
**PART 3: THEMES OF
SVĀMINĀRĀYAᅆA HINDU THEOLOGY**

9) ĪSVARA

- Nature
- Roles and Functions
- Distinction from and Relation to Parabrahman

9) ĪŚVARA

Of the distinctive five-entity system of Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta, one entity (after Akṣarabrahman) which stands out from the other schools, despite its familiar name, is Īśvara. Not to be confused with Parabrahman or God, it is more akin to the jīva than anything else. In fact, it may have been noticed that as a category of essentially finite beings under the influence of māyā, it was mentioned alongside the jīvas throughout the previous chapter. This draws on a practice found in the Vacanāmṛt where Svāminārāyaṇa routinely speaks of both the jīvas and Īśvaras in tandem. For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. I.45, Svāminārāyaṇa states how Parabrahman “pervades all jīvas and Īśvaras as their inner-controller” and “governs the granting of the deserved fruits of karmas to all jīvas and Īśvaras according to their respective karmas.”

Similarly in Vac. Gaḍh. II.21, on the same topic but related to the dream state, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

In reality, it is God – who transcends both jīva and Īśvara, and who is also the giver of the fruits of karmas – who creates the world experienced in dreams according to the karmas of each particular jīva and Īśvara.

In another sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa states:

God sees all of the jīvas and Īśvaras who dwell in the countless millions of brahmāṇḍas as clearly as he sees a drop of water in his palm (Vac. Gaḍh. II.53).

It is not surprising, then, that the nature of Īśvara is also presented most succinctly in juxtaposition to the jīva. In this sense, much of what has been

explained about jīva stands also for īśvara. Having now expounded upon the nature of jīvas, here we can focus mainly on the distinguishing features of the nature and function of īśvaras, and their distinction from and relation to Parabrahman in particular.

9.1) Nature of Īśvara

In Svāminārāyaṇa theology, īśvaras are ontologically distinct from all other entities, and hold a place metaphysically higher than that of jīvas yet, like them, are still bound within māyā and infinitely inferior to Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman. As eternal entities, they are without beginning and without end. Even after the dissolution of each brahmāṇḍa, they exist in a dormant state within māyā until called again to activity in the next round of cyclic creation. Throughout these phases of creation (origination, sustenance and dissolution) and in whatever state (bound or liberated), they remain immutable and pure in their essential nature. They are many and qualitatively the same, but not one; they forever retain their individuality, never merging into māyā, Parabrahman or each other. Essentially composed of sat-cit-ānanda (existence, consciousness and bliss), they are sentient beings. They are also intelligent agents, endowed by Parabrahman with the ability and freedom to know, act and enjoy as they wish, and therefore are also wholly dependent on him (and Akṣarabrahman). Like the jīvas, īśvaras, too, have three bodies and three states, which, out of ignorance, they fail to distinguish their true identity from, forcing them also to endure the incessant cycle of transmigration until securing final liberation through brahmavidyā.

As we shall see further on, the īśvaras' prime role as deputed to them by Parabrahman relates to the various functions of a brahmāṇḍa. In each function, an īśvara will take on a particular title or designation, such as 'Virāṭa Puruṣa' or 'Vairāja Puruṣa' (who is the inner soul or 'administrator' of the physical brahmāṇḍa). With countless brahmāṇḍas, each title or designation also has countless īśvaras in number. In describing one such īśvara in Vac. Gaḥ. II.31, Svāminārāyaṇa elucidates the nature of īśvaras in general more clearly. He firstly states:

That Virāṭa Puruṣa is just like this jīva, and his actions are also similar to that of the jīva.

As he proceeds to explain the similarities, Svāminārāyaṇa also indicates the points of difference between the two categories of beings.

The lifespan of that Virāṭa Puruṣa is two parārdhas [i.e. 2×10^{17} human years]. The creation, sustenance and dissolution of this world are his three states, just as waking, dream and deep sleep are the three states of the jīva. Virāṭa, sutrātmā and avyākṛta are the three bodies of that Virāṭa Puruṣa.

Svāminārāyaṇa provides more information about the causal body of īśvara in Vac. Kār.12, just as he does for the jīva. The relevant statement for both reads:

The causal body is the māyā of the jīva. That same causal body evolves into the gross and subtle bodies. Thus, all three – the gross, subtle and causal bodies – can be said to be the māyā of the jīva. In the same manner, virāṭa, sutrātmā and avyākṛta can be said to be the māyā of īśvara.

We find a similar description of īśvaras in the Bhāṣyakāra's comment to AU 1.1.2. Having described in the preceding mantra the creation of brahmāṇḍas from Parabrahman, the Soul of all, the Upaniṣad goes on to state:

He [Paramātman] saw [i.e. thought], ‘These worlds [have been created by me]. Now, let me create the guardians of the worlds.’

Here the Bhāṣyakāra confirms the being of the Vairāja Puruṣa as an Īśvara. He then describes how, like the jīva, it is bound by māyā [but] has a considerably longer lifespan of about two parardhas, i.e. 2×10^{17} human years. Like the jīva’s gross, subtle and causal bodies, it has its own three bodies known as virāṭa, sūtrātman and avyākṛta. These are encircled by the eight sheaths [constituents of the creative process], and are evolved from mahattattva [itself originally evolved from māyā]. And like the jīva’s three states of waking, dream and deep sleep, so, too, the Īśvara has the states of creation, sustenance and dissolution.³⁹⁹

These three states are borne of māyā, with each state predominantly the cause of one of the three māyic constituents: sattvaguṇa, rajoguṇa and tamoguṇa.

While in each state, the Īśvara is said to be more aware of and functioning in one of the three bodies than the others, lending it a specific technical title in that state: Vairāja, Hiranyagarbha, and Īśvara.

As we did for the jīva, this information can be succinctly tabulated as follows:

³⁹⁹ AU-SB 1.1.2, pp. 418-19.

State of Īśvara	Predominant Māyic Quality	Predominant Body	Title of Īśvara
Creation	Sattvaḡuᅇa	Virāᅇa	Vairāja
Sustenance	Rajoḡuᅇa	Sūtrātman	Hiranyagarbha
Dissolution	Tamoḡuᅇa	Avyākᅇta	Īśvara

Together with the same information about the jīva, we can present a useful comparative summary of both in another table thus:

Body		State		Title	
Jīva	Īśvara	Jīva	Īśvara	Jīva	Īśvara
Sthūla (Gross)	Virāᅇa	Jāgrata (Wakefulness)	Utᅇpati (Creation)	Viᅇva	Vairāja
Sukᅇma (Subtle)	Sūtrātman	Svapna (Dream)	Sᅇhiti (Sustenance)	Taijasa	Hiranyagarbha
Kāraᅇa (Causal)	Avyākᅇta	Suᅇupti (Deep Sleep)	Pralaya (Dissolution)	Prājña	Īśvara

Like the jīvas, when an īśvara falsely identifies with its three bodies, that is known as its anvaya (concomitant) form, whereas when it correctly self-identifies itself as distinct from all its bodies and as characterised by pure eternal

existence, consciousness and bliss, that is its vyatireka (distinct) form [Vac. Gaḍh. I.7, Vac. Sār.5].

Since īśvaras suffer from ignorance, it is evident that they, too, are in need of correct knowledge. But are they eligible for brahmavidyā just as humans are? This question forms the topic of debate at BS 1.3.26. After a prima facie view rejecting their eligibility, the Sūtrakāra, as interpreted by the Bhāṣyakāra, emphatically asserts that they are indeed eligible, as evidenced by such śruti statements as the opening verse of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad:

Brahmā arose as the first among the gods [devas], as the creator of all and the guardian of the world. To Atharvaṇ, his eldest son, he revealed the knowledge of Brahman [i.e. Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman], the root of all knowledge (MuU 1.1.1).⁴⁰⁰

Svāminārāyaṇa mentions explicitly in Vac. Gaḍh. II.31 that “like the jīva, that Virāṭa Puruṣa is also bound”, adding that it can transcend māyā and become brahmarūpa only when it worships God (whom he calls there ‘Puruṣottama’ and ‘Vāsudeva Bhagavān’). Importantly, this is only possible for īśvaras on earth in human embodiment, which it receives when its karmas sufficiently ripen. Here on earth, an īśvara would need to perform the same praxis as a jīva, by devoutly serving with correct theological knowledge the manifest form of Parabrahman, i.e. the Brahmasvarūpa Guru. Interestingly, then, when in human form, an īśvara would appear visibly indistinguishable from a jīva.

⁴⁰⁰ BS-SB 1.3.26, pp. 111-12.

As similar as they are, though, Svāminārāyaṇa warns against the mistake of equating jīvas and īśvaras. In Vac. Pan.2, he firstly states that such an identification

would suggest that the sthūla body is the same as virāṭa, the sukṣma body is the same as sūtrātman, and the kāraṇa body is the same as avyākṛta. It also suggests that the waking state is the same as that of sustenance, the dream state is the same as that of creation, and the deep sleep state is the same as that of dissolution. Moreover, Viśva, Taijasa and Prājña would be considered equal to Viṣṇu, Brahmā and Śiva, respectively.⁴⁰¹

However, this understanding is incorrect, he stresses, and encourages that it be rectified by learning the following distinction from “a wise person”:

The five material elements residing in the body of īśvara are known as mahābhūtas [‘great elements’], and those elements sustain the bodies of all jīvas. On the other hand, the five material elements in the body of the jīva are minor and are incapable of sustaining others. Also, a jīva possesses limited knowledge compared to an īśvara, who is all-knowing.

īśvaras are thus distinct and superior to jīvas by way of their composition, knowledge, and also Parabrahman-endowed authority. Therefore, Svāminārāyaṇa concludes:

One should learn such a method of interpretation so that the jīva and īśvara are not misunderstood to be equal (Vac. Pan.2).

9.2) Roles and Functions of īśvaras

So who are these īśvaras? And what do they do?

⁴⁰¹ This prima facie view seems to be gleaned from the Mokṣadharmā, chapters 289-306, particularly 289.3-6 and 306.75-77, found in the Mahābhārata’s Śānti Parva.

By its very nature, this topic is inextricably tied with creation, and so can only really be treated satisfactorily by returning to it after a description of the creative process, which we shall be turning to shortly in the next chapter. There, a simple but complete classification of beings in a chart of the cosmic order shall hopefully elucidate the matter sufficiently.

Here, we can briefly note that Svāminārāyaṇa points to īśvaras generally in Vac. Gaḍh. II.22 as “the lords of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, i.e. Brahmā and other īśvaras”, and similarly again in the immediately previous sermon when talking about the visceral world of dreams:

In the same way as jīvas, īśvaras such as Brahmā, etc. also experience creations during their dream state (Vac. Gaḍh. II.21).

Svāminārāyaṇa is referring to the familiar Hindu triad of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva – the ‘gods’ assigned the tasks of origination, sustenance and dissolution within each brahmāṇḍa – and all other beings in the creative process up to and including the countless pairs of Pradhāna-Puruṣa first evolved from the converging of Mūla-Prakṛti (māyā) and Mūla-Puruṣa (an akṣaramukta). This includes Vairāja Puruṣa, who is the inner soul of each brahmāṇḍa and therefore has the physical brahmāṇḍa as its gross body (called virāṭa) [Vac. Kār.12, Gaḍh. II.10, Gaḍh. II.31]. Its subtle body (called sūtrātman), like that of a jīva, comprises its own senses and inner faculties. These are presided over by various divinities of nature which are said to facilitate each function. For example, Sūrya, the sentient being of the sun, facilitates the sense of sight. These divinities also preside over the senses and faculties of each jīva, and are listed as below:

Sense/Faculty		Presiding Divinity	
4 Inner Faculties (Antaḥkarāṇa)	Manas	Thinking	Anirddha/Candra
	Buddhi	Reasoning	Pradyumna/Brahmā
	Citta	Contemplating	Vāsudeva
	Ahaṃkāra	Self-Identifying	Saṅkarṣaṇa/Rudra
5 Cognitive Senses (Jñānendriya)	Caḡṣus	Sight	Sūrya
	Śrotra	Hearing	Diśā
	Ghrāṇa	Smelling	Aśvinīkumāra
	Rasanā	Taste	Varuṇa
	Tvak	Touch	Vāyu
5 Conative Senses (Karmendriya)	Vāk	Speech	Agni
	Pāṇi	Dexterity	Indra
	Pāda	Locomotion	Viṣṇu
	Pāyu	Excretion	Mitra
	Upastha	Generation	Prajāpati

As explained, these divinities include the sentient beings enlivening the various forces of nature, reiterating the important Hindu belief of a living world infused with energy and emotion.

Sentient Divinity	Aspect of Nature
Sūrya	Sun
Candra	Moon
Pṛthvī	Earth
Ākāśa	Space
Diśā	Directions
Varuṇa	Water
Vāyu	Wind
Agni	Fire
Indra	Rain

Some of these as well as a few other divinities are mentioned at AU 1.1.3 as “hatching” from the various organs and senses of Vairāja Puruṣa, who is the “guardian of the world” [AU 1.1.2]. The world is depicted there as a massive cosmic egg.⁴⁰²

As aforementioned, more about this topic will be covered in the following chapter on māyā when we discuss the order of creation for each brahmāṇḍa. A brief explanation can nonetheless be provided here analogously using the

⁴⁰² See AU-SB 1.1.3, pp. 419-20.

following downscaled model adapted from Svāminārāyaṇa's own sermons
(which we shall be examining shortly).

Consider a country comprising many cities. Each city is assigned a minister to oversee its smooth and efficient running. Furthermore, each minister is assisted by junior ministers, secretaries and council members, each with a specific portfolio of duties. All these people are human, just like the citizens they serve, only with more power and authority. Similarly, each world ('city') is under the 'local' authority of Vairāja Puruṣa ('minister'), who is the soul of the living brahmāṇḍa and who has other divinities ('junior ministers') – such as Sūrya (of the sun), Pṛthvī (the earth), Varuṇa (water), etc. – working under him in various assigned duties to ensure its ordered functioning. All these beings are metaphysically Īśvara; they are distinct from, superior and yet similar to the jīvas of each brahmāṇḍa, i.e. bound by māyā but with more power and authority.

A natural progression of this analogy would be to extend it up to the 'national' level, relating the prime minister or king of the land to Parabrahman, who holds overall power and control for the workings of each city/brahmāṇḍa (though he may not always exercise it directly), and who devolves some of that authority to each of his appointed ministers to allow them to fulfil their duties, who, all the while, remain answerable and subordinate to their leader. Importantly, however, one needs to remember that while the leader of the land is another human just like his/her ministers and deputies, Parabrahman is metaphysically distinct from

all Īśvaras. This leads us neatly on to the following section, where we further explore this distinction and relationship between the two.

9.3) Distinction from and Relation to Parabrahman

By their name, one can be forgiven for mistaking 'Īśvara' to mean God. They are in fact ontologically distinct entities; metaphysically different from Parabrahman as well as infinitely inferior to him.

Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises this repeatedly in various ways. For example, when narrating a correct form of theological reflection, he states in Vac. Sār.1:

One should think of the greatness of God in the following way: '... I have attained Śrī Puruṣottama Bhagavān in person, the very Puruṣottama Bhagavān who is... the master of Brahmā and the other devas, who themselves are the lords of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas.

Svāminārāyaṇa reiterates this form of relationship through his familiar analogy of Parabrahman as a world-emperor, in which the countless Īśvaras are mere village chiefs. This is most vividly presented in Vac. Pan.4 and is worth re-citing here in this context.

For example, suppose there is a great world-emperor whose kingdom stretches from where the sun rises to where it sets.... So powerful is this world-emperor that it is not possible to count the villages in his empire, as they are innumerable. The chiefs of these villages also cannot be counted, as they too are innumerable. Furthermore, the countless chiefs of those villages come to his court to make requests. The emperor's money, property, pleasures, palaces and wealth are also countless. Similarly, God is the king of the kings of countless villages in the form of brahmāṇḍas.

Moreover, the chiefs of those villages in the form of brahmāṇḍas are Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. Just as in one village one chief is senior

and the whole population of that village bows before him and follows his command, and just as the chief in turn bows before the king, similarly, in each brahmāṇḍa Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva are senior, and the others in that brahmāṇḍa, that is the devas, demons, humans, seers and prajāpatis of that brahmāṇḍa, worship them and follow their command. But Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva in turn worship Puruṣottama Bhagavān and follow his command.

Furthermore, all of the Brahmās, Viṣṇus and Maheśas of all of the brahmāṇḍas pray to God, 'Mahārāja! Please have compassion on us and visit our brahmāṇḍa' – just as the chief of a village requests the world-emperor, 'Mahārāja! I am poor. Please visit my house. I shall serve you to the best of my ability.' In the same way, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva pray to that God: 'Mahārāja! Please have mercy upon us and grace us with your darśana; do visit our brahmāṇḍa.' Only then does God assume a body in that brahmāṇḍa (Vac. Pan.4).

To be clear, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Maheśa (Śiva) are still the mighty lords of each brahmāṇḍa, exercising phenomenal power and commanding the veneration and obedience of humans and even lesser divinities. But as powerful and venerable and dominating as they may be, they are of utter lowly rank before the Lord of all lords – like “poor” “village chiefs” to the “Great King of all kings”. Even their mention in the plural – “Brahmās, Viṣṇus and Maheśas”, each of the countless brahmāṇḍas – further attests to their relative powerlessness; together, they are reigned over by only the one supreme Parabrahman. And their prayer of sheer supplication, beseeching Parabrahman to grace them with his audience, conclusively cements his position of paramount sovereignty and metaphysical supremacy.

This superior-subordinate or ruler-ruled relationship between Parabrahman and īśvaras is especially reinforced by the evocative phrase “īśvarnā paṇ īśvar”, meaning that Parabrahman is the Īśvara (Lord) of all īśvaras (lords) even. It

highlights Parabrahman as being at least as superior to the īśvaras as they themselves are over others. Whatever power or control they wield over their individual world, it is Parabrahman the Great Lord who reigns over all such lesser lords in all worlds. Svāminārāyaṇa uses the phrase at Vac. Gaḍh. III.38, framing it, importantly, within the doctrine of Pragaṭa. He proclaims:

This manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān before your eyes is...
the Lord of all lords [īśvarnā paṇ īśvar] (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

The Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad similarly states:

Tam īśvarāṇām paramam maheśvaram... |

He who is the Supreme Great Lord of all the lords... (SU 6.7).

When the term “Maheśvara” appears in the Bhagavad-Gītā also, the Bhāṣyakāra relates it to Parabrahman as the “Lord of all īśvaras”, i.e. their controller [5.29, 10.3 and 13.22].

Significantly, the phrase “īśvarnā paṇ īśvar” can also be found in the Vacanāmṛt in directly addressing Svāminārāyaṇa. When a scholar of the “Mādhvī Sampradāya” entered one of Svāminārāyaṇa’s assemblies, Svāminārāyaṇa asked about the belief that Vṛndāvana, the earthly abode of God, survives final dissolution.⁴⁰³

The scholar acknowledged Svāminārāyaṇa’s “valid question”, but was unable to answer it. In supplication, he asked in return:

⁴⁰³ See, for example, *Padma Pūrāṇa*, Pātāla Khaṇḍa 69.69, 71, and 73.26.

In my mind, I have formed a firm belief in you, that you are the ācārya of all ācāryas and the īśvara of all īśvaras. Therefore, please have compassion on me and explain to me your doctrine (Vac. Gaḍh. III.10).

Svāminārāyaṇa duly went on to explain the five eternal entities of Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, māyā, īśvara and jīva.

As powerful as the īśvaras are, though, their powers are of course delegated to them and ultimately regulated by Parabrahman. Indeed, Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises, the īśvaras are able to function at all only by the enlivening and empowering presence of Parabrahman within them, just as he dwells in all other beings and things as their śarīrin.

The inspirer of both the īśvara known as Virāṭa Puruṣa and of this jīva is Puruṣottama (Vac. Gaḍh. II.31).

Further on in this sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa expands upon what he means by the “inspirer” of Virāṭa Puruṣa. He describes in detail how “the senses, inner faculties and their presiding divinities” had all “entered that Virāṭa” and “attempted to awaken him.” Yet, “despite Virāṭa’s soul being inside his body, Virāṭa still did not rise.” It was only when Parabrahman, the Soul of all souls, “entered him... did the body of Virāṭa rise.” And “only then did Virāṭa Puruṣa become capable of performing all his activities” [Vac. Gaḍh. II.31].⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰⁴ See also Vac. Gaḍh. II.10.

Svāminārāyaṇa extends this discussion into the important avatāra-avatārin doctrine. As we learned when looking at the supremacy of Parabrahman, he is described as the avatārin, the source of all avatāras, whereas these avatāras themselves actually emanate from Virāṭa Puruṣa, and so are metaphysically Īśvara in being and distinct from Parabrahman. It is only by Parabrahman's special 're-entering' (anupraveśa) that they are empowered to fulfil their task on earth and become worthy of human veneration [Vac. Gaḍh. II.31 and Vac. Pan.7].

This concept of Parabrahman inspiring and mobilising the gods is also presented anecdotally at KeU 3-4, where Indra, Vāyu, Agni and the other divinities are seen arrogantly celebrating "our victory" over the asuras and congratulating each other on "our greatness". They are summarily made to realise how powerless they actually are and that their triumph was due only to the gracious empowerment of Parabrahman, without whom they would not be able to function at all.

Apart from functioning in general, even the Īśvaras' enjoyment is not possible independently of Parabrahman, for he is the omniscient, omnipresent grantor of the fruits of their karmas, just as he is for the jīvas [Vac. Gaḍh. I.45], since the Īśvaras, too, are still subject to karmas, just like the jīvas. This is also true of karmas that sometimes express themselves in the dream state. As we saw earlier, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

In reality, it is God – who transcends both jīva and Īśvara, and who is also the giver of the fruits of karmas – who creates the world

experienced in dreams according to the karmas of each particular jīva and īśvara.

In Vac. Kār.1, Svāminārāyaṇa extends Parabrahman’s inspiration even to the state of “deep sleep” at the time of final dissolution, when the īśvaras (and jīvas) are dormant within māyā without name or form. Only when Parabrahman wills and inspires do those īśvaras assume a name and form.

In all ways and states, then, the īśvaras are absolutely dependent on Parabrahman – for their functioning and enjoyment, and for their very existence. This is confirmed in the Jyotirādyadhiṣṭhānādhikaraṇa (BS 2.4.14-15), just as the Paratantrādhikaraṇa (BS 2.3.41-42), discussed in the previous chapter, helped in confirming the dependency of jīvas on Parabrahman.⁴⁰⁵ Parabrahman thus remains in full and ultimate control.

Svāminārāyaṇa is sure to add, though, that the relationship between Parabrahman and the īśvaras is a devout and loving one. While it is true that,

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

it is not a fearful compliance. Rather, as we saw in the sovereign king-village chief analogy above at Vac. Pan.4,

Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva in turn worship Puruṣottama Bhagavān
and follow his command,

⁴⁰⁵ See BS-SB 2.4.14-15, pp. 261-62.

even though they themselves are worshipped and obeyed in their respective worlds. This is because Parabrahman is eminently worthy of their highest reverence, adoration and humility, which the īśvaras so readily accord him.

Even the great such as Brahmā, Śiva,... apply the dust of God's holy feet upon their heads. They put aside all of their self-importance and constantly offer devotion to him (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

The Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, too, states:

The devas worship that immortal [Parabrahman]... (BU 4.4.16).

This best summarises and concludes the relationship īśvaras enjoy with Parabrahman.