unlike any other form. He explains at considerable length in Vac. Pan.4:

> The Vedas, the Purāṇas, the Mahābhārata, the Smṛtis and the other scriptures proclaim that the original form of God, which is eternal, without a beginning and divine, resides in his Akṣaradhāma. They also state what that God is like. His form is not like any form that can be seen by the eyes. His sound is not like any sound that can be heard by the ears. His touch is not like any touch that can be felt by the skin. His smell is not like any smell that can be smelt by the nose. Nor is God like anything that can be described by the tongue....
>
> Moreover, the beauty of that God is such that it cannot be compared to any other object in this brahmāṇḍa – up to and including everything from Brahmā, etc. to the smallest blade of grass. His sound is such that it cannot be compared to any other sounds in this brahmāṇḍa. The smell of God is such that it cannot be compared to any other smell in this brahmāṇḍa. The touch of God is such that it cannot be compared to any other touch in this brahmāṇḍa. The tastes related to God are such that they cannot be compared to any other taste in this brahmāṇḍa....
>
> The form of that God is such that it cannot be compared to the form of anyone in this brahmāṇḍa. Why? Because all of the forms in this brahmāṇḍa which evolved from Prakṛti-Puruṣa are māyic, whereas God is divine. So, since the two are totally different, how can they possibly be compared? For example, we can compare a man to something by saying, 'This man is like a buffalo, like a snake, like a sparrow, like a donkey, like a dog, like a crow or like an elephant.' But in reality, such comparisons are not appropriate for humans. Why? Because all of those animals are of a totally different category than humans. Even between a human and a human, there is no exact similarity whereby one can claim, 'This person is exactly like that person.' If he were exactly like the other person, then how could the original person be recognised? Therefore, despite the fact that all humans belong to the same category, no two are exactly alike. Just look at Bhago and Muḷo. The two are said to be identical [twins], but if one stays with them for a few days, one can distinguish between them and say, 'This is Bhago and this is Muḷo.' But if there were no difference, how could they be distinguished? So, if there is no great similarity between human and human, how can there be similarity between that which is māyic and that which is not māyic? What can possibly be compared to God and the abode of God?

One reason for this stark difference is that God's body is not formed, as human or even devic bodies are, as a consequence of karmas accrued over numerous lives by way of their ignorance and association with māyā. Parabrahman, rather, is absolutely and eternally free of māyā, transcending it and controlling it instead. He is never defiled by māyā in the slightest.

> In no way does even a hint of māyā [māyāno leśa] taint the form of God (Vac. Gaḍh. II.4).

In fact, Parabrahman is wholly "untouched by māyā" [Vac. Loyā.13] and

> does not have any māyic qualities [guṇas]. He is forever gunātīta [transcending māyic qualities] and divine in form [dıvyamūrtı] (Vac. Kār. 7).

As we saw earlier from Vac. Kār.8 as well, Parabrahman is "nirguṇa" which includes being "extremely unaffected, extremely pure, extremely untainted". Again, this is eternally so for Parabrahman. Svāmināràyaṇa stressed this while commenting on the first verse of the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa – "Janmādasya yataḥ..." – as it was being read in one of his assemblies. He explained that "yatra trisargo mṛṣā" should be understood as meaning

> that the entities evolved out of the three qualities [guṇas] of māyā – namely the five material elements, the senses, the mind, etc., and their presiding devatās – are never at all present in God at any time, past, present or future (Vac. Pan.7).

This point is used to refute one of the other objections at BS 2.1.32, part of the Sarvopetādhikaraṇa, which we saw earlier when dealing with śāstric consistency as a source of understanding Parabrahman's formfulness. Drawing from the same verse of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad,

> Dear Son, in the beginning, there was verily only this Being [sat] (6.2.1),

the objectors ask how it can be possible for Parabrahman to have eyes, ears, hands, feet, life-breath, mind, etc. when there was absolutely nothing apart from Being ['sat'] to make them from? The Bhāṣyakāra effectively retorts: Precisely! They are not 'made' from anything but are Being itself.[154]

This helps explain that God's eyes, ears and other 'sense organs' (as we would call them) are not like the organs of a human. As we learned when expounding upon Parabrahman's unlimited knowledge, he does not need any senses or organs or mental faculty to know. He knows everything independently, directly, immediately, simultaneously, continuously, effortlessly, perfectly. This is because he is infinitely full of knowledge, and his mind, senses and organs are all divine and unlimited.

Continuing further, this non-material composition of God also helps explain why he is not ascribed a particular gender. As we shall see in more detail in the chapter on jīva, Svāmināràyaṇa describes even the finite soul as "neither male nor female. "It is", like Parabrahman, "characterised by pure existence and consciousness" [Vac. Gaḍh. III.22]. We receive another clue about the non-sexuality of God's form from the new, divine body that the jīvas and īśvaras receive during the state of post-mortem liberation when dwelling in the transcendental abode with God. Svāmināràyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. III.38, as

[154] BS-SB 2.1.32, pp. 181-83.

mentioned above, that this body is like God's two-armed human-shaped form, but adds elsewhere that it is

> different from the two genders of the world. It is neither female in shape nor male in shape. It has a wholly brahmic body, which is neither feminine nor masculine (SV 7.2).

Yet, in applying some sort of name or identity to God, the limitations of human language and imagination force us to use nouns, pronouns and imagery which inevitably have gender connotations. For example, 'Bhagavān', the most commonly used term for God in the Vacanāmrut, is unmistakeably masculine, as is 'king', an analogy we have found being employed often. This, though, is not to discount the fact that God is equally identified by other names and images throughout Hindu texts, such as Puruṣottama (male), Paramātman (male), Parabrahman (neuter), and many others, such as Devatā (female). Thus, to attribute any form of sexuality to God would be a mistake.

To be clear, throughout this discussion, it needs to be remembered that Svāminārāyaṇa's emphasis is on Parabrahman being 'manuṣyākāra' – human in shape or *form* – not on him having a human *body*. Not understanding this will lead to another false assumption, that like ordinary humans, Parabrahman's form must also be subject to change and decay – growing from that of a child, a youth and an adult, to eventually becoming old and infirm. But as Svāminārāyaṇa explained in Vac. Gaḍh. II.13, the form of God "appears youthful" [kiśora] and is unchanging. He adds elsewhere:

> That God remains as he is during the time of creation, sustenance and dissolution of the cosmos, i.e. he does not undergo any changes

> like worldly objects do. He always maintains a divine form (Vac. Kār.7).

This is because

> time devours everything except God; that is to say, time's powers are incapable of affecting God's form (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

The same is true for space. One could question how God could have any form – let alone one which is human in shape – and not be limited to being within a certain spatial boundary. But as we saw earlier, Svāminārāyaṇa insists that Parabrahman is already unbound by space; there is no place where one can say that God is not. He is omnipresent, even while having a definite form, because of his divine powers. The point being made to any proponents of a formless God is this: If you resort to calling God nirākāra simply to avoid him being limited by space, well, Parabrahman for us is already unbound by space. He is everywhere at all times. So there is no question of avoiding any undesirable but inescapable limitations. Besides, it is not possible to 'measure' him by any physical measurements, simply because he transcends all physicality and eludes all measurements. Svāminārāyaṇa stated in Vac. Kār.8 that God is "subtler than the extremely subtle, and... vaster than the extremely vast." The Upaniṣads also hint at this. They proclaim Parabrahman is

> smaller than a grain of rice, than a barley corn, than a mustard seed, than a grain of millet or than a kernel of a grain of millet.

And yet equally he is

> larger than the earth, larger than the intermediate region, larger than the sky, larger than these worlds (CU 3.14.3).

Quite simply, God is:

> Smaller than the smallest, larger than the largest (SU 3.20 & KaU 2.20).

What the Upaniṣads and Svāmināràyaṇa are trying to say, in effect, is that such physical measurements or boundaries do not apply to God. He is beyond all limitations of space, even as he remains in his "original" human form [Vac. Kār.8].

According to Svāmināràyaṇa, then, Parabrahman has an eternal human form which is wholly unique, uniquely pure, and purely divine.

6.5) PRAGAṬA: God as Manifest

We move now from Parabrahman possessing a divine human form in his transcendental abode to Parabrahman manifesting in divine human form on earth.

We opened this chapter on Parabrahman by summarising Svāmināràyaṇa's formulation of 'jñāna' from Vac. Loyā.7. It told us about the four aspects of God that constitute true theological knowledge. So far, we have covered three of these aspects – God as Sarvopari (transcending everything, even māyā and Akṣarabrahman), as Kartā (being the doer and cause of all), and as Sākāra (eternally having a divine form which is human in shape). In this final and all-important aspect, we shall expound upon Parabrahman as Pragaṭa, being manifest on earth among humans.

While some of the specifics might differ, in the generalities, the description so far of a supreme, loving, almighty, all-knowing, all-pervasive creator God is what one might expect, especially in a Hindu theist religious tradition. But perhaps what dramatically sets apart the Svāmināràyaṇa theological understanding of God from other systems is its emphasis that that supremely transcendental God can be, and indeed is, wholly present and personable among us, in human form, here and now.

Of course, that God descends upon earth in human – or any other freely chosen – form at and for a particular time is a concept that is familiar to many Hindu theologies, especially the Vaiṣṇava kind. So what is different in this corresponding doctrine in the Svāmināràyaṇa tradition? Two things primarily. Firstly, Parabrahman as Pragaṭa is the descent of the avatārin himself, not an avatāra.[155] As we noted when understanding the absolute supremacy of Parabrahman, he is the source of all avatāras, and though empowered by his special indwelling presence and thereby divinised for their assigned task and time on earth, the avatāras themselves are metaphysically īśvara, not Parabrahman.[156] This makes the coming of Parabrahman himself all the more

[155] Svāmināràyaṇa explains, for example, in Vac. Gaḍh. II.9:

> One should realise the manifest God that one has met to forever possess a divine form and to be the avatārī, the cause of all of the avatāras.

[156] The various Vaiṣṇava schools differ significantly in their doctrines of divine descent regarding the many avatāras, including their classifications and the terminology used to describe the various types. While some avatāras are regarded as 'aṃśa avatāras' or 'kalā avatāras' (in whom only a partial manifestation of Viṣṇu has occurred, i.e. in whom Viṣṇu has manifested his powers, knowledge, etc. partially), some – variously, for example, either exclusively Kṛsna; or just Rāma, Kṛsna and Nṛsimha; or the ten principal forms, including Matsya, Varāha, etc. – are regarded as the pūrna avatāra (in whom a complete manifestation of Visṇu has occurred, with all his powers, knowledge, etc.). For the latter, the Śrī Vaiṣṇava school, for example,

unique, gracious, and powerfully liberative. Secondly, after first descending upon and carrying out his desired plan on earth, Parabrahman continues to remain fully present even after returning to his abode upon completing a typical human lifespan. He does this by living on through Akṣarabrahman, whom, as we shall later see, he invariably brings with him in human form [Vac. Gaḍh. I.71], and who then takes the role of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru. This sets in motion the Guru Paramparā, an unbroken succession of enlightened Gurus through whom Parabrahman continues his liberative work. So even while the Guru is metaphysically Akṣarabrahman in entity and ontologically distinct from Parabrahman, he serves as the complete and perfect medium for God's love, bliss, blessings, and grace, and, importantly, functions as the means to securing eternal communion with God in final liberation.

