
PART 3: THEMES OF SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA HINDU THEOLOGY

7) AKṢARABRAHMAN

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7) AKṢARABRAHMAN

When we began Part 3 with an overview of Svāminārāyaṇa theology's tattva mīmāṃsā (metaphysics), we noted that an immediately distinguishing feature of the system is that it hosts *five* eternal entities (or realities) – Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, māyā, īśvara and jīva – in contrast to other systems which have one, two or three. One of the metaphysical entities which readers might be unfamiliar with as found within Svāminārāyaṇa theology is Akṣarabrahman, known also as Akṣara and Brahman. Specifically, we noted that it raised a number of important and difficult questions of the system, such as:

- a) Is the 'Brahman' of the Svāminārāyaṇa School the same 'highest reality' as that of the other schools?
- b) If so, then what/who is 'Parabrahman'?
- c) If not – and 'Parabrahman' is the name simply applied to what others call Brahman – then what/who is this other 'Brahman'?
- d) Are there *two* 'highest realities' in the Svāminārāyaṇa School? Clearly not, for this is, by definition of the superlative, implausible. But then how are 'Brahman' and 'Parabrahman' related? Indeed, how are the two distinct?

During the process of our exposition of Akṣarabrahman in this chapter, we shall be answering all of these questions in some detail, beginning with the last question, which, in many ways, will help answer the rest as well as others about the nature, function and significance of Akṣarabrahman. While it will not be possible to raise and address all of the debates here concerning Akṣarabrahman,

especially when introducing it for the first time in such a theological context, all of the major themes will nonetheless be covered using our key theological texts of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition as well as the Prasthānatrayī and its commentaries.

As before, though, it will be helpful to our progress through this chapter if we first have an initial outline.

Akṣarabrahman (also called Akṣara and Brahman) is ontologically the second-highest entity – transcending everything, including māyā, except Parabrahman. It serves in the following four forms:

- As the abode of Parabrahman – the divine, luminous realm called Akṣaradhāma (occasionally also Brahmadhāma, Brahmapura, Brahmaloaka, Brahmamahola, etc.) which is presided over by Parabrahman in his distinct transcendental form, and which also holds the innumerable liberated souls (called akṣaramuktas) who enjoy the eternal unlimited bliss of Parabrahman.
- As a sevaka in Akṣaradhāma – the ideal devotee, human in form, forever residing in Akṣaradhāma as an exemplar to all other liberated souls.
- As Cidākāśa – the all-pervading light of Akṣarabrahman supporting countless millions of brahmāṇḍas.
- As the Brahmasvarūpa Guru – the human form on earth whom Parabrahman brings with him when he manifests in person and

through whom Parabrahman lives on and continues his work of liberation. The Guru leads jīvas and īśvaras to the liberated state of brahmarūpa (or akṣararūpa), wherein they experience the undisturbed bliss of Parabrahman.

7.1) Akṣarabrahman as Ontologically Distinct from Parabrahman

Our first task will be to establish Aksarabrahman as a metaphysical entity ontologically distinct from Parabrahman. Why does Svāminārāyaṇa theology feel the need to have another, discrete entity – apart from the highest entity Parabrahman – when other schools of Vedānta have managed fine without it? Crucially, is there scriptural support for such an entity within the Vedānta tradition?

To provide a fuller answer to these very important questions, we shall need to conduct a separate study of the Vedānta texts, checking for valid interpretations and arguments using the Vedāntic system's own tools of hermeneutics. If this study is to be satisfactorily thorough, it will also require juxtaposing the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition's interpretation with those of the other main schools of Vedānta and their rich commentarial corpus. For this, I have delimited the study to the following five schools: Kevalādvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita, Svābhāvīkabhedābheda, and Śuddhādvaita.

The aim, to be clear from the outset, is not to expose any flaws or inconsistencies in these other schools of Vedānta, or to establish the superiority of the

Svāminārāyaṇa school among them. Rather, the study offers a valuable opportunity for reasoned argumentation based on textual exegesis using classical hermeneutical tools on a doctrine that is central to Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.

While this study will necessarily demand a slight change in style from the one adopted thus far – by discussing other schools and drawing more heavily upon secondary sources – it should not be forgotten that it is still forms an important constitutive part in our meta-discourse of expounding the themes of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, and shall be especially relevant when checking for the theological validity of a system by way of its potential for reasoned argumentation within the constricts of scriptural authority.

Before delving into this detailed textual inquiry that is to follow, we shall need to begin with a brief explanation of the factors that will facilitate and determine it.

For this limited inquiry, I have chosen to examine three passages from the Prasthānatrayī (the canonical treatise-triad of the Vedānta system): one from the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, which invites a discussion from the Brahmasūtras; one from the eighth chapter of the Bhagavad-Gītā; and one from the fifteenth chapter of the Bhagavad-Gītā. As we learned in Part 1 when introducing the sources of this project, all doctrines of the Vedāntic schools must conform to a valid interpretation of this triad in order for them to be deemed authentic. Any deviation from this sacred revelation would render the doctrines invalid.

Furthermore, the Vedānta tradition is a “coherent, organically integrated tradition of commentaries”.¹⁷¹ Each ācārya of a school (or its early proponents) wrote extensive, systematic commentaries on the triad. These commentaries received secondary commentaries which, in turn, were subjects of further commentaries, expositions and/or summaries. This provides us with what Clooney describes as a “luxuriant commentarial elaboration that grew over generations.”¹⁷² Any serious attempt to understand and discuss Vedānta must inevitably include an engagement with these scholastic texts. Failing to do so would be like “examin[ing] a gem in a totally dark room, [or] appreciat[ing] a tree by cutting away everything but its roots.”¹⁷³

Hence, we shall be scrutinising each of the aforementioned three passages with the aid of at least three levels of supporting material gleaned from the major Vedānta schools and key texts from the Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta corpus. This will allow us to compare interpretations and fairly challenge the Svāminārāyaṇa School’s own theological propositions regarding Akṣarabrahman. As far as possible, we shall be using the primary sources in their original Sanskrit, supported at times with translations and secondary works of scholarship in English and occasionally Hindi and Gujarati.

¹⁷¹ Clooney, *Theology After Vedanta*, p. 14.

¹⁷² *ibid*, p. 23.

¹⁷³ *ibid*, p. 22.

J.A.B. van Buitenen bemoans the fact that some “Western scholars disregard these erudite studies by the privileged [commentators] with great disadvantage to their comprehension of the scholastic background of the studied authors.” J.A.B. van Buitenen, *Rāmānuja’s Vedārthasaṃgraha*, annotated trans. and critical edn, (Poona: Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, 1956), p. vi.

Since the subject of our inquiry lies within the realm of Vedānta, we must also accept that this inquiry is subject to the rules of examination that govern this realm. These “rules of textual interpretation”, Olivelle explains, “were first systematized within the [Purva] Mīmāṃsā school”,¹⁷⁴ a tradition which developed rigorous hermeneutical methods to achieve precision in religious practices.¹⁷⁵ Some of these principles and methods were adopted, and later also modified, by the Vedāntins¹⁷⁶ to help them determine the correct interpretation of their more philosophical texts.¹⁷⁷ Chief among these hermeneutical devices, it may be asserted, is a set of six tools which are collectively known as the ṣaḍ-linga, or ‘six clues’. Sāyaṇa Mādhava (14th century) in his famous *Sarvadarśanasāṅgraha*, a doxographic treatise of the various schools of Vedānta, cites a popular verse which encapsulates all six. It reads:

Upakramopasaṃhārāvabhyāso’pūrvatā phalam |
Arthavādopapattī ca liṅgam tātparyanirṇaye ||¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ Patrick Olivelle, *Renunciation in Hinduism: A Medieval Debate*, 2 vols (Vienna: Gerold; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), I, p. 56.

¹⁷⁵ Later schools of Mīmāṃsā, such as those propounded by Kumārila Bhaṭṭa and Prabhākara (both eighth century), were arguably more philosophically evolved.

¹⁷⁶ Vedānta (also called ‘Uttara-Mīmāṃsā’, or the ‘Later Inquiry’) is a natural heir to these hermeneutical principles and methods because it is traditionally paired with its predecessor Purva-Mīmāṃsā (the ‘Early Inquiry’, often called simply ‘Mīmāṃsā’). Together they form a part of the six orthodox systems of Hindu thought; the other pairs being Sāṃkhya and Yoga, and Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika. Hence, also, Clooney urges that (Advaita) Vedānta must be read ‘within the paradigm’ of Mīmāṃsā. See: *Theology After Vedanta*, pp. 23-26 and ‘Binding the Text: Vedanta as Philosophy and Commentary’, in *Texts in Context: Traditional Hermeneutics in South Asia*, ed. by Jeffrey R. Timm (Albany: State University of New York, 1992), pp. 47-68.

¹⁷⁷ “Vedanta employs all the Mīmāṃsā theory of hermeneutics in all its efforts towards the understanding of the Absolute as proclaimed by the Vedas.” A. Ramaswamy Iyengar, ‘Hermeneutics: A Vehicle of Perennial Wisdom’ in *Indian Theories of Hermeneutics*, ed. by P.C. Muraleemadhavan (New Chandrawal Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corporation, 2002), p. 123.

¹⁷⁸ Sāyaṇa Mādhava, *Sarvadarśanasāṅgraha* (Pune: The Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1924), pp. 405-06.

That is, to determine the import (tātparyanirṇaya) of a text treated within a particular section (prakaraṇa), one must check for:

- 1) upakrama and upasaṃhāra (opening and ending) – consistency between what is stated in the introduction and at the conclusion;
- 2) abhyāsa (repetition) – what is stated repeatedly;
- 3) apūrvatā (novelty) – what is novel or stated in a novel way as compared to other sections;
- 4) phala (fruit) – what the fruits stated relate to;
- 5) arthavāda (commendation) – what is commended (or condemned);
and
- 6) upapatti (reasoning) – what is logically argued for or against.

Importantly, Sāyaṇa Mādhava adds that this set of clues was “demonstrated by the earlier ācāryas.”¹⁷⁹ Indeed, exponents of each of the major schools are known to have applied these tools to advance their arguments. Rāmānuja, for example, cites them repeatedly in his *Vedārthasaṅgraha*. Śaṅkarite commentators such as Akhaṇḍānanda (14th century),¹⁸⁰ Vidyāraṇya (14th century),¹⁸¹ and Govindānanda (16th century)¹⁸² have also used them, as has the Bengali scholar

¹⁷⁹ Sāyaṇa Mādhava, *Sarvadarśanasāṅgraha*, p. 405.

¹⁸⁰ Akhaṇḍānanda, *Tattvadīpana* in Padmapādācārya, *Pañcapādikā with Commentaries by Prakāśātmā, Akhaṇḍānanda and Viṣṇubhaṭṭopādhyāya* (Varanasi: Mahesh Anusandhan Sansthan, 1992), p. 575.

¹⁸¹ Vidyāraṇyamuni, *Vivaraṇaprameyasāṅgraha* (Kashi: Achuyta Granthamala Karyalaya, 1940), p. 747.

¹⁸² Govindānanda, *Bhāṣyaratnāprabhā* in *Brahmasūtraśāṅkarabhāṣyam with Three Commentaries*, 2nd edn (Mumbai: Nirnayasagar Press, 1909), pp. 62 & 67.

of the Svābhāvīkabhedābheda School, Mādhava Mukundadeva (16th century).¹⁸³

As a result, the verse has since found its place in several encyclopaedic glosses of the Vedānta system.¹⁸⁴

Richard De Smet in his pioneering work *The Theological Method of Śaṅkara* elucidates upon how each of these six exegetical tools helps determine the sense and coherence of a text. In elaborating upon the first tool, he cites chapter six of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad as an example. It begins with the words “One only, without a second” (6.2.1), and ends with the sentence: “All this is one with that. That is the Truth. That is Ātman. Thou art that, O Śvetaketu” (6.6.13). De Smet then concludes: “Such clear beginnings and ends are the best sign of the intention of the śruti [Vedic verse or text].”¹⁸⁵ He thus gives prime importance to upakrama and upasaṃhāra.

This echoes Van Buitenen’s assertion in his notes to Rāmānuja’s *Vedārthasaṃgrah*. After listing the six “canons of exegesis... by which the right interpretation is determined”, he explains that “the most important are

¹⁸³ Mādhava Mukundadeva, *Adhyāsa-(Parapakṣa)-Girivajrākhyo Grantha* (Vrundavan: Śrī 108 Nimbārka Mahāsabhā, 1936), p. 207.

¹⁸⁴ For example: Tārānātha Bhaṭṭācārya, ed., *Vācaspatyam*, 7 vols (Varanasi: Chaukhamba, 1962), II, p. 1199; Bhīmācārya, ed., *Nyāyakośa*, 4th edn (Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1973), p. 158; and *Viśiṣṭādvaitakośa*, ed. by Lakṣmītātācārya, 6 vols (Melukote: Saṃskṛta Saṃśodhana Saṃsat, 1983-), III (1989), pp. 211-12.

See also: A. Ramaswamy Iyengar, ‘Hermeneutics: A Vehicle of Perennial Wisdom’ and C. Rajendran, ‘Aspects of Ancient Indian Hermeneutics’, both in *Indian Theories of Hermeneutics*, ed. by P.C. Muraleemadhavan (New Chandrawal Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corporation, 2002), pp. 123-24 and pp. 175-76, respectively.

¹⁸⁵ Richard de Smet, *The Theological Method of Śaṅkara*, (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1953), pp. 207-08 cited in Julius Lipner, *The Face of Truth* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993), p. 150 n38.

upakrama and upasaṃhāra: the latter may never be in conflict with the former in order to establish the ekavākyatā¹⁸⁶ [consistency] of a context.”¹⁸⁷

Hence, throughout our inquiry here, we shall be applying this most important hermeneutical tool to check for semantic consistency within the various interpretations of the selected passages. We shall also refer to the other tools wherever the scope of the discussion allows. Importantly, then, our three passages and their interpretations, central as they are to Brahmanic discussion among the various schools of Vedānta, will be analysed using classical hermeneutical tools and methods developed within the Vedāntic tradition itself.

We can now proceed to carefully scrutinise our three canonical passages as interpreted within the various commentarial texts of each of the major Vedānta schools and then also in the theological texts of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition.

7.1.1) Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 2.1.2: akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ

The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad belongs to the Atharva Veda and is considered one of the principal Upaniṣads in Brahmanic discussion.¹⁸⁸ It comprises 64 verses¹⁸⁹ over

¹⁸⁶ Literally, ‘one-statement-ness’.

¹⁸⁷ Van Buitenen, *Rāmānuja’s Vedārthasaṅgraha*, annotated trans. and critical edn, (Poona: Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, 1956), p. 200 n134.

¹⁸⁸ Three of the twenty-eight adhikaranas in the Brahmasūtras which directly discuss Brahman are devoted to the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad. Śāṅkara alone cites it 129 times in his *Brahmasūtrabhāṣyam*. Paul Deussen, *Sixty Upaniṣads of the Veda*, trans. by V.M. Bedekar and G.B. Palsule, 2 vols (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980), II, p. 569.

¹⁸⁹ Rāmānuja mentions a verse after 1.1.6 which is not found in some editions, making for him a total of 65 verses.

three chapters, themselves called muṇḍakas, with each muṇḍaka being further divided into two parts, called khaṇḍas.

The first part of chapter one introduces brahmavidyā, “the knowledge which is the basis of all forms of knowledge” (MuU 1.1.1), by tracing its transmission from Brahmā (not to be confused with Brahman) to his eldest son Atharvan, then successively on to Aṅgiras, Bhāradvāja Satyavāha, Aṅgirasa, and finally, to Śaunaka, ‘the wealthy householder’. In the ensuing dialogue between the latter two, Śaunaka asks:

O venerable [Aṅgirasa], by knowing what can all else be known?
(MuU 1.1.3).

In reply, Aṅgirasa defines two types of knowledge – aparā (lower) and parā (higher). The lower knowledge, he explains, includes learning of the four Vedas and their auxiliary disciplines – phonetics, metrics, grammar, etymology, astronomy, and ritual science. In contrast:

Atha parā yayā tad akṣaram adhigamyate |

The higher knowledge is that by which ‘akṣara’¹⁹⁰ can be realised
(MuU 1.1.5).

The remaining portion of this first part is devoted to a description of that ‘akṣara’.

¹⁹⁰ We shall leave the term ‘akṣara’ un-translated since its interpretation is the very core of this discussion.

In part two of the first chapter, a comparison unfolds between the two knowledge-types, specifically describing the transient fruits of purely ritualistic Vedic karma. It ends with another mention of the higher, brahmavidyā. Thus, the first chapter serves as a foreword to the continuing elucidation of brahmavidyā.

The second chapter opens with a descriptive verse narrating the process of creation and dissolution in relation to 'akṣara':

This is the truth: As from a blazing fire, sparks of like form issue forth by the thousands, similarly, O dear [Śaunaka], beings of various forms issue forth from akṣara and return to it only (MuU 2.1.1).

Immediately thereafter, we find a turn in subject. With the following verse begins the description of [Parama]Puruṣa, the supreme person:

Divine and formless is Puruṣa; residing without and within, unborn.

Without breath and without mind, pure, he is... (MuU 2.1.2).

The remaining portion of this verse, upon which we are focusing this section of our inquiry, reads in Sanskrit:

akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ

– a seemingly simple phrase which, as we shall see, can prove rather difficult to interpret consistently.

At the outset, what can be said about the three terms in this phrase? Most basically, the following:

Term	Type	Gender	Number	Case	Meaning
akṣarāt	?	male or neuter	singular	Ablative	?
parataḥ	invariable adjective	(any)	(any)	(ablative)	high
paraḥ	adjective	male	singular	nominative	high

At the core of our discussion lies the term 'akṣara' – which we must remember is synonymous with 'Brahman' and 'Akṣarabrahman' in the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition. A correct understanding of the term will naturally lead to a correct interpretation of the passage and, indeed, most of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad seeing how central it is to its underlying theme.

Etymologically, 'akṣara' is derived from the verb kṣiṇ, meaning 'to wane' or 'to perish'. The negating 'a' prefix thus relates 'akṣara' to 'imperishable'.¹⁹¹ But exactly how? The term – like 'brown', for example, in English – can serve as an adjectival noun, an adjective, and as a proper noun. Hence its lexical confusion. An introductory overview of how these three options can be applied and what their ramifications could be shall aid us later when we delve into a survey of the interpretations offered by the various schools.

'Akṣara' as an Adjectival Noun: Applying the rules of Sanskrit grammar, where an adjective must agree with its corresponding noun in gender, number and case,

¹⁹¹ Van Buitenen, in tracing "the career of *akṣara*" through Vedic texts, emphasises its meaning as 'syllable', and later as relating to the creative syllable AUM. He rejects its literal meaning as 'imperishable', but accepts that it becomes a descriptor of another being or entity – an adjectival noun. 'Akṣara', in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 79.3 (1959), 176-87.

it is evident that 'paraḥ' – like the other adjectives in the verse – qualifies Puruṣa since both terms are male, singular, and in the nominative case. That would leave the invariable adjective 'parataḥ' as the qualifier of 'akṣarāt', thus providing us with a straightforward reading of the phrase:

The high [Puruṣa] transcends the high imperishable.

Or phrased more naturally:

Puruṣa is higher than the high imperishable.

But what is to be understood as this 'imperishable', i.e. which noun is it representing? Jīva, prakṛti (either sentient or insentient), Śrī, Paramātman? All are intrinsically imperishable. As we shall see, the ācāryas are divided on this key issue.

'Akṣara' as an Adjective: If, alternatively, 'akṣara' is used as a simple adjective, the phrase as a whole becomes rather awkwardly constructed. There now appears to be a missing noun for the invariable adjective 'parataḥ' to qualify. It could qualify another qualifier, and so perhaps 'parataḥ paraḥ' together become "higher than the high" – which can plausibly apply to Puruṣa, the supremely highest person. But then that leaves the ablative 'akṣarāt'. What is it qualifying? It cannot legitimately qualify Puruṣa because of the difference in cases. So again, there is a missing noun. We are left asking: 'imperishable *what?*'

'Akṣara' as a Proper Noun: Treating 'akṣara' as a proper noun effectively implies it is a distinct entity – such as the individual 'Mr Brown' in our analogy, as

compared to the colour brown (adjectival noun) or a hue of that colour (adjective). This would be a 'conventional' (rūḍha) use of the term, as opposed to an etymologically derived (vyutpanna) one, since its significance as meaning 'imperishable' is rendered secondary. But this would raise numerous questions about how to interpret the same term when it appears elsewhere in the same Upaniṣad where it seemingly applies to Puruṣa. And so why the need for another, distinct entity?

These and many such questions are addressed in our discussion below.

Noteworthy at this point is how the lexical diversity of 'akṣara' has led modern Indian and Western scholars to offer a variety of translations (note: not *interpretations*) for the term. The following table illustrates:

Translation	Translator(s)
Creator	Mascaró ¹⁹²
Imperishable	Deussen ¹⁹³ Hume ¹⁹⁴ Müller ¹⁹⁵ Thibaut ¹⁹⁶
imperishable	Deussen ¹⁹⁷ Olivelle ¹⁹⁸ Roebuck ¹⁹⁹
immortal	Ram Mohun Roy ²⁰⁰
immutable	Radhakrishnan ²⁰¹
Indestructible	Thibaut ²⁰²
indestructible	Swami Sivanand ²⁰³
unchangeable	Dasgupta ²⁰⁴

¹⁹² Juan Mascaró, *The Upanishads* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 77.

¹⁹³ Paul Deussen, *The System of the Vedānta*, trans. by Charles Johnston (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1990), p. 132.

¹⁹⁴ Robert Ernest Hume, *The Thirteen Upanishads*, 2nd rev. edn (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 370.

¹⁹⁵ Max Muller, *The Upanishads*, 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1962), II, p. 34.

¹⁹⁶ George Thibaut, trans., *Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, Part I, *Sacred Books of the East*, ed. by Max Muller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), vol. XXXIV, p. 283.

¹⁹⁷ Paul Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upanishads*, 2nd edn, trans. by Rev. A.S. Geden (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1979), p. 202.

¹⁹⁸ Patrick Olivelle, trans., *Upanisads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 271.

¹⁹⁹ Valerie J. Roebuck, *The Upanisads*, rev. edn (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 323.

²⁰⁰ Ram Mohun Roy, *Translation of the Moonduk-Opunishud of the Uthurvu-Ved* (Calcutta: D. Lankheet, 1819), p. 10.

²⁰¹ RadhaKṛṣṇan, *The Principal Upanisads*, Centenary Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 680.

²⁰² George Thibaut, trans., *Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary of Rāmānuja*, Part III, *Sacred Books of the East*, ed. by Max Muller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), vol. XLVIII, p. 283.

²⁰³ Swami Sivananda, *Principal Upanishads*, 2 vols (Rishikesh: Yoga Vedanta Forest University, 1950), I, p. 343.

²⁰⁴ Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, 1st Indian edn, 5 vols (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), III, p. 46.

All of these scholars have translated the term 'akṣara' as being either an adjective of or a synonym (adjectival noun) for Puruṣa. However, this evades important issues of contextual and semantic consistency when 'akṣara' appears both earlier (at 1.1.5, 1.1.7, 1.2.13, 2.1.1) and again later (at 2.2.2 and 2.2.3) within the same Upaniṣad. For a more hermeneutically grounded approach, we must now turn to the classical Vedānta schools, and observe how they have interpreted this passage in their commentarial literature.

7.1.1.1) Kevalādvaita

The first mention of 'akṣara' in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad is in reference to the 'higher knowledge', at 1.1.5. Śaṅkara states in his commentary of that verse:

Higher knowledge is that by which the imperishable Parameśvara can be realised.²⁰⁵

Clearly, Śaṅkara has taken 'akṣara' here as an adjectival noun representing Parameśvara, the imperishable supreme Lord. To support his interpretation, Śaṅkara argues that the description that immediately follows can only be of the supreme reality, hence, here, too, 'akṣara' must refer to the same. Indeed, verse 1.1.6 begins to describe 'akṣara' as:

invisible, intangible, without lineage or without caste, without eyes or ears, and without hands or feet; it is eternal, pervading, omnipresent, and exceedingly subtle. That is the immutable that the wise perceive as the source of all beings....²⁰⁶

Surely, this must be a description of the supreme reality, Śaṅkara maintains.

