
**PART 2: SOURCES & TOOLS OF
SVĀMINĀRĀYAᅆA HINDU THEOLOGY**

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2) INTRODUCTION

A good starting point for the study of a theological system is the basis upon which its ideas are established and articulated. When venturing to provide an example of Hindu theology by way of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, this is as good a place as any to set off on our project, by asking: What are its sources and the tools by which we can understand its theological foundations and, indeed, theologise within the tradition? But like many of the matters we encounter in Hindu theology – as in any other theological system perhaps – this is a deeply complex subject requiring considerable foundational knowledge and consequential discussion to be able to understand it even somewhat satisfactorily. Here, then, in this first real introduction to Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, we are quickly faced with a tricky paradox: this initial discussion about the basis of our theological exposition can only properly become clear after the exposition itself. This interdependency among the various doctrines is in many ways characteristic of a functioning theological system, as we shall soon and repeatedly discover throughout this thesis.

For the topic of ‘Sources and Tools of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu Theology’ especially, we should know that some of the most intricate interlocking occurs with the sections on Parabrahman as Praḡaṭa (chapter 6.5), Akṣarabrahman as the Brahmasvarūpa Guru (7.4.4), Māyā as ignorance (10.1.7), and Mukti as a whole (11), to which we shall allude wherever necessary. In the interest of economy and coherence, it would not make sense of course to repeat all of those overlapping ideas in this Part, especially as they will be far more appreciable in

their proper context alongside other important aspects of their respective themes. But nor is a healthy dose of recapitulation necessarily a bad thing, particularly if it helps us tie together the intricate workings of the theological whole. Indeed, sometimes it will be unavoidable; even though we shall be engaging with certain discussions and sermons in detail later, it might be necessary to introduce them here, if only to better understand them again in their full hereafter. In this sense, this part, Part 2, functions rather like a preview of the chapters to follow in Part 3. Many of the topics we begin to tackle are more fully discussed at their appropriate juncture in later sections among the themes of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology. This explains the many instances we will encounter here of “as we shall see later” or “as will be discussed in more detail in the chapter on...”. This patient deferral of some discussions (or some aspects of a discussion) calls us to provisionally accept certain ideas now in order for them to be tested more rigorously in the coming exposition, leaving open the opportunity to return to this ‘prolegomenon’, if it can be called that, and understanding it more fully afterwards. Again, this is another salient feature of what we might mean (and shall soon cover) as ‘appealing to revelation’; revelation is accepted to begin the theological project, even if it becomes a focus of discussion and investigation later, which often argues for its authority and validity. This fittingly introduces this section on the sources and tools of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.

But before we can proceed to answering the question ‘How can we know about God?’, a still more fundamental and provocative question awaits us: Can God be known at all?

2.1) The Imperceptibility and Ineffability of God

The Upaniṣads famously extol the imperceptibility and ineffability of the highest reality. For example:

From where speech returns with the mind having not grasped it...
(TU 2.4.1).

It cannot be grasped by the eyes, nor even by speech, nor by other senses or by austerities or work (MuU 3.1.8).

Not by speech, not by mind, nor by the eyes is it possible to reach him (KaU 6.12).

There the eyes go not. Speech goes not. Nor the mind (KeU 1.3).

In picking up on each of the three key tools of perception mentioned in this last verse – cakṣus (eyes), vāk (speech), and manas (mind) – the Bhāṣyakāra offers a basic epistemological analysis of why perception, worldly testimony and inference cannot serve as independent means to valid knowledge of God. In summary, it is as follows:

- cakṣus (eyes): The eyes are representative here of all cognitive senses, which are instrumental in directly cognising tangible objects. For example, the sense of sight allows eyes to perceive physical form, the sense of hearing allows ears to perceive sounds, and so forth with the

senses of touch, taste and smell and their respective sense organs, the skin, tongue, and nose. However, their scope is firmly confined within the realm of the physical world, composed as it is, like the senses and sense organs, of māyā. They cannot possibly perceive anything which is beyond māyā, such as the form and virtues of the divine, transcendental and limitless Parabrahman. Parabrahman is thus “atīndriya” – beyond the senses; intangible.