As we carefully unpack these ideas in the exposition ahead, we shall also need to address some important questions and challenges to this key Svāminārāyaṇa doctrine in order to enable our understanding of it to be somewhat thorough. First, though, as has become the set pattern now, we shall learn the centrality of this doctrine in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology as decidedly emphasised in the primary revelatory texts of the tradition.

accepts all ten descended forms as the direct vibhava, or manifestation, of Vāsudeva or Nārāyana. As another example, the Gaudīya Vaiṣṇava school believes Kṛṣṇa to be the source of all other avatāras and as 'Mahā-Visnu' himself. In this respect, it is similar to the Svāminārāyana doctrine that Parabrahman is the cause of all other avatāras and he himself also descends in human form. However, the significant difference I am pointing to here is that, in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, the other avatāras (Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, etc.) are metaphysically different and ontologically distinct from Parabrahman, i.e. they are īśvaras, albeit endowed by Parabrahman's special divinising and empowering presence, but not Parabrahman himself; in the other Vaiṣnava schools, the cause of the other avatāras and the pūrṇa avatāra or vibhava, whoever and however many they may be, are metaphysically the same.

6.5.1) Centrality of Pragaṭa/Pratyakṣa Parabrahman in Svāmināràyaṇa Hindu Theology

Of all the aspects of Parabrahman discussed so far, Svāmināràyana and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī place special stress on the importance of God being manifest [pragaṭa] and realising him as such. As we shall repeatedly encounter in his sermons, Svāmināràyaṇa often brings this belief into even sharper focus by referring to that God as being 'pratyakṣa' – literally, 'before the eyes'. This is in direct contrast to God being 'parokṣa', i.e. 'beyond the eyes', as is Parabrahman's distinct, transcendental form in Akṣaradhāma or his immanent form pervading throughout the universe. And yet the two are dramatically brought together in sermons such as Vac. Loyā.7, which, as we have been seeing from the beginning, includes an important epistemological discussion about what constitutes 'jñāna'. In fact, Svāmināràyaṇa defines "paripūrṇa jñāna [perfect theological knowledge]" in that discussion as

> to know and see with such an understanding of greatness that the God who dwells within all [material and spiritual realities] as their antaryāmin and as their cause is the very God who is manifest before the eyes.

What is also interesting here, especially when offering a definition of "perfect theological *knowledge*", is the equal emphasis laid by Svāmināràyaṇa on 'knowing' and 'seeing'. It is not enough, then, to merely 'know' God as being so manifest "before the eyes", but it is equally necessary to 'see' him, that is, to be among him, allowing a direct and personal relationship with him.[157] We shall

[157] Very soon below we shall also learn the converse, that merely seeing God in manifest form is insufficient; one must perfectly know him as well.

pick up on and develop this idea later with more soteriological context, but it is sufficient to note here that the statement used in our formulation of theological knowledge at the start of this chapter follows on directly from the excerpt above and includes a further hint about that relationship by mentioning "ananyapaṇe seve", i.e. to singularly serve that pratyakṣa form. As a reminder, it reads:

> Such a jñānin is one who singularly serves God manifest before the eyes – who eternally has a form – realising him as transcending Prakṛti-Puruṣa and Akṣara, and as being the cause and support of all. Such understanding constitutes jñāna, and such jñāna leads to ultimate liberation.

Svāminārāyaṇa reiterates this need for personal engagement with God in that same sermon, expanding it from 'seeing' to include all of the senses as well as the mind and a spiritual experience [jīvasattā tadāśrit je anubhav]. Calling it a part of "ātyantika jñāna [final, ultimate or highest knowledge]", Svāminārāyaṇa says:

> Thus, to know God perfectly is to know the manifest form of God before the eyes through the senses, the inner faculties, and experience. Only then can one be said to be a perfect jñānin. However, if any one of these three aspects is lacking, one cannot be said to have realised ultimate jñāna, nor can one thereby overcome [the cycle of] births and deaths.

If in Vac. Loyā.7 Svāminārāyaṇa urges that the parokṣa form of Parabrahman which is immanent and pervasive is the same as the one manifest before the eyes (i.e. pratyakṣa), in Vac. Pan.7 he stresses that that pratyakṣa form is the same as the parokṣa form of Parabrahman which is distinct and transcendental in Akṣaradhāma.

> Those who realise this esoteric truth understand the human form of God on this earth as being exactly the same as the form of God residing in Akṣaradhāma; they do not feel that there is even a slight difference between that form and this form. One who has

> known God in this way can be said to have known God perfectly. For him, māyā can be said to have been eradicated. One who realises this is called a jñāni-devotee and an ekāntika bhakta [realised devotee].

Wishing to emphasise the worth of this realisation still more, Svāminārāyaṇa adds:

> If, by chance, a person possessing such firm upāsanā of the manifest form of God before the eyes – never doubting any māyā to be present in that form of God – were to behave unbecomingly due to the influence of bad company or due to the influence of his own past karmas, even then he would attain liberation. On the other hand, one who has doubts in realising God in this way, then even if he is a perfect celibate of the highest order and a great renunciant, attaining liberation would still be extremely difficult for him (Vac. Pan.7).

In both Vac. Pan.7 and Vac. Loyā.7, as we have seen elsewhere, Svāminārāyaṇa uses the soteriological imperative to emphasis the essentiality and primacy of such "perfect" and "ultimate" (or final, highest) theological knowledge. This becomes a recurrent theme throughout the Vacanāmrut and Svāmīnī Vāto, where both Svāminārāyaṇa and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī reiterate the need to know and serve the manifest form of God as the only way to overcome māyā, to purify the self, and to secure ultimate liberation (ātyantika mukti). When mentioning God, both also often refer to the Brahmasvarūpa Guru through whom Parabrahman continues his presence on earth after his return to Akṣaradhāma. Various terms are used for the Guru, including 'Sant', 'Sādhu', 'Satpuruṣa', and 'Bhakta', and usually qualified as 'God's Sant', 'God's Sādhu', 'Parama-Bhāgavata Sant', 'Ekāntika Sant', 'Ekāntika Bhakta', 'Uttama (Highest) Bhakta', 'Perfect Bhakta' and similar modifiers to distinguish him from other renunciants or eminent devotees,

depending also on the context. What is important to note is that both God and Guru are invariably mentioned alongside each other in these important soteriological statements. For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. II.21 – traditionally titled 'The Main Principle' – Svāmināràyaṇa begins by saying:

> If a person realises the greatness of the manifest form of God before the eyes and the Sant who is God's devotee in exactly the same way as he realises the greatness of parokṣa [i.e. past] avatāras of God such as Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, etc.[158] as well as the greatness of parokṣa [i.e. past] sādhus such as Nārada, the Sanakādika, Śukajī, Jaḍabharata, Hanumāna, Uddhava, etc.[159] – then nothing remains to be understood on the path of liberation.

To stress the absolute essentiality of understanding this principle, Svāmināràyaṇa goes on to say:

> Whether this principle is understood after being told once, or after being told a thousand times; whether it is understood today, or after a thousand years, there is no option but to understand it.

As if to further corroborate his point, he calls upon the "wise" of the past who, too, unreservedly endorse this principle.

> Even if one were to ask Nārada, the Sanakādika, Śukajī, Brahmā and Śiva, since they are wise, even they, using many different techniques, would point to the manifest form of God before the eyes and the manifest form of the Sant before the eyes as being the only granters of liberation. They would also explain that the greatness of the manifest form of God before the eyes and the manifest form of the Sant before the eyes is exactly the same as the greatness of past forms of God and the Sant.

What does such an understanding of this 'main' principle result in?

[158] Svāmināràyaṇa clarifies and adds to this in Vac. Gaḍh. II.9 by saying that "one should realise the manifest God that one has met" to be not a form of the past avatāras, but "to be the avatārī, the cause of all of the avatāras."

[159] As we shall we later in this section, Svāmināràyana explains the 'Sant' is actually Akṣarabrahman.

> A person who has such a firm conviction has grasped all of the fundamental principles. What is more, he will never fall from the path of liberation.

Svāminārāyaṇa concludes the sermon with the yet more emphatic statement:

> Thus, the essence of all of the scriptures is this very fact (Vac. Gaḍh. II.21).

This final point is made explicit in Vac. Gaḍh. II.59, where Svāmınārāyaṇa begins:

> In the four Vedas, the Purāṇas and the Itihāsa scriptures, there is but one central principle, and that is that only God and his Sant can grant liberation.

He then goes on to conclude:

> So, when one attains God or his Sant, then, apart from this, there is no other liberation for the self; this itself is ultimate liberation (Vac. Gaḍh. II.59).

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī elaborates upon what such 'ultimate liberation' means and how it can be secured in his sermon at SV 5.5, and like Svāminārāyaṇa, aligns manifest God with 'God's Sant'.

> Only ultimate liberation can be called liberation [mokṣa], but by entering the other abodes, one still has to return to the womb [i.e. the cycle of births and deaths], and as long as one has to return to the womb, it cannot be called liberation. Such liberation can be secured by seeking the refuge of manifest God or the manifest Ekāntika Sant of God, but this is not possible by others.

All of these statements serve to confirm ultimate liberation for those who fully realise Parabrahman as Pragaṭa – either as manifest himself during his own time on earth or living on through the Brahmasvarūpa Guru thereafter. We shall see in the chapter on Mukti how liberation can take not only a post-mortem form, of eternal communion with Parabrahman in Akṣaradhāma, but also be a state of

enlightened living while still inhabiting the mortal body. Related to this latter state, Svāminārāyaṇa indicates in other sermons that knowing and developing resolute faith in God in human form here on earth leads to a sense of complete spiritual fulfilment and a feeling of heightened bliss. Devotees rejoice in the assurance that they have nothing left to accomplish and that their ultimate liberation is secured – indeed, it is already actuated – for the God they will meet and reside with after death in Akṣaradhāma they are seeing here, now, while alive. They thus feel extremely blessed and thankful for the grace bestowed upon them in meeting and serving God in human form.

Svāminārāyaṇa describes this experience as accompanied by "extreme elation" [Vac. Gaḍh. I.63] and continuous "awe all day and night", such that a devotee "will sway in an ocean of bliss throughout the day" [Vac. Gaḍh. I.78] and "continuously experience wonder in his heart" [Vac. Kār.8].

Such overwhelming joy is the result of not some pollyannaish hope but a deep-seated internal conviction that Svāminārāyaṇa narrates in sermons such as Vac. Loyā.2. A devotee who has developed absolute faith in the manifest form of God

> does not harbour any fear of death and believes, 'I have attained before my eyes the manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān, and so I am fulfilled.'

In Vac. Gaḍh. I.63 he adds more about what that (post-)mortal fear is replaced with.

> A person with perfect faith feels within, 'I have attained all there is to attain; and wherever the manifest form of God resides, that itself

> is the highest abode.... Now I have nothing more to achieve. I have attained Goloka, Vaikuṇṭha and Brahmapura.'

In this same sermon, Svāmināràyaṇa states again that after perfectly knowing God in the manifest form, one is left with "nothing more to realise" and "nothing more to achieve". Elsewhere he reiterates that such a person has "nothing left to accomplish; he is fulfilled", concluding that this is because "he has reached the culmination of all spiritual endeavours" [Vac. Gaḍh. II.13].