²⁰⁵ *Muṇḍakopaniṣad with Śāṅkarabhāṣya* (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1992), p. 12.

²⁰⁶ *Muṇḍakopaniṣad with Śāṅkarabhāṣya*, p. 13.

This group of verses is also the topic of discussion in the Brahmasūtras. Taking their cue from the opening of MuU 1.1.6, aphorisms 1.2.21 to 1.2.23 are called the Adṛśyatvādiguṇakādhikaraṇa – “Regarding the attributes of invisibility, etc.” The doubt raised by Śāṅkara as a prima facie view is whether these qualities – invisibility, intangibility, etc. – can qualify the non-sentient Pradhāna of the Sāṃkhya system (referred to as Prakṛti in Vedānta²⁰⁷). After all, it is the material ‘source of all beings’, as mentioned above. Furthermore, how else could one reconcile the statement at MuU 2.1.2, placing Puruṣa as higher than the high ‘akṣara’? Pradhāna, being the source of all beings, transcends them all and yet is subordinate to Puruṣa.

Śāṅkara rejects this suggestion emphatically, arguing:

That which here is spoken of as the source of all beings, distinguished by such qualities as invisibility and so on, can be the highest Lord only; nothing else. Whereupon is this conclusion formed? On the statement of attributes. For the clause, ‘He who is all-knowing, all-perceiving’ [MuU 1.1.9 & 2.2.7] clearly states an attribute belonging to the highest Lord only, since the attributes of knowing all and perceiving all cannot be predicated... of the non-intelligent Pradhāna.²⁰⁸

But then what to make of “akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ”? Having ‘akṣara’ mean the imperishable highest Lord here at MuU 1.1.6 would imply that there is an even higher entity at MuU 2.1.2. Surely, nothing can be higher than the highest Lord. And yet this is what would result – *if* consistency was to be retained.

²⁰⁷ For the significance of Prakṛti and its interchangeability with Pradhāna, see Lipner, *The Face of Truth*, pp. 155-56 n28.

²⁰⁸ *Brahmasūtra with Śāṅkarabhāṣya*, (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, n.d.) pp. 82-83; trans. of Thibaut, *Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary of Śāṅkarācārya*, I, pp. 136-37.

Śaṅkara, however, chooses 'akṣara' at MuU 2.1.2 to mean the "unmanifest form of Prakṛti"²⁰⁹ which to some extent reverts to the prima facie view mentioned earlier. In commentating on BS 1.2.22, he elaborates:

Here the term ['akṣara'] means that undeveloped entity which represents the seminal potentiality of names and forms, contains the fine parts of the material elements, abides in the Lord, forms his limiting adjunct, and being itself no effect [but the cause] is high in comparison to all effects.²¹⁰

Srinivasa Chari thus summarises in his *The Philosophy of the Vedāntasūtra*: "The word akṣara here [MuU 2.1.2] does not mean Brahman as the source of the universe (bhūtayoni) but the primordial cosmic matter in its unmanifest form... for the obvious reason that there cannot be anything greater than the akṣara as Brahman."²¹¹ There seems to be some inconsistency here between how Śaṅkara interprets 'akṣara' initially, as Parameśvara, and later, as prakṛti, within the same topic.

Śaṅkara realised this, of course, and so offers a number of arguments to justify his interpretation. One of particular interest is regards to the explicit mention at MuU 1.1.4 of two categories of knowledge – one lower and the other higher. If, Śaṅkara argues, he had obstinately interpreted 'akṣara' at MuU 2.1.2 in the same way he had at, say, MuU 1.1.6 – as Brahman – this would have necessitated a third knowledge-category higher than that of parāvidyā, because now its subject,

²⁰⁹ *Muṇḍakopaniṣad with Śāṅkarabhāṣya* (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1992), p. 14.

²¹⁰ *Brahmasūtra with Śāṅkarabhāṣya*, p. 85; trans. of Thibaut, *Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary of Śāṅkarācārya*, I, p. 140.

²¹¹ S.M. Srinivas Chari, *The Philosophy of the Vedāntasūtra* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1998), p. 37.

'akṣara', is no longer the highest entity. Having thus three categories of knowledge – the lower, based on the Ṛg Veda, etc.; the higher, based on the knowledge of 'akṣara'; and the highest, based on this higher-than-'akṣara' entity – directly contradicts MuU 1.1.4, and hence is untenable.²¹² Moreover, the term 'brahmavidyā' would effectively be rendered meaningless, because now it no longer relates to Brahman or the highest entity, even though it is commended at the very beginning of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad as "the highest knowledge" (MuU 1.1.2) and "the base of all forms of knowledge" (MuU 1.1.1).²¹³ The logic is, of course, incisive – and necessary to defend the breach of an all-important exegetical rule.

A study of works by later scholars of the Kevalādvaita School reveals no clear attempt to resolve the apparent anomaly. Naturally, they offer further justification and support for Śaṅkara's interpretation from within the matrix of their own doctrines and concepts. For example, Vācaspati Mīśra (ninth century), the first and widely respected as the greatest champion of Śaṅkara's *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, continues in his own *Bhāmatī* commentary with a rejection of Prakṛti as the source of the universe, thus identifying Brahman as 'akṣara' at MuU 1.1.5-7.²¹⁴ When met at MuU 2.1.2 with the prospect of an entity higher than this highest Brahman, he applies Śaṅkara's concept of vivarta (illusory

²¹² *Brahmasūtra with Śaṅkarabhāṣya*, p. 83; trans. of Thibaut, *Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, I, p. 138.

²¹³ *ibid.*

²¹⁴ Vācaspati Mīśra, *Bhāmatī* in *The Brahmasūtra Śaṅkara Bhāṣya with the Commentaries: Bhāmatī, Kalpataru and Parimala*, ed. by K.L. Joshi, 3 vols (Delhi: Parimal, 1987), I, pp. 255-57.

appearance) to redefine this earlier mention as the attribute-less (Nirguna or Nirviśeṣa) Brahman, and 'akṣara' here as the subordinate attribute-full (Saguṇa) Brahman.²¹⁵

This interpretation is essentially furthered by both Amalānanda (thirteenth century) in his *Vedāntakalpataru*,²¹⁶ a commentary on *Bhāmatī*, and thereafter by the famed Appaya Dīkṣita (sixteenth century) in his commentary on *Vedāntakalpataru, Kalpataruparimala*.²¹⁷

7.1.1.2) Viśiṣṭādvaita

Rāmānuja, in this instance, follows Śaṅkara closely. In his *Śrībhāṣya* commentary of the corresponding BS 1.2.22²¹⁸, he advances a similar prima facie view by raising the doubt of:

whether the Akṣara, possessing invisibility and other such attributes,²¹⁹ and the Being which is higher than what is beyond the Akṣara,²²⁰ are (respectively) the Prakṛti (i.e. material Nature) and the Puruṣa (i.e. individual self)?²²¹

²¹⁵ *ibid*, pp. 257-58.

²¹⁶ Amalānanda, *Vedāntakalpataru*, *ibid*, pp. 255-58.

²¹⁷ Appaya Dīkṣita, *Kalpataruparimala*, *ibid*, pp. 255-58.

²¹⁸ Rāmānuja bifurcates an aphorism in 1.2, hence numbering of aphorisms in this *pāda* of his *Śrībhāṣya* is displaced by one in comparison to other commentaries.

²¹⁹ MuU 1.1.6.

²²⁰ MuU 2.1.2.

²²¹ Rāmānuja, *Śārīrakamīmāṃsā Śrībhāṣya* (Brindaban: Mohalla Gyan Gudarhi, 1937), pp. 218-19; trans. based on M. Rangacharya and M.B. Vardaraja Aiyangar, *The Vedāntasūtras with the Śrībhāṣya of Rāmānujācārya*, 2nd edn, 3 vols (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988-91), II (1989), p. 41.

In support of this position is the argument that the Puruṣa of the Sāṃkhya system is considered the aggregate of all individual selves (samaṣṭipurūṣa), and is thus higher than the undifferentiated Prakṛti (or Pradhāna), which also happens to be the material source of all beings. This is indeed an interesting argument because it is based on an attempt to retain semantic consistency for the term 'akṣara' as Prakṛti at both MuU 1.1.6 and 2.1.2.

However, Rāmānuja, like Śaṅkara, insists:

That which possesses invisibility and the other qualities, and that which is higher than the high Akṣara, is no other than the Paramapurūṣa [highest person] himself. Why? For the text declares attributes which belong to the highest Self only, namely, 'He who is all-knowing, all-perceiving' [MuU 1.1.9], etc.²²²

Realising that this is a deviation from how he has interpreted 'akṣara' in its previous occurrences, Rāmānuja attempts to justify his interpretation of MuU 2.1.2. He explains that the highest Puruṣa is, of course, the subject of the highest knowledge [MuU 1.1.5], characterised by such attributes as invisibility, etc. and the source of all beings [MuU 1.1.6], the creator of the world [MuU 1.1.7], from whom the world with all its differentiated names and forms evolves, and who is the all-knower and all-perceiver [MuU 1.1.8-9] – and thus identified by 'akṣara' in all these verses. However, this cannot be the case with "akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ" [MuU 2.1.2] because:

being the all-knower and the cause of all, and hence also the highest of all, there can be nothing that is higher than him.²²³

²²² Rāmānuja, *Śārīrakamīmāṃsā Śrībhāṣya*, p. 83; trans. based on *The Vedāntasūtras with the Śrībhāṣya of Rāmānujācārya*, II, p. 42.

²²³ Rāmānuja, *Śrībhāṣya*, p. 219.

And therefore,

the word 'akṣara' here denotes the insentient [prakṛti] in its subtle, elementary form.²²⁴

Sudarśana Sūrī (13th century), the first and foremost commentator on Rāmānuja's *Śrībhāṣya*, opts to explain (away) this inconsistency in his *Śrutaprakāśikā* by citing MuU 1.2.13, which alludes to brahmavidyā as the knowledge of "akṣara Puruṣa". Interpreting 'akṣara' here as an adjective, he argues that this verse establishes 'akṣara' and [Parama]Puruṣa as being non-different, thus either term could equally be applied as pertaining to the source of all beings [MuU 1.1.7], etc. And so, because Puruṣa is akṣara, it is obvious, then, that some entity other than Puruṣa must relate to the 'akṣara' in "akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ". This is the primordial prakṛti, as Rāmānuja has proclaimed.²²⁵ Such an explanation, however, does little to mend the original break in interpretative consistency.

A generation after Sudarśana Sūrī, two of the most important stalwarts of the Viśiṣṭādvaita School rose – Pillai Lokācārya and Vedānta Deśika (both 13-14th century). The latter, in particular, was a prolific writer, expounding and defending Viśiṣṭādvaita doctrines through numerous independent works such as his *Nyāyapariśuddhi*, *Nyāyasiddhāñjana*, *Tattvamuktākalāpa*, and his magnum opus, the *Rahasyatrayasāra*. He also wrote a short work based on the *Śrībhāṣya*,

²²⁴ ibid.

²²⁵ Sudarśana Sūrī, *Śrutaprakāśikā on Rāmānuja's Śrībhāṣya*, 2 vols (Mysore: Śrī Vedānta Deśika Vihāra Sabhā, 1959), II, BS 1.2.22.

called the *Adhikaraṇasārāvali*. As the name suggests, it is a summarisation of the various adhikaraṇas in the Brahmasūtras, and so adds very little to what Rāmānuja has already stated at BS 1.2.22-24.²²⁶

Rāmānuja himself did not write a commentary on the Upaniṣads. This was supplied in the 15th century by Raṅgarāmānuja, whose *Upaniṣatprakāśikā* is little more than a collation of Rāmānuja's arguments from the *Śrībhāṣya*. Hence at MuU 1.1.5 and 1.1.8 (1.1.7 in all other editions), he explains 'akṣara' is denotive of the highest entity, Paramātman.²²⁷ But then at MuU 2.1.2 he argues that this cannot possibly hold true here because there can be nothing higher than the highest Self. Thus, in "akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ", 'akṣara' must mean the unmanifest prakṛti.²²⁸

7.1.1.3) Dvaita

Madhva (also known as Ānandatīrtha) characteristically offers a novel solution to the problem of consistent interpretation within the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (which he calls the 'Ātharvaṇa Upaniṣad'). He differs initially from his two predecessors by classifying the teachings of even the four Vedas and the six Vedāṅgas as parāvidyā "if [they] reveal Viṣṇu."²²⁹ He thus relates the 'akṣara' mentioned in

²²⁶ Vedānta Deśika, *Adhikaraṇasārāvali with Two Commentaries: Adhikaraṇacintāmaṇi and Sārārtharatnaprabhā* (Madras: Sri Nilayam, 1974), pp. 172-74.

²²⁷ Raṅgarāmānuja, *Prakāśikā on Īśa-Kena-Kaṭha-Praśna-Muṇḍaka-Māṇḍukyānandavalli-Bhṛgūpaniṣadaḥ* (Pune: Anandashram Mudranalaya, 1947), pp. 153-54 & 157.

²²⁸ *ibid*, pp. 165-67.

²²⁹ *Shatprasna-Atharvana-Mandukya-Upanishads (with English Translation and Notes According to Sri Madhvacharya's Bashya)*, trans. by K.T. Pandurangī (Chirtanpur: Sriman Madhva Siddhantonnahini Sabha, 1986), pp. 52-53 [emphasis added].

connection with the highest knowledge at MuU 1.1.5 to the highest deity (also referred to as Hiraṇyagarbha²³⁰).

How Madhva tackles 'akṣara' at MuU 2.1.2 is more fully apparent in his *Sūtrabhāṣya*, the first and most important of his four commentaries on the Brahmasūtras.²³¹ Together with its subsequent commentaries – chief of which are Jayatīrtha's *Tattvapraśāṅgīkā* (14th century), Vyāsātīrtha's *Tātparyacandrikā* (15th-16th century) and Rāghavendratīrtha's *Tātparyacandrikāprakāśa* (17th century), the latter two being successive commentaries upon the preceding commentary – we are provided a complete picture of the Dvaita School position.

To begin with, Madhva offers four options for a prima facie view at BS 1.2.21. Could that which is endowed with such attributes as invisibility, etc.²³² be 1) insentient prakṛti, 2) sentient prakṛti, 3) Brahmā, or even 4) Rudra?

The first view gains support from the analogies at MuU 1.1.7 – a spider spinning out its web and drawing it in again, herbs and plants sprouting from the earth, and hair growing on a person's head – all of which affirm the material causality of 'akṣara'. This insentient prakṛti's relationship with its sentient counterpart could also allow the latter to qualify, because it could thus be regarded as the

²³⁰ *Sūtraprasthānam* and *Upaniṣatprasthānam* in *Sarvamūlagranthāḥ* (Bangalore: Akhila Bharata Madhva Maha Mandala Publications, 1969), p. 30.

²³¹ The *Sūtrānuvyaḥyāna* is a versified form of the *Sūtrabhāṣya*; the *Nyāyavivraṇa* deals exclusively with the organic details of the Brahmasūtra adhikaraṇas; and the *Brahmasūtrānubhāṣya* is a brief extension upon the first commentary.

²³² MuU 1.1.6-9.

efficient cause, if only figuratively. Of the two, however, the former is thought to be more intimately connected to the effect (the world and all beings), and so, claims Vyāsātīrtha, the insentient prakṛti should be given priority of consideration.²³³

The latter two options stem from two references to the person of Brahmā²³⁴ and one to Īśa,²³⁵ and a confusion of whether brahmavidyā could possibly relate to either Brahmā or Rudra. This is quickly ruled out leaving the insentient prakṛti as Brahman’s sole challenger for the position of ‘akṣara’.

Madhva defends that Brahman is the efficient cause of the universe and only it is endowed with qualities such as invisibility, etc. For how can an insentient entity be “the all-knower and all-perceiver...”, as described at MuU 1.1.9? Hence, Brahman should be understood as being represented by the adjectival noun ‘akṣara’ throughout the MuU.

But then what of MuU 2.1.2? “This [verse]”, B.N.K. Sharma explains on behalf of the prima facie advocate, “makes the identification of the Akṣara with the Supreme Brahman impossible”, because it necessarily implies an entity higher

²³³ Vyāsātīrtha’s *Tātparyacandrikā* in *Srī Madhvācārya Brahmaśūtrabhāṣya with Three Glosses*, critically ed. by R. Raghavendra Acharya, 2nd edn, 3 vols (Mysore: Oriental Research Institute, 1992), III, p. 498.

²³⁴ MuU 1.1.1 & 1.1.9.

²³⁵ MuU 3.1.3.

than this Brahman. "No Vedāntin", he continues, "could consent to deprive Brahman of its summit position.... Hence Akṣara must be prakṛti."²³⁶

Not so, Madhva maintains. Brahman can relate to 'akṣara' and retain its highest position if one accepts the notion of three 'akṣaras'. He postulates that the insentient primordial prakṛti (or mūla-prakṛti), the sentient cit-prakṛti (or Śrī), and the Supreme Self (Paramātman) are all imperishable, and hence all three are 'akṣara'. Furthermore, each stand in ascending order of imperishability to each other: prakṛti, the material source of the world, is the first and lowest 'akṣara'; Śrī, the deity presiding over the insentient prakṛti, is the higher, second 'akṣara'; and Paramātman is the highest, third 'akṣara'. For his purpose, Madhva cites a verse purportedly from the Skanda Purāṇa. It reads:

Prakṛti, insentient in form, is the lower Akṣara. [Whereas] Śrī, the sentient higher prakṛti, consorted to Viṣṇu, is called higher Akṣara. Above her is Parameśvara [i.e. Viṣṇu], known as the high[est] Akṣara.²³⁷

This verse, however, is untraceable!

Sharma finally concludes: "It is fully conceded by Madhva that the akṣara that is placed at the starting point of the series of the three akṣaras in 'akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ' is different from the akṣara that stands at the summit of that series."²³⁸

²³⁶ B.N.K. Sharma, *The Brahmasūtras and their Principal Commentaries: A Critical Exposition*, 2nd edn, 3 vols (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1986), I, p. 183.

²³⁷ Cited in *Sūtraprasthānam in Sarvamūlagranthāḥ*, p. 31; *Anubhāsya of Śrī Madhvācārya with the Commentary Tattvapraśāṅkā of Śrī Chalāri Śeṣācārya*, ed. by R.G. Malagi (Mysore: Oriental Research Institute, 1985), p. 29; and *Shatprasna-Atharvana-Mandukya-Upanishads*, p. 68.

²³⁸ Sharma, *The Brahmasūtras and their Principal Commentaries*, I, p. 184.

That is, there is an inconsistent interpretation of 'akṣara' within this passage of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad.

7.1.1.4) Svābhāvīkabhedābheda

Like Rāmānuja, Nimbārka did not comment directly on the Upaniṣads. Moreover, his commentary on the Brahmasūtras, called the *Vedāntapārijātasaurabha*, is extremely brief to the point of being aphoristic in itself, prompting his adherents to more correctly refer to it as a 'vṛtti' or 'vākyaṛtha'²³⁹ (explanation) rather than a 'bhāṣya' (commentary). Indeed, his 'explanation' of BS 1.2.22-24 amounts to little more than a sentence for each of the three aphorisms.²⁴⁰ Later proponents of the Svābhāvīkabhedābheda School, however, have furnished extensive works upon the *Vedāntapārijātasaurabha*, chief among which is the *Vedāntakaustubha*²⁴¹ of Śrīnivāsa²⁴². To this day, it remains one of the principal expository texts of the School.

Satyānanda observes that "much of [t]his bhāṣya appears to be a summary of the bhāṣya of Śāṅkara wherever there is no doctrinal conflict between Nimbārka and

²³⁹ The colophon appended to each of the *pādas* reads: "Iti śrīmad-bhagavan-nimbārka-viracite śārīraka-mīmāṃsā-vākyaṛthe vedānta-pārijāta-saurabhe..."

²⁴⁰ Satyānanda, *Nimbārka*, p. 173.

²⁴¹ Bose explains that Śrīnivāsa's *Vedāntakaustubha* is not technically a 'commentary' on Nimbārka's *Vedāntapārijātasaurabha*, but an independent commentary on the Brahmasūtras which "elucidates admirably the points of Nimbārka by means of suitable arguments and quotations." See: *Vedāntapārijātasaurabha of Nimbārka and Vedāntakaustubha of Śrīnivāsa: Commentaries on the Brahmasūtras*, trans. and ann. by Roma Bose, 3 vols (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1940-1943), I, p. 11. Also, its colophon reads: "Śrīnivāsācāryyena viracite śārīraka-mīmāṃsā-bhāṣye vedānta-kaustubhe..."

²⁴² Satyānanda, who claims Nimbārka predates Śāṅkara, places Śrīnivāsa after Śāṅkara but before Rāmānuja, i.e. between the 9th and 11th centuries; *Nimbārka*, pp. 119-48. Dasgupta finds this dating "hardly credible"; *A History of Indian Philosophy*, III, p. 399.

Śaṅkara.”²⁴³ Accordingly, then, Śrīnivāsa first treats the ‘akṣara’ of MuU 1.1.6 as an adjectival noun representing Paramātman, the highest self.²⁴⁴

But then at MuU 2.1.2, breaking from Śaṅkara, he offers three options. ‘Akṣara’, Śrīnivāsa claims, can denote: 1) Paramapurusa’s own power (sva-śakti), 2) pradhāna (i.e. prakṛti), or 3) Puruṣa, the aggregate of all individual souls. Each is greater than all individual souls, all modifications, and pradhāna, respectively, yet all three are subordinate to Paramapurusa, the Supreme Person.²⁴⁵

It is unclear why Śrīnivāsa feels compelled to offer so many options. What is clear, however, is that there seems to be some interpretative inconsistency. Śrīnivāsa admits: “[‘Akṣara’] mentioned the second time... does not refer to Paramātman as it did earlier.”²⁴⁶

7.1.1.5) Śuddhādvaita

Some eighty-four works are traditionally attributed to Vallabha, many of which are extremely short devotional tracts. One of his most important and theological works is his laconic commentary on the Brahmasūtras, the *Aṅubhāṣya*.²⁴⁷ This

²⁴³ Satyānanda, *Nimbārka*, p. 147.

²⁴⁴ Śrīnivāsācārya, *Vedāntakaustubha* in *Brahmasūtranimbārkabhāṣyam*, 4 vols (New Delhi: Chawkhamba, 2000), I, p. 163.

²⁴⁵ Śrīnivāsācārya, *Vedāntakaustubha*, pp. 164-65.

²⁴⁶ Śrīnivāsācārya, *Vedāntakaustubha*, p. 165; based on trans. by Bose, *Vedāntapārijātasaurabha of Nimbārka and Vedāntakaustubha of Śrīnivāsa*, I, p. 129.

²⁴⁷ There is a theory among adherents of the Śuddhādvaita School that Vallabha’s *Aṅubhāṣya* (literally, ‘small commentary’) was an abridgement of his more comprehensive *Brhadbhāṣya* (‘large commentary’) which is now lost. Jethalal G. Shah, *An Introduction to Anubhāṣya* (Baroda & Delhi: Shri Vallabha, 1984), pp. 12-22.

has a string of extensive commentaries attached to it, most notable of which is the *Bhāṣyaparakāśa* by Puruṣottamacaraṇa (17th-18th century), which was in turn commentated upon by Yogi Gopeśvara (18th-19th century) in his *Bhāṣyaparakāśaraśmi*. Together they provide a window into the theology of the Śuddhādvaita School.

In a slightly different vein from his predecessors, Vallabha begins with a prima facie view wherein the Sāṃkhya system's aggregate soul (Puruṣa) – not prakṛti – is 'akṣara', since it, too, can be the source of the world as it shares dual causality with prakṛti. Like Rāmānuja, Madhva and Nimbārka, he advances this doubt by arguing that such an interpretation allows the higher-than-'akṣara' entity mentioned at MuU 2.1.2 to relate to Brahman – thus maintaining semantic consistency.²⁴⁸

Vallabha returns, of course, to affirm that only the highest entity, Brahman, can be the subject of brahmavidyā, because only then could it satisfy the answer to Śaunaka's original question.²⁴⁹ Moreover, no one besides the highest Brahman can be ultimately responsible for the creation of the world.

²⁴⁸ *Aṇubhāṣya on the Brahmasūtra with the Commentary Bhāṣyaparakāśa and Super-commentary Raśmi on the Bhāṣyaparakāśa*, ed. by Mulchandra Tulsidas Teliwala, 4 vols (Delhi: Akshaya, 2005), I, pp. 554-55.

²⁴⁹ "By knowing what can all else be known?" MuU 1.1.3.

Then in line with his principal doctrine of ‘concrete singularity’ (as opposed to Śāṅkara’s ‘abstract monism’),²⁵⁰ Vallabha explains that the one Brahman can also be denoted by ‘akṣara’ at MuU 2.1.2 since here Brahman should be regarded as a slightly ‘inferior’ version of the supreme Brahman mentioned earlier.²⁵¹ ‘Both’ are still ontologically indistinct, he maintains, because any difference is purely adjunctive. But then what belies this ‘superior-inferior’ relationship (parāparabhāva) between the two-yet-one Brahman? Vallabha explains: “‘Akṣara’ is Brahman with some of its bliss latent,” whereas the original Brahman is prakāśānanda, meaning that all of its intrinsic bliss is fully manifest.²⁵² Puruṣottamacaraṇa comments that this difference is quantitative – Akṣara’s bliss is quantifiable whereas Brahman’s bliss is not²⁵³ – and that the former should be seen as a “natural state” of the latter.²⁵⁴ On this, Yogi Gopeśvara extrapolates extensively stressing further the ontological identity of the two.²⁵⁵ This way, they all argue, Brahman’s summit position remains uncompromised. Nevertheless – identical as both may be – one must use Brahman when interpreting MuU 1.1.5, 1.1.7, etc., and ‘Akṣara’ when interpreting MuU 2.1.2.

²⁵⁰ Helmuth Von Glasenapp, *Doctrines of Shri Vallabhacharya*, trans. by Ishverbhai Amin (Baroda & Delhi: Shri Vallabha, 1984), pp. 41-42.

²⁵¹ This is reminiscent of Vācaspati Miśra’s interpretation where he uses Saguṇa Brahman and Nirguṇa Brahman.

²⁵² *Aṇubhāṣya on the Brahmasūtra*, I, pp. 557-59; see also Jethalal G. Shah, *An Introduction to Anubhāṣya* (Baroda & Delhi: Shri Vallabha, 1984), p. 74.

²⁵³ Puruṣottamacaraṇa, *Bhāṣyaprakāśa in Aṇubhāṣya on the Brahmasūtra*, I, p. 563.

²⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 559.

²⁵⁵ Yogi Gopeśvara, *Raśmi in Aṇubhāṣya on the Brahmasūtra*, I, pp. 559-64.

7.1.1.6) Svāminārāyaṇa

As we know, Svāminārāyaṇa himself did not write a commentary on the Upaniṣads or Brahmasūtras directly. His teachings compiled in the Vacanāmṛut, however, constitute a natural, albeit indirect, commentary on the triad.

Additionally, his long, encyclical letters also contained considerable doctrinal elucidation, some of which have been compiled and published as the Vedarasa. A study of these and other sources provides us with a reading of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad according to the Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta tradition.

Svāminārāyaṇa states in Vac. Gaḍh. I.64:

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

This seems to be a direct translation of the passage at MuU 2.1.2, “akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ.” The statement gains meaning as an interpretation, however, when we realise from its surrounding context that ‘Akṣara’ here is being used as a proper noun – not an adjective or adjectival noun – thus implying a distinct and unique metaphysical entity.

If this is so, and – crucially – semantic consistency is to be maintained, then that would mean that this same Akṣara is also the ‘akṣara’ described in the preceding verses as “bhūṭayoni [the source of all beings]” (MuU 1.1.6), and from what all things spring forth and (ultimately) returns (MuU 2.1.1). This is indeed the case. At least twice in the Vacanāmṛut Svāminārāyaṇa describes Akṣara as “the cause of all” (Vac. Gaḍh. I.63 & Vac. Gaḍh. II.3) and a further three times as ‘wherein all

things return at the time of dissolution' (Vac. Gaḍh. I.12, Vac. Kār.7 & Vac. Bhūgoḷ
-Khagoḷ).

Furthermore, in the first letter of the Vedarasa, Svāminārāyaṇa's description of
Akṣara matches MuU 1.1.6 virtually verbatim. It reads:

And that Akṣara is invisible, ungraspable, and intangible; it is
without lineage, without eyes, without ears, without hands and
without feet; it is eternal, pervading, omnipresent, exceedingly
subtle and immutable; and that Brahman is the cause for the
creation of all living beings.²⁵⁶

Thereafter in the final letter of the Vedarasa, Svāminārāyaṇa reiterates:

And the creator and dissolver of the whole world... is
Akṣarabrahman.²⁵⁷

But this raises an inevitable question: If Akṣara is the 'cause of all' and to what all
return, does this not undermine the supremacy and ultimate causality of
Parabrahman? Apparently not. In line with MuU 2.1.2, Svāminārāyaṇa clearly
explains in Vac. Gaḍh. II.3:

Parabrahman, that is Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa, is distinct from
Brahman, and is also the cause, support and inspirer of Brahman.

Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises the supremacy of Parabrahman/Puruṣottama over
Brahman/Akṣara on several other occasions also. We noted a few of these in the
chapter on Parabrahman. As a reminder, they are:

Just as God is the soul of 'kṣara' [i.e. all sentient beings and māyā],
he is also the soul of Akṣarabrahman... and he supports both

²⁵⁶ *Vedarasa*, 3rd edn (Ahmedabad: Svāminārāyaṇa Akṣarapith, 1978), p. 17.

²⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 213.

'kṣara' and Akṣara by his powers while he himself is different from both 'kṣara' and Akṣara (Vac. Gaḍh. I.72).

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

By means of his antaryāmin powers, God pervades all finite beings [ātman] 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 (Vac. Gaḍh. I.64).²⁵⁸

Moreover, Svāminārāyaṇa stresses that no one – not even Akṣara – can challenge Puruṣottama's position as supreme Lord. He states:

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).²⁵⁹

Thus, despite Akṣara having such an exalted status, the supremacy and ultimate causality of Puruṣottama is in no way diminished or challenged. If anything, Puruṣottama's supremacy is raised even higher, for he is, as we have been trying to understand, 'greater even than Akṣara, the greatest.'

It is this ontologically distinct-yet-connected relationship between Brahman and Parabrahman within Svāminārāyaṇa theology which helps in consistently interpreting the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad from beginning to end. MuU 1.1.5, for example, begins with a definition of the lower knowledge. The verse then states

²⁵⁸ See also Vac. Kār.8 & Vac. Loyā.10.

²⁵⁹ Similarly Vac. Kār.10 & Vac. Loyā.4.

And now the higher [knowledge],
which initiates an extended description that continues until MuU 1.2.11. These
verses describe both Akṣara and the higher Puruṣa, i.e. Puruṣottama. After urging
the aspirant to seek a Brahmasvarūpa Guru at MuU 1.2.12 –

To realise that [higher knowledge], imperatively go, with sacrificial
wood in hand, to only that Guru who is Brahman...²⁶⁰

– MuU 1.2.13 then brings the two together as pertaining to brahmavidyā:

And that learned [Guru] must teach that brahmavidyā... by which
the truth of Akṣara and Puruṣa is perfectly known.²⁶¹

That is, for the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, both Akṣara (Brahman) and
Puruṣottama (Parabrahman) are the subjects of brahmavidyā, the highest
knowledge, thus avoiding the need for a third knowledge-category, as Śaṅkara
had warned. (We shall return to this conceptualisation of brahmavidyā in the
next section when elaborating upon BS 1.1.1.)

This is reiterated at the end of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad with an interestingly novel
concept being introduced. Verse 3.2.1 states:

The wise and desire-free who know that highest abode Brahman –
which is resplendent with light and wherein all resides – and offer
upāsanā to Puruṣa, transcend the seed of this [transmigratory life].

²⁶⁰ This verse is explained in full according to MuU-SB 1.2.12, pp. 253-56 further on in this
chapter when discussing Akṣarabrahman as the Brahmasvarūpa Guru.

²⁶¹ This passage in Sanskrit reads:

Yenākṣaram puruṣam veda satyam provāca tām tattvato brahmavidyām |

It will be noticed that an explicit term for “and”, such as ‘ca’ or ‘tathā’, is missing from the
original. However, since “akṣara” here is not an adjective or adjectival noun – but, as we have
seen, is evidently denoting the *distinct* Akṣarabrahman – the subjects of brahmavidyā
delineated in this verse are both “akṣara” and “puruṣa”. Hence, “and” becomes a natural and
inevitable part of the articulation of this verse. See MuU-SB 1.2.13, pp. 256-57.

Brahman is described here as the ‘abode’. As we have initially learned and shall discuss at greater length later, in the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, Akṣarabrahman also serves as the transcendental abode of Parabrahman. Moreover, this verse corresponds to arguably the central doctrine of the Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta School – realising oneself as Akṣara and worshipping Puruṣottama.

Svāminārāyaṇa brings both of these points together in many discourses which closely agree with the aforementioned MuU 3.2.1. He explains:

Countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, each encircled by the eight barriers,²⁶² appear like mere atoms in Akṣara. Such is the greatness of Akṣara, the abode of Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa. One who offers upāsanā to Puruṣottama realising oneself as this Akṣara can be said to have attained the highest level of resolute faith (Vac. Loyā.12).

This faith, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, leads to “ultimate liberation” from the cycle of births and deaths (e.g. Vac. Kār.7, Vac. Loyā.7).

And this liberation is the fruit of brahmavidyā commended and described in further detail in the subsequent, final verses of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad. This neatly concludes (upasamhāra) the topic of brahmavidyā that was introduced (upakrama) at MuU 1.1.1.

We thus notice here in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad all six tools, or ‘clues’, of exegetical analysis coming into play: repetition, novelty, fruit, commendation, reasoning, and, primarily, consistency between the introduction and conclusion.

²⁶² The eight barriers (astāvaraṇa) are: 1) pṛthvi; 2) jala; 3) tejas; 4) vāyu; 5) ākāśa; 6) mahattattva; 7) Pradhāna-Puruṣa; and 8) Prakṛti-Puruṣa.

Each of these tools is also employed by the Bhāṣyakāra in his concluding comment at the end of the Aṛṣyatvādhikaraṇa (for him, these are sūtras 1.2.22-24). Earlier, as his prima facie viewpoint, he had offered pradhāna, the individual soul, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman as possible contenders for that which is qualified by invisibility, etc. (MuU 1.1.6), i.e. 'akṣara'. He quickly rejects the first two options, arguing that the qualities of omniscience, etc. and world-causality mentioned later could not possibly apply to the insentient pradhāna or the limited soul. After explaining over the three sūtras how it can apply to Akṣarabrahman, he finally asks: But why can 'akṣara' not be denotive of Parabrahman? Surely all the qualities apply to him, as he is invisible, etc., omniscient, and also the cause of the world. Furthermore, 'akṣara' can simply be an adjective to Parabrahman, for he is, of course, imperishable and immutable. So why the need to introduce another entity distinct from Parabrahman?

The Bhāṣyakāra firstly acknowledges that this is natural question for those who "are unaware of the entity of Akṣarabrahman" and therefore "have an impoverished understanding of the actual denotation of revealed words." He then goes on to demonstrate by employing the six hermeneutical tools that it is necessary and proper to accept Akṣarabrahman as the subject of MuU 1.1.6 because only then will the integrity of the entire Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad text be possible, especially with the explicit reference at MuU 2.1.2 to the higher-than-

highest Puruṣa transcending this Akṣara; the superiority [paratva] of the former over the latter itself confirming the distinction between the two.²⁶³

Thus, as the other schools have endeavoured to retain semantic consistency while interpreting “akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ” and other Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad passages – all the while, within the framework of their doctrinal matrix – for the Svāminārāyaṇa School, if a semantically consistent interpretation throughout the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad has been possible it is because of its belief that Akṣarabrahman is a unique metaphysical entity ontologically distinct from Parabrahman.

7.1.2) Bhagavad-Gītā 8.21: tad dhāma paramaṃ mama

The Bhagavad-Gītā is in many ways an Upaniṣad itself²⁶⁴ – many even refer to it as the ‘Gitopaniṣad’ – least not because of its composition as a dialogic teaching to the inquisitive Arjuna (the śiṣya) from the wise master (or ‘guru’), Kṛṣṇa. This, along with its theme of brahmavidyā,²⁶⁵ makes the Bhagavad-Gītā especially fitting to consider alongside the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad. Moreover, with the subject of our inquiry being Akṣarabrahman, what better passage to select for our

²⁶³ BS-SB 1.2.24, pp. 78-79. See also MuU-SB 2.1.2, pp. 260-61.

²⁶⁴ The colophon at the end of each chapter of the Bhagavad-Gītā (Iti śrīmad-bhagavad-gītāsūpaniṣatsu...) unequivocally states that the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna (śrī-kṛṣṇnārjuna-samvāde) is indeed an upaniṣad. Hence also the feminine-inflected proper noun ‘Gītā’ (rather than the masculine ‘Gītaḥ’ or neuter ‘Gītam’), since it follows ‘upaniṣad’, a feminine noun.

²⁶⁵ The colophon continues as “brahmavidyām yogaśāstre”, further revealing the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna as concerned with brahmavidyā.

examination than from the Bhagavad-Gītā's eighth chapter, entitled 'Akṣarabrahmayoga'.

The chapter begins with a string of seven successive questions posed by Arjuna which have arisen from the terminology and teachings offered by Kṛṣṇa at the end of the previous chapter [BG 7.29-30]. Arjuna's questions are: 1) What is 'Brahman'? 2) What is 'adhyātman'? 3) What is 'karma'? 4) What is 'adhibhūta'? 5) What is 'adhidaiva'? 6) What is 'adhiyajña' and how does it reside in the body? and 7) How can Kṛṣṇa be known by the self-controlled at the time of death? [BG 8.1-2]. Our focus is Kṛṣṇa's answer to the first question and how the narration of 'Brahman' and 'akṣara' throughout the chapter is interpreted by the various schools.

The answer begins with a brief reply at BG 8.3. The relevant portion of the verse reads in Sanskrit:

Akṣaram brahma paramam....

With 'parama' the superlative meaning 'highest' or 'greatest', we are again left with a number of options for interpreting 'akṣara' depending on its connection with 'Brahman'. The term also appears in several other verses in the chapter. In particular, we are interested in how it is interpreted at BG 8.21. There, 'akṣara' is aligned with avyakta (literally 'unmanifest'), paramā gati (the highest goal or end), and also

Yaṁ prāpya na nivartante tad dhāma paramam mama,

which literally means, 'It is my highest dhāma – (generally meaning 'abode') – from which, having attained, none revert.' Similar mentions can also be found in later chapters, to which we shall also briefly refer.

A look now to the various schools and their interpretations.

7.1.2.1) Kevalādvaita

From the very outset at BG 8.3, we find the ācāryas differing considerably with each other. Śāṅkara opens his commentary here by unequivocally stating that 'Brahman' must mean 'para ātmā' (the higher self), for which both 'paramaṃ' and 'akṣaram' are adjectives stressing its supremacy and non-perishability, respectively.²⁶⁶

Ānandagiri in his *Śāṅkarabhāṣyavyākhyā*, a gloss upon Śāṅkara's commentary on the Bhagavad-Gītā, extrapolates upon the ācārya's use of other Upaniṣadic references and emphasises that only Paramātman can be both the highest and imperishable.²⁶⁷

Then at 8.21, Śāṅkara explains that 'akṣara' here refers to the highest abode of Viṣṇu – not to 'para ātmā'. He specifies it as a place (sthāna) and the highest goal

²⁶⁶ Śāṅkara, *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Adi Sankaracharya*, trans. by Alladi Mahadeva Sastry (Madras: Samata, 1998), p. 223.

²⁶⁷ Ānandagiri, *Śāṅkarabhāṣyavyākhyā* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, ed. by Gajanana Shambhu Sadhale, 3 vols (Delhi: Parimal Publications, 1992), II, pp. 69-70.

(parama pada), which relates to the ‘highest goal’ (paramā gati) mentioned explicitly at 8.13 and implicitly at 8.11. This latter verse actually reads:

Yad akṣaram vedavido vadanti... tat te padaṃ saṅgrahaṇa
pravakṣye |

For Śaṅkara, this translates as:

That Imperishable Goal which the knowers of Veda declare... that
Goal will I declare to thee with brevity.²⁶⁸

Interestingly, Śaṅkara has interpreted ‘akṣara’ here as an adjective, meaning imperishable, qualifying ‘pada’, which he takes to mean ‘goal’. This latter term appears in relation to ‘abode’ in the fifteenth chapter as well. Both BG 15.4 and 15.5 mention ‘pada’ which Śaṅkara continues to interpret as ‘goal’. Thereafter at 15.6, we see a recurrence of the second half of verse 8.21 cited above. Śaṅkara interprets it as he did earlier, as the “highest abode of Viṣṇu”²⁶⁹ from where there is no returning to a transmigratory existence.

Finally, in the last verse of chapter eight, another reference is made to ‘para sthāna’, the highest place a desire-free yogi is said to attain. Here, Śaṅkara begins interpreting this ‘highest place’ as “the Supreme Primeval Abode” of the Lord,²⁷⁰ but then ends by calling this final attainment “Brahman, the cause.”²⁷¹

Madhusūdana Sarasvati (15th-16th century), a later exponent of the

²⁶⁸ BG 8.11, trans. by Alladi Mahadeva Sastry, *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Adi Sankaracharya*, p. 227.

²⁶⁹ *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Adi Sankaracharya*, pp. 400-02.

²⁷⁰ BG 8.28, trans. by Sastry, *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Adi Sankaracharya*, p. 237.

²⁷¹ *ibid.*

Kevalādvaita School, picks up on this and explains that Śaṅkara intends 'sthāna' to mean not 'place' (i.e. relating to an abode of some sort) but to 'state'. He thus asserts that the true meaning of this verse, indeed the whole chapter, is that the yogi "reaches the State of the Lord, which is supreme, all-surpassing... and primordial, the source of all. That is to say, he realises Brahman Itself, the Cause of all."²⁷²

7.1.2.2) Viśiṣṭādvaita

Rāmānuja begins on a very different note. He writes in his commentary of BG 8.3:

That which is the Supreme Imperishable (Akṣara) has been named 'Brahman'. The Akṣara is that which cannot be destroyed and forms the totality of all individual selves.²⁷³

But then immediately he qualifies 'akṣaram' with 'paramaṃ' offering the revised interpretation of "all selves separated from prakṛti", i.e. liberated souls, or muktātmans.²⁷⁴

At 8.11, he offers yet more novel interpretations for both 'pada' and 'akṣara'. The former he defines as "that by which [the goal] is reached", implying the mind or spirit, because the latter, he asserts, is "[the Lord's] imperishable self" – the goal that all are endeavouring to reach.²⁷⁵ Vedānta Deśika in his *Tātparyacandrikā*, a

²⁷² Madhusudana Sarasvati, *Bhagavad-Gita with the Annotation Gūdhārtha Dīpikā*, trans. by Swami Gambhirānanda (Delhi: Advaita Ashrama, 1998), p. 568.

²⁷³ Rāmānuja, *Śrī Rāmānuja Gītā Bhāṣya with Text and English Translation*, trans. by Svāmī Ādidevānanda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2001), p. 271.

²⁷⁴ *ibid.*

²⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 278.

gloss on Rāmānuja's *Gītābhāṣya*, defends this by clarifying that 'pada' relates to upāsānā, and 'akṣara' means Paramātman.²⁷⁶ That is, one can reach Paramātman by upāsānā.

Now, at 8.21, when 'akṣara' appears again in reference to 'dhāma' and the highest goal, Rāmānuja offers two – again, novel – interpretations. First, he claims 'dhāma' refers to the "pristine nature of the freed self, free from contact with inanimate matter." This is "a state", he stresses – not a place – "of non-return to saṃsāra [the incessant cycle of births and deaths]."²⁷⁷ Alternatively, "the term 'dhāma' may signify 'luminosity'. And luminosity connotes knowledge."²⁷⁸ For some reason, Rāmānuja is avoiding the more common meaning of the term 'dhāma' as 'abode' despite having lavishly described its transcendent glory in many of his other devotional works.²⁷⁹ Even more surprising is it then, that in the final verse, which does not explicitly use this term, Rāmānuja accepts that the perfect yogi "reaches the supreme, primal abode."²⁸⁰

²⁷⁶ Vedānta Deśika, *Tātparyacandrikā* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, II, p. 91.

²⁷⁷ *Rāmānuja Gītā Bhāṣya*, p. 286.

²⁷⁸ *ibid.*

²⁷⁹ See, for example, Rāmānuja's *Vaikuṇṭhagadya* in *The Gadyatraya of Rāmānuja*, trans. by M.R. Rajagopala Ayyangar (Madras: M.R. Rajagopala Ayyangar, n.d.).

²⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 291.

7.1.2.3) Dvaita

Madhva's commentary on chapter eight of the Bhagavad-Gītā is rather sparse. Surprisingly, even at 8.3, he offers no real comment on Brahman or 'akṣara', but simply states,

The highest 'akṣara' is Brahman,²⁸¹

without elaborating on what precisely is meant by 'akṣara'. He does, however, in the next immediate mention of 'akṣara' at 8.11, enter into a brief debate about 'pada'. He insists that this term should be identified with 'abode', and not 'word', another valid synonym for 'akṣara'. He cites grammatical verb tables and other Vedic texts to support his case. This, as Jayatīrtha explains, is for two reasons: 1) to dispel the misconception that meditation on the sacred word (or syllable) 'Aum' only leads to gradual liberation and not to immediate post-mortem liberation; and 2) to make liberation more accessible because not all may be capable of uttering 'Aum' or the name of Viṣṇu at the time of death.²⁸²

After laying such stress on the abode of God, it is rather surprising that Madhva interprets 'dhāma' – normally translated as 'abode' – at BG 8.21 to mean 'light'. In fact, he diverts the attention of the whole verse away from 'the abode of Viṣṇu' to 'Viṣṇu' himself. This has prompted Sharma to complain that "Madhva's gloss [on chapter eight] seems a bit out of joint at places."²⁸³ But surely the Lord, Madhva

²⁸¹ Madhva, *Mādhvagītābhāṣya* and Jayatīrtha, *Prameyadīpikā* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, II, p. 71.

²⁸² Jayatīrtha, *Prameyadīpikā* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, vol. II, p. 91; Arvind Sharma, *The Hindu Gītā: Ancient and Classical Interpretations of the Bhagavadgītā* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1986), pp. 180-81.

²⁸³ Sharma, *The Hindu Gītā*, p. 229.

and Jayatirtha both maintain, is the ‘unmanifest’, the highest goal, and from whom, having reached, there is no return.²⁸⁴

Madhva reiterates this at BG 15.6 where the same statement recurs, but avoids any comment on terms such as ‘pada’ or ‘sthāna’ – to mean ‘place’ or ‘location’ – at BG 8.28, 15.4 and 15.5.

7.1.2.4) Svābhāvīkabhedābheda

Nimbārka, we are told, did not write a commentary on the Bhagavad-Gītā. The only extant work we have from the Svābhāvīkabhedābheda School on the Bhagavad-Gītā is the *Tattvapraśāsikā* by Keśava Kāśmīrī Bhaṭṭa. It begins by following Rāmānuja’s interpretation almost identically. At BG 8.3, for example, ‘akṣara’ is either “the totality of all individual selves” or “all selves separated from prakṛti.”²⁸⁵ Even Bhaṭṭa’s definition of ‘pada’ at 8.11 matches Rāmānuja’s – “that by which one can reach”, i.e. not the goal but the way.²⁸⁶

For BG 8.21, however, we find a very different approach. Bhaṭṭa interprets ‘tad dhāma paramaṃ mama’ as “[the Lord’s] place of residence”, but he identifies this with the “pure soul devoid of prakṛti [i.e. māyā]”. One could ask: but does not the Lord reside in all souls? In anticipation of this, he answers, yes, God does reside

²⁸⁴ Madhva, *Mādhvagītābhāṣya* and Jayatirtha, *Prameyadīpikā* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, vol. II, p. 109.

²⁸⁵ Keśava Kāśmīrī Bhaṭṭa, *Tattvapraśāsikā* in *Shrīmad-Bhagavad-Geeta Containing Eight Commentaries*, ed. by Jeevarama Lallurama (Mumbai: Gujarat Printing Press, 1912), p. 617.

²⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p. 637.

in all souls²⁸⁷ – even those still enmeshed in prakṛti – but his “best and eternal home” is the pure soul. Hence, the qualifier ‘paramaṃ’.²⁸⁸

7.1.2.5) Śuddhādvaita

Vallabha, as we learnt earlier, defines ‘Akṣara’ as non-different from Brahman but inferior to it because the bliss of each is, respectively, partially latent and fully manifest. He finds an opportunity to affirm this at BG 8.3. He writes in his *Tattvadīpikā* commentary:

Brahman, imperishable and unmanifest, with its unquantifiable bliss... who is that Paramātman, the Lord Puruṣottama, with his bliss fully manifest... That Brahman is non-distinct from the imperishable Akṣara, with its quantifiable bliss.²⁸⁹

At 8.21, however, he defines ‘Akṣara’ as the name given to the Lord’s “base”, Vaikuṅṭhabhuvana,²⁹⁰ which Puruṣottamacaraṇa clarifies as the “home of God”.²⁹¹ This, they both assert, is the highest goal and a place where the souls are no longer subject to reincarnation.

Then again at BG 8.11, Vallabha offers a variation on this. He identifies ‘pada’ as not a place, but the holy feet of the Lord – ‘feet’ being another synonym for

²⁸⁷ For example. “I reside in the hearts of all” (BG 15.15).

²⁸⁸ Bhaṭṭa, *Tattvapraśāṅgīkā*, pp. 655-56.

²⁸⁹ Vallabha, *Tattvadīpikā* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, II, p. 72.

²⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 109.

²⁹¹ Puruṣottamacaraṇa, *Amṛtatarangīnī* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, II, p. 110.

'pada'.²⁹² When the term appears elsewhere – at BG 15.4 and 15.5, for example – he refers again to the abode of God as he does at BG 8.28 and 15.6.

7.1.2.6) Svāminārāyaṇa

For the Svāminārāyaṇa School, Akṣara and Brahman are synonymous.²⁹³ In what could be called a commentary on BG 8.3, a letter from the Vedarasa reads:

Now to expound upon the term 'Brahman'. That Brahman is entwined in everything... and is called Akṣarabrahman.²⁹⁴

Earlier in the same letter, another statement links this with BG 8.21.

Svāminārāyaṇa writes:

And that abode [dhāma] in the form of Akṣara is higher than the high [parāt-par].²⁹⁵

In the Vacanāmṛut, too, Svāminārāyaṇa makes several references to Akṣara as the abode of Puruṣottama. For example:

That Akṣara is the abode of Puruṣottama Bhagavān (Vac. Gaḍh. I.63).

That Akṣarabrahman is the abode wherein God resides (Vac. Pan.1).

That same Akṣarabrahman serves as the abode of Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa (Vac. Amd.6).

²⁹² Vallabha, *Tattvadīpikā*, p. 91.

²⁹³ The synonymy of 'Akṣara' and 'Brahman' is confirmed by BG 8.3 itself, and can also be found in the Upaniṣads, e.g. at MuU 2.2.2, and KaU 2.16 and 3.2.

²⁹⁴ Vedarasa, p. 152.

²⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 146.

On many other occasions, he simply refers to this abode as 'Akṣaradhāma' (Vac. Gaḍh. I.21, Vac. Gaḍh. I.71) or 'Brahmadhāma' (Vac. Amd.6).

Svāminārāyaṇa also describes this abode in line with other verses in the Bhagavad-Gītā. It is the ultimate goal [8.13, 8.21],²⁹⁶ the highest abode [8.21, 8.28, 15.6],²⁹⁷ exceedingly luminous [15.6],²⁹⁸ and from where there is no return to the cycle of births and deaths [8.21, 15.6].²⁹⁹ Moreover, by stressing this abode as a place – not a 'state' or as 'light' or 'knowledge'³⁰⁰ – the terms 'pada' [8.11, 15.4, 15.5] and 'sthāna' [8.28] can all be interpreted consistently.

We shall, of course, take up a more detailed exposition of this abode when discussing the four forms of Akṣarabrahman. Here, it is important to note that establishing Akṣarabrahman as Parabrahman's abode also confirms the two are distinct entities and that the latter, being the 'dweller' or 'Lord' of the divine realm, is superior to the former.

In his extensive comment on this opening phrase of BG 8.3, the Bhāṣyakāra firstly explains why etymologically 'Akṣara' is a fitting name or defining term for Brahman, before going on to argue why it could not possibly apply to any other

²⁹⁶ Vac. Gaḍh. I.21.

²⁹⁷ Vac. Gaḍh. III.21 and Amd.7 (twice).

²⁹⁸ Vac. Gaḍh. I.71, Loyā.14, Gaḍh. II.39, Gaḍh. II.50, Vad.9, Vad.12, Gaḍh. III.30, Gaḍh. III.31, Gaḍh. III.32 and Gaḍh. III.33.

²⁹⁹ Vac. Sār.14.

³⁰⁰ See also Brahmadarshandas, *Vacanāmṛt Rahasya*, III, pp. 94-101.

entity. Since he draws heavily upon BG 15.16-18, which forms the third passage of our inquiry, we shall consider those arguments there in the immediately following section.

What is worth mentioning here is the interesting observation the Bhāṣyakāra makes at the very end of the eighth chapter of the Bhagavad-Gītā. He notes that the text can in fact be conceived as being of two distinguishable parts, with the first eight chapters speaking predominantly of Brahman, and the latter ten chapters focussing predominantly on Parabrahman. To substantiate his point, he provides a summary with sample verses of each of the first eight chapters and alludes to what is to come in the remainder. He then concludes with the statement: "Thus, the entire Gītā is imbued with [the siddhānta of] Brahman and Parabrahman."³⁰¹

7.1.3) Bhagavad-Gītā 15.16-18: Kṣara, Akṣara & Uttama Puruṣa

From 'Akṣarabrahmayoga' we move on to 'Puruṣottamayoga', the fifteenth chapter of the Bhagavad-Gītā. A relatively short chapter – comprising only twenty verses – it is nonetheless "exegetically one of the more intricate"³⁰² because it refers so explicitly not only to the highest person, Puruṣottama (i.e. Parabrahman), from which the chapter receives its title, but also to that person's juxtaposition with all other beings.

³⁰¹ BG-SB 8.28, pp. 198-99.

³⁰² Sharma, *The Hindu Gītā*, p. 195.

Three verses lie at the heart of the chapter – 15.16, 15.17 and 15.18 – and form the focus of this, the last section of our investigation. In all, the three verses discuss three types of beings or spirits: 'kṣara', 'akṣara', and 'uttama Puruṣa'. Except for these and one more technical term, the verses are in fact rather straightforward to read. Leaving the key terms un-translated, the verses state the following:

- there are two types of puruṣas (beings or spirits) in this world – 'kṣara' and 'akṣara'
- all beings are 'kṣara'
- 'akṣara' is said to be 'kūṭastha'
- the highest Puruṣa is 'different' [from the above two]. He:
 - is God, known also as Paramātman and Puruṣottama
 - is immutable
 - supports the whole world having entered it
 - is the highest; higher than both 'kṣara' and 'akṣara'

The simple structure of these consecutive verses allows us to survey their interpretations by the various schools collectively. We can tabulate the identification of each of the terms by each of the ācāryas, and thereafter consider any relevant arguments before examining the Svāminārāyaṇa School's reading of the passage. Firstly, then, the overview.

7.1.3.1) All Schools

The following table provides a distillation of the ācāryas' commentaries on BG 15.16-18. It highlights how each of the key terms in these three verses is interpreted.

	'kṣara'	'akṣara'	'kūṭastha'	'uttama Puruṣa'
Kevalādvaita ³⁰³	all illusory forms in evanescent saṃsāra	māyā-śakti (illusion-power of the Lord), i.e. the seed of saṃsāra	immutable or illusory	Supreme Self
Viśiṣṭādvaita ³⁰⁴	all individual selves bound by insentient matter	totality of all released selves	immutable	Supreme Person
Dvaita ³⁰⁵	all individual selves	sentient prakṛti	[no comment]	Supreme Self
Svābhāvīkabhedābheda ³⁰⁶	all embodied individual souls	all eternal souls	immutable/imperishable	Supreme Self
Śuddhādvaita ³⁰⁷	all individual selves bound by insentient matter	totality of all released selves at the feet of God	immutable	Supreme Person
Svāminārāyaṇa ³⁰⁸	all jīvas & īśvaras	Akṣara	immutable	Puruṣottama

³⁰³ *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Adi Sankaracharya*, pp. 409-11.

³⁰⁴ *Rāmānuja Gītā Bhāṣya*, pp. 498-501. See also: John Braisted Carman, *The Theology of Rāmānuja: An Essay in Interreligious Understanding* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 100-01.

³⁰⁵ Madhva, *Madhvagītābhāṣya* and Jayatūrtha, *Prameyadīpikā in The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, III, p. 186.

³⁰⁶ Bhaṭṭa, *Tattvaparakāśikā*, pp. 1075-76, 1078 & 1080.

³⁰⁷ Vallabha, *Tatīvadīpikā* and Puruṣottamacaraṇa, *Amṛtaraṅgiṇī in The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, III, pp. 187-88 & p. 190.

³⁰⁸ Sources to follow.

The percipient format of the table reveals some interesting comparisons. Firstly, it is clear that all schools agree that the 'uttama Puruṣa' is the highest self/person/being. However, almost all differ in their interpretation of what exactly this supreme position transcends, i.e. what are 'kṣara' and 'akṣara'?

'Akṣara' is described at BG 15.16 as being 'kūṭastha', which all agree means immutable. Śaṅkara, however, to substantiate his concept of vivarta (illusory appearances), offers as an alternative a number of synonymous terms all relating to 'illusion'. This allows him to identify 'aksara' with the power of 'God' that creates the illusory, evanescent world – the unchanging seed of change. The changing forms themselves are therefore 'kṣara'. "Śankara's position", Sharma remarks, "is cogent, but only... after [his philosophy] has been superimposed on the Gita."³⁰⁹

One issue that has proven a little problematic for some of the other exegetes is the singularity of the term 'akṣara' in BG 15.16. Rāmānuja, for example, who wants to identify it with all individual souls released from insentient matter (acit), is faced with a question. How to identify multiple souls with a singular term? His solution is to group them into a "generic class" which he refers to as the "totality of all released souls".³¹⁰

³⁰⁹ Sharma, *The Hindu Gītā*, p. 78.

³¹⁰ *Rāmānuja Gītā Bhāṣya*, p. 499.

Madhva, as we see, raises the interpretation onto a cosmological level. He takes prakṛti, the primary matter of the world, as 'akṣara'. Jayatīrtha adds that this prakṛti is cetanā, i.e. sentient,³¹¹ which in the Dvaita School refers to Śrī or Lakṣmī. On this point, Veṅkaṭanātha of the Kevalādvaita School directs a number of interrogative questions. Is Lakṣmī, he asks Madhva, non-distinct from Paramātman (i.e. Viṣṇu) or distinct from him? If the former, then how can he be said to be "higher than 'akṣara'" [15.18] if she is 'akṣara' and both are ontologically identical? If the latter, then since you believe in only two sentient metaphysical entities – jīva and Paramātman – that would mean that Lakṣmī is another individual soul, which you have already described as 'kṣara'. So then why the distinction between 'kṣara' and 'akṣara'? Furthermore, 'kṣara' according to you represents "all individual souls", so how can Lakṣmī escape this all-inclusive classification and become 'akṣara'?³¹² Veṅkaṭanātha's questions do indeed seem valid because the Dvaita School has no metaphysical entity that stands higher than the jīvas and yet lower than Puruṣottama.

Similar questions can also be posed to the Śuddhādvaita School. Vallabha, perhaps realising this, makes no mention here of the 'Akṣara' he described earlier at BG 8.3 as the non-different form of Brahman with its partially latent bliss.

³¹¹ Jayatīrtha, *Prameyadīpikā* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, III, p. 186.

³¹² Veṅkatanātha, *Brahmānandagīryākhyāna* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, III, p. 187.

7.1.3.2) The Svāminārāyaṇa School

Akṣara in the Svāminārāyaṇa School, as we saw with MuU 2.1.2, transcends all – jīva, īśvara and māyā – except Puruṣottama. This metaphysical juxtaposition is stated in the Vacanāmṛt in terms that agree closely with BG 15.18. For example:

And what is God like? He transcends both 'kṣara' and Akṣara...
(Vac. Gaḍh. III.31).

Nevertheless, when that Puruṣottama Bhagavān, who transcends both 'kṣara' and Akṣara, assumes a human form.... He supports both 'kṣara' and Akṣara by his powers while he himself is different from both 'kṣara' and Akṣara (Vac. Gaḍh. I.72).

Similar statements affirming Puruṣottama's place above Akṣara, as "the highest", abound (Vac. Gaḍh. I.33, Gaḍh. I.47, Gaḍh. I.64, Gaḍh. I.72, Gaḍh. I.73, Kār.8, Loyā.7, Loyā.10, Gaḍh. II.13, Gaḍh. III.38, Amd.6). Many refer to him specifically as "Akṣarātīta", i.e. transcending Akṣara (Vac. Gaḍh. I.41, Gaḍh. I.51, Gaḍh. I.66, Gaḍh. I.78, Gaḍh. II.13, Gaḍh. II.18, Gaḍh. II.31), as we saw in detail in the chapter on Parabrahman.

Combining this with the following statement clarifies what we are to understand as 'kṣara'.

That form of Puruṣottama – which transcends jīvas, īśvaras and Akṣara – should be understood as his transcendental form (Vac. Sār.5).

By simple elimination, 'kṣara' thus represents all jīvas (individual souls) and īśvaras (empowered super-souls).³¹³

Moving on to Akṣara, Svāminārāyaṇa calls it 'kūṭastha' just as in BG 15.16. He writes:

That Akṣara is the seer of all, the witness of all, and worthy of being known by all of the Vedas.... It is kūṭastha and devoid of any insentience.³¹⁴

Elsewhere in the Vedarasa, Svāminārāyaṇa brings together the term 'kūṭastha' and Akṣara's immutability more specifically:

Now I expound upon the nature of Akṣara in another way. The being known as Akṣara is kūṭastha.... That Akṣara is immutable and does not falter from or change its extraordinary form by way of this immutability. Therefore, that Akṣara is unfaltering and constant. That Akṣara is eternal.³¹⁵

Svāminārāyaṇa also emphasises the singularity of Akṣara, which corresponds with the use of 'akṣara' in singular form at BG 15.16. He states:

There are many who, having realised Akṣara to be their ātman, have attained qualities similar to that of Akṣara. That Akṣara, however, is one.³¹⁶

³¹³ Etymologically, 'kṣara' means 'perishable'. However, jīvas and īśvaras are eternal entities and so their classification as 'kṣara' relates simply to their physical embodiments being subject to birth, change and death. This is how all ācāryas have explained this classification. See also BS-SB 1.1.2, p. 15.

³¹⁴ Vedarasa, p. 213.

³¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 171; similarly also pp. 144, 151 & 152.

³¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 213-14. See also *ibid.*, pp. 144, 146 & Vac. Loyā.17.

And finally, as in BG 15.17 and 15.18, Puruṣottama is described as ‘different’ (i.e. distinct) from and higher than the others. In the last portion of his last letter in the Vedarasa, Svāminārāyaṇa writes:

Puruṣottama is distinct from Akṣara, is the highest person [‘uttama Puruṣa’], and is [known as] Paramātman, Parabrahman, and Parameśvara.³¹⁷

This distinction is of paramount importance to the unchallenged superiority of Puruṣottama. No one or nothing, Svāminārāyaṇa asserts, can ever be on par with Puruṣottama – not even Akṣara.

No one up to and including Akṣara is capable of becoming as powerful as Puruṣottama (Vac. Kār.8).

God is immensely powerful. No one up to and including Akṣara is capable of becoming like him. This is an established principle (Vac. Loyā.4).³¹⁸

The Bhāṣyakāra’s extensive comment on BG 15.16 actually comes at BG 8.3 when he cites the former in support of his identification of ‘akṣara’ in “Akṣaram brahma paramam” with the entity Akṣarabrahman. There he suggests a number of alternative readings for ‘kṣara’ and ‘akṣara’. After presenting their case as convincingly as possible, he rejects all of them one after the other using the qualifier ‘kūṭastha’ – which he explains as involving eternal and complete immutability – to assert that it cannot tenably apply to individual souls, liberated souls, or any other sentient form except Akṣarabrahman.

³¹⁷ Vedarasa, p. 214.

³¹⁸ Similarly Vac. Kār.10.

But why cannot it not also apply to Parabrahman, for surely he is also entirely and eternally immutable? The Bhāṣyakāra argues simply that the Bhagavad-Gītā itself explicitly mentions at 15.17 and 15.18 that Puruṣottama is “different [anya]” from and “higher [uttama]” than or “transcending [atīta]” both kṣara and Akṣara, and also calls the latter Puruṣottama’s “highest abode” at 15.6 and 8.21. And since Parabrahman is explicitly distinguished from Akṣara at 15.17 and 15.18, neither can Parabrahman be accepted at 8.3; that is, ‘akṣara’ is not merely an adjective qualifying the imperishable (Para)Brahman. Thus, the Bhāṣyakāra concludes, since ‘Akṣara’ at 15.16 applies to Akṣarabrahman, it must also apply to Akṣarabrahman at 8.3 where the same topic is being discussed, thereby preserving coherency and continuity throughout the Bhagavad-Gītā text.

7.1.4) Summary & Conclusion

Our survey of the various schools and their interpretations of selected passages from the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad and Bhagavad-Gītā can now culminate in a final table. This will allow us to compare how the term ‘akṣara’ has been interpreted in each of these passages and thereby check for semantic consistency.

	MuU 1.1.7	MuU 2.1.2	BG 8.3	BG 8.21	BG 15.16/18
Kevalādvaita	Parameśvara	unmanifest form of prakṛti	para atma	imperishable [state of Brahman-realisation]	māyā-śakti, i.e. the seed of saṃsāra
Viśiṣṭādvaita	Paramapuruṣa	prakṛti in its subtle, elementary form	totality of all individual selves/ all selves separated from prakṛti	imperishable [Lord's self]	totality of all released selves
Dvaita	Brahman	Śrī	Brahman	imperishable [Lord's self]	sentient prakṛti
Svābhāvika-bhedābheda	Paramātman	1) Paramapuruṣa's own power, 2) prakṛti, or 3) Puruṣa	totality of all individual selves/ all selves separated from prakṛti	imperishable [pure soul devoid of prakṛti]	all eternal souls
Śuddhādvaita	Brahman	Akṣara (inferior Brahman)	Akṣara (inferior Brahman)	imperishable [home of God]	totality of all released selves at the feet of God
Svāminārāyaṇa	Akṣara	Akṣara	Akṣara	Akṣara [abode of Puruṣottama]	Akṣara

Our aim in this inquiry, to reiterate, was never to refute or criticise the doctrines and/or interpretations of the various schools of Vedānta, but more positively, to offer a Svāminārāyaṇa reading of selected Vedāntic texts in reference to one the school's central doctrines. And yet it was necessary to study the interpretations offered by the other schools, and how they reached them, in order to contextualise the interpretation within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition. Any comparison of the interpretations from the other schools was, hence, to firstly, challenge, and secondly, clarify the Svāminārāyaṇa School's own interpretation. Significantly, this was done within the framework of the classical Vedānta tradition as a whole, using its own tools and methods, and remaining faithful to its longstanding and collectively accepted premises and conventions.

Our inquiry has revealed many observations along the way. Firstly, we learned that classical Vedāntin theologians are relatively more alert to hermeneutical analysis, especially interpretative consistency, than their modern counterparts. Through the rich commentarial tradition of Vedānta, we were also able to discover how the proponents of each school have endeavoured to interpret the passages in concordance with their own doctrinal matrix. In doing so, we noticed, the ācāryas and later commentators have at times needed to forfeit semantic consistency to maintain their doctrinal consistency.

For the Svāminārāyaṇa School, we learned that these three passages provide canonical evidence for the ontological distinction between Brahman and

Parabrahman (or Akṣara and Puruṣottama).³¹⁹ In examining and understanding this distinction, we have also found much to answer many of the questions with which we began this chapter. To return to the questions briefly (in a slightly modified order to aid logical flow), we can now summarise:

- d) There is only one 'highest reality' in the Svāminārāyaṇa School, not two.
- a/b) This is known as 'Parabrahman' (or Puruṣottama), who is in some ways similar to the Brahman of the theistic schools.
- a/c) The 'Brahman' (or Akṣara) of the Svāminārāyaṇa School is distinct from and subordinate to 'Parabrahman'.
- c/d) 'Brahman' has many roles and functions. One of its most important is to serve as the transcendental abode of Parabrahman.

Members and proponents of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition will feel that theological inquiries such as these prove the tradition as being both distinctive from other Vedāntic schools yet still authentic within the Vedānta system as a whole. For us, it has provided a useful insight into the deep exegetical discussions that can ensue in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology when difficult questions are raised and answered from within the tradition, often in defence of

³¹⁹ A similar survey of other Upaniṣadic and Gītā statements – such as “So’śnute sarvān kāmān saha brahmaṇā vipaścitā” (TU 2.1.1), “Anāndi mat-param brahma” (BG 13.12), “Brahmaṇo hi pratiṣṭhā’ham” (BG 14.27), etc. – have been found to lead to the same conclusion. Constraints of space and concerns about excessive replication of arguments have not made it possible or necessary even to include everything exhaustively. For a full discussion of this and other themes, see the complete Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya commentaries on the Prasthānatrayī.

the tradition itself, especially when engaged in a classical debate with other theological systems.

7.2) Essentiality and Centrality of Akṣarabrahman in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu Theology

Having established Akṣarabrahman as an ontologically distinct metaphysical entity apart from and subordinate to Parabrahman, we can now move on to further understanding its role within Svāminārāyaṇa theology.

If we can briefly return to our formulation of jñāna from Vac. Loyā.7 that guided our exposition of Parabrahman, it will be recalled that one of the key aspects of correct theological knowledge which leads to ultimate liberation is that Parabrahman transcends Akṣarabrahman. We noted when discussing Parabrahman's supremacy that Svāminārāyaṇa frequently juxtaposes it against the greatness of Akṣarabrahman (e.g. Vac. Kār.8, Loyā.13, Gaḍh. II.13, Gaḍh. III.38, Amd.6).

In summary, we learned that Parabrahman is:

- greater even than 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

We observed that while this unequivocally stressed the impassable supremacy of Parabrahman, it also served to highlight Akṣarabrahman's own position as being exceedingly great; indeed, as being impassable by all except Parabrahman. We can add here that this greatness is due entirely to Akṣarabrahman's relationship with and subordination to Parabrahman, and if the above summary also indicates Akṣarabrahman as one who also causes, supports, inspires, controls, pervades, ensouls, and is independent, it is only by the full will and calling of Parabrahman himself (e.g. Vac. Loyā.13).

“So,” when Svāminārāyaṇa concludes in Vac. Gaḍh. I.63,

if this is the greatness of Akṣara, then how can one possibly comprehend the extent of God's greatness?

he is implying that, ultimately, the most accurate description of Parabrahman's limitless, unfathomable greatness is that he is simply greater than Akṣarabrahman; he is 'Akṣarātīta' (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).

This being so, our understanding of Parabrahman cannot have begun in earnest without having first fully understood Akṣarabrahman. In this sense, as we progress along our exposition of Akṣarabrahman, our journey to learn about God is only just beginning.

Equally, if knowing Parabrahman is absolutely essential, and the best that can be said about him is that he transcends Akṣarabrahman, it follows that knowing Akṣarabrahman is also absolutely essential – for all the reasons it is necessary to know Parabrahman, primary of which, as we learned, is for ultimate liberation.

We shall of course be addressing the many aspects of liberation in our final chapter in this Part, on Mukti, but it is relevant to include here that Svāminārāyaṇa explains such liberation – both pre- and post-mortem – as leading from a state of perfect spiritual purity and maturity, which he calls being akṣararūpa or brahmarūpa (literally, ‘like Akṣarabrahman’). It not only entails eradicating māyic impurities borne of an ignorant, material self-understanding, but, more positively, acquiring the qualities of Akṣarabrahman. How is both made possible for a finite being? Svāminārāyaṇa explains, for example, in Vac.

Gaḍh. II.31:

The jīva remains continuously attached to māyā.... Only when one continuously associates with Brahman, one’s inspirer, through contemplation – as previously described – is that attachment broken....

If one associates with Brahman through continuous contemplation in this manner, the jīva acquires the virtues of Brahman (Vac. Gaḍh. II.31).

It is this constant association and spiritual connection with Akṣarabrahman, in the form of the living Guru, that we shall discuss in more detail further on.³²⁰

³²⁰ See sections 11.3.2.1 and 11.3.2.2.

Clearly, though, it explains the essential soteriological role of Akṣarabrahman in helping devotees become brahmarūpa.

Svāminārāyaṇa further stresses the need of Akṣarabrahman by stressing the need to become brahmarūpa and rise above ignorance. Only then, he asserts, can one develop the highest level of resolute faith (Vac. Loyā.12) and spiritual experience (Vac. Gaḍh. I.40) and enjoy unhindered devotion to God (Vac. Gaḍh. I.23, Loyā.13, Gaḍh. II.35); otherwise, all of one's spiritual understanding is rendered futile (Vac. Gaḍh. I.44) and the result will be incessant internal turmoil (Vac. Sār.15, Gaḍh. III.1, Gaḍh. III.21, Gaḍh. III.39) and certain uncertainty on the path of devotion (Vac. Sār.1, Sār.15, Loyā.17, Gaḍh. II.30). In fact, Svāminārāyaṇa goes as far as to say in Vac. Loyā.7:

Only one who is brahmarūpa is worthy of offering devotion to Puruṣottama.

Conversely, he reiterates in the same sermon:

One who does not offer devotion to Parabrahman after becoming brahmarūpa cannot be said to have attained ultimate liberation.

This statement needs to be read in both ways: to secure ultimate liberation, one must offer devotion to God even *after* becoming brahmarūpa; and equally, to offer devotion to Parabrahman in order to secure ultimate liberation, one must *first* become brahmarūpa. Thus both are essential – becoming brahmarūpa and offering devotion to Parabrahman. As we touched upon during our textual study, this is arguably the central doctrine of Svāminārāyaṇa theology: to offer devotion to Parabrahman having become brahmarūpa.

Svāminārāyaṇa and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī call a person who observes such a method of devotion a definitive (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39), perfect (Vac. Gaḍh. I.11) and complete devotee (SV 3.9, 5.88), with Svāminārāyaṇa adding in Vac. Amd.2:

He who worships God having discarded all māyic influences and become brahmarūpa is the best devotee.... Only he who worships Parabrahman having become brahmarūpa is the best.

Drawing upon this last sermon and four others – Vac. Gaḍh. I.23, Vac. Amd.3, Vac. Gaḍh. II.30 and Vac. Gaḍh. II.45 – Guṇātītānanda Svāmī further stresses that no matter how eminent one may be, “there is no alternative in millions of eons” but to become brahmarūpa and offer devotion to Parabrahman, because “this is the principle of Svāminārāyaṇa” (SV 3.13).

In another sermon he succinctly states:

Believing oneself as brahmarūpa and offering devotion – this is *the* conclusive doctrine [siddhānta] (SV 1.59).

We should also recall here the very purpose of Parabrahman’s manifestation on earth in human form. Svāminārāyaṇa revealed in his own words:

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.³²¹

Svāminārāyaṇa notably brings together here the description of Parabrahman’s being as transcending Akṣarabrahman, and his function as making souls Akṣarabrahman-like.

³²¹ *Ātyantika Kalyāṇa*, p. 76.

So, to fully know Parabrahman and to rise above māyā and become brahmarūpa, knowing and serving Akṣarabrahman is essential. As Svāminārāyaṇa simply states in one of his letters:

There is no path to liberation without knowing Brahman.³²²

This essentiality and centrality of Akṣarabrahman in Svāminārāyaṇa theology is also iterated by the Bhāṣyakāra in a way that would be useful to cover here in some detail.

In the preface to each of the volumes of his Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya, the Bhāṣyakāra opens with a statement about the central topic of these revealed texts. He asserts that it is brahmavidyā, the knowledge of 'Brahman'. Citing the Īśā Upaniṣad and Kena Upaniṣad, he firstly explains that it is only by such 'vidyā' that ultimate liberation from the incessant cycle of births and deaths can be secured.

Vidyayā'mṛtam aśnute |

By knowledge, one enjoys the immortal state (IU 11).

Vidyayā vindate'mṛtam |

By knowledge, one attains the immortal state (KeU 2.4).

However, the Bhāṣyakāra observes from the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, as we also did in our earlier study, that there are two types of vidyā: parā and aparā. It is the highest vidyā – synonymous with 'brahmavidyā' and also the Bhagavad-Gītā's

³²² Vedarasa, p. 18.

‘adhyātmavidyā’ (10.32) – that can lead to ultimate liberation. The subject of this highest knowledge, as we saw, is both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman (or Puruṣottama and Akṣara).

An important way in which this is substantiated is through the exegesis of the crucial opening aphorism of the Brahmasūtras:

Athā’to brahmajijñāsā |

Next, therefore, the desire to know ‘Brahman’ (1.1.1).

After confirming continuity from the Purva Mīmāṃsā (Former Inquiry) to the Uttara Mīmāṃsā (Latter Inquiry) by the word ‘atha’ (‘next’), and explaining the consequential import of the term ‘ataḥ’ (‘therefore’), the Bhāṣyakāra begins to carefully dismantle the ‘brahmajijñāsā’ compound.

He firstly explains the genitive relationship between ‘jijñāsā’ (literally, ‘knowledge-desire’) and ‘Brahman’; i.e. it is the ‘knowledge-desire of Brahman’, or, more plainly, the desire to know ‘Brahman’. He then continues to unpack the term ‘brahma’ in ‘brahmajijñāsā’ by stating that it is a type of coordinative compound (dvandva samāsa) called the ekaśesa dvandva, or residual compound. It takes the dual (or plural) form of only its final constituent member, for example: mātā [mother] + pitā [father] = pitarau [i.e. two parents]. The morphological similarity of the two terms ‘Brahman’ and ‘Parabrahman’ allow both to be called collectively by their common parts, i.e. ‘Brahman’, also making them suitable candidates for the residual compound. Examples of this abound in

Hindu texts. For example, Rāma and Balarāma (the elder brother of Kṛṣṇa) are often referred together as simply 'Rāmau' [the two Rāmas]. Another common example, drawing on not philological similarities of the words themselves but extending to the affinity of the characters, leads Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa to sometimes be collectively known as 'Kṛṣṇau' [e.g. Mahābhārata, Ādi Parva 221.33]. In the same way, 'Brahmau' is the conjugated form denoting Brahman and Parabrahman. The correct grammatical resolution thus takes the form: Brahma [Akṣarabrahman] + Brahma [Parabrahman] = Brahmau ['the two Brahman', i.e. Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman]. It is this term which conjoins with 'jijñāsā' to provide the full meaning of the 'brahmajijñāsā' compound: the desire to know Brahman and Parabrahman.

And since, the Bhāṣyakāra adds, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman are eternally by their very nature greater than all jīvas, īśvaras, māyā and liberated souls, the name 'Brahman' (literally meaning 'great' or 'vast') is wholly befitting for both.³²³

In support of the two types of Brahman, the Bhāṣyakāra cites from the fifth chapter of the Praśna Upaniṣad. In reply to the question posed by Satyakāma pertaining to the after-life, Pippalāda states:

Etad-vai satyakāma param cāparam ca brahma yad-aumkāraḥ |

That which is the sound of 'Aum', O Satyakāma, is verily the higher and lower Brahman (PU 5.2).

³²³ When the topic first arises in the Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya of the Upaniṣads, at KaU 2.16, the Bhāṣyakāra also explains why, etymologically, 'Aksara' and 'Brahman' are appropriate names for Akṣarabrahman. He goes on to provide a useful overview of all four forms and the nature of Akṣarabrahman. See KaU-SB 2.16, pp. 103-11.

The dual classification of 'higher' and 'lower' confirms the distinction between Parabrahman and (Akṣara)Brahman, especially when the fruit of meditating on 'Aum' is described as attaining "either" ("ekatara") of them.

However, the Bhāṣyakāra is quick to warn against carelessly ascribing either or both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman to wherever the term 'Brahman' appears in Vedānta texts. Rather, he insists, as always, the import of a word must be determined by carefully considering the topic of a text from beginning to end, looking out also for such important clues as repetition, novelty, commendation, reasoning, etc. For example, just as the Sanskrit word 'saindhava' can denote both 'salt' and 'horse', its intended meaning in each instance must be ascertained by the context within which it is being used.³²⁴ Hence, in some cases, 'Brahman' might exclusively refer to Parabrahman (e.g. Yato vemāni bhūtāni jāyante... [TU 3.1.1]) or exclusively to Akṣarabrahman (e.g. Etadhyevā'kṣaram brahma etadhyevā'kṣaram param [KaU 2.16]), or, in some cases, it might refer to both Parabrahman *and* Akṣarabrahman (e.g. Sarvam khalvidam brahma [CU 3.14.1]).

But why, a resister asks, cannot 'Brahma' in 'brahmajijñāsā' denote Parabrahman alone? Why are you insisting on both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman being the subject of knowledge? The Bhāṣyakāra defends: "It is not our insistence at all, but rather the insistence of the sacred revealed texts that brahmavidyā constitutes the knowledge of both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, the fact of

³²⁴ Another example, in English, would be the word 'bat'. Whether it was being used by a zoologist or a cricketer, and in which context, would help determine what it was denoting.

which the Sūtrakāra is supremely aware.” At this, the Bhāṣyakāra enters into an extensive defence of this interpretation based on the entire Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad text, employing all six of the hermeneutical tools mentioned earlier, to conclusively demonstrate how brahmayidyā must necessarily comprise both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. After citing a total of 28 verses in sequence from the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, each time bringing them into the context of brahmayidyā, the Bhāṣyakāra concludes:

Thus, accepting both entities is certainly in consonance with revelation [śruti] and reasoning [yukti] as well as with the opinion of the Sūtrakāra. In so interpreting the texts, we are saved from maligning the letter [i.e. spirit] of the revealed texts [i.e. Upaniṣads], the letter of the sūtras, and also the letter of Brahman [or Akṣarabrahman³²⁵].³²⁶

However, if this interpretation of ‘Brahman’ denoting both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman at BS 1.1.1 is to be valid, it must also hold for BS 1.1.2-4 to then be applicable for the whole of the Brahmasūtra text. As Clooney explains: These four sūtras are in effect “a text in themselves” which also “set the parameters within which the ensuing analysis is to proceed.”³²⁷ The Bhāṣyakāra duly continues this interpretation throughout the catuḥsūtrī and the complete Brahmasūtras, and indeed the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā as well. At BS 1.1.2, he cites several Upaniṣadic verses which point to Akṣarabrahman as well as Parabrahman being both the efficient and material cause of the universe (which we shall explore

³²⁵ This also serves as a play on words since ‘aksara’ also means ‘letter’.

³²⁶ BS-SB 1.1.1, pp. 4-8.

³²⁷ Clooney, *Theology After Vedanta*, pp. 72 & 73.

below when discussing Akṣarabrahman's nature and his role in creation, etc.).³²⁸ Similarly, at BS 1.1.3, he cites several verses to show that, like Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman can be known because it is the source of the Vedānta teachings.³²⁹ And at BS 1.1.4, he confirms that Akṣarabrahman, along with Parabrahman, is also the consistent object of Vedānta, and therefore the texts need to be harmonised accordingly to bring opposing and incoherent interpretations into line. For this, the Bhāṣyakāra declares, either or both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman will be called upon during the course of the Brahmasūtras, as and when the topic demands.³³⁰

The Bhāṣyakāra continues this interpretation consistently until the very end, with the final sūtra [BS 4.4.22] proclaiming that those who realise this brahmavidyā, i.e. who know both Brahman and Parabrahman, attain an eternal place in the abode of God, from which there is no reversion (anāvṛtti).³³¹

To conclude, the dialogue between Yājñavalkya and Gārgi in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad succinctly summarises both affirmatively and negatively the result (or 'fruit') of including and excluding Akṣarabrahman from brahmavidyā.

Yājñavalkya warns his fellow sage:

In this world, O Gārgi, he whosoever without knowing Akṣara worships, makes offerings or performs austerities for many

³²⁸ BS-SB 1.1.2, pp. 13-16.

³²⁹ BS-SB 1.1.3, pp. 18-19.

³³⁰ BS-SB 1.1.4, pp. 25-29.

³³¹ BS-SB 4.4.22, pp. 431-32.

thousands of years, the fruit of all his [endeavours] will indeed be
impermanent.

O Gārgi, whosoever leaves this world without having known
Akṣara, he is pitiful [kṛpaṇa].

Whereas,

O Gārgi, whosoever leaves this world having known Akṣara, he is a
brāhmaṇa [a perfect knower of Brahman, i.e. brahmarūpa] (BU
3.8.10).

According to both primary Svāminārāyaṇa texts and the Prasthānatrayī, it can be
discerned that Akṣarabrahman has an integral, central and indispensable role in
Svāminārāyaṇa theology in helping devotees to fully know Parabrahman and
reach the highest Brahman-like spiritual state for liberation here and for ever
after.

7.3) Nature of Akṣarabrahman

Our initial textual inquiry and subsequent study of the essential role of
Akṣarabrahman in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology have necessitated and
therefore already resulted in the introduction of some important aspects of
Akṣarabrahman's nature. These and other aspects will be developed yet further
as we expound upon each of the four forms of Akṣarabrahman in the following
section. However, still more needs to be said about the nature of Akṣarabrahman
in a way that will lead to a more complete elucidation about this central
metaphysical entity. We therefore turn our attention here to see more closely
what Svāminārāyaṇa texts and the Prasthānatrayī have to say about the nature of
Akṣarabrahman.

What is noticeable in these śāstric descriptions of Akṣarabrahman is that they are not always found in neat categories ready for easy presentation in systematic expositions such as this. Even while listing some of Akṣarabrahman's many inherent qualities, a discussion may suddenly mention his role in creation or as the support of the world, for example. This need not hinder us particularly. Indeed, it will allow us to traverse more freely through the many passages, picking up important aspects as and when they are presented, and gradually building the complete theological image of Akṣarabrahman. However, it will mean that this and the following section will need to be read together to fully understand Akṣarabrahman's nature – reminding us readers again of the abiding patience necessary when attempting to grasp a complex system of ideas. Not until the very end after such long, careful and diligent reading do all the parts fit together, and our joy and satisfaction then is all the more richer for it.

7.3.1) One Without Second

There is only one Akṣarabrahman. Svāminārāyaṇa affirms this by using the singular pronoun when referring to Akṣarabrahman in his sermons. For example, when explaining how one can develop an aversion for worldly pleasures, Svāminārāyaṇa states that part of the solution is to realise the greatness of God. A person who has such a realisation also has a fair assessment of the entire world. "He knows", Svāminārāyaṇa explains, that

‘God is like this, and these are the rewards of engaging in the worship of God and listening to religious discourses. Akṣara is like this, and the bliss associated with *him* is like this (Vac. Loyā.17; emphasis added).

In the Vedarasa, too, Svāminārāyaṇa uses the same singular personal pronoun (“evo”) when discussing Akṣarabrahman.³³² In the last of these statements, Svāminārāyaṇa explicitly writes:

There are many who, having realised Akṣara to be their soul, have attained qualities similar to that of Akṣara. That Akṣara, however, is one.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī similarly states:

Akṣara in the form of [God's] abode is only one while there are countless millions of akṣaramuktas (SV 5.177).

This singularity can also be noted in the Bhagavad-Gītā at 15.16 for example, where ‘kūṭasthaḥ’ used to define Akṣara is in the singular case whereas the ‘kṣara’ are “sarvāṇi bhūtāni”, all [other] beings.

More explicitly, the Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad proclaims Akṣara (in the form of Brahmaloḥka) as being simply “eka” and “advaita” (4.3.32), i.e. one without second. The Bhāṣyakāra explains that this is because no other being or thing is capable of eternally holding Parabrahman and countless millions of liberated souls.³³³

³³² E.g. pp. 144, 146, and 213-14.

³³³ BU-SB 4.3.32, p. 258.

7.3.2) Transcending All (Except Parabrahman)

We noted during our study of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad passage 'akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ' that an almost identical statement can be found at Vac. Gadh. I.64.

Svāminārāyaṇa said:

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

While this affirms Parabrahman's outright supremacy, it just as much describes Akṣarabrahman's greatness above all other entities. In his comment at MuU 2.1.2, the Bhāṣyakāra firstly explains how "parataḥ" can indeed qualify "akṣarāt", "because [Akṣara] is greater than all jīvas, īśvaras, māyā and brahmarūpa liberated souls". In what way precisely is Akṣarabrahman superior to them all? The Bhāṣyakāra explains individually, beginning with the insentient māyā.

Akṣarabrahman is superior to māyā because he is "the cause of the origination, etc. of the world", for which māyā is the base material. As we shall see further on in this very section, Akṣarabrahman is both the material and efficient cause of the world, controlling, inspiring and using māyā for the purpose of creation.

For the jīvas and īśvaras, "who fall into the category of 'kṣara'", Akṣarabrahman "pervades them and is their inner controller [antaryāmin], support and governor; grants the fruits of their karmas..., and creates the places, bodies, etc. of these souls whereby they can experience these fruits; serves as the bridge for those of them seeking liberation, helping them cross the ocean of misery associated with the cycle of births and deaths, and being extremely instrumental

in them attaining the natural, superlative bliss of Paramātman; and makes brahmarūpa those who associate with him so that they are able to offer the highest devotion to Paramātman.”

This leaves the muktas, who have already reached this highest state. However, since even they are “not eternally devoid of any contact with māyā”, it is Akṣarabrahman who “grants the liberated state to the jīvas” and, “as the divine Akṣaradhāma”, also “serves as the support of all muktas even now [in their final, liberated state] by way of being their śarīrin, etc.”³³⁴

The Bhāṣyakāra then goes on to provide a string of śāstric references supporting each of these ways in which Akṣarabrahman is superior.

He similarly comments on the adjective “paramam” of BG 8.3 (also discussed in our study earlier) by explaining that Akṣarabrahman “transcends everything except Parabrahman, i.e. all jīvas, īśvaras, māyā and all its work, and all liberated souls.” In other words, the Bhāṣyakāra stresses, Akṣarabrahman is “the best [śreṣṭha]”. Again, this “eternal transcendence” over all these entities is attributed to Akṣarabrahman “pervading, controlling, supporting and illuminating them, by being their cause and soul, and because of other qualities of excellence.” Here, again, several references are cited supporting each of these points.³³⁵

³³⁴ MuU-SB 2.1.2, p. 259.

³³⁵ BG-SB 8.3, pp. 173-78.

What needs to be added here is that the Bhāṣyakāra also uses the “paraḥ” at MuU 2.1.2 to describe how, despite all this greatness, Akṣarabrahman is still subordinate to Parabrahman, “because that highest Being is the governor, master, inspirer, support, śarīrin, etc. of even that great Akṣara.” Thus, the Bhāṣyakāra adds, the name for God as ‘Parabrahman’ (literally, ‘greater-Brahman’) is wholly appropriate, seeing as he is greater [para] even than Brahman. Moreover, he stresses, the fact that Akṣarabrahman is greater than all else besides Parabrahman is also only because of the wish of Parabrahman, but not otherwise.³³⁶

In support of this, he cites KaU 3.11 and 6.8 and TU 2.1.1, as well as such verses from the Bhagavad-Gītā as

Anādi mat-param brahma |

Brahman is eternal and transcended only by me (13.12)

and

Brahmaṇo hi pratiṣṭhāham |

I am the support of Brahman (14.27).

We shall also see later how Svāminārāyaṇa, when relating Parabrahman to the king of the world, describes Akṣarabrahman (in the form of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru) as the queen (Vac. Gaḍh. II.22).

³³⁶ MuU-SB 2.1.2, p. 260.

Not only do these statements serve to further establish the ontological distinction between Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, they also reveal the impassable greatness of Akṣarabrahman – impassable, that is, by all except Parabrahman.

7.3.3) Immutable

In describing the transcendence of Akṣarabrahman, it is especially stressed by Svāminārāyaṇa that it transcends māyā. This is to be absolutely clear that Akṣarabrahman is beyond the reach of māyā's defiling and destructive influence.

One way that Svāminārāyaṇa does this is to explain Akṣarabrahman's immutability and completeness. While we had touched upon Akṣara as "kūṭustha" in our study of BG 15.16 earlier, the topic warrants a little more attention here where we can provide further statements from sampradāyic texts.

Svāminārāyaṇa states, for example, in Vac. Gaḍh. II.3:

Brahman is immutable and indivisible, that is, it does not suffer from any alterations nor can it ever be fragmented.

He similarly writes in one of his letters:

- That Akṣara is immutable and does not falter from or change its extraordinary form by way of this immutability. Therefore, that Akṣara is unfaltering and constant. That Akṣara is eternal.³³⁷

This is all true – and all the more impressive – even though Akṣarabrahman is immanently present throughout all of māyā's work. Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

³³⁷ Vedarasa, p. 171.

And what is that Brahman like? Well, it is immanently present within all, from māyā to... the entire individuality and collectivity of the world. [Yet] it is devoid of the world's qualities and flaws; it is untainted. It cannot be cut, pierced, burnt, wet or dried. It is pure like space. It dwells within all things, yet it remains untouched by anything. It is pure [nirmala, literally 'unsullied'].³³⁸

In another letter, Svāminārāyaṇa wrote about the immutability or constancy of Akṣarabrahman by highlighting its power over time (an aspect of māyā).

That Akṣara is without the states of creation, sustenance and destruction. By its light, even time can be destroyed. Akṣara is stable [sthīra] and eternal [sanātana].³³⁹

Like Parabrahman, this is also due to Akṣarabrahman having a distinct (vyatireka) form of its own, as we shall see further on in this section.

Furthermore, Akṣarabrahman's transcendence over māyā will especially be brought into focus when we discuss its soteriological role in the form of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru.

7.3.4) Satyam, Jñānam, Anantam

An important description of Akṣarabrahman can be found in the opening passage of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad's Ānandavallī. It reads:

Satyam jñānam anantam brahma (2.1.1) |³⁴⁰

³³⁸ Vedarasa, p. 151.

³³⁹ Vedarasa, p. 144.

³⁴⁰ The Bhāsyakāra argues that this description can only be of Akṣarabrahman, not Parabrahman. In the opening phrase of the same mantra,

Brahmavid-āpnoti param

He who knows Brahman attains the highest (2.1.1),

the term 'Brahma' relates to Akṣarabrahman, and 'param' (or highest) refers to Parabrahman, since this latter relative term must denote something which transcends even Akṣarabrahman. It is wholly correct according to Svāminārāyaṇa theology that he who perfectly knows

The Bhāṣyakāra expands each of these three important definers to explain that, firstly, Akṣarabrahman's existence is real, meaning that it is eternally divine and immutable in form and nature.

Secondly, Akṣarabrahman is eternally of the form of knowledge. This knowledge is devoid of even the slightest contact of māyā, saving it from any form of corruption or compromise. Furthermore, not only is Akṣarabrahman *made of* knowledge, it also *has* knowledge as a quality, because only then would it be able to know. This knowledge, again, is eternal and unlimited.

Lastly, 'ananta'. This is defined in two ways: without end, as in without destruction, to explain that Akṣarabrahman is imperishable; and without end, as in without limit, since Akṣarabrahman is also unlimited. On the latter, this infiniteness is to be further understood in three ways, as being unbound by space, time and object, which, the Bhāṣyakāra explains, means it cannot be said that Akṣarabrahman is 'here but not there', 'now but not then', 'this but not that'. This is because Akṣarabrahman is omnipresent (in its Cidākāśa form), eternal, and the omni-soul pervading everything (except Parabrahman).³⁴¹

Brahman (i.e. is brahmarūpa) attains Parabrahman [Vac. Gaḍh. I.21, Gaḍh. II.8, Gaḍh. II.62]. Furthermore, since the description immediately following "satyam jñānam-anantam brahma" in the very same verse clearly refers to Akṣarabrahman as the "highest abode [parame vyoman]", the portion in-between them must also relate to Akṣarabrahman. It is untenable that a denotation of a word would change so rapidly within the same verse or that God be called 'the highest abode'. TU-SB 2.1.1, pp. 361-63.

³⁴¹ TU-SB 2.1.1, pp. 362-63.

7.3.5) Role in the Origination, Sustenance and Dissolution of the Universe

In our discussion about the essential and central role of Akṣarabrahman in Svāminārāyaṇa theology, we came across the notable interpretation of the first aphorism of the Brahmasūtras, where 'brahma' in 'brahmajijñāsā' denotes both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman.

By its very function, however, the second aphorism of the Brahmasūtras,

Janmādyasya yataḥ (BS. 1.1.2),

is what defines the Brahman of BS 1.1.1, i.e. it is "that from which [occurs] the creation, etc. of this [world]." In other words, we can only accept Akṣarabrahman to also be the subject of the desirable knowledge if it can be proven to be the cause of the origination, sustenance and dissolution of the world.

The Bhāṣyakāra endeavours to prove this is indeed the case by citing śāstric statements. For example, as we saw earlier, the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad states:

This is the truth: As from a blazing fire, sparks of like form issue forth by the thousands, similarly, O dear [Śaunaka], beings of various forms issue forth from Akṣara and return to it only (MuU 2.1.1).

Akṣarabrahman's causality is also confirmed by an earlier verse from the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad [1.1.6] where it is described as "bhūtayoni", the cause of all beings. The text goes on to explicitly state:

Akṣarāt sambhavatīha viśvam |

This world is created from Akṣara (1.1.7).

Three similes are provided in this verse to consolidate the point, which, the Bhāṣyakāra explains, provide useful insights about how exactly Akṣarabrahman is the cause. The world is created from Akṣara:

1. “as a spider spins out and draws in” its thread. This firstly points to Akṣarabrahman as the material cause of the world, since he creates the world from his own ‘body’, i.e. māyā, and māyā, too, at the time of dissolution, returns into him, just like the silk thread extruded and then retracted by a spider. Moreover, the Bhāṣyakāra stresses, this simile also importantly indicates that Akṣarabrahman does not change its form or nature in any way while being the cause of the world; it remains immutable throughout. Using a counter-example, the Bhāṣyakāra explains that Akṣarabrahman’s causality is not like that of milk, which, as the material cause of yoghurt, turns *into* its effect; the milk ceases to exist in its original state after it has become the yoghurt. Akṣarabrahman, on the other hand, has an eternal existence, and remains exactly as it is throughout the process of creation, sustenance and dissolution.
2. “as plants sprout from the earth.” Here the Bhāṣyakāra highlights that various plants, shrubs and trees all grow from the soil – some bear thorns; some are lush with fragrant flowers; and some abound with fruits, sweet, sour, bitter or pungent – but each one only according to the qualities inherent in its own seed. Similarly, while Akṣarabrahman makes possible the origination of the world and all its inhabitants, they all ‘grow’ only according to their own ‘seed’ of karma which contains the code – the

combined impressions of all their past deeds, good and bad – that in turn determines the physical body they receive and the pleasures they will enjoy and pains they will suffer during that particular lifetime. This exonerates Akṣarabrahman from the double-charge of partiality (vaiṣamya) and cruelty (nairghrṇya) often associated with ‘the problem of evil’ – just as the unbiased earth is blameless for the disparate flora which sprouts from it. (We shall be taking up this point in more detail in the chapter on māyā, when discussing the nature and process of creation.³⁴²)

3. “as hair [grows] on a living person’s head and body.” This shows, the Bhāṣyakāra explains, that the world is created from Akṣarabrahman effortlessly, without exertion or labour, just as facial, androgenic or other types of hair grow naturally on a person.³⁴³

Akṣarabrahman is thus the cause of the origination, sustenance and dissolution of the world, and it is so immutably, blamelessly, and effortlessly.

Sometimes, the Bhāṣyakāra explains, Akṣarabrahman’s role is mentioned in texts conjointly with that of Parabrahman, when generic terms such as ‘Brahman’ or ‘Sat’ (Being) are employed. This can be confirmed when the import of the entire text is examined, as we did with the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad. Examples of such texts include the following:

³⁴² See section 10.2.2.

³⁴³ MuU-SB 1.1.7, pp. 239-40.

Sarvam khalvidam brahma taj-jalān³⁴⁴-iti śānta upāsīta... |

All this [visible world] is verily Brahman, from which it comes forth, in which it is dissolved, and by which it lives. This is how, tranquil, one should offer upāsānā to it... (CU-SB 3.14.1).

Brahma va idam agra āsīt... tasmāt-tat sarvam abhavat... |

In the beginning, there was only this Brahman... From that, all that was created... (BU 1.4.10).

Sanmulāḥ somyemāḥ sarvāḥ prajāḥ sadāyatanāḥ satpratiṣṭhāḥ |

O dear [Śvetaketu], all these beings have 'Sat' as their source, 'Sat' as their support, and 'Sat' as their resting place (CU-SB 6.8.4).

What thus begins at BS 1.1.2 to define 'Brahman', confirming both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman as causes of the world and therefore worthy of being known [BS 1.1.1], continues throughout the first chapter of the Brahmasūtras where causality is a key tool in harmonising equivocal śāstric statements. In the last full adhikaraṇa of BS 1 before the final colophonic sūtra, we see the arguments against the Sāṃkhya School drawing to an end, confirming that Pradhāna (i.e. prakṛti or māyā) is not the independent cause of the world, but its inner soul, Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, are in fact the cause. Why?

Sākṣāc-cobhayāmnānāt |

Because both have been explicitly proclaimed (1.4.26).

³⁴⁴ 'jalān' is a hapax legomenon, which requires the commentary to provide its full meaning. The Bhāṣyakāra explains that it is an acronym composed of 'ja' from 'jāyate', meaning 'to be born'; 'la' from 'liyate', meaning 'to be dissolved'; and 'an' from 'aniti', meaning 'to live'. The term therefore becomes 'jalān', and together with 'tat', the demonstrative pronoun referring back to 'Brahman', provides the extricated meaning given above. CU-SB 3.14.1, pp. 131-32.

Here again the Bhāṣyakāra cites several verses from the Upaniṣads confirming Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, and both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman as the material and efficient cause of the world, as indicated by the Sūtrakāra himself.

Like Parabrahman, though, Akṣarabrahman's cosmological role is not limited to the origination and dissolution of the world, but extends also to its sustenance in various ways. Svāminārāyaṇa states, for example:

Brahman, who is the witness, enters the brahmāṇḍa... and makes it conscious, giving it the powers to perform all activities. The nature of that Brahman is such that when it enters an object that is as inert as wood or stone, that object becomes such that it can move (Vac. Gaḍh. II.20).

It is Akṣarabrahman, then, which also enlivens and empowers the created world by entering within it. If we recall, this is similar to the description of Parabrahman being the śarīrin of the universe, and indeed, Akṣarabrahman is thus the embodied soul of all things and beings (except Parabrahman) in the same way.

That is probably why we see the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad talk of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman in almost identical terms. For example, at 2.1.10, Parabrahman (or Puruṣottama, the highest person) is identified with this whole world on account of his omnisoulship:

Puruṣa evedam viśvam...]

Just a few mantras later, the very same phrase is used for Akṣarabrahman, identifying him also with the world on account of *his* omnisoulship:

Brahmaivedam viśvam... (2.2.11) |

This omnisoulship is further confirmed when we learn of Akṣarabrahman as also being the ontic ground supporting the material and spiritual world, and controlling it by dwelling within it. While some of the statements above have mentioned this already, both these aspects can be seen more clearly, for example, in the cordial but vehement dialogue between Yājñavalkya and Gārgi in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad symposium.

After seeking permission from the assembled scholars and Yājñavalkya himself, Gārgi asks:

O Yājñavalkya, what is that which is above the sky and beneath the earth, and between both the sky and earth, and that which is called the past, the present and the future? Upon what is all this woven back and forth? (BU 3.8.3).

In response to her question, Yājñavalkya firstly replies that it is “ākāśa”. Either unsatisfied with this answer³⁴⁵ or not fully understanding it, Gārgi presses further, asking:

Upon what is ‘ākāśa’ woven back and forth? (BU 3.8.7).

It is then that Yājñavalkya states:

Etad vai tad-akṣaram gārgi brāhmaṇā abhivadanti |

³⁴⁵ See Olivelle’s opinion that Gārgi’s response to Yājñavalkya is “dripping with sarcasm” because she is unsatisfied with his initial answer. Hence, she asks the same question again. *Upanisads*, p. 311.

That, O Gārgi, is indeed what the knowers of Brahman proclaim as Akṣara (BU 3.8.8).³⁴⁶

Akṣarabrahman is thus the ontic ground upon which all of existence – past, present and future – subsists, just as the warp is upon which the weaver’s shuttle moves back and forth.

After describing Akṣarabrahman with a string of apophatic and sometimes contrastive terms – “it is neither gross nor subtle, neither short nor long,” etc. – Yājñavalkya then goes on to repetitively state Akṣarabrahman’s governance over all aspects of the universe that it also upholds (vidhṛta).

Within the governance of this Akṣara, O Gārgi, do the upheld sun and moon verily stand.

Within the governance of this Akṣara, O Gārgi, do the upheld sky and earth verily stand.

Within the governance of this Akṣara, O Gārgi, do the upheld moments, hours, days and nights, half-months, months, seasons and years verily stand.

Within the governance of this Akṣara, O Gārgi, do the rivers flow – some to the east from the white [snowy] mountains, others to the west in their own directions.

Within the governance of this Akṣara, O Gārgi, do recipient men praise donors, deities [praise] the patron, and forefathers [praise] the ancestral offering (BU 3.8.9).

The Bhāṣyakāra explains that these are just a few indicative features of the entire universe. For example, the ‘flowing rivers’ imply that Akṣarabrahman also

³⁴⁶ This verse is the subject of the Aksarādhikarāṇa at BS 1.3.10-13. The Bhāṣyakāra explains here why the term ‘akṣara’ is indeed denotive of Akṣarabrahman and not pradhāna or the individual soul, whether jīva or īśvara. BS-SB 1.3.10-13, pp. 97-101.

governs the rains, and therefore the crops which grow by the rains. And since all of life is dependent on food and water, it is Akṣarabrahman who nourishes and supports all forms of life. Similarly, by mentioning benefactors and beneficiaries, noble people on earth as well as the dwellers of the higher realms, it should be understood that all beings of the universe are governed by Akṣarabrahman.

It should be stressed again that here and wherever else the causality and governance of Akṣarabrahman is mentioned, the Bhāṣyakāra keenly points out that it is only possible by and according to the “eternal wish of Paramātman”.³⁴⁷

As we saw earlier, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

Brahman is the cause and support of all, including Prakṛti-Puruṣa³⁴⁸, etc., and pervades everything by its antaryāmin powers.... Parabrahman, that is, Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa, is distinct from that Brahman, and also the cause, support and inspirer of Brahman (Vac. Gaḍh. II.3).

Like Parabrahman, then, and only by his will, Akṣarabrahman is the material and efficient cause of the world, its support and also its inner-controller by virtue of pervading everything as its soul.

Before we go on to further explore the nature and function of Akṣarabrahman, let us briefly touch upon three pairs of terms by which Svāminārāyaṇa describes Akṣarabrahman in the Vacanāmṛut. We shall explore these with a little more

³⁴⁷ E.g. MuU-SB 1.1.7, pp. 240 & 241.

³⁴⁸ ‘Prakṛti-Puruṣa’ is a shorthand term referring to the combined form of primordial māyā [Mūla-Prakṛti] and an akṣaramukta [Mūla-Puruṣa] (selected by Akṣarabrahman in Akṣaradhāma), who together initiate the creative process, as willed and commanded by Parabrahman. See chapter 10.2.3 for further elaboration on the protological process.

detail when looking at each of the four forms of Akṣarabrahman in the following section, but it is useful nonetheless to see Svāminārāyaṇa's description of Akṣarabrahman's nature based on these statements alone. The three pairs are:

- Anvaya and Vyatireka
- Nirguṇa and Saguṇa
- Nirākāra and Sākāra

7.3.6) Anvaya and Vyatireka

As we learned when expounding upon Parabrahman, the two contrastive terms of 'anvaya' and 'vyatireka' essentially refer to immanence and transcendence, respectively. Svāminārāyaṇa applies them both to Akṣarabrahman in two sermons, Vac. Gaḍh. I.7 and Vac. Sār.5. In the former, he describes Akṣarabrahman's immanent form as when it

pervades māyā and the entities evolved from māyā, the countless millions of brahmāṇḍas.

To this, he adds in Vac. Sār.5:

That which is the inspirer of Prakṛti-Puruṣa and all of the devatās such as Sūrya, Candra, etc., should be known as the immanent form of Akṣara.

As for Akṣarabrahman's distinct, transcendental form, that is

when it is distinct from everything and has the attributes of eternal existence, consciousness and bliss (Vac. Gaḍh. I.7).

This is the form

in which there is not even a trace of the influence of Prakṛti-Puruṣa, etc. and in which only Puruṣottama Bhagavān resides (Vac. Sār.5).

Together, these statements also emphasise Akṣarabrahman's absolute purity, transcendence (especially above māyā), and independence, except, of course, from Parabrahman.

7.3.7) Nirguṇa and Saguṇa

When describing Akṣarabrahman as both saguṇa and nirguṇa, Svāminārāyaṇa mainly refers to its size. He explains in Vac. Gaḍh. II.42 that Akṣarabrahman has

an extremely subtle form, smaller even than an atom.

This is its nirguṇa form.

Conversely,

the saguṇa form is much larger than even the largest of objects.

In describing this further, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

Countless millions of brahmāṇḍas dwell like mere atoms around each and every hair of that Akṣara. It is not that those brahmāṇḍas become small compared to Akṣara; they still remain encircled by the eight barriers. Rather, it is because of the extreme vastness of Akṣara that those brahmāṇḍas appear so small.

Then applying an analogy, he adds:

Take Mount Girnār³⁴⁹ as an example. Compared to Mount Meru³⁵⁰, it appears to be extremely small. However, compared to Mount

³⁴⁹ This is in fact a range of mountains found near the city of Junagadh, in south-west Gujarat. The tallest of them rises to 1,031 metres (3,382 feet), making it the highest peak in Gujarat.

Lokāloka³⁵¹, Mount Meru itself appears to be extremely small. In the same way, the brahmāṇḍas remain exactly as they are, but in comparison to the extreme vastness of Akṣara, they appear to be extremely small. This is why they are described as being like atoms (Vac. Gaḍh. II.42).

Like Parabrahman, however, it would not be incorrect to add that Akṣarabrahman is devoid of any defiling māyic qualities, hence also 'nirguna', and is replete with countless superlatively excellent auspicious qualities, hence also 'saguṇa'.

7.3.8) Nirākāra and Sākāra

In Vac. Gaḍh. I.21, Svāminārāyaṇa alludes to two types of forms of Akṣarabrahman.

One, which is formless [nirākāra] and pure consciousness [caitanya], is known as Cidākāśa.

In contrast, the other type is when Akṣarabrahman has a form (sākāra). While Svāminārāyaṇa mentions explicitly in the sermon above only two of the three forms which are sākāra, we shall move on to expounding upon all four forms (i.e. the one nirākāra form and the three sākāra forms) in more detail in the section following the summary below.

³⁵⁰ Also known as 'Sumeru', this refers to the sacred mountain mentioned in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain cosmology, considered to be the centre of the physical, metaphysical and spiritual universes. It is said to be to be 84,000 yojanas high (c. 672,000 miles or 1,082,000 kilometres). See references to 'Mahāmeru', for example, in the Mahābhārata at Ādi Parva 17. Śānti Parva 222.18 notes it as 'the king of mountains'.

³⁵¹ This is another mountain mentioned in cosmological accounts within Hindu texts. It is described as the boundary to the three worlds, and being golden in colour and as smooth as glass (Devi Bhāgavata 8).

7.3.9) In Relation to Parabrahman

A useful conclusion to this section on the nature of Akṣarabrahman can be provided by the following summary, listing the similarities and differences between Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman gleaned from above and relevant parts of the chapter on Parabrahman.

Similarities between Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman

- Both eternally transcend māyā.
- Both are one without second.
- Both have a definite human-like shape in their distinct transcendental form.
- Both are replete with divine virtues and devoid of māyic impurities.
- Both have a causal role in the origination, sustenance and dissolution of the world, though neither engage actively; their mere will activates the process.
- Both support, empower, inspire, pervade, and control by dwelling within all other beings and things, and are their embodied soul (śarīrin).
- Both, even while eternally residing in Akṣaradhāma in human form, manifest in various brahmāṇḍas in human form for the liberation of countless souls. Yet, even then, they are both divine and unsullied by māyā.
- Both need to be known to attain brahmavidyā, which is essential for securing ultimate liberation.

Differences between Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman

- Parabrahman supports, empowers, inspirers, pervades and controls from within even Akṣarabrahman; whereas Akṣarabrahman does not support, empower, inspire, pervade or control Parabrahman.
- Parabrahman is the soul of Akṣarabrahman, whereas Akṣarabrahman is a part of the body of Parabrahman.
- Parabrahman is the extremely powerful owner and master (svāmin) of Akṣarabrahman; Akṣarabrahman is the extremely subservient servant (sevaka) of Parabrahman.
- Parabrahman is eminently worshippingable (upāsya), whereas Akṣarabrahman is the perfectly devout and humble worshipper (upāsaka).
- Parabrahman, with all his unlimited powers, splendour, knowledge, bliss, virtues, etc., is totally independent, even of Akṣarabrahman, whereas Akṣarabrahman and his unlimited powers, splendour, knowledge, bliss, virtues, etc. are all totally dependent on Parabrahman.
- As Akṣaradhāma, Akṣarabrahman is the abode of Parabrahman, where Parabrahman and countless liberated souls reside. Parabrahman is the Lord of Akṣaradhāma, presiding over it as its sovereign ruler and owner.³⁵²

³⁵² For a more detailed discussion about the relationship between Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, and the supremacy of the former over the latter, see the Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya commentary on the Ubhayavyapadeśādīkaraṇa (BS-SB 3.2.26-29; pp. 302-04) and especially the Parādīkaraṇa (BS-SB 3.2.30-35; pp. 304-10).

7.4) Four Forms of Akṣarabrahman

Akṣarabrahman is 'one without second'. Yet as one entity, it functions in four different ways and so can be seen in the following four forms:

- As Cidākāśa, the all-pervading, all-supporting consciousness
- As Akṣaradhāma, the abode of Parabrahman
- As the ideal Sevaka in Aksaradhāma
- As the Brahmasvarūpa Guru on earth

Before we turn to expound upon each, it is necessary to reiterate that in being of one substance, there is no internal relationship (causal or otherwise) between the four forms; they are all indistinctly, absolutely and truly the one and same Akṣarabrahman.

This is made all the more clear in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad where all four forms can be found in one particular mantra:

Āviḥ sannihitam guhācaram nāma mahat padam atraitat
samarpitam |

Ejat prāṇan nimiṣac ca tad etaj jānatha sadasadvareṇyam param
vijñānād yad variṣṭam prajānām (MuU 2.2.1) ||

According to the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, the Bhāṣyakāra explains that the first two terms point to the two types of Akṣarabrahma: āviḥ, or 'manifest', is Akṣarabrahman as the abode, sevaka and Guru, all of which have a definite form; whereas sannihitam, or 'concomitant', is Akṣarabrahman in its all-pervading

form, i.e. Cidākāśa. These four are then individually referred to in the verse as follows:

Akṣarabrahman Form	Term/Phrase	Meaning
Cidākāśa	guhācaram	dwelling within the cave [of the heart]
Abode	mahat padam	great place
Sevaka in Abode	atraitat samarpitam	dedicated here [in the great place]
Guru	ejat prāṇan nimīṣat	moving, breathing, blinking

The verse concludes with the instruction:

Know that Akṣara, which is both gross and subtle, the most desirable, the highest because of its extraordinary knowledge, and what people most desire (MuU 2.2.1).³⁵³

We ourselves can now move on to understanding each of these four forms of Akṣarabrahman in more detail.

7.4.1) Akṣarabrahman as Cidākāśa

Of the four forms of Akṣarabrahman, the only one without a definite shape is Cidākāśa. As we saw, Svāminārāyaṇa states in Vac. Gaḍh. I.21, “Akṣara”,

which is formless [nirākāra] and pure consciousness [caitanya], is known as Cidākāśa.

³⁵³ See also MuU-SB 2.2.7, pp 276-77 and MuU-SB 3.1.7, p. 288 for other instances, according to the Bhāṣyakāra, where all four forms of Akṣarabrahman are indicated in one verse.

This is also the anvaya (immanent) form of Akṣarabrahman described at Vac. Gaḍh. I.7, and the nirguṇa (subtle) form described in Vac. Gaḍh. II.42, which we also saw earlier. In both these senses, Cidākāśa is described as being all-pervading. As the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, too, explains:

This immortal Brahman is verily in front. Brahman is behind.
Brahman is to the right and to the left. It is below and above. This
Brahman verily pervades the whole world (2.2.11).

Furthermore, as the name suggests, Cidākāśa is a form of space (ākāśa), but it is wholly different from material space; it is spiritual and sentient, i.e. composed of consciousness (cit). Svāminārāyaṇa explains this difference at great length in Vac. Gaḍh. I.46 when he is questioned by a 'Vedāntin' about the assimilation of 'ākāśa'. Svāminārāyaṇa clarifies that the two types of ākāśa – one which is full of consciousness and the other which is one of the five material elements (alongside earth, water, fire and air) – are different and should not be confused. How are they different? The gist of Svāminārāyaṇa's explanation is as follows:

- Cidākāśa is never assimilated; it is eternal, i.e. it is not created or dissolved, unlike material space which originates during the creative process of each brahmāṇḍa.
- Cidākāśa is immutable and infinite; it has no states of contraction or expansion like material space.
- Cidākāśa is extremely bright, whereas material space is marked by the absence of light.

-
- Cidākāśa is immanently present everywhere, within the smallest part of an atom and around the vast brahmāṇḍas; countless millions of brahmāṇḍas are ‘within’ Cidākāśa.
 - Cidākāśa is the omni-support (sarvādhāra); it supports everything, including māyā and its work, i.e. countless millions of brahmāṇḍas.

A similar description of Akṣarabrahman can be found in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad at 2.2.2. It reads:

Yad-aṇubhyo’ṇu ca yasminl-lokā nihitā lokinasca tad-etad-akṣaram
brahma |

That which is subtler than the subtle [atom] and within which the realms and their inhabitants rest, that is this Akṣarabrahman.

The Kāṭha Upaniṣad similarly mentions that “all realms are supported by it [which is called Brahman]” (5.8), while the Bhagavad-Gītā simply calls Akṣarabrahman “bhūtabhartṛ”, the supporter of all beings (13.16), and “sarvabhṛt”, the supporter of all (13.14).

If we also recall Yājñavalkya’s answer to Gārgi in BU 3.8, it is this Akṣara upon which the whole world is “woven back and forth” and “within the governance of this Akṣara” that all is upheld in its proper place, functioning as it should. A similar proclamation can be found in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad –

What is luminescent, and upon which the sky, the earth, the intermediate region, and the mind with all its vital breaths are woven, that indeed is the one [Brahman] (MuU 2.2.5) –

which forms the topic of the Dyubhvādyadhikaraṇa at BS 1.3.1-7, and also at CU

8.1.3 –

As far as this [material] space extends, so extends the [spiritual] space within the heart. Within it rests both the sky and the earth, both fire and air, both the sun and the moon, lightning and the stars. Whatever of this [world] is here and whatever is not – it all rests within this [spiritual space] –

which forms the topic of the Daharādhikaraṇa at BS 1.3.14-23. Svāminārāyaṇa in fact points to this discussion by referring to the knowledge of Cidākāśa as “Daharavidyā” at the end of his explanation in Vac. Gaḍh. I.46. In much the same vein as Svāminārāyaṇa’s explanation noted above, the Daharādhikaraṇa argues that the ‘subtle space’ within the heart mentioned at CU 8.1.1 should refer to Akṣarabrahman dwelling in the form of Cidākāśa, not the material space of the worldly sort (bhautika ākāśa), because it is Akṣarabrahman that is full of higher consciousness and the all-pervading support of the world.³⁵⁴

Svāminārāyaṇa also states in one of his letters:

That Brahman is interwoven within all and is vast [yet] without the qualities of the gross [i.e. material] elements. It is unbound by time and space, and is unlimited. It transcends the elements of space, etc. It dwells completely within māyā and the work of māyā; it is within it and outside of it. Because of its vastness, it is called ‘Brahman’, and is also called Akṣarabrahman. It is the support of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, and the inspirer of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, and at the centre of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas.³⁵⁵

³⁵⁴ BS-SB 1.3.14-3, pp. 101-09.

³⁵⁵ Vedarasa, p. 152.

7.4.2) Akṣarabrahman as Parabrahman's Abode

The sākāra (having a definite shape) and saguṇa (vast) form of Akṣarabrahman described by Svāminārāyaṇa at Vac. Gaḍh. I.21 and Vac. Gaḍh. II.42, respectively, relates to Akṣarabrahman as the abode of Parabrahman. Called Akṣaradhāma (and occasionally Brahmadhāma, Brahmaloaka, Brahmaṇḍa and Brahmamahola), it is the transcendental divine realm where Parabrahman and innumerable liberated souls eternally reside. It is the place where earthly souls aspire to transcend upon death, to forever enjoy the undisturbed, unlimited bliss of God. It is their place of final rest, the ultimate destination, the highest goal.

As we already saw in our study of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad and Bhagavad-Gītā passages at the beginning of this chapter, Svāminārāyaṇa explicitly states in sermons such as Vac. Pan.1 that

that Akṣarabrahman is the abode wherein God resides,

and in Vac. Gaḍh. I.63, that

the cause of all of these [elements and entities] is Akṣarabrahman,
which is the abode of Puruṣottama Bhagavān.

In his comment on the Kaṭha Upaniṣad phrase

Sarve vedā yat padam āmananti

That place which all the Vedas extol... (2.15),

and a similar phrase at BG 8.11,

Yad-akṣaram vedavido vadanti

Which Akṣara, the knowers of the Vedas proclaim...,

the Bhāṣyakāra provides scores of references from the Vedas, Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā confirming Akṣarabrahman as the home of God as well as various aspects of its nature.³⁵⁶ We now have occasion to learn more about these aspects.

Undoubtedly the most important feature of Akṣaradhāma is that at its centre sits the distinct transcendental human-shaped form of Parabrahman in all his divine and resplendent glory. In our extensive discussions in the previous chapter about the immanently pervading (anvaya) yet eternally distinct (vyatireka) form of Parabrahman, we noted Svāminārāyaṇa explaining that this was possible by way of Parabrahman's extraordinary yogic powers. What he was stressing was that God, even while revealing himself throughout the universe,

Nevertheless, he himself is still always present in his Akṣaradhāma....

He is forever present on his throne in his Akṣaradhāma (Vac. Gaḍh. II.64).

Svāminārāyaṇa adds that this is also true when Parabrahman manifests in human form on earth. He never abandons his place in Akṣaradhāma; he does not 'move' from there to be on earth.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī provides a description of this eternally resident form in one of his sermons. He states:

Who is unborn even though taking birth; whose form is unfaltering and eternal; who has a divine form even while having a human-shaped form, and who has a human-shaped form which is divine;

³⁵⁶ KaU-SB 2.15, pp. 99-102 and BG-SB 8.21, pp. 189-93.

who is in Akṣaradhāma yet here and here yet certainly in Akṣaradhāma; in fact, wherever he is, is indeed the centre of Akṣaradhāma; who is complete with magnanimity, profundity, sweetness, loving compassion, integrity, knowledge, strength, splendour, taste, smell, and other similarly extremely wondrous divine qualities – that is Puruṣottama, the supreme Śrī Sahajānanda Svāmī [Svāminārāyaṇa] who forever resides in his Akṣaradhāma being served by countless liberated souls and divine powers, where he is blissful in and of himself, but out of sheer compassion, accepts the service of Akṣara and all others (SV 7.27).

Svāminārāyaṇa also describes the throned form of Parabrahman in Akṣaradhāma, giving special reference to the abode's extreme luminance.

There is an all-transcending mass of divine light which cannot be measured from above, below, or in any of the four directions; that is to say, it is endless. Amid this mass of light lies a large, ornate throne upon which presides the divine form of Śrī Nārāyaṇa Puruṣottama Bhagavān. Countless millions of liberated souls are seated around that throne and enjoy the darśana of God (Vac. Loyā.14).

Svāminārāyaṇa describes the divine and intense light of Akṣaradhāma in various other sermons also, calling the abode “replete with light [tejomaya]” (Vac. Gaḍh. I.71, Gaḍh. II.39, Gaḍh. II.50, Gaḍh. III.31, Gaḍh. III.32), “a mass of light [tejno rāśi or tejno samūh]” (Vac. Loyā 14, Gaḍh. III.31), “a mass of Brahmic light [Brahmajoytino samūh]” (Vac. Gaḍh. III.36), and the “realm of light [tejnu maṇḍal]” (Vac. Gaḍh. III.33). In Vac. Var.12 he adds that it is “luminous [prakāśamān] like countless millions of suns, moons and fires”.

As bright as this may sound, though, this light is also described as extremely cool, pleasant, and beautiful. Svāminārāyaṇa begins describing this transcendental beauty in Vac. Gaḍh. I.12 with the following terms:

The abode of God is without a beginning and without an end; it is divine [‘aprākṛta’, i.e. non-māyic or not of this world], infinite and indivisible; and it is characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss.

Seeking to provide some sort of visual representation after these abstract terms,

Svāminārāyaṇa then continues:

I shall describe it using an analogy. Imagine that this whole world, with all of its mountains, trees, humans, animals and all other forms, is made of glass. Also imagine that all of the stars in the sky are as bright as the sun. Then, just as this glass world would glow with extreme beauty amid this radiance, the abode of God is similarly beautiful. Devotees of God see this in samādhi and attain that luminous abode after death.

Similar descriptions of the luminous abode of God can be found at MuU 2.2.10, KaU 5.15, SU 6.14, BG. 15.6 and also CU 3.11.1-3. They all refer to it as ‘beyond the reach of the sun and moon’, i.e. worldly light, with the first three identically proclaiming that it is Akṣarabrahman’s light by which all else is illumined.

There shines not the sun. There shines not the moon or stars, nor does shine this lightning. How, then, can this fire [shine there]? By it alone, being luminous, is all else reflected. By its light is all this [world] illumined (KaU 5.15, MuU 2.2.10 & SU 6.14)

That the sun, etc. do not shine in Akṣaradhāma further points to the abode’s transcendence beyond all earthly and celestial regions. With the sun and moon also symbolic of the passages of time, it reiterates Akṣaradhāma as being eternal and beyond time. As we saw earlier:

That Akṣara is without the states of creation, sustenance and destruction. By its light, even time can be destroyed. Akṣara is stable, eternal, and the place of residence of Parameśvara.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁷ Vedarasa, p. 144.

The Chāndogya Upaniṣad also describes it as a place where “neither days nor nights, age nor death” can enter, adding:

nor sorrow, nor good or bad deeds. All impurities retreat from here. This is the pure Brahmāloka (8.4.1).

Such transcendence above time and impurities explains that Akṣaradhāma is beyond the destructive and defiling influence of māyā. This is the distinct form of Akṣarabrahman Svāminārāyaṇa describes in Vac. Sār.5,

in which there is not even a trace of the influence of Prakṛti-Puruṣa³⁵⁸, etc. and in which only Puruṣottama Bhagavān resides.

One way in which Svāminārāyaṇa reiterates Akṣaradhāma’s transcendence beyond all other realms, even those of other devatās, is by describing it as absolutely unique and incomparable to them. He states in Vac. Pan.4:

The abode of God is such that it cannot be compared to any other place in this brahmāṇḍa. Specifically, out of all of the various places in the seven dvīpas and the nine khaṇḍas, the extremely beautiful places of Brahmā and others on Meru, the various places on Mount Lokāloka, the realms of Indra, Varuṇa, Kubera, Śiva and Brahmā, and many other places, not one can compare to the abode of God.

This is why the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad at 4.3.32 describes Brahmāloka as “unique” and the “highest goal”, the “highest place”, the “highest realm”, with KaU 2.17 calling it simply “śreṣṭha”, the best. Similarly, as we saw in our study earlier, the Bhagavad-Gītā extols it as the “highest goal” (8.13 & 8.21), “highest place” (8.28), and “highest abode” (8.21 & 15.6).

³⁵⁸ As explained, ‘Prakṛti-Puruṣa’ is a shorthand term referring to the combined form of māyā [Mūla-Prakṛti] and an aksaramukta [Mūla-Purusa], who together initiate the creative process.

In Vac. Gaḍh. II.24, Svāminārāyaṇa provides one reason for this uniqueness and transcendency of Akṣaradhāma above the other realms. He explains:

With the exception of God's Akṣaradhāma, the form of God in that Akṣaradhāma and his [liberated] devotees in that Akṣaradhāma, all realms, the devas inhabiting those realms, and the opulence of the devas – everything – is perishable.

Another important aspect of Akṣaradhāma further establishing its eminence is the highest, unparalleled bliss experienced there because of Parabrahman's unconcealed presence. When describing in ascending order the relative happiness of various realms and then the superiority of God's bliss, Svāminārāyaṇa states 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 Br̥haspati's happiness, then Brahmā's, then Vaikuṅṭha's. Beyond that, the happiness of Golok is superior, and finally, the bliss of God's Akṣaradhāma is vastly superior.

Reminiscent of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad's Ānandavallī, this is also similar to BU 4.3.33 where Yājñavalkya describes to King Janaka the happiness of the various realms in ascending order, each a hundred-fold greater than the previous, climaxing finally with the supreme bliss of Brahmaloaka.

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] Mokṣadharmā³⁵⁹ that the realms of the other devatās are like naraka [i.e. hell] compared to the Akṣaradhāma of God (Vac. Sār.1).

³⁵⁹ Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva 191.6.

What, then, can be said of this bliss in relation to the pleasures of the earthly realm?

Compared to the bliss of the abode of God, the māyic sensorial pleasures are like excreta. Only worms that live in excreta feel that there is profound bliss in excreta; a human would realise excreta to be nothing but utter misery (Vac. Var.19).

In reality, though, the bliss in Akṣaradhāma is simply incomparable.

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).

It is by a mere “trace” of this “supreme bliss”, explains the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, that “all other creatures survive” (4.3.32).

Furthermore, not only is Akṣaradhāma the only place where this highest bliss is available, it is available there forever, for this is a place from which there is no return to a transient, miserable existence (Vac. Sār.14, BU 6.2.15, CU 4.15.6, BG 8.21, BG 15.6, BS 4.2.2). Entry, though, is only possible to those who have reached the highest enlightened state of being brahmarūpa (Vac. Pan.7).³⁶⁰ Both of these points reaffirm Akṣaradhāma as the transcendental abode.

Another way of understanding Akṣaradhāma’s greatness is by its size.

Svāminārāyaṇa describes the immense vastness of Akṣaradhāma in Vac. Gaḍh.

I.63 and Vac. Gaḍh. II.42, stating that “countless millions of brahmāṇḍas float like

³⁶⁰ As the final place of rest after death for the liberated souls, we shall be revisiting some of these ideas when discussing liberation, as we deal also with such topics as the types of bodies that liberated souls assume in Akṣaradhāma and the ‘service’ they perform there. See Chapter 11.2.1.

mere atoms” around it. “It is not that those brahmāṇḍas become small compared to Akṣara”, he clarifies, because “they still remain encircled by the eight barriers”.

Rather, it is because of the extreme vastness of Akṣara that those brahmāṇḍas appear so small (Vac. Gaḍh. II.42).

Using an analogy, Svāminārāyaṇa further tries to explain:

Just as an ant moving on the body of a huge elephant appears insignificant, likewise, before the greatness of that Akṣara, everything else pales into insignificance (Vac. Gaḍh. I.63).

It is clear that Svāminārāyaṇa is talking here about Akṣarabrahman as the abode, and not the all-pervading Cidākāśa,³⁶¹ because he goes on to mention in Vac.

Gaḍh. II.42:

Moreover, God – who is Puruṣottama – forever remains present in that Akṣaradhāma.

Svāminārāyaṇa also states clearly in Vac. Loyā.12:

Countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, each encircled by the eight barriers, appear like mere atoms before Akṣara. Such is the greatness of Akṣara, the abode of Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa.

So large is this abode, Svāminārāyaṇa accepts, that it is unperceivable.

That Akṣara also possesses a form, but because it is so vast, its form cannot be visualised.... It is within that Akṣaradhāma that Puruṣottama Bhagavān himself eternally resides (Vac. Gaḍh. I.63).

Thus, by its size, bliss, finality, exclusivity, timelessness, imperishability, purity, luminance, and other qualities, we have attempted to understand the nature of

³⁶¹ For a detailed discussion of the problems that would arise were Akṣaradhāma not considered to be an actual place and simply like the all-pervading Cidākāśa, see Brahmadarshandas, *Vacanāmṛt Rahasya*, III, pp. 94-101. He also addresses questions arising from considering Akṣaradhāma as an actual place; *ibid*, pp. 87-93. See also BG-SB 8.21, pp. 190-91.

Akṣaradhāma and its transcendence. Of course, simply being the singular home of Puruṣottama – the highest being, the impassably supreme entity, the creator and controller of all brahmāṇḍas, the avatārīn (cause of all avatāras), etc. – is evidently suffice in establishing it as the supreme abode, beyond all other abodes, realms and regions in the countless millions of brahmāṇḍas.

7.4.3) Akṣarabrahman as Sevaka in Akṣaradhāma

We have already noted from Vac. Gaḍh. I.21 that Svāminārāyaṇa talks about the two types of forms of Akṣarabrahman: one which is formless, i.e. Cidākāśa; and the others which have a definite form. In that sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa specifically mentions:

In its other form, that Akṣara remains in the service of
Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa.

Svāminārāyaṇa is referring to the human-shaped form of Akṣarabrahman that resides within Akṣaradhāma, itself another of its forms. As a sevaka (literally ‘servant’) there, he is the supreme devotee of Parabrahman, serving as an exemplar for all the liberated souls who are also resident within the divine realm. Together, they enjoy the bliss of Parabrahman. This is mentioned as a part of the description of the superlative, matchless bliss which forms the central theme of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad’s Ānandavallī. The long opening verse begins with a statement confirming the distinction between Brahman and the “highest”, i.e. Parabrahman, and the three terms we saw earlier describing Brahman – satyam, jñānam and anantam. It then states:

Yo veda nihitam guhāyām parame vyoman |

So'snute sarvān kāmān saha | brahmaṇā vipaściteti³⁶² |

Who knows [that Brahman] dwelling in the cavity [of the heart]
and in the highest abode, he enjoys all pleasures with the
omniscient Brahman (2.1.1).

The Bhāṣyakāra explains that the person who knows the various forms of Akṣarabrahman, as including the all-pervading Cidākāśa and the abode of God, becomes liberated. Upon death, he reaches that abode of God and experiences the highest bliss along with Akṣarabrahman, who is also present there with other liberated souls.³⁶³ This verse therefore points to the form of Akṣarabrahman resident within Akṣaradhāma.

The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad further describes this Akṣarabrahman “firmly residing” in that “divine Brahmapura abode” in terms suggesting a divine human-shaped form (2.2.7), which is pure, beautiful and resplendent (2.2.9).

As we also saw at the beginning of this section, MuU 2.2.1 describes this form as being “dedicated” or totally devoted (samarpita). This further reiterates that Akṣarabrahman, in *all* its forms, is first, foremost and always a devotee of Parabrahman, serving him variously in four different forms. This servitude and

³⁶² ‘vipaścita’ is another hapax legomenon. The Bhāṣyakāra explains that term in the instrumental case qualifying the neuter ‘brahmaṇā’ is composed of parts from three terms: ‘vi’ from ‘viśeṣa’, meaning ‘especially’; ‘paś’ from ‘paśyat’, meaning ‘seeing’ or ‘knowing’; and ‘cit’, meaning consciousness. Together they provide the full meaning relating to Brahman’s extraordinary capacity to know all things on account of his supreme consciousness, which I have shortened in the translation below to ‘omniscient’.

³⁶³ TU-SB 2.1.1, p. 363.

devotion is perhaps most distinguishable in this human-shaped form within Akṣaradhāma.

This same transcendental form of Akṣarabrahman also manifests on earth in human form, just as Parabrahman manifested on earth as Svāminārāyaṇa (even while forever remaining present in Akṣaradhāma). It is to this, the fourth form of Akṣarabrahman, and perhaps the most important for the individual souls on earth, that we now turn.

7.4.4) Akṣarabrahman as Brahmasvarūpa Guru

If we recall, we left our chapter on Parabrahman ending on something of a cliff-hanger. We had already established that a cardinal and distinguishing doctrine of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, by which all others are illumined and consummated, is 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.

Our subsequent question was: How does he do this? If Svāminārāyaṇa was only present on earth from 1781 to 1830, how does Parabrahman continue to remain present to continue his work after that period? That is, to whom do the evocative words ‘God manifest before your eyes’ – which Svāminārāyaṇa uses so profusely – apply today?

We can now answer these questions about Parabrahman in this section on Akṣarabrahman as the Brahmasvarūpa Guru.

From a careful study of the Vacanāmṛut, it becomes clear that Svāminārāyaṇa did not intend those words about ‘God manifest before the eyes’ to remain restricted to his presence alone for the limited time of his divine embodiment on earth. He makes the profoundly important revelation in Vac. Gaḍh. I.71:

When God manifests for the purpose of granting liberation to the jīvas, he is always accompanied by his Akṣaradhāma, his attendants – who are formed of consciousness – and all of his divine powers.

Parabrahman, then, is never alone on earth; he is *always* accompanied by Akṣarabrahman (and some chosen liberated souls from Akṣaradhāma). So important and real is this co-manifestation of Akṣarabrahman that Svāminārāyaṇa concludes his sermon thus:

Therefore, a devotee of God should realise that the form of God along with his Akṣaradhāma is present on this earth, and he should also explain this fact to others.

It is this Akṣarabrahman – in another form, the abode of God – that is the Brahmasvarūpa Guru on earth. Just as in his eternally distinct form Parabrahman is fully manifest in his abode called Akṣaradhāma, on earth, he chooses to similarly reside in his ‘human-abode’, the same Akṣarabrahman who assumes the form of the Guru.

Svāminārāyaṇa provides two analogies in Vac. Pan.7 to help explain how this presence of Parabrahman within Akṣarabrahman can be understood. The first is of red-hot piece of iron. Having fully ‘entered’ the metal, fire “suppresses the quality of coldness and the black colour of the iron” and instead “exhibits its own

quality” of heat and redness. Similarly, “when the sun rises, the light from all of the stars, the moon, etc. merges into the sun’s own light, and only the sun’s light remains.” In the same way, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, when God ‘enters’ into the Guru, “he overpowers [Akṣarabrahman’s] light and exhibits his own divine light to a greater degree.”

In this way, Svāminārāyaṇa extends the full substantial presence³⁶⁴ of Parabrahman to the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, whom, as we saw earlier, he refers to variously (and sometimes interchangeably in the same statement) as the ‘Sant’, ‘Satpuruṣa’, ‘Sādhu’, ‘Bhakta’, etc.

In Vac. Sār.10 he unequivocally reveals:

When one has the darśana of such a Sant, one should realise, ‘I have had the darśana of God himself’.

These remarkable words epitomise the doctrine that God is present in and functions through the Guru. As we learnt in ‘Parabrahman as Pragaṭa’ in the previous chapter, ‘seeing’ within such theological contexts is indicative of the face-to-face meeting with God, a personal, intimate encounter and relationship

³⁶⁴ Of course, Parabrahman has a presence in all beings and things. However, his *substantial* presence in Akṣarabrahman is like in no other entity or element. After narrating the creative process involving the various entities and elements, Svāminārāyaṇa explains this point in Vac. Gaḍh. I.41, beginning:

Purusottama Bhagavān enters and dwells in all of the above as their cause and antaryāmin. However, he does not manifest in Prakṛti-Puruṣa to the extent he manifests in Akṣara; and he does not manifest in Pradhāna-Puruṣa to the extent that he manifests in Prakṛti-Puruṣa; and he does not manifest in...

continuing until all the creative constituents have been included. Thus, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, Parabrahman resides most fully in Akṣarabrahman.

with him. While the Guru neither is nor ever becomes God, God is revealed in and by the Guru. Quite simply, according to Svāminārāyaṇa: to have seen the Guru is to have seen God; to have met the Guru is to have met God.

This also has an equally powerful implication from God's side. If the devotees see and relate to God through the Guru, it is just as true that God reciprocates by meeting and relating with his devotees through the Guru as well. The Guru is thus the mediator between humans and God, making possible the personal encounter that Svāminārāyaṇa stressed was the prime reason for Parabrahman's manifestation on earth. Equally, then, to have been seen by the Guru is to have been seen by God; to have been blessed by the Guru is to have been blessed by God.

Such emphatic statements are validated by the Upaniṣads (which we shall consider shortly) and Svāminārāyaṇa when he reveals the full presence of God in the Guru. For example, in explaining in Vac. Gaḍh. I.27 the "countless types of powers" of the Guru, he adds:

Since it is God who sees through his [the Sant's] eyes, he empowers the eyes of all of the beings in the brahmāṇḍa; and since it is God who walks through his legs, he is also capable of endowing the strength to walk to the legs of all of the beings in the brahmāṇḍa.

He goes on to conclude:

Thus, since it is God who resides in all of the senses and limbs of such a Sant, that Sant is able to empower the senses and limbs of

all beings in the brahmāṇḍa. Therefore, such a Sant is the sustainer [ādhāra] of the world.³⁶⁵

It is noteworthy that Svāminārāyaṇa relates both the Guru's cognitive sense-organs (jñāna indriya) as well as his conative sense-organs (karma indriya) – reflected in the specific examples of the eyes and feet – as being inhabited by God. He then expands this by mentioning “sarva indriya”, implying that all parts of the Guru's being are imbued with God's presence. This leads to the belief that God knows and functions through the Guru, and fully lives on through him.

This explains what Svāminārāyaṇa means when he says “such a Sant has a direct relationship [sākṣāt sambandh] with God” (Vac. Gaḍh. III.27). It is a direct, complete and substantive relationship.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī reinforces this relationship in his sermon at SV 5.392 when he states:

The association of the Sādhu is a direct relationship with God and leads to the bliss of God. Why? Because God fully resides in the Sādhu.

Further along in the same sermon, Guṇātītānanda Svāmī is posed with an important question that we also need to address as a part of this elucidation on the Guru and the continued manifestation of God. A member from the assembly asked him:

Is not God manifest before the eyes through the mūrtis?

³⁶⁵ This also resonates with the Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad statements of Yājñavalkya which talk of Akṣara as upholding the whole universe. See BU-SB 3.8.9, pp. 193-95.

It is a valid question borne of theological reflection and practice since mūrtis (sacred images ritually infused with the presence of the deity) hold a key role in the daily worship of God. The presence of God in them is undeniable, with Svāminārāyaṇa himself mentioning in Vac. Gaḍh. I.68 that God resides in the various types of mūrtis as well as in the Sant. However, is God's presence in mūrtis the same as it is in the Guru?

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī provides an extensive answer based on other Vacanāmrut sermons (primarily Vac. Var.12), before concluding emphatically:

Therefore, only the walking-talking form of God should be understood as the manifest form before the eyes. Indeed, it is the great Sant who infuses the mūrti with the presence of God. Mūrtis, scriptures and places of pilgrimage cannot together form a Sādhu, but it is the great Sant who forms all three. Therefore, only the Sant in whom God fully resides is the manifest form of God before the eyes.

To iterate this unique theological status of the Guru, Svāminārāyaṇa extols him in his sermons in the highest possible manner, often in the first person. For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. I.37 he goes as far as to say:

Even I place the dust of his feet on my head. In my mind, I am afraid of hurting him, and I also long to have his darśana.... The darśana of such a perfect Bhakta of God is equivalent to the darśana of God himself. He is so great that his darśana alone can redeem countless fallen souls (Vac. Gaḍh. I.37).

As he lauds the Guru, Svāminārāyaṇa also firmly and repeatedly warns against hurting or maligning him, often showing dire and irreparable spiritual consequences if one does [Vac. Gaḍh. I.1, Gaḍh. I.35, Gaḍh. I.53, Gaḍh. I.58, Gaḍh. I.73, Sār.18, Loyā.1, Gaḍh. II.46, Gaḍh. III.12]. In this regard, Vac. Var.14 is

especially noteworthy for its mention of 'seeking the refuge of the Satpuruṣa' and the pre-eminence of this above all other forms of dharmic living.

Thus, by seeking the refuge of the Satpuruṣa, regardless of how terrible a sinner a person may be, he becomes extremely pure and attains samādhi. On the other hand, a person who maligns the Satpuruṣa is still a terrible sinner, regardless of how sincere he may seem to be in abiding by dharma. Moreover, he can never have the realisation of God in his heart.

Conversely, Svāminārāyaṇa also stresses that serving the Guru and earning his favour is tantamount to serving God and earning God's favour. That is why he explains in Vac. Gaḍh. III.26:

Such a Sant should not be thought to be like a human nor should he be thought to be like even a deva.... Such a Sant, even though he is human [in form], is worthy of being served like God.

Svāminārāyaṇa elaborates on how to serve the Guru "like God" in Vac. Var.5 by instructing "equal service" of both, further establishing the full presence of God in the Guru. He states:

Just as one performs the mānsi pūjā [worship by mental visualisation] of God, if one also performs the mānsi pūjā of the highest Bhakta along with God; and just as one prepares an offering of food for God, similarly, if one also prepares an offering for God's highest Bhakta and serves it to him; and just as one donates five rupees to God, similarly, if one also donates money to the great Sant – then, by performing with extreme affection such equal service of God and the Sant who possesses the highest qualities, even if he is a devotee of the lowest calibre and was destined to become a devotee of the highest calibre after two lives, or after four lives, or after ten lives, or after a hundred lives, he will become a devotee of the highest calibre in this very life. Such are the fruits of the equal service of God and God's Bhakta (Vac. Var.5).

Serving the Guru is thus serving God, the fruit of which can accelerate one spiritually a hundred-fold.

Svāminārāyaṇa substantiates the service of the Guru in Vac. Gaḍh. II.28 by adding his personal example again. He says:

Even I am the devotee of such a perfect Bhakta of God and offer my devotion to the Bhakta of God.

Equally remarkable statements continue throughout the rest of this sermon, in which Svāminārāyaṇa reiterates in various ways the influential theological role of the Guru.

Those who have perceived flaws in the Bhakta of God, even though they were very great, have fallen from their status of eminence. Those who progress do so only by serving the Bhakta of God, and those who regress do so only by maligning the Bhakta of God.

“In fact,” Svāminārāyaṇa declares, such is the direct relationship between God and Guru that

the only method for a person to please God is to serve the Bhakta of God by thought, word and deed. The only method to displease God is to malign the Bhakta of God.

Perhaps feeling that he had still not emphasised his point about the Guru enough, Svāminārāyaṇa completed his address with the following emphatic addendum:

What is this sermon like which I have delivered before you? Well, I have delivered it having heard and having extracted the essence from the Vedas, the Śāstras, the Purāṇas and all other words on this earth pertaining to liberation. This is the most profound and fundamental principle; it is the essence of all essences. For all those who have previously attained liberation, for all those who will attain it in the future, and for all those who are presently treading the path of liberation, this discourse is like a lifeline.

The soteriological imperative at the conclusion of the sermon here confirms that the ‘Bhakta’ Svāminārāyaṇa has referred to throughout these statements

consistently refers only to the Guru but not other devotees of God, however eminent.

In another sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa draws upon the 'king' analogy that we saw being used many times throughout the exposition of Parabrahman. Here, Svāminārāyaṇa still reserves the kingship for God, but includes the Guru as his 'queen'. He explains:

For example, in a kingdom, the queen reigns over the same land the king reigns over, and the queen has the same authority as the king's authority.³⁶⁶ In the same way, that Sādhu has the very same influence as God's influence (Vac. Gaḍh. II.22).

What is especially remarkable about all these statements is that they are being made by Svāminārāyaṇa, who has already revealed himself as Parabrahman. He evidently felt that revealing the Guru as bearing the full substantial presence of God would in no way undermine or compete with his own position as being Parabrahman in person. What this tells us about God in Svāminārāyaṇa theology is that Parabrahman remains Parabrahman – the one without second; impassable and unchallengeable. Yet his full glory and work is fulfilled through the Guru when Parabrahman is not personally present. Thus the cognate doctrines of Pragaṭa and Akṣarabrahman as Guru point to a continued presence of Parabrahman not limited to Svāminārāyaṇa's own time on earth.

³⁶⁶ This of course relates to the Indian conception of monarchy from the early nineteenth century.

This is brought most dramatically to light in the matter of liberation. For example, in Vac. Var.10, Svāminārāyaṇa states:

One who aspires for liberation should recognise God through these characteristics and seek the refuge of that God.... However, when God is not manifest on this earth before the eyes, one should seek the refuge of the Sant who is absorbed with that God, because the jīva can also secure liberation through him.

God thus continues his liberative work through the Guru.

Here, we should pause for some theological reflection to clarify and confirm the important issue about the metaphysical identity of the Guru.

Who is this Guru that Svāminārāyaṇa extols so profusely and to whom he affords such a prominent role throughout his sermons? Cannot the 'Sant' or 'Sādhu' from these many statements refer to any ordained monk of the Svāminārāyaṇa order, or the 'Bhakta' refer to any devotee of the fellowship, or the 'Satpuruṣa' refer to any noble person? How can we be certain that it is Akṣarabrahman that Svāminārāyaṇa revealed accompanies Parabrahman on earth?

The answer to this crucial question about the being of the Guru lies in his function that Svāminārāyaṇa reveals in these very statements. Throughout, he identifies the Guru with the work of liberation, as in the statement above from Vac. Var.10. As another example, in Vac. Jet.1 he firstly describes the insurmountability of māyā and how "no jīva can conquer it". Then in explaining "the means to transcend[ing] māyā", he states:

When the jīva meets the manifest form of Śrī Puruṣottama
Bhagavān – who is beyond māyā and who is the destroyer of māyā

and all karmas – or the Sant who is absorbed with that God, then, by accepting their refuge, the jīva can transcend māyā.

As we learnt at the very opening of this Part, the Svāminārāyaṇa School has accepted five metaphysical entities. Of these five, only two – Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman – transcend māyā, and so only they can possibly liberate others from it. Yet Svāminārāyaṇa mentions above that both “Śrī Puruṣottama Bhagavān” and “the Sant” can do this. What does this tell us about the metaphysical identity of the Guru? He is not Parabrahman, who, as we know, is one without second. But if the Guru is capable of functioning as liberator, then he must be Akṣarabrahman.

The same conclusion can be derived by bringing together two sermons Svāminārāyaṇa delivered at Vac. Sār.7 and Vac. Gaḍh. I.73. In the first, he unravels the significance behind an analogy found in the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa alluded to at 1.1.4, that the ‘wheel’s edges are blunted at the sacred place of Naimikṣāraṇya Kṣetra’. He explains that the ‘wheel’ is the incessantly spinning mind and its jagged ‘edges’ are the senses (cognitive and conative). They are blunted, i.e. purified, in the holy association of the Sant, therefore he should be known as the metaphorical ‘Naimikṣāraṇya Kṣetra’. There (i.e. with him), he instructs, “one should seek liberation” and “remain there with an absolutely resolute mind.”

In the second sermon, Vac. Gaḍh. I.73, Svāminārāyaṇa states clearly that “the senses are the edges of the mind-wheel” and “they are blunted only by the

complete realisation of Brahman and Parabrahman.” Here Svāminārāyaṇa mentions both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman as instrumental in ‘blunting the edges’ of the mind, whereas in Vac. Sār.7 he pointed to only the Sant. The Sant is not Parabrahman. Therefore, he must be the other entity mentioned at Vac. Gaḍh. I.73, i.e. Akṣarabrahman.

But does this not undermine the unique and exclusive relationship one is to have with God? Indeed, Svāminārāyaṇa himself instructs in Vac. Gaḍh. III.16, drawing upon one of his oft-used analogies:

A devotee should have firm fidelity to God. Specifically, like a woman who observes the vow of fidelity, he would never develop the same affection towards even other mukta sadhus, however great they may be, as he has developed towards whichever form of God he has had the darśana of. Nor does he develop affection for other avatāras of his Īṣṭadeva. He keeps affection only for the form that he has attained, and he acts according to his wishes only. If he does happen to respect others, it is only because of their association with his God. One who, like a faithful wife, has such faithful devotion towards one’s own Īṣṭadeva, never develops affection on seeing others, however virtuous they may be.

Clarifying and strengthening his point, Svāminārāyaṇa adds:

For example, Hanumānjī is a devotee of Śrī Raghunāthajī. Following the avatāra of Rāma, there have been many other avatāras of God, but Hanumānjī’s devotion has been like that of a woman who observes the vow of fidelity, as he has remained faithful to Rāmacandrajī only. This is why Hanumānjī’s devotion is considered to be like that of a faithful wife. The devotion of a devotee of God who has such fidelity can be said to be like that of a faithful wife. Conversely, if a person does not have such an inclination, his devotion can be said to be like that of a prostitute. Therefore, one should not knowingly engage in devotion that would cause one to be disgraced. Instead, a devotee of God should thoughtfully engage in faithful devotion – like that of a faithful wife.

And yet, Svāminārāyaṇa also instructs, in the most clear and emphatic words, to associate with and develop profound love for the Guru. For example, after citing verse 3.25.20 from the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa, which he translates as

If a person maintains profound love towards the Ekāntika Sant of God just as resolutely as he maintains profound love towards his own relatives, then the gateway to liberation opens for him,

Svāminārāyaṇa concludes:

Maintaining profound love towards such a Sant also opens the gateway to liberation (Vac. Gaḍh. I.54).

In another sermon he states:

For a person who desires his own liberation, nothing in this world is more blissful than God and his Sant. Therefore, just as a person is profoundly attached to his own body, he should be similarly attached to God and his Sant (Vac. Gaḍh. III.7).

How can these statements be reconciled with that equally clear and emphatic teaching of Vac. Gaḍh. III.16 where not even muktas are to be loved on par with God? It tells us, firstly, that the Guru is not a liberated soul; a mukta is liberated, yes, but nonetheless a soul like any other, who, by the very definition of 'liberated', was once bound by māyā. Rather, he must be something metaphysically greater than a liberated soul, something that has never been shackled or sullied by māyā. Only two such māyā-transcending entities exist: Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman. The Guru is not God. Therefore, the Guru is Akṣarabrahman. *Quod erat demonstrandum.*

Throughout the Vacanāmṛut, we find a similar and widely recurrent theme of the Guru being revealed in his soteriological role and as someone with whom to have

such a devotional relationship. For example, Svāminārāyaṇa unequivocally urges at Vac. Gadh. III.26:

Those who are eager to secure their liberation should thus serve such a Sant.

The Upaniṣads are similarly unequivocal, not only on the absolute need for a Guru to transcend māyā and realise the highest, final, brahmic state of enlightenment, but also on the Guru's metaphysical credentials. For example, as part of the continuing elucidation of brahmavidyā in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, each aspirant is instructed thus:

Tad-vijñānārtham sa gurum evābhigacchet samidh-paniḥ
śrotriyam brahma niṣṭham |

To realise that [higher knowledge of Akṣara (or Brahman) and Puruṣa (or Parabrahman), i.e. brahmavidyā], imperatively go, with sacrificial wood in hand, to only that guru who is Brahman, who is the knower of the true meaning of revealed texts, and who is firmly established [in God] (MuU 1.2.12).

By splitting “brahma” and “niṣṭham” normally considered as a single compounded term, the Bhāṣyakāra provides the crucial distinction here that the Guru is one not just ‘established in Brahman’ [brahmaṇi niṣṭha], but ‘the very form of Brahman’ [brahmasvarūpa eva]. Hence, the correct qualifier for the Guru is ‘brahmasvarūpa’ – the form of Brahman (or Akṣarabrahman).

This means the Guru is further qualified by two adjectives: niṣṭham, which reveals that he is “entirely and eternally established [nitāntam nityam tiṣṭhati] in Parabrahman”; and śrotriyam, which has the richly multifarious meaning of one who not only is well-versed in the true meaning of the revealed texts, but has a

direct and full realisation [sākṣātkāra] of them, which means that he has effortlessly applied their principles in his life, and who, by his own exemplary life [ācāra] and teachings [upadeśa], can adeptly convey those principles to those keen on seeking liberation.

The Bhāṣyakāra also makes clear what this list of essential credentials does *not* include. He emphasises this by way of the accentuating “eva” used in the statement. Not only, he explains, does it mean that it is *essential* to seek the refuge of such a guru in order to gain brahmavidyā, i.e. there is absolutely no other way to assimilate the highest theological knowledge, but also that one should seek the refuge of *only* such a guru, and not any other who may bear some semblance to a guru by way of his ochre robes, erudition, oratory skills, institutional power, large following, etc. but who in fact does not have the realisation of the revealed texts and is not metaphysically Akṣarabrahman.³⁶⁷

When expanding upon KaU 2.8-9 –

It [liberative knowledge] is difficult to grasp when taught by an inferior man, even though one may be highly contemplative. Yet there is no way to it without it being taught by the non-inferior [i.e. superior teacher, the Brahmasvarūpa Guru], [for] it is subtler than an atom [and] beyond the realm of reason. Nor can this knowledge be grasped by argumentation. Yet, Dearest [Naciketas], it is well known when taught by the other [the Brahmasvarūpa Guru] (KaU 2.8-9).

– the Bhāṣyakāra again draws a particularly sharp contrast between the essential bona fide Guru, who must above all be Akṣarabrahman, and the “inferior”

³⁶⁷ MuU-SB 1.2.12, pp. 253-56.

teachers of brahmavidyā. Those who fall under this latter category are, he explains, they who worship merely the words of scriptures (rather than their meaning or practice), who are interested in mere debates about the Vedas (but not understanding their true meanings), who determine meanings of words independently (without appeal to revelation), who have not sought the refuge of a Guru themselves, who are unbelievers, who have imperfect knowledge, whose intellect on the spiritual path has been afflicted by unbridled reason, who are of weak faith, who identify with the body (rather than the soul), and who do not have a direct realisation of the 'Akṣara-Puruṣottama siddhānta'.³⁶⁸

The Upaniṣads provide further evidence of the Guru being Akṣarabrahman by using a term which also elucidates his role in connecting humans to God. He is repeatedly described as the "setu", or bridge.

Yaḥ setur-ijānānām akṣaram brahma yat param |

The bridge for those who offer sacrifices is Akṣarabrahman, the highest (KaU 3.2).

Amṛtasyaiṣa setuḥ |

This is the bridge to the immortal (MuU 2.2.5).

Atha ya ātmā sa setu... |

Now, the Soul [of all] is the bridge... (CU 8.4.1).

Amṛtasya param setum... |

The best bridge to immortality... (SU 6.19).³⁶⁹

³⁶⁸ KaU-SB 2.8, p. 91.

³⁶⁹ See also the other analogy used at SU 2.8, of Akṣarabrahman being a boat [uḍupa] used by the wise to cross the frightful forces of māyā.

In all four instances, the Bhāṣyakāra describes Akṣarabrahman as the bridge spanning across the incessantly gushing “great river of saṃsāra” (perpetual transmigration from birth to death and rebirth brought on by the ignorance which is māyā), allowing one to cross from this side of a worldly, transient and sorrow-mixed existence over to a divine, eternal and purely blissful existence with God.

The Bhāṣyakāra adds that the Guru thus serves as a “mādhyama”, literally ‘medium’, so that devotees can “reach” God and personally experience him – know him and love him – here and now on earth. As we noted, one – if not the prime – purpose of Parabrahman’s manifestation on earth in human form is to accept the loving devotion of his beloved devotees (Vac. Kār.5). While Svāminārāyaṇa was able to do this during his own presence on earth, this is still possible for the devotees by serving the Guru, through whom God also accepts the devotees’ devotion. That is why, as we saw, Svāminārāyaṇa advocates serving the Guru on par with God (Vac. Var.5, Vac. Gaḍh. III.26).

Extrapolating the analogy at KaU 3.2, the Bhāṣyakāra also adds that just as an expansive bridge can save even the strongest of swimmers from unknown dangers which lurk beneath the surface of treacherous waters, so, too, the Guru provides a safe transit across the unpredictable and sometimes dangerous course of māyic life.³⁷⁰

³⁷⁰ KaU-SB 3.2, pp. 123-24.

Interestingly, he also explains at MuU 2.2.5 that the analogy reiterates the distinction between the five metaphysical entities of Svāminārāyaṇa theology: if the bridge is Akṣarabrahman and the 'other side' is Parabrahman, what the bridge spans over is māyā and those who need the bridge to cross over it are jīvas and Īśvaras.³⁷¹ What this also tells us, importantly, is that even while the Guru's position can hardly be overstated, he remains the bridge, the means; he never becomes the end, which is always and only Parabrahman. Worship – or 'upāsanā', as it is more correctly known – is always of Parabrahman (the upāsya, or worshippable), albeit in his most accessible form manifest through the Guru. Thus, whatever reverence or devotion or praise is offered to the Guru, it is with the good knowledge that Parabrahman is fully residing within him and who is ultimately accepting the devotion. To recall the analogy introduced earlier of holy water within a vessel: in wishing to offer pūjā of the water, one must perform the pūjā of the vessel which contains the water. Similarly, if one serves the Guru it is because he is the vessel containing Parabrahman. The vessel and the contents never become one. Thus, of all the glory of the Guru mentioned above, upāsanā – loving worship informed by correct theological knowledge, as we have come to define it³⁷² – is exclusively of Parabrahman. The meaning of Akṣara-Puruṣottama Upāsanā, a technical name related to brahmavidyā describing the theological underpinning of some denominations of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, is thus not the worship of Akṣara *and* Puruṣottama, but

³⁷¹ MuU-SB 2.2.5, p. 274.

³⁷² As a shorthand definition for 'upāsanā', this will suffice for now, but it's broad and multilayered meaning would require much more treatment in an independent study.

the worship of Puruṣottama as Akṣara; offering perfect devotion after realising the perfectly enlightened state of being like Akṣarabrahman (akṣararūpa or brahmarūpa) [e.g. Vac. Loyā.12; Vac. Gaḍh. II.3] – for which Akṣarabrahman is obviously essential. Akṣarabrahman is, after all, first, foremost and always a devotee of God; the perfect devotee of Parabrahman. And as great as he may be in relation to all other entities, the Brahmasvarūpa Guru is infinitely subordinate to Parabrahman himself (Vac. Gaḍh. I.64, Vac. Loyā.13).³⁷³

In balance, then, the Guru is metaphysically Akṣarabrahman in entity and eternally and ontologically distinct from and subordinate to Parabrahman, yet he serves as the complete and perfect medium for God's presence – his love, bliss, blessings, grace, etc. – and, importantly, functions as the means to securing eternal communion with God in final liberation.

There are clear and crucial connections here with liberation as well, and we shall clarify at its appropriate point how exactly the Guru facilitates it.³⁷⁴ Now, it is important to simply affirm that because of his role in liberating souls from māyā and leading them to Parabrahman, the 'Sant', 'Sādhu', 'Bhakta', 'Satpuruṣa', etc. mentioned in all such statements denotes only the māyā-transcending Akṣarabrahman Guru.

³⁷³ For a more extensive discussion of the meaning of 'Akṣara-Purusottama Upāsanā', see Brahmadarshandas, *Vacanāmrut Rahasya*, III, pp. 195-214.

³⁷⁴ See especially section 11.3.2.

Such statements abound. Svāminārāyaṇa repeatedly refers to such a Guru in the Vacanāmṛt immediately alongside God – quite literally, as ‘God and God’s Sant’, ‘God and God’s Bhakta’, etc. – when covering a range of important theological topics. While there are too many instances to cite them all individually, an overview should provide a sufficient idea of the emphasis Svāminārāyaṇa places on the Guru throughout the Vacanāmṛt.

- Attaining God and the Guru: Vac. Gaḍh. I. 14, Gaḍh. I.78, Gaḍh. II.59, Gaḍh. II.66
- Loving God and the Guru: Vac. Gaḍh. II.63, Gaḍh. III.7, Gaḍh. III.11
- Realising God and the Guru to be divine: Vac. Loyā.18, Gaḍh. II.63
- Having faith in the words of God and the Guru: Vac. Sār.5, Sār.9, Loyā.2, Loyā.10
- Association of God and the Guru: Vac. Gaḍh. II.28
- Resolute faith in God and the Guru: Vac. Loyā.3
- Greatness of God and the Guru: Vac. Gaḍh. I.72, Kār.9, Loyā.3, Loyā.8, Loyā.16, Loyā.17, Gaḍh. II.21, Gaḍh. II.62, Gaḍh. III.14, Gaḍh. III.28
- Obeying God and the Guru: Vac. Gaḍh. I.15, Gaḍh. I.16, Sār.2, Gaḍh. II.26
- Serving God and the Guru: Vac. Gaḍh. I.2, Gaḍh. I.8, Gaḍh. I.31, Loyā.8, Gaḍh. II.25, Gaḍh. II.41, Gaḍh. II.63, Var.5, Var.17, Amd.3
- God and the Guru as liberators: Vac. Gaḍh. II.59, Var.10, Var.19, Gaḍh. III.7

In addition, while in several sermons Svāminārāyaṇa mentions God alone, in several others he mentions only the Guru when discussing many of these topics above as well as a few others (Vac. Gaḍh. I.44, Gaḍh. I.54, Gaḍh. I.55, Gaḍh. I.58,

Gaḍh. I.60, Gaḍh. I.66, Sār.7, Sār.10, Sār.18, Loyā.12, Gaḍh. II.7, Gaḍh. II.13, Gaḍh. II.13, Gaḍh. II.28, Gaḍh. II.51, Gaḍh. II.54, Var.4, Var.11, Var.14, Gaḍh. III.2, Gaḍh. III.5, Gaḍh. III.26, Gaḍh. III.27).³⁷⁵

As we draw this section to a close, and with it the chapter on Akṣarabrahman – and apparently now, also the chapter on Parabrahman – it should be evident that the doctrine which Svāminārāyaṇa was most prolific about and for which he reserved some of his most emphatic statements was the doctrine of Pragaṭa – Parabrahman living on and working through Akṣarabrahman in the form of the Guru – a principle he feels is so essential that “there is no option but to understand it,” whether “after being told once, or after being told a thousand times”, whether “today, or after a thousand years.” It is the crux of “all the fundamental principles” and “the essence of all of the scriptures” [Vac. Gaḍh. II.21]; the “one central principle” of all śruti and smṛti texts [Vac. Gaḍh. II.59]. Indeed, this is “the most profound and fundamental principle”, “the essence of all essences”, “the essence” of all words “on this earth pertaining to liberation”, and the very “lifeline” of all those on the path to liberation – past, present and future [Vac. Gaḍh. II.28]. This is because Parabrahman fully resides in the Guru [Vac. Gaḍh. I.27]. So complete and substantive is this presence, that seeing him is seeing God [Vac. Sār.10, Gaḍh. I.37]; serving him is serving God; maligning him is maligning God [Vac. Gaḍh. II.28, Gaḍh. III.26, Var.5, Var.14].

³⁷⁵ I am grateful to Sadhu Brahmadarshandas for this study of Svāminārāyaṇa’s sermons from the *Vacanāmṛut* presented in his *Vacanāmṛut Rahasya*, III, pp. 174-75.

In this way, Parabrahman is entirely present and graciously active through the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, who accompanied him on earth and through whom Parabrahman remains forever present, continuing his liberative work among the people and allowing them a direct and personal relationship with him. Though not God himself, all statements containing the words 'God manifest before the eyes' thus now refer forthrightly and exclusively to the Brahmasvarūpa Guru.