- vāk (speech): This represents the faculty of speech and the capacity of words. While everyday patterns of speech (vyavahāra) or vivid descriptions may be able to elucidate the qualities of worldly objects and events, they cannot fully describe God, his form and his qualities, because he is absolutely not of this world. Besides, the Bhāṣyakāra adds, worldly testimony still relies on the senses of perception and physical organs, whose limitations have already been indentified above.
- manas (mind): The mind is the ‘inner sense’, and here indicates the means of inference. With inference also predicated upon direct perception, it, too suffers from the same limitations highlighted above. [The role of ‘reason’ as a *tool* or an ancillary source for theological knowledge is discussed in more detail later in this Part, hence any further elucidation on this topic has been reserved for then.]

While spelling out the scope and limitations of these means of cognition and articulation, the Bhāṣyakāra is careful to make two important points. Firstly, in his refutation of sensory and mental means, he is sure to qualify them with the

term 'laukika', relating to this world, i.e. anything composed of māyā. This has important implications for the authority of divinely inspired and divinely spoken words which constitute Scripture (verbal testimony), and also for the state of liberation when the liberated soul is endowed with brahmic mind and senses by which it enjoys the direct realisation of Parabrahman. A more general denial of sensory perception of Parabrahman would preclude this climactic experience as well as the possibility of Scripture as an authentic source of theological knowledge. (We shall be covering both of these topics in some detail in the chapter on Mukti and further in this chapter, respectively.)

Secondly, the Bhāṣyakāra invariably adds that the senses and mind return from Parabrahman not entirely empty-handed, so to speak, but having not grasped him fully.³⁷ With each of the three means mentioned at KeU 1.3, for example, the Bhāṣyakāra adds "sāmpūrṇatayā", "sākalyena" and "kārtsnyena" – each meaning "completely" – to emphasise that the eyes, speech and mind cannot have a *complete* perception of Parabrahman. But this does not deny them *any* perception of Parabrahman whatsoever. After all, the Bhāṣyakāra adds, if that were not the case, the following statements instructing individuals to know, see, realise or contemplate upon Parabrahman would be rendered futile:

Verily, that Self [Paramātman] is to be realised, heard, reflected and contemplated upon (BU 2.4.5 & 4.5.6).

Seek to know that. That is Brahman (TU 3.1.1).

³⁷ TU-SB 2.4.1, p. 370.

Seek indeed to know that Truth [Parabrahman] (CU 7.16.1).

Know that Puruṣa who should be known (PU 6.6).

Equally, descriptions of knowing, seeing, realising Parabrahman would also have to be non-veridical. For example:

Your most auspicious form, that I see (IU 16, BU 5.15.1).

When he knows him thus... (CU 1.9.2).

It [the Self] is seen by the pointed, subtle intellect of those discerning seers (KaU 3.12)

The wise who perceive him residing within the soul, theirs alone is eternal peace, not others' (KaU 5.13).

When a person knows God... as that cause, he is liberated from all sins (SU 6.13).

They continuously extol me (BG 9.14).³⁸

But then how can these two sets of statements be reconciled? On the one hand they attempt to describe God and urge that he should be known, and yet, on the other, he is described as ineffable and not completely knowable. But that is precisely the thrust of the Vedāntic argument, the Bhāṣyakāra observes. Even after knowing all that one can know about God, what one really needs to know – indeed, what one *can* know – about God is that he is unlimited, unfathomable. In

³⁸ The Bhāṣyakāra also cites many of these passages in response to the objector's claim at BS 1.1.1 that it is futile to desire to know 'Brahman', simply because 'Brahman' is unknowable. See BS-SB 1.1.1, pp. 11-12.

fact, when concluding this comment, the Bhāṣyakāra questions whether the limited human mind and senses can ever fully grasp even meagre, tangible objects such as a pot or rag (or describe everyday human experiences³⁹). What, then, can be said of their inadequacy in comprehending someone as subtle and transcendental as Parabrahman?⁴⁰ What this ensures is that any authentic knowledge or description of Parabrahman, even while being useful and meaningful, is never exhaustive; he remains that much beyond the limited capacity of māyic faculties and this-worldly means of cognition and articulation. In other words, any knowledge of God does not subvert his unlimited nature (or 'mystery').⁴¹ Even the fullest realisation will always be of the form 'neti neti' – "Not this much; not this much."⁴² The experience is so staggeringly overwhelming that any sincere attempt to articulate it in words seems woefully inadequate. Whatever eloquence one can muster and however many superlatives one can summon, human language and devices of expression seem certain to fall short of fully describing the greatness, power, charm, beauty, and auspicious qualities of God.

³⁹ We are reminded here of Wittgenstein's argument that if human words are incapable of describing the distinctive aroma of coffee, how could they possibly cope with something as subtle as God.

⁴⁰ KeU-SB 1.3, pp. 35-37. See also BS-SB 1.1.1, pp. 11-12.

⁴¹ We shall be expounding upon the unlimited nature of Parabrahman in detail in the next Part (chapter 6.2.2), and discussing it again in the chapter on Mukti when surveying the state of liberation (11.2.3) and the relationship of the liberated souls with Parabrahman (11.2.4).

⁴² While still apophatic, this interpretation is markedly different from the entirely negating "Not this; not this." The difference is between totally (and lazily) denying any descriptive power or worth to theological language, and realistically and humbly acknowledging its inadequacy even while continuing to endeavour in theology (or 'God-talk').

This seems to be the inevitably humble realisation candidly shared by the seers of the Kena Upaniṣad:

We know not, we cannot understand how one can expound him (1.3).

The Bhāṣyakāra explains here that the sheer transcendence or other-worldliness of Parabrahman means that there is no known tangible reference point with which to begin describing him. He is simply incomparable to anything that can be found in this māyic world or can be perceived by māyic senses. Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises these two points at considerable length in Vac. Pan.4 when he begins:

The Vedas, the Purāṇas, the Mahābhārata, the Smṛtis and the other scriptures proclaim that the original form of God – which is eternal, without a beginning and divine – resides in his Akṣaradhāma. They also mention what that God is like. His form is not like any form that can be seen by the eyes. His sound is not like any sound that can be heard by the ears. His touch is not like any touch that can be felt by the skin. His smell is not like any smell that can be smelt by the nose. The tongue cannot describe that God. He cannot be conceived by the mind; he cannot be contemplated upon by the citta; he cannot be comprehended by the buddhi, nor can the ahaṃkāra fully claim, 'I am God's, and God is mine'. In this manner, God remains beyond the reach of the senses and inner faculties.

Moreover, the beauty of that God is such that it cannot be compared to any other object in this brahmāṇḍa ['world' or planetary system] – including everything from Brahmā to the smallest blade of grass. His sound is such that it cannot be compared to any other sounds in this brahmāṇḍa. The smell of God is such that it cannot be compared any other smell in this brahmāṇḍa. The touch of God is such that it cannot be compared to any other touch in this brahmāṇḍa. The tastes related to God are such that they cannot be compared to any other taste in this brahmāṇḍa. The 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, Varuna, Kubera, Śiva and Brahmā, and many other places, not one can compare to the abode of God. 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.

Svāminārāyaṇa then goes on to explain the basis of this incomparability, ironically, with the help of several similes.

The form of that God is such that it cannot be compared to the form of anyone in this brahmāṇḍa. Why? Because all of the forms in this brahmāṇḍa which evolved from Prakṛti-Puruṣa are māyic, whereas God is divine. So, since the two are totally different, how can they possibly be compared? For example, we can compare a man to something by saying, 'This man is like a buffalo, like a snake, like a sparrow, like a donkey, like a dog, like a crow or like an elephant.' But in reality, such comparisons are not appropriate for humans. Why? Because all of those animals are of a totally different category than humans. Even between a human and a human, there is no exact similarity whereby one can claim, 'This person is exactly like that person.' If he were exactly like the other person, then how could the original person be recognised? Therefore, despite the fact that all humans belong to the same category, no two are exactly alike. Just look at Bhago and Mūḷo. The two are said to be identical [twins], but if one stays with them for a few days, one can distinguish between them and say, 'This is Bhago and this is Mūḷo.' But if there were no difference, how could they be recognised? So, if there is no great similarity between human and human, how can there be similarity between that which is māyic and that which is not māyic? What can possibly be compared to God and the abode of God?

Svāminārāyaṇa thus concludes again:

After all, all scriptures claim, 'God is beyond the reach of the senses and the