The overriding feeling that Svāmināràyana is describing is one of absolute fulfilment. It is not to be mistaken with contentment, where one is satisfied with one's lot, however meagre it may be. Rather, it is when one becomes 'pūrṇakāma' (having all desires fulfilled) and 'kṛtārtha' (having all things accomplished) – with nothing more to achieve or desire, nothing lacking for the future, because such a person has attained 'paramapada', the highest goal possible, here and now.

In stark contrast, one who has not been blessed with such a relationship with the manifest form of God, or one who has been so blessed but does not have a true understanding of him as such, is left reeling in confusion, apprehension and a gnawing feeling of insufficiency, especially tormented by misgivings about his fate after death.

> A person who has not been graced with the presence of the Sant nor graced even with the presence of the form of God will feel in his mind, 'I am ignorant, and I will not be liberated.' As is his understanding, so will be his fate after death (Vac. Gaḍh. I.14).

But as explained earlier from Vac. Loyā.7, it is not enough to merely 'see' God in manifest form; one has to 'know' and realise him perfectly for what he is. Otherwise, Svāminārāyaṇa warns in Vac. Gaḍh. I.72, one will doubt, "'Although I have met God, will I be liberated or not?'". He adds to this in Vac. Var.12 that one who has a weak understanding of God in this regard, despite being within the religious community,

> still doubts, 'Who knows whether I will be liberated or not? When I die, will I become a devatā? Or will I become a king? Or will I become a ghost?'

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī therefore explains that even if one has the manifest God before one's eyes, but if one cannot recognise him and appreciate his full, unbounded glory, then that God is as good as being parokṣa (beyond the eyes) [SV 5.392].

As noted already, such a person is not a perfect jñānin and will therefore not "overcome [the cycle of] births and deaths" [Vac. Loyā.7]. Even if he be "a perfect celibate of the highest order and a great renunciant", securing liberation for him will be "extremely difficult" [Vac. Pan.7]. In fact, Svāminārāyaṇa adds, even if such a person "is a sincere renunciant" and "is vigilantly striving to eradicate lust, anger, avarice, etc.", these impurities will not be "eradicate[d]... by his efforts alone." Instead, "ultimately, he will become impure and be consigned to naraka" [Vac. Gaḍh. II.14]. At the very most, by virtue of their other spiritual endeavours, such persons may enter the paradisiacal realms of other devas, but they will

certainly not be eligible to enter the highest abode of Parabrahman [Vac. Gaḍh. II.9, Vac. Gaḍh. II.13].

"Therefore," Svāminārāyaṇa urges,

> one should attempt to understand this profound principle by any means within this lifetime.

Otherwise, he warns,

> in no way will one ever be redeemable (Vac. Gaḍh. II.13).

It might have been noticed that some of these sermons are the very same ones – often using the same excerpts with greater detail – from those cited at the beginning of this chapter when highlighting the essentiality of correct theological knowledge within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology. What this means is that all those statements, when read in full and with their correct semantic context, actually refer to knowing the *manifest* form of God. So, if perfectly knowing the nature of God is foundational, central and apical to Svāminārāyaṇa theology, and that nature of God is crucially of the *manifest* form of God, it therefore follows that perfectly knowing the nature of the *manifest* form of God is foundational, central and apical to Svāminārāyaṇa theology. In other words, while this doctrine is not the whole of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, it is by what all other doctrines are illumined and consummated.

6.5.2) Parabrahman as Manifest

But what does it mean that Parabrahman is 'manifest before the eyes'? What does understanding Parabrahman as pragaṭa or pratyakṣa involve? Here we shall

unpack this essential theological doctrine and understand its various facets while, along the way, considering some of the questions and challenges that arise from accepting God as being manifest in human form.

As an initial overview, to aid and guide our progress through the rest of this section, Parabrahman as pragaṭa involves the following:

- The manifest human form of Parabrahman is the very same transcendental form resident in Akṣaradhāma, complete with all his lordship and powers
- In his human form, Parabrahman is still totally divine and unaffected by māyā
    - Yet he generally conceals his divinity, out of compassion, to be accessible and relatable to his devotees
    - Yet he often exhibits human traits and tendencies, to be relatable to his human devotees
- Parabrahman assumes a human form out of his free, loving and gracious will
- Parabrahman manifests in human form to fulfil the wishes of his beloved, loving devotees, to liberate innumerable finite beings, and to establish Ekāntika Dharma
- Parabrahman is Svāmināràyaṇa, who personally descended on earth in 1781 CE
- Parabrahman remains present on earth through his Sant (the Brahmasvarūpa Guru), who is the living form of Akṣarabrahman

We now address these aspects of Parabrahman's manifestation more fully below.

6.5.2.1) Divine Embodiment of the Transcendental Form

Svāminārāyaṇa makes it abundantly clear that the form of God 'manifest before the eyes' is the very same transcendental form that eternally presides over Akṣaradhāma. Should there be any lingering doubts, he explicitly and repeatedly stresses that "both are one", with "absolutely" "no difference between the two".

> The same form that is in Akṣaradhāma – which transcends the qualities of māyā [i.e. is gunātīta] – is manifest before the eyes. There is no difference between the two (Vac. Gaḍh. III.31).

> There is absolutely no difference between the manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān visible before you and the form of God residing in Akṣaradhāma; both are one (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

Svāminārāyaṇa adds to this by often describing the manifest form in the same terms as the transcendental form, such as being replete with all his divine light, powers and lordship, etc. Phrases such as "*that* God", "that *very* God" and intensifiers such as "*himself*" serve to further enunciate the identity between the two. For example:

> God, who is Puruṣottama, forever resides with a divine form in his Akṣaradhāma, whose divine light is comparable to that of millions of suns and moons. Countless millions of brahmarūpa muktas serve the holy feet of that God. That God, Parabrahman Puruṣottama, himself manifests on earth...
>
> When that God manifests, he is indeed accompanied by... all of his divine lordly powers [sarve aiśvarya] (Vac. Gaḍh. I.71).

> That God himself, possessing countless divine powers, becomes like a human... (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

To cite again from Vac. Pan.7, a sermon we have used often, Svāminārāyaṇa states in one part:

> One should realise the manifest form of God before the eyes to be exactly the same as the form of God resplendent with infinite lordly powers and divine light in Akṣaradhāma at the end of final dissolution.

He then immediately follows with the familiar declaration:

> One who realises this is said to have known God perfectly.

Even the excerpt from this sermon we have cited twice before, emphasising 'knowing God perfectly', is preceded as follows:

> That God, who has a luminous and divine form, becomes like a human... always doing so with all of his strength, divine powers and attendants. Those who realise this esoteric truth... can be said to have known God perfectly (Vac. Pan.7).

This again helps to contextualise 'perfect theological knowledge' in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology as knowledge of the *manifest* form of God before the eyes.

As we near the end of our exposition of Parabrahman, many of the descriptive statements of his nature excerpted elsewhere will resurface, as can be noticed above. This is because, in their full, they actually go on to climax by stating that that very same God – one without second, the Lord of all lords who impassably reigns supreme, who is the cause of all avatāras and who transcends even Akṣara, who is the super-soul residing within all, controlling, pervading, supporting, empowering the whole universe, who is its ultimate creator, sustainer and dissolver, indeed, the doer and cause of all, and who, unbound by

time and space, is replete with unlimited divine glory, knowledge, power, splendour, bliss and auspicious virtues – is he who manifests in human form.

This will mean that while many of these statements have already been cited elsewhere in this chapter, often piecemeal, it will be worth revisiting them in full – even though they are sometimes long and at the risk of some repetition – to see the force and clarity of this point as well as how these earlier aspects come together in providing a fuller, clearer image of the nature of Parabrahman.

For example, when discussing the all-doership of Parabrahman and his role as both the efficient cause and material cause of the universe, we cited excerpts from Vac. Gaḍh. I.51. In the build-up to those statements, Svāmināràyaṇa carefully and sequentially delineates each of the material elements (earth, water, light, air and space) and metaphysical entities involved in the creation process, each time highlighting the causality, subtlety and pervasiveness, and therefore the superiority, of each succeeding element. After describing Akṣarabrahman, the highest of all other elements, he states:

> Beyond that Akṣara is Akṣarātīta Puruṣottama Bhagavān, who is the all-doer – responsible for the creation, sustenance and dissolution of everything – and the cause of all. Now, a cause always pervades its effect, and simultaneously, also remains distinct from it. Thus, if one looks from the perspective of Puruṣottama Bhagavān – the cause of all – then nothing else appears to exist except Puruṣottama Bhagavān.
>
> It is this very God who...[160] gives darśana in a manifested form to all of the people on this earth (Vac. Gaḍh. I.51).

[160] A small phrase has been elided here (and in similar excerpts in this discussion) so to not prematurely reveal the answer to a question we shall be asking very soon hereafter.

In another discourse, Svāminārāyaṇa wishes to state simply that 'Puruṣottama Bhagavān manifests on this earth.' How he explains this at length perfectly demonstrates the point we are making here. He says:

> Puruṣottama Bhagavān transcends Akṣara. By his wish, countless millions of brahmāṇḍas are created, and by his powers, these brahmāṇḍas are supported. That God is distinct [vyatireka], yet is immanently present [anvaya] within everything, and while being immanent [anvaya], is still distinct [vyatireka] from everything. He dwells within each and every atom in his antaryāmin form just as he is in his manifest form before the eyes. Without that God's wish, not even a blade of grass is able to flutter. He is responsible for creating, sustaining and dissolving countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, and all the pain and pleasure the beings encounter therein. All that God does is all that happens. It is this God who manifests on earth... (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

When in Vac. Loyā.18 Svāminārāyaṇa asks the fundamental question,

> What is the form of that God like?

he answers with an extensive description beginning thus:

> God is characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss [saccidānanda], and possesses a form full of divine light. In every single pore of his body, there is light equivalent to millions and millions of suns. Moreover, that God is so handsome that he puts even millions of Kāmadevas to shame. He is the lord of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, the king of kings, the controller of all, the antaryāmin of all, and extremely blissful. Before his bliss, the pleasure of seeing countless beautiful women pales into insignificance. In fact, before the bliss of the form of that God, the sensorial pleasures of this realm and the higher realms pale into insignificance. Such is the form of God. That form always has two arms but by his wish, he may appear to have four arms, or sometimes to have eight arms, or he may even be seen as having a thousand arms.

As the exposition continues at some length with examples and counter-examples, he returns to the idea of that very same God manifesting in human form, confirming and clarifying that

> even though God appears to be like a human, that form still has the aforementioned luminosity and bliss. Those who are adept in the [yogic] practices of meditation [dhyāna], concentration [dhāraṇā] and contemplative absorption [samādhi] see that very form as having the light of millions and millions of suns (Vac. Loyā.18).

Similarly in Vac. Gaḍh. III.37, he provides an extensive exposition with the same conclusion. It, too, is worth citing here in full, if only to provide another useful summary of many of the aspects of Parabrahman's nature discussed so far.

> Now I shall narrate to you the jñāna of the form of God. No deva, human or anything created from Prakṛti possesses a form like God. In addition, time devours everything except God; that is to say, time's powers are incapable of affecting God. This is what God is like. In fact, only God is like God; no one else can even compare to him. Also, a devotee in the abode of God who has attained attributes similar to God also possesses a form similar to that of God. Nevertheless, that devotee is still a mukta, and God is, after all, Puruṣottama. Indeed, God is supreme among everyone and is fit to be worshipped by everyone. He is also their master. No one, however, can fathom the greatness of that God. He has a divine form, is nirguṇa, and is worthy of being meditated upon. In fact, that form of God is such that a person who meditates upon him becomes nirguṇa himself.
>
> Moreover, while staying in one place – in his abode – God resides by way of his immanent [anvaya] form as the antaryāmin and the giver of the deserved fruits of karmas to all of the jīvas in countless brahmāṇḍas. Indeed, he is the very life of all jīvas; without him, those jīvas are not capable of doing anything or indulging in anything.
>
> In addition, that God is the master of all yogic powers. Just as a person who has attained yogic powers can obtain with his own hands any object even in Brahmaloka while sitting here, similarly, God, using his yogic powers, performs all activities while staying in one place only. Also, for example, the fire that is latent within wood and stone is different from the wood and stone themselves. Similarly, God dwells within all jīvas, but his form is different from the jīvas.
>
> That God himself, possessing countless divine powers, becomes like a human... (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

In the very next sermon, Vac. Gaḍh. III.38, Svāminārāyana reverses the order of his statements while still maintaining the tenor of his point. This sermon is also noteworthy for the important clarification it provides that the manifest form of God is not an avatāra, but the avatārin.

> There is absolutely no difference between the manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān visible before you and the form of God residing in Akṣaradhāma; both are one. Moreover, this manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān before your eyes is the controller of all, including Akṣara. He is the Lord of all lords and cause of all causes. He reigns supreme, and he is the cause of all of the avatāras (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

Svāminārāyaṇa also mentions in Vac. Gaḍh. II.9 that "one should realise the manifest God that one has met" to be not a form of the past avatāras, but "to be the avatārin, the cause of all of the avatāras."

Amid these emphatic statements, it is important to not lose sight of the fact that Parabrahman still never vacates his place in Akṣaradhāma; he does not 'move' from there to be manifest on earth. That distinct (vyatireka) form remains as it is, eternally presiding over the highest abode where innumerable liberated souls continue to enjoy his divine communion. Even more so, then, this serves to underscore the enormity and uniqueness of Parabrahman's manifestation on earth, among bound beings, where his form is real and full, and diminished not in the slightest by human corporeality. It is to this aspect of Parabrahman's manifest form, and the associated questions, that we now turn.

6.5.2.2) Absolute Divinity of the Embodied Form

Parabrahman's manifestation on earth is real and full. The very same transcendental God of Akṣaradhāma is he who manifests on earth in human form.

An important clarification that Svāminārāyaṇa makes throughout this discussion on Parabrahman's manifestation on earth is that Parabrahman does not *become* human *per se*, but *assumes* a human form, or, as he says, "becomes like a human" [Vac. Gaḍh. I.72]. By doing so, he does not forfeit any part of his inherent nature. Parabrahman remains, as he is in his abode, absolutely divine and untouched, unsullied by māyā.

Indeed, if it is the "very same" transcendental Parabrahman of Akṣaradhāma who manifests himself on earth, replete in all his divine powers, light and lordship – "without the slightest difference" – it should evidently follow that he is as divine and untouched by māyā on earth as he is in his abode. Svāminārāyana makes this point clear in Vac. Gaḍh. III.31. It was cited above in part. It reads more fully thus:

> The same form that is in Akṣaradhāma – which transcends the qualities of māyā [i.e. is gunātīta] – is manifest before the eyes. There is no difference between the two. Just as the form in the abode is gunātīta, the human form is also gunātīta (Vac. Gaḍh. III.31).

That is to say, both forms are equally divine, equally transcendental of māyā.

Yet it is also true that Parabrahman at least *assumes* a human form. What is one to make of that? Is his 'body' of flesh and bones like that of any other human being? It is to be considered material?

Svāminārāyana explains in Vac. Gaḍh. I.71 that it is not, because "when Puruṣottama Bhagavān manifests on earth, all entities that he accepts become divine" by his own overwhelming divine nature. Therefore, he adds, "the three bodies, i.e. the gross, subtle and causal; the three states, i.e. the waking, dream and deep sleep; the ten senses; the five life-breaths; etc." may all be *apparent* in the manifest form, and "although all of them appear to be like those of ordinary humans," in reality, though, they are all divine, "not māyic." Svāminārāyaṇa's point is that there can be no material-spiritual dichotomy to be found in God's human form; it is *all* 'Parabrahman'. It is as if, he explains, "like an image made of pure sugar crystals"; it is entirely sweet, "with no scope for any part being worthy of disposal" [Vac. Pan.7, Vac. Gaḍh. II.17].

This effectively answers the charge that if Parabrahman has a human form then he will necessarily be sullied and limited by all the imperfections and limitations of human corporeality. However, as Svāminārāyaṇa has explained, a human form for God is not detrimental to his perfect nature because even that material body is divinised and subsumed within or absorbed into God's complete, eternally divine being. It is for this reason also that I have avoided using the term 'incarnation' for the manifestation of Parabrahman in human form, because, strictly speaking, it is not 'God become flesh'.

It may also have been noticed at the other junctures where Parabrahman's perfect nature has been challenged – when he is immanent within māyā and the whole universe as their inner soul or material cause, or as the doer of all actions, or even in his distinct human-shaped form in Akṣaradhāma – Svāmināràyaṇa has repeatedly and explicitly stated that Parabrahman is "sadā divya", *eternally* divine, and he remains totally pure and "unaffected, untouched, untainted" by māyā, and is immutable and the very same at all times [e.g. Vac. Kār.7, Vac. Kār.8, Gaḍh. II-10, Gaḍh. II.17, et al]. This necessarily includes Parabrahman's time on earth.

In Vac. Gaḍh. II.49, Svāmināràyaṇa more specifically addresses the divinity of this human form by contrasting it with other forms. He firstly states:

> There is a great difference between the form of God manifest before the eyes and other, māyic forms. However, those who are ignorant and those who are utter fools consider God's form and māyic forms to be the same.

Svāmināràyaṇa then goes on to explain why they differ so fundamentally.

> Those who see māyic forms and those who contemplate upon māyic forms spend countless millions of years wandering in the cycle of births and deaths. In comparison, those who see God's form and those who contemplate upon God's form escape from all bondages of time, karma and māyā, attain the highest state of enlightenment, and become attendants of God (Vac. Gaḍh. II.49).

The argument seems to be that if other beings can be liberated from the otherwise inescapable thralls of time, karma and māyā by contemplating upon God's manifest form, how can that very form be binding to God himself? Just as those bound beings, by his overwhelming divinity, are elevated to the highest

spiritual state, so, too, the body that God accepts is transformed from a material substance to a divine, Godly nature.

This expectedly leads to two difficult questions: If Parabrahman is indeed fully divine in his manifest form – complete with all his powers, light and lordship – why is that divinity not (always and fully) visible? And if he is not really human like other beings, why, instead, are human features and traits visible in him?

Svāminārāyaṇa answers both questions in an extensive sermon he delivers in Vac. Pan.4. It is worth working through that sermon and following his line of explanation, which we can intersperse with other useful points provided by Svāminārāyaṇa elsewhere in the Vacanāmrut.

Svāminārāyaṇa begins in Vac. Pan.4 by stating:

> When that [transcendental] God assumes the form of a human being, he behaves exactly like a human.

He elaborates on this by explaining that God assumes the same lifespan, strength and all the outer appearances of a normal human being passing through the phases of life, from birth, childhood, youth, old age, and eventually on to death. These outer similarities are accompanied by inner human tendencies. Svāminārāyaṇa lists these extensively: "such as lust, anger, avarice, cravings for taste, egotism, affection, arrogance, envy, jealousy, enmity, attachment, infatuation, happiness, misery, fear, fearlessness, bravery, cowardice, hunger, thirst, desires, cravings, sleep, prejudice, a feeling that this belongs to others, a

feeling that this belongs to me, renunciation, detachment, etc." All of these, Svāminārāyaṇa adds, "are apparent in God as well when he assumes a human body." This is how "all of the scriptures have also described that human form of God along with his original, divine form."

Svāminārāyaṇa clarifies, though, that even while God assumes a human form and behaves just like a human, his inherent divinity is not totally indiscernible. "One who is intelligent," he explains, can discern that even though such human tendencies are apparent in God,

> they certainly are not like those possessed by other humans. An intelligent person realises that there is something divine about that God, and with this understanding, he develops the conviction of him being God.

He uses the example of the great theologian Śaṅkarācārya who yogically entered the body of a king in order to learn certain amorous details necessary for a debate to which he had been challenged by a female scholar.[161] During his time inhabiting the king's body,

> [Śaṅkarācārya's] bodily gestures and his emotions were all amorous like those of the king. The queen, however, was intelligent and realised, 'My husband did not possess such powers. Therefore, some other soul has entered his body.' In the same manner, divinity is apparent in God in human form. As a result, one develops the conviction of him being God (Vac. Pan.4).

In Vac. Gaḍh. II.4, Svāminārāyaṇa provides another insight into how Parabrahman can be discerned on earth as different from others. He uses the

[161] *Śrīmatśankaradigvijayaḥ*, Chapters 9-10.

contrast between gold and other metals. When buried, other metals decompose and become one with the soil, whereas gold remains distinct and unaffected. In the same way, when others, "regardless of how great they may be", are surrounded by sensorial pleasures, they lose their integrity and "become engrossed in those sensorial pleasures". God, on the other hand, even though he "seems to be like a human, there is no worldly object capable of affecting him. Regardless of how alluring a sense-object may be, he is never enticed by it. Such is the transcendental greatness of God."

If that is the case, Svāmināràyaṇa continues probing in Vac. Pan.4 by anticipating a query from his audience:

> Then you may say, 'If someone develops the conviction of God on noticing something divine, then if he were to display much divinity, many people would develop such conviction.'

Svāmināràyaṇa is effectively asking our first question: Why does God not display his full divinity if it helps in people realising him as God?

He answers this most directly when he draws upon two famous incidents, one from the Mahābhārata and the other from the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa. He firstly narrates:

> When Kuntājī invoked Sūrya [the deity of the sun] using the mantra given by Durvāsā, Sūrya came to Kuntājī in a human form just like Kuntājī's own form. As a result, she was able to enjoy his intimacy and thus conceived Karṇa.[162] In actuality, Sūrya is extremely luminous; if he had come with all of his light, Kuntājī

[162] This is narrated in the Mahābhārata at Vana Parva 290-291.

> would have been burnt to death, and she would not have been able to enjoy his intimacy. Also, when Sūrya used to come to Satrājīta Yādava, he came as a human.[163] But when he came to Kuntājī and came to Satrājīta, did he leave his place in the sky? In reality, he did remain in the sky; but assuming another form, that very same Sūrya came to Kuntājī and Satrājīta. Moreover, there was just as much luminosity in that form as there is in the sun, but he suppressed that luminosity and came as a human.

Then moving on to the point at hand he explains:

> In the same way, if God were to present himself to beings with all of his divinity, then humans would not find it suitable, and they would wonder, 'Is this a ghost, or what?' Therefore, God suppresses his own divine powers and presents himself exactly like a human. But at the same time, he still remains present in his own abode. Only when God manifests as a human are people able to see him, touch him, and offer the nine types of devotion to him. If God does not become like a human and instead behaves with complete divinity, then people would not be able to develop affection or feelings of affinity for him.

Svāminārāyaṇa explains very clearly here that God does not abandon his original divine form, but deliberately, and only temporarily, conceals his full divinity. He has good reason to, he explains. It is so that he can become accessible and adorable to ordinary beings and they in turn can relate to him, developing that personal, intimate relationship that we have mentioned is an essential aspect of 'perfect theological knowledge'. To reiterate this vital point, Svāminārāyaṇa explains the reasoning further.

> Why? Because a human develops affection and affinity for another human, animals develop mutual affection and affinity for other animals, but humans and animals do not develop the same affection and affinity for each other. Why? Because those belonging to the same category [sajātīya] develop affection towards each other, but not towards those belonging to different categories

[163] This is mentioned in the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa at 10.56.3.

> [vijātīya]. Similarly, God suppresses his divinity and becomes exactly like a human so that his devotees can develop affection for him. He does not exhibit his divinity. His exhibiting divinity would place him in a different category, and as a result, devotees would not be able to develop affection and affinity towards him. It is for this reason that when God appears in human form, he remains extremely wary in ensuring his own divinity is concealed.

Svāminārāyaṇa then cites the famous example of Arjuna when Kṛṣṇa revealed to him his 'universal form' [viṣvarūpa], as narrated in the eleventh canto of the Bhagavad-Gītā. Arjuna did not enjoy seeing the divinely magnificent but terrible form, and became agitated instead. Only when Kṛṣṇa presented himself in a human form again was Arjuna appeased and 'returned to his senses'.[164]

Svāminārāyaṇa thus concludes:

> Therefore, only when God behaves like a human does a person find it suitable; otherwise he would not (Vac. Pan.4).

In another sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa draws upon another useful, classical analogy and similarly stresses:

> The greatness of God is such that within the pore of his each and every hair, countless millions of brahmāṇḍas appear as mere sub-atomic particles. Only when that vast God becomes like a human for the sake of the liberation of the jīvas do they have an opportunity to serve him. If he were to remain exactly the same size as he is, then even the ruling devatās of this brahmāṇḍa, i.e. Brahmā and others, would be incapable of seeing him or serving him. What, then, can be said of mere humans? Consider, for example, the vaḍvānala fire that dwells in the ocean. Despite consuming the waters of the ocean, it is so vast that even the water of the ocean itself cannot extinguish it. If we wished to light an oil lamp in our homes and that vaḍvānala fire were to enter our homes, instead of enjoying the light of the oil lamp, we would all be burnt and reduced to ashes. However, if that same fire were to assume the form of an oil lamp, its light would provide joy – even

[164] BG 11.51.

> though the oil lamp is that very same fire. The oil lamp is so weak that it could be easily extinguished by blowing on it or smothering it by hand. Nevertheless, only it can provide comfort to us, whereas the vaḍvānala fire cannot. In the same way, God may appear to be as powerless as a human, but only through that form can countless jīvas attain liberation (Vac. Gaḍh. I.72).

Svāminārāyaṇa makes it decidedly clear, then, that it is the conscious and supremely loving and compassionate choice of God to become as human-like as possible – while remaining exactly as he is – so that humans can relate to him and love him, which otherwise would not be possible. It seems it is more important to God that humans can grow to love him than be impressed by his lordly powers. We shall elaborate upon the nature and efficacy of this choice in the following section, but here we can say that in order to become so relatable and endearing, Parabrahman must necessarily conceal his transcendental powers [Vac. Gaḍh. I.78] and positively "exhibit" all the same outer appearances and inner tendencies – flaws, failings, foibles and all – of a typical human being [Vac. Gaḍh. I.72],[165] even at the very real risk of being perceived by the ignorant as being 'just like any other human' [Vac. Gaḍh. I.58, Loyā.18, Vac. Gaḍh. II.65, Vac. Amd.4]. This is why the (full) divinity of God when he is manifest before the eyes is not (always) perceivable, but the humanity is.

If we return to our two questions, the above explanation provides the answer from God's side as to why *he* does not reveal his divinity and exhibits human

[165] Svāminārāyana adds in several other sermons that for the discerning devotees, even these 'weaknesses' and the apparently human behaviour become worthy of narrating, extolling and remembering, for they are just as auspicious and carry just as much liberative value and potency [e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.3, Gadh. I.47, Gadh. I.78, Loyā 9, Gadh. II.10, Gadh. II.17, Gaḍh. II.35, Gadh. II.39, Gaḍh. II.58].

traits instead. There is an equally important and useful answer to be yielded when we reframe the questions to lay the burden of responsibility on humans: Why is that *humans* cannot see that divinity in the manifest form of God and instead see only the human traits?

Svāmināràyaṇa provides answers for this in Vac. Pan.7, another extensive sermon rich in imagery and an extended analogy, which, again, we shall follow in detail corroborated with excerpts from other sermons.

He begins with a familiar statement:

> One should realise the manifest form of God before the eyes to be exactly the same as the form of God resplendent with infinite lordly powers and divine light in Akṣaradhāma at the end of final dissolution. One who realises this is said to have known God perfectly.

It is true, though, that not everyone has such a realisation of the manifest form of God. Svāmināràyaṇa therefore explains:

> However, when an ignorant person looks at that manifest form of God before the eyes with a māyic vision, he perceives a human like himself. Just as he himself is born, becomes a child, becomes a youth, becomes old and dies, in the same way, he believes God to undergo the same process. But when one sincerely worships God having faith in the words of the Ekāntika Sant of God, one's māyic vision is resolved. Thereafter, one realises that same form of God as being the supreme conscious being [paramacaitanya], characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss [saccidānandamaya].

Here Svāmināràyaṇa has clearly distinguished those who are ignorant, whose perception of God's fully divine reality is clouded by their māyic vision, and the

devotees who have learned from the Brahmasvarūpa Guru how to correctly see and serve that God.

Svāminārāyaṇa briefly vindicates "the phases of childhood, youth and old age apparent in God, as well as his birth and death" which are "perceived" by the foolish as being "due to his yogic powers [yogamāyā]". "In reality," however, "God remains exactly as he is", and that is how the discerning devotees see him.

Svāminārāyaṇa then goes on to explain these two types of audiences using an elaborate version of the 'classical Indian rope trick' as an analogy.

> For example, an adept magician arms himself with weapons and ascends to the sky to fight against the warriors of the demons, the enemies of Indra. Then, having been cut to pieces, he falls to the ground. Thereafter, the magician's wife gathers those pieces together and burns herself on his funeral pyre. After a short while, the magician appears out of the sky, armed with weapons, exactly as he appeared before. He then asks the king for a reward and requests, 'Please return my wife.' Having seen such an astonishing performance, if one is unable to comprehend the 'māyā' of even a magician, how, then, can the yogic powers [yogamāyā] of God possibly be comprehended? One who does comprehend the 'māyā' of the magician realises: 'That magician has not died, nor has he been burnt; in reality, he is exactly the same as he was before.' In a similar manner, one who is said to have perfectly realised the nature of God understands God to be immutable[166] and imperishable, absolutely unchanging (Vac. Pan.7).

This idea is taken up again in Vac. Amd.4 where Svāminārāyaṇa explains the seemingly incomprehensible mystery of God's human manifestation further. He

[166] The original term here is 'akhaṇḍa'. Considering the context and how it is used more widely throughout the Vacanāmrut, the more consistent translation here would not be 'indivisible' but 'eternal' or 'immutable'. I have chosen the latter since 'avināśī' (imperishable or indestructible) follows immediately.

firstly describes the "mystification" or "confusion" [bhrahma] of those who are not devotees and who, having an unfavourable or atheistic intelligence [nāstika mati], allege that God, too, passes through birth and death, just like themselves, and his body is the result of an accruement of karmas, just like their own. They thus "superimpose" their own māyic transformations onto God. To this, Svāminārāyaṇa contrasts the devotees who, with their favourable, theistic intelligence [āstika mati],

> realise the understanding of the atheists [nāstika] to be wrong. They know the body of God to be eternal, and that the birth, childhood, youth, old age and death of God, as well as whatever other bodily traits he may display, are his līlā [intended sport]. This is because time and māyā are not powerful enough to have any sort of influence on God's body. In fact, all transformations that do appear to occur in God's body are all due to his yogic powers. Those who are devotees of God are not confused by this, whereas the minds of those who are not devotees become bewildered, just like worldly people become bewildered on seeing a magician's acts. Those, however, who are aware of the magician's techniques are not bewildered (Vac. Amd.4).

Svāminārāyaṇa also rebuts here the non-believers' challenges about Parabrahman's human form. Ordinarily, a human body is necessitated by, and its nature and development are governed by, the good and bad deeds performed over previous lives. But Svāminārāyaṇa clarifies that Parabrahman's manifestation is not compelled or determined by karma, nor is his human form detrimental to his perfect nature. He manifests independently, by his own free will, or 'līlā' as he calls it.

Returning to Vac. Pan.7, Svāminārāyaṇa similarly concludes:

> One who has such an understanding is not confused about God in any way (Vac. Pan.7).

Throughout both sermons, Svāminārāyana's use of the magician's astonishing and mystifying act points to the wondrous and otherwise incomprehensible mystery of that transcendental, wholly divine, immutable and eternal Parabrahman manifesting in human form, apparently being born, changing, and eventually dying. How can this be? It is by God's freely willed application of his "yogamāyā" (yogic powers), which Svāminārāyaṇa juxtaposes with the magician's own "māyā" or amazing powers. "If one is unable to comprehend the 'māyā' of even a magician, how, then, can the yogamāyā of God possibly be comprehended?" However, moving on to the audience now, Svāminārāyaṇa qualifies that those "who are aware of the magician's techniques" – such as his wife, children and assistants – are not at all "bewildered" and realise that the magician has neither been severed nor died; "in reality, he is exactly the same as he was before." Similarly, those devotees with the correct theological understanding of Parabrahman's divine, eternal and immutable nature, realise him to be "exactly the same as the form of God resplendent with infinite lordly powers and divine light in Akṣaradhāma".

Here, it is important to note, Svāminārāyaṇa is also positioning the erroneous perception [ayathārth jñān] of God, borne of the seer's own ignorance (māyā), against correct and complete theological knowledge [yathārth paripūrṇa jñān] made possible by the Ekāntika Sant. The 'māyā' therefore referred to in the magician's act is not to be misconstrued as suggesting that God's 'show' of human

traits is somehow illusory in the sense of being a deception or a falsehood. Rather, it is explaining the seer's veil of ignorance both obstructing and distorting the reality that God is unborn, unchanging and undying, divine, unlimited and transcendental. Those who are freed of this veil have the unhindered vision to see the reality as it is. As we saw earlier, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

> Even though God appears to be like a human, that form still has the aforementioned luminosity and bliss. Those who are adept in the [yogic] practices of meditation, concentration and contemplative absorption see that very form as having the light of millions and millions of suns... (Vac. Loyā.18).

Properly understood, then, both set of answers to our pair of questions combine to explain that Parabrahman manifests in his human form concealing his divine powers and instead, by his yogic powers, exhibits human traits. Those who have the correct theological knowledge can appreciate the absolute divinity of that manifest human form.

6.5.2.3) Divine Embodiment by Free Will and Loving Compassion

Parabrahman chooses to manifest on earth ontologically unchanged, to offer no less an experience to his human devotees, but in a form that makes him accessible, appreciable and adorable. Having already learned this much about God's freely-willed manifestation in the preceding section, we can now examine it further here, leading also in the next section to answer questions of why he manifests on earth at all.

We begin by referring to a question asked to Svāminārāyaṇa in Vac. Gaḍh. I.78, a sermon in which he calls upon his younger, student sādhus to pose various questions to him. One such student asks:

> God transcends Akṣara; he is beyond mind and speech; and he is imperceptible to all. Why, then, can everyone see him as manifest before the eyes?

It is a natural question, especially when Svāminārāyaṇa has previously extolled the absolute transcendental nature of Parabrahman. Underlying the question seems to be the query that if Parabrahman is so divine, transcendental and imperceptible to the mind and senses, and it is that same eminently distinct form which manifests on earth, then that too should be similarly imperceptible. Otherwise, if it is perceptible, it cannot be the same transcendental form.

Svāminārāyaṇa duly replies:

> God – who transcends Akṣara, who is beyond mind and speech, and who is imperceptible – himself, out of compassion, resolves: 'May all the enlightened and unenlightened people on Mṛtyuloka behold me.' Having resolved in this manner, God – whose will always prevails – becomes perceivable to all people on Mṛtyuloka out of compassion (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

Svāminārāyaṇa thus explains that Parabrahman is indeed how you describe him – transcendental and truly beyond the full grasp of the mind and senses – yet it is by his own free, compassionate will [saṅkalpa] that he makes himself perceptible to the people on earth. Notably, he calls the earth here by its technical name of Mṛtyuloka (literally, 'realm of death'), referring to the inevitable perishability of the world and the embodied beings who inhabit it. Furthermore, his will to be

seen by, and therefore become accessible to, mere mortals is not restricted to the enlightened devotees only; his manifestation is for the benefit of all those on earth, irrespective of their deserving or undeserving worth. This is why Svāmināràyaṇa qualifies God's resolve as being formed "out of compassion".

Another similar question triggered the discussion in Vac. Gaḍh. I.51.

Svāmināràyaṇa was asked:

> The ten senses are produced from rajoguṇa, and the four inner faculties are produced from sattvaguṇa. Thus, all of the senses and inner faculties are māyic. God, however, transcends māyā. How, then, can one cultivate the conviction of God through the māyic faculties? Also, how can one perceive God with one's māyic eyes and other senses?

Svāmināràyaṇa first sought to clarify and corroborate the question by asking:

> Māyic objects can be realised by māyic means, and if one has realised God through the same māyic faculties and senses, then it implies that God must also be māyic. That is your question, is it not?

The audience confirmed:

> Yes Mahārāja, that is precisely our question. You have clarified it for us.

Svāmināràyaṇa then embarked on an extensive elucidation of the utter supremacy of Puruṣottama with respect to the other elements and entities within the creative process (which we touched upon earlier). He then concludes:

> It is this very God who, out of compassion, for the liberation of the jīvas, makes himself personally visible in a manifested form to all the people on earth.

Again, we see a conscious, compassionate act by Parabrahman to present himself to all those on earth. What is especially striking, again, is that Svāmināràyaṇa emphasises it is "this very" supremely transcendent Parabrahman who has made himself available to those who are incapable of availing him, "out of compassion", "for the[ir] liberation". They could in no way rise up to reach him, and so he 'stoops down' to uplift them.

Parabrahman's manifestation on earth as an act of supreme grace is made all the more clear when Svāmināràyaṇa describes the earnest supplication of even the great devas who beseech him to grace them with his audience.

> All of the Brahmās, Viṣṇus and Maheśas of all of the brahmāṇḍas pray to God, 'O Mahārāja! Please have compassion on us and visit our brahmāṇḍa' – just as the chief of a village requests the world-emperor, 'Mahārāja! I am poor. Please visit my house. I shall serve you to the best of my ability.' In the same way, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva pray to that God: 'Mahārāja! Please have mercy upon us and grace us with your audience; do visit our brahmāṇḍa.' Only then does God assume a body in that brahmāṇḍa (Vac. Pan.4).

Svāmināràyaṇa accentuates this unmerited grace even further by describing the utter insignificance (compared to Parabrahman) of the beings of each brahmāṇḍa before whom he presents himself.

> God is the Lord of the lords of countless brahmāṇḍas. However, the brahmāṇḍas of which he is lord are insignificant compared to him.... Within each brahmāṇḍa there are Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, as well as the pṛthvi with its seven dvīpas, seven oceans, Meru, and Lokāloka and other mountains. The brahmāṇḍas also contain the 14 realms, the eight barriers, and many other things. God is the lord of countless such brahmāṇḍas. For example, one can realise the eminence of an emperor of the world, even though his villages can be counted. But the eminence of God is much greater because even those countless brahmāṇḍas are insignificant to him. So then, of what significance can the beings of those brahmāṇḍas be before

> God? Of no significance at all; they are utterly insignificant (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

And yet the climax of God's loving compassion is that before such "utterly insignificant" souls, Parabrahman, too, makes himself equally insignificant in order to be so accessible to them.

In Vac. Gaḍh. I.63, Svāminārāyaṇa provides another extensive description of the unfathomable, ineffable greatness of Parabrahman. He begins by drawing upon the analogy of a great king whose commands the other devas unreservedly obey. Then describing the opulence of the other realms which are insignificant before Akṣaradhāma, Parabrahman's abode, he describes the limitless and unfathomable greatness of Akṣarabrahman. Even the liberated souls (called 'attendants' here) within Akṣaradhāma have "divine light equivalent to that of millions and millions of suns around each and every hair." His point is:

> Therefore, if those attendants are so great, how can the greatness of their master, Puruṣottama Bhagavān, possibly be described?

Nevertheless, Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to say:

> In this way, that God, who is extremely powerful, extremely luminous, and extremely great, contains his spiritual powers and divine light within himself and becomes like a human being for the liberation of jīvas. He assumes a form that allows people to see him, serve him, offer worship to him, etc. For example, a minute thorn that has pricked an ant's leg cannot be removed with a spear or a spike; it can only be removed using an extremely fine pin. In the same manner, God confines his greatness within himself and assumes an extremely modest form. Just as Agni [the deity of fire] constrains his light and flames to assume a human form, similarly, God also suppresses his powers and acts as a human for the liberation of jīvas. However, a foolish person thinks, 'Why does God not manifest any powers?' But he does not realise that God

> deliberately conceals his powers for the sake of the jīvas' liberation. After all, if he were to manifest his greatness, then even the brahmāṇḍa would pale into insignificance. What, then, can be said of jīvas? (Vac. Gaḍh. I.63).

Svāminārāyana further emphasises in Vac. Gaḍh. I.78 the dramatic contrast between Parabrahman's inherent powers and the "modest" form he graciously assumes. After listing the transcendental features of Puruṣottama Bhagavān's nature – he transcends Akṣara, by whose mere wish countless millions of brahmāṇḍas are created,... and without whose wish not even a blade of grass is able to flutter, etc. – and stating that it is "this God who manifests on earth", he immediately says:

> Yet, when that very God mounts a horse, it appears that the horse is carrying him; though, in reality, it is God who is the upholder of the horse. Furthermore, when God sits on the earth, it seems that the earth is supporting God; yet, in reality, it is God who supports the entire earth along with its mobile and immobile forms of life. Moreover, at night, the light of the moon, an oil lamp or a torch allow one to see God; or during the day, the light of the sun allows one to see God. In reality, however, it is that God who provides light to the sun, the moon, and the flames of fire. Such are the magnificent powers of God. Despite this, though, God has become like a human for the sake of the liberation of the jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

Such is the magnanimity and utter graciousness of Parabrahman that he manifests on earth in so modest a human form. It is an act borne of his free, loving and supremely compassionate will.

6.5.2.4) Purpose of Divine Embodiment

Parabrahman's love, compassion and grace become even more appreciable by understanding the reasons for his manifestation, for the important question of

'Why?' still remains to be answered. Why does Parabrahman so manifest in human form on earth and continue to remain present? Even if he can – and without injury to his perfect nature – why should he? What is his purpose [prayojana] in making himself so relatable and endearing?

Three objectives seem to be discernible from Svāmināràyaṇa's sermons, though they may hold varying degrees of precedence in his mind.

Firstly, as the many afore-cited excerpts have already iterated, Parabrahman manifests on earth to grant ultimate liberation to countless souls. To reprise a few brief statements:

> That God himself... becomes like a human for the purpose of granting liberation to the jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).
>
> That God... becomes like a human, out of compassion, to liberate the jīvas (Vac. Pan.7).
>
> Out of compassion, that very same God is manifest... for the purpose of granting ultimate liberation to jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.31).
>
> It is that same supreme Puruṣottama Bhagavān who manifests on this earth out of compassion, for the purpose of granting liberation to the jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

Related to this is the second reason for Parabrahman's manifestation on earth: to establish dharma. Svāmināràyaṇa, however, clarifies that this is not merely the moral injunctions codified in the śāstras enjoining people of various classes

(varṇa) and stages (āśrama). Rather, it is to establish the more comprehensive Ekāntika Dharma, of which the aforementioned is only a part.

Ekāntika Dharma, also know as Bhāgavata Dharma, is a four-fold system of theological praxis defined by Svāmināràyaṇa that finite beings need to observe to please God and thereby secure their liberation. It comprises: 1) dharma – leading a righteous life by observing the moral codes of the śāstras; 2) jñāna – realising oneself to be the ātman, distinct from the body; 3) vairāgya – being dispassionate towards worldly pleasures; and 4) bhakti – offering selfless devotion to God while realising his greatness.

We shall be elucidating upon these in a little more detail in the chapter on Mukti when discussing the way to liberation. Here, it is suffice to confirm from Vac. Gaḍh. II.46 and Vac. Gaḍh. III.21 that Svāmināràyaṇa states Ekāntika Dharma as a reason for God's manifestation.

The third reason why Parabrahman personally manifests on earth, and for Svāmināràyaṇa, what seems to be the principal reason, is so that he can personally fulfil the wishes of his beloved, loving devotees. Svāmināràyaṇa reveals this in Vac. Kār.5, firstly announcing to the assembly that "I wish to ask a question." After receiving the signal to proceed, he asks:

> God assumes a form on earth to grant liberation to the jīvas. But is he not capable of granting liberation while remaining in his abode, without assuming a form? After all, God can grant liberation in any manner he wishes. What, then, is the purpose of him assuming a form on earth? Furthermore, if God can only grant liberation when

> he assumes a form, and he is incapable of granting liberation otherwise, it would suggest that much of a weakness in God. But in reality, God is capable of granting liberation to the jīvas by assuming a form, and he is also capable of granting liberation to the jīvas without assuming a form. So, then, what is the purpose of God assuming a form on earth? That is the question.

The question itself is a classical question related to God's descent or manifestation on earth. The Vacanāmrut notes that many senior sādhus in the assembly answered Svāmināràyaṇa's question according to their understanding but none to his complete satisfaction. An interactive discourse ensued, wherein he raised doubts to their answers and ultimately refuted them. The sādhus then "folded their hands and requested, 'O Mahārāja, only you are capable of answering this question.'" Svāmināràyaṇa thereafter explained:

> The very purpose for which God assumes a form is this: Having surrendered himself to the loving devotion of those devotees who have intense love for him, God assumes whichever form the devotees wish for in order to grant them bliss. Whatever wishes those devotees may then have, he fulfils all of them. Since the devotees are physical and have bodies, God also assumes physicality and becomes like a person with a body, and showers affection upon those devotees. In addition to this, he hides his powers and behaves with the devotees as a son, or as an intimate companion, or as a friend, or as a relative. Because of this, the devotee may not maintain much protocol with God. Nonetheless, God showers his affection upon the devotee in whichever manner he desires.

"Thus," Svāmināràyaṇa concludes,

> the very purpose God assumes a form is to fulfil the desires of his loving devotees. Along with this, he grants liberation to innumerable other jīvas and also establishes dharma.

While Svāmināràyaṇa does include the other aforementioned two reasons at the end of this sermon, he clearly gives primacy to the third by twice referring to it

as the "very purpose". This may be due to the vital importance he lays on the personal relationship between Parabrahman and individuals. As we shall see later, it this intimate loving relationship with the manifest form of God before the eyes which is central in the practice of Ekāntika Dharma and by which liberation of the soul is secured. In this sense, then, it is clearer why Svāminārāyaṇa should regard this third reason as the principal or even exclusive reason for Parabrahman's manifestation, and the other two as incidental or consequential.

What is also striking from this sermon is that while Parabrahman manifests for the benefit and uplift of everyone, it is for his loving devotees that he offers himself most unreservedly. Svāminārāyaṇa uses the phrase "ādhīn thaine" to describe how Parabrahman, literally, 'becomes supported by' the devotion of those devotees who love him intensely [atiśay prītivāḷā bhakto]. He, who is the grand support and ontic ground of all [sarvādhāra], willingly becomes 'supported' [ādhīna] by the love of his otherwise feeble devotees. He, by whose mere wish countless millions of brahmāṇḍas are created, sustained and dissolved, and without whose wish not even a single blade of grass is able to stir, readily submits to the wishes of his mortal devotees, surrendering his wishes and actions to them in order to fulfil *their* will, not his; to do as *they* want, not as he. He, who is supremely divine and characterised by existence, consciousness and bliss, and who is replete with unlimited lordly powers, deliberately conceals that divinity and instead assumes a modest, physical form, just like that of his devotees, so that they can relate to him as *they* prefer. He is aware that this may – and often does –result in a breach of all proper decorum with him. But that is of

no significance to him. What *is* vitally important to him is that he, personally, is present on earth to receive their love and reciprocate it, personally. Such is the intensity and intimacy of Parabrahman's uncompromising love for his beloved, loving devotees.

6.5.2.5) Parabrahman Manifest in Human Form as Svāminārāyaṇa

The exposition of Parabrahman as found in the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition comes to its full culmination and concreteness in the person of Svāminārāyana. The first and best way to examine this is to consider Svāminārāyaṇa's own words from the Vacanāmrut where he reveals himself as such. This revelation is confirmed, clarified and consolidated by Guṇātītānanda Svāmī in the Svāmīnī Vāto, and attested to by many others in other texts and personal accounts. The limited nature of this study will not permit a study of all these sources. In any case, it is certainly not the remit of this project to prove or disprove Svāminārāyaṇa's claim to Godhood, which would need to be done by examining the full gamut of his life, work and teachings, including the many miracles attributed to him and the spiritual experiences of those who lived with and met him. These are chronicled in the scores of voluminous books and diaries and thousands of kīrtanas (or bhajanas, devotional songs) written about him by these witnesses, and any such project would necessarily involve a careful examination of this corpus along with several other relevant sources. Here, we are concerned only with the theological nature of Parabrahman in Svāminārāyaṇa theology, and need only to draw from our already established theological texts.

It needs to be acknowledged first, though, that Svāminārāyaṇa spoke of himself in varying ways, reportedly in accordance to the receptivity and spiritual maturity of his varying audiences.[167] These and other factors would need to be properly understood in their full contexts before a complete and accurate theological picture can emerge about Svāminārāyaṇa from these texts or any one text or statement alone. He was, nevertheless, unequivocal in his most profoundly revelatory statements. For example, from many of the statements cited in this chapter discussing the various aspects of Parabrahman, it may have been noticed that they often contained references to Parabrahman as 'manifest before the eyes' or 'this manifest form', or similar. Svāminārāyaṇa is evidently referring to himself as he spoke these words to his audience at the time. Some of these important statements include the following:

> God eternally possesses a form. He is the creator, sustainer and dissolver of countless brahmāṇḍas; he is forever present in his Akṣaradhāma; he is the lord of all; and it is he who is manifest here before your eyes (Vac. Gaḍh. III.35).

> And what is that God like [who resides in his abode which is filled with an ocean of divine light and who assumes a form on earth]? Well, he transcends both kṣara [māyā and all finite beings][168] and Akṣara; he is the cause of all causes; and countless millions of akṣararūpa muktas worship his holy feet. Out of compassion, that very same God is manifest now and visibly present before your

[167] Brahmadarshandas offers an extensive analysis of these statements in his *Vacanāmrut Rahasya*, II, pp. 257-333. To this, Shrutiprakashdas adds a useful historical perspective and contextualises several other sampradāyic sources in another in-depth interrogation in *Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāymā Avatār-Avatārī Nirūpaṇ*, pp. 242-453.

[168] While 'ksara' literally means perishable, it is translated traditionally here to include all finite beings, i.e. jīvas and īśvaras, whose bodies perish in every lifetime during transmigation. This also maintains semantic consistency with verses such as BG 15.16 which distinguishes 'kṣaraḥ sarvāṇi bhūtāni' from the immutable Aksara. See also the almost identical phrase in Vac. Gaḍh. I.72 which uses 'kṣara' and 'Akṣarabrahman' – not just 'Aksara' – further justifying this translation here.

> very eyes for the purpose of granting ultimate liberation to jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.31).

> One should realise the manifest form of God before the eyes to be exactly the same as the form of God resplendent with infinite lordly powers and divine light in Akṣaradhāma at the end of final dissolution (Vac. Pan.7).

> It is the same master of that [Brahmapura] abode – the lord of Akṣara and the muktas, Parabrahman Puruṣottama – who is present here in this Satsanga fellowship (Vac. Amd.6).

If the above statements identify Svāmināràyaṇa with the distinct, luminous and supremely sovereign Parabrahman resident in Akṣaradhāma (i.e. vyatireka), the following identify him with that same transcendental being who is also immanent (anvaya) within every being and thing.

> [Puruṣottama Bhagavān] dwells within each and every atom in his antaryāmin form just as he is in his manifest form before the eyes (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

> One should think of the greatness of God in the following way: 'I am the ātman, while the manifest form of God before the eyes whom I have met is Paramātman. I have attained Śrī Puruṣottama Bhagavān in person, the very Puruṣottama Bhagavān who is the lord of Goloka, Vaikuṇṭha, Śvetadvīpa and Brahmapura, as well as the master of Brahmā and the other devas, who themselves are the lords of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas. That Paramātman forever resides in my ātman (Vac. Sār.1).

Here he reveals himself as sarvakartā and sarvakāraṇa (the doer and cause of all):

> God fully resides in the heart of a person who possesses the following understanding: 'The earth remains stable and trembles; the stars remain steady in the sky; the rains fall; the sun rises and sets; the moon appears and disappears, waxes and wanes; the vast oceans remain constrained within their boundaries; a drop of

> liquid develops into a human possessing hands, feet, a nose, ears and the rest of the ten senses; the clouds, through which lightning strikes, float unsupported in the sky – these and a countless variety of other wonders are due only to the form of God that I have attained.' With this understanding, he has the conviction that no one except the manifest form of God is the cause of these wonders. He realises, 'The countless wonders which have occurred in the past, those which are currently taking place, and those which will occur in the future are all only due to the manifest form of God that I have met before my eyes' (Vac. Gaḍh. I.27).

> In this way, the manifest form of Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa before the eyes is the cause of all; he is forever divine and has a form (Vac. Pan.7).

In the following statements, Svāmināràyaṇa identifies himself as the avatārin, the cause of all of the avatāras.

> One should realise the visible God that one has met to forever possess a divine form and to be the avatārin, the cause of all of the avatāras (Vac. Gaḍh. II.9).

> It is this Puruṣottama [residing within the divine light of Akṣaradhāma] who transcends Akṣara and who is the cause of all avatāras.... Realise that the form amidst the divine light is this Mahārāja visible before you (Vac. Gaḍh. II.13).

> All of the avatāras of God manifest from the very God that is present in this Satsaṅga fellowship. That is to say, he is the cause of all of the avatāras and is the antaryāmin of all. It is he who, in Akṣaradhāma, is radiant, full of countless powers and eternally has a form. He is also the Lord of all of the lords of the countless brahmāṇḍas. He is even the cause of Akṣarabrahman (Vac. Amd.6).

Bringing many of these aspects together in Vac. Gaḍh. III.38, Svāmināràyaṇa states:

> It is that same supreme Puruṣottama Bhagavān [true, divine and extremely luminous; characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss; resident in Akṣaradhāma in a two-armed

> form like a human being, and served there by the liberated souls upon whom he bestows his supreme bliss] who manifests on this earth out of compassion, for the purpose of granting liberation to the jīvas. He is presently visible before everyone, he is your favoured deity [iṣṭadeva], and he accepts your service. In fact, there is absolutely no difference between the manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān visible before you and the form of God residing in Aksaradhāma; both are one. Moreover, this manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān before your eyes is the controller of all, including Akṣara. He is the Lord of all īśvaras and the cause of all causes. He reigns supreme, and he is the cause of all of the avatāras. He is worthy of being worshipped single-mindedly by all of you. The many previous avatāras of this God are also worthy of being paid obeisance and are worthy of reverence (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

Svāminārāyaṇa also spoke explicitly about himself in the first person. For example, in Vac. Amd.7, he reveals the following by way of describing his yogic journey through various realms and abodes:

> I went alone to the abode of Śrī Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa, which transcends everything. There, I saw that it was I who am Puruṣottama; I did not see anyone eminent apart from myself. In this manner, I travelled to these places [the various realms and abodes] and finally returned to my body.
>
> Then, when I looked within again, I realised that I am the creator, sustainer and dissolver of all of the brahmāṇḍas. In those countless brahmāṇḍas, it is by my divine light that countless Śivas, countless Brahmās, countless Kailāsas, countless Vaikuṇṭhas and Golokas, Brahmapuras, as well as countless millions of other realms are all radiant.
>
> And what am I like? Well, if I were to shake the earth with the toe of my foot, the worlds of countless brahmāṇḍas would begin to shake. It is also by my light that the sun, the moon, the stars, etc. are radiant.

Several texts of the tradition also carry a statement from Svāminārāyaṇa found in old manuscripts which reveal the divine purpose of his manifestation on earth in

a human form. It reads as follows (with the original north-Indian dialectic Hindi first):

> Dūsarā avatār hai so kārya-kāraṇ avatār huā hai, aur merā yah avatār hai so to jivoku brahmarūp karke ātyantik mukti dene ke vāste Akṣarātīt Puruṣottam jo ham vah manuṣya jaisā banyā hu.
>
> While other avatāras had manifested to fulfil a particular task, my manifestation is to make souls brahmarūpa and grant them ultimate liberation. That is why I, Puruṣottama who transcends even Akṣara, have become like a human.[169]

In one of his sermons, Guṇātītānanda Svāmī also quotes Svāmināràyaṇa as saying:

> I have come from Akṣaradhāma with my Akṣaradhāma, countless liberated souls and the īśvaras of other abodes to grant ultimate liberation to innumerable souls (SV 7.14).

Apart from direct revelations of himself as Parabrahman, Svāmināràyaṇa also revealed several other aspects of his nature in various sermons, especially with regard to being untainted and unaffected by the world around him. To cite a few here, in Vac. Kār.6 he states:

> As for me, not even the slightest bit of lust, anger, avarice, egotism, envy or jealousy enters my heart. Also, in my heart, I experience a strong aversion for the sensorial pleasures, namely sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch. In fact, I do not have even the slightest interest in any one of the sensorial pleasures. Whenever I accept food or clothes, I do so on seeing the loving devotion of the devotees; never do I accept them for my own physical pleasure. In fact, all of my actions of eating, drinking, wearing, etc. are for the

[169] *Ātyantika Kalyāṇa*, p.76.

See also a similar statement found in one of Svāmināràyana's few extant letters, written to his lay and monastic devotees:

> Kalyānke karne vāste merā avatār hai. Āj to mai avidyārūp je māyā hai, tiske nāśke vāste pragaṭ huā hū. Āj to merā prayojan ehi hai, jyo avidyāku nāś karnā, jivku brahmarūp karnā. Is prayojan vāste me pragaṭ huā hū. Jivuke mukti deneke vāste, manuṣya esā banyā hū (*Śrījīnī Prasādīnā Patro*, 7).

> sake of all the sādhus and satsaṅgīs [monastic and lay followers]. If I feel that it is for my own sake and not for their sake, then I would immediately discard it. Actually, the only reason I keep this physical body is for the sake of the satsaṅgīs; besides that, there is no other reason. Devotees such as Mūḷjī Brahmacārī, Somlā Khācara and others who have been staying close to me for so many years, know my nature and realise, 'Besides the devotees of God, Mahārāja does not have affection for anyone else. In fact, Mahārāja is unaffected by anything, just like space.' In this manner, those who constantly stay near me know my nature. In fact, I have sacrificed my body for the sake of those who are devotees of God by word, thought and deed. Therefore, in all ways, I am attached to whosoever is a devotee of God. To me, the wealth of the 14 realms, without the devotees of God, seems as worthless as a blade of grass.

Similarly, in Vac. Gaḍh. I.73 he adds:

> My dispassion for the world [vairagya] is [inextinguishable] like that of the fire of lightning and the vaḍvānala fire. This nature of mine is known by those who have stayed extremely close to me. However, those who remain far from me are unable to realise my nature. Thıs Mūḷjī Brahmacārī [my personal attendant] may appear to be naïve, yet he thoroughly knows my nature, realising, 'Mahārāja is as untouched as space. He has no prejudices against or in favour of anyone.'

When about to deliver an important sermon on the nature of Parabrahman in Vac. Gaḍh. II.13, Svāminārāyaṇa prefaced the sermon with this extensive personal revelation:

> I remain naturally in a state in which even if I wished to engross my mind in the most charming sounds, the most charming touch, the most charming smells, the most charming tastes and the most charming sights of this world, I could not do so; I remain absolutely dejected towards them. In fact, all of the attractive sense-objects and the repulsive sense-objects are the same to me. Also, a king and a beggar are the same to me. Further, to rule all the realms and to beg for food carrying a broken begging bowl are the same to me. Even sitting with honour on an elephant and walking on foot are the same to me. Whether someone honours me with sandalwood paste, flowers, fine clothes and ornaments, or throws dirt on me – all are the same to me. Whether someone praises me or insults me

> – both are the same to me. Gold, silver, diamonds and refuse are all the same to me. Moreover, I look upon all devotees of God as being equal; I do not differentiate one as being superior and another as being inferior....
>
> When I outwardly praise some object or criticise another, I do so purposefully. Whenever I forcefully engage the attention of my senses towards objects, they remain there very reluctantly; as soon as I relax that force, they withdraw immediately. It is like throwing a stone into the air; it goes as high as it can depending on the force of the throw, but ultimately it falls back to earth. Or consider a weak bull; it can stand only as long as a man forcefully supports it. But as soon as he withdraws the support, it slumps to the ground. Further, imagine a very strong man who is able to crack a betel nut between his teeth. But, after sucking ten or twenty very sour lemons, he would have great difficulty chewing even roasted chick peas. In this manner, it is only when I forcefully engage my attention in the sense-objects that they remain engaged in them.

In Vac. Gadh. II.33, Svāminārāyaṇa swears by his inner purity in the following way:

> If it appears to me that I have a liking for something, I would only be happy after I have discarded it. Should I recall in my mind any object or any person other than devotees of God, then I would feel comfortable only after I have totally distanced myself from that object or person. Also, in my heart, in no way do I ever experience an aversion towards a devotee of God. Even though I am insistently offered objects of enjoyment without actually wishing for them myself, I still do not have any desire for them. In fact, I push them away. In fact, I swear by the lives of these paramhansas that from the day I was born to this very day, I have never harboured an improper thought regarding women or wealth, either in the waking state or in the dream state. Thus, I am eternally pure.

These and many other statements about the life and character of Svāminārāyaṇa would need to be checked against evidence from historical and other sources to confirm their consistency or prove any contradictions. However, as already explained, this lies beyond the scope of this project.

Before completing this section, it will be useful to refer to at least two sermons from the Svāmīnī Vāto where Guṇātītānanda Svāmī adds his revelation about the nature of Parabrahman and identifying him decisively with Svāmināŕāyaṇa. The statements are worth citing here almost full for the classical style they adopt – addressing Parabrahman with panegyric names that each celebrate a particular attribute, aspect or excellence and thereby providing greater insights about his identity – and also because, as we draw this whole chapter to a close, they serve as a useful compilation of the many aspects of Parabrahman that have been expounded from the beginning. The first sermon is as follows:

> That avatārin of all avatāras Śrī Harikṛṣṇa Pūrṇa Puruṣottama... reigns supreme with his divine form and replete with divine radiance, lordship, glory, strength, fame and similarly infinite divine qualities. He is one whose every wish is fulfilled, who is replete with the divine powers of doership, knowledge, action, dissolution, support, inspiration, eternal existence, extremely arresting charm, and whose powers are unfathomable, unrestricted, extraordinary, flawless, invincible, and is replete with the powers of grandeur, controllership, splendour, and infinite other divine powers. He is Śrī Harikṛṣṇa Puruṣottama Śrī Sahajānanda Svāmī, who is replete with multiple magnificently wondrous virtues, having the most divine of all divine forms while presiding in his Akṣaradhāma, who is unborn even while taking birth, unaltered, indivisible, having a divine form while having a human-shaped form, and having a human-shaped form while having a divine form, who is in Akṣaradhāma and yet here; in fact, wherever he is is the very centre of Akṣaradhāma. He, replete with magnificently wondrous and divine virtues such as generosity, profundity, sweetness, motherly love, integrity, knowledge, strength, radiance, taste, smell, etc., is the supremely highest Śrī Sahajānanda Svāmī Puruṣottama, who presides over his Akṣaradhāma while being served by infinite liberated souls and infinite powers. He is blissful by his own bliss [yet], out of loving mercy on Akṣara and all others, he accepts their service offered unto him. He himself is flawless in all ways and has all his desires fulfilled. He is served by Akṣara, and infinite liberated souls and powers and infinite vibhūtis [emanations], infinite lordship, and is replete with eternally accomplished, superlatively limitless, unrestricted, divine lordly powers, and whose birth has been

> through Dharmadeva and Bhaktimātā. This very Śrī Svāmināràyaṇa is ındeed Akṣarātīta, the supreme Puruṣottama from whom all avatāras manifest and in whom they all return (SV 7.27).

In the other sermon, Guṇātītānanda Svāmī quotes the address made to Svāmināràyana when he was ritually anointed as the head of the religious fellowship as a 20-year-old by the then-leader Ramānanda Svāmī. The extensive sermon reads in most part:

> This [Svāmināràyana] is worthy of being believed by, worshipped by and attained by everyone. There is a myriad variety of sounds, touches, sights, tastes and smells in this world, but he is beyond them all as extremely supreme – beyond all avatāras, all vibhūtis [emanatıons], all powers, the akṣaramuktas and even Akṣaradhāma. He is Akṣarātīta, replete with all happiness and bliss, the all-knower, fully present everywhere, having a divine form, the highest of all causes, the grantor of fruits to everyone's karmas, the support of all, the teacher of all, all-pervading, worthy of being offered upāsanā to by all [sarvopāsyamūrti], worthy of being contemplated upon by all, replete with all essences, replete with all wishes, absolutely perfect, flawless, indivisible, worthy of being offered devotion by all, the vessel of all lordship, the vessel of all powers, the vessel of all vibhūtis, the vessel of all splendours, the vessel of all charm, the vessel of all mercy, the vessel of infinite divine, redemptive qualities, magnificently wondrous, a superlatively limitless grand ocean of perfect forms, qualities and virtues, that is, Śrī Sahajānanda Svāmī Puruṣottama, worthy of being offered upāsanā by all, the Lord of all lords and the avatārin of all avatāras.... Thus he has manifested from Akṣaradhāma to liberate countless jīvas... the lord of Akṣaradhāma, the supreme and perfect Puruṣottama Bhagavān (SV 7.2).

I have relied in this section on simply presenting the statements from our two theological texts with little or no commentary, hoping that the statements themselves – already of quite considerable length – would adequately elucidate the point being made about the revelation of Svāmināràyaṇa as Parabrahman. All that needs to be said in conclusion is that based on these and other such

statements and sources, those of the Svāmināràyaṇa religious community confess their faith in Svāminārāyana as being the human form of Parabrahman manifest on earth during the relatively recent and short period of time between 1781 and 1830 CE. 'Svāminārāyaṇa' therefore becomes the name of choice for followers of the tradition by which to identify and worship Parabrahman, hence the name of the tradition itself.[170]

6.5.2.6) Continued Presence of Parabrahman through Akṣarabrahman

Our chapter on Parabrahman is not quite complete, especially the aspect of his manifestation on earth. We earlier established that one of the distinguishing features of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology was that Parabrahman – distinct from and the cause of all avatāras – himself manifests on earth in human form, and, vitally, that he chooses to remain present ever thereafter.

How does he do this? If Svāminārāyaṇa was only present on earth from 1781 to 1830, how does Parabrahman remain present to continue his liberative work after that period? Crucially, to whom do the evocative words of 'God manifest before your eyes' apply now, today?

These tantalising questions can only be properly answered after our exposition of Akṣarabrahman is complete, so it is to this to which we now promptly turn.

[170] The Bhāsyakāra elucidates upon the nomenclature of the 'Svāminārāyana' School, or Svāmināràyaṇa Darśana, at MuU-SB 3.2.11, p. 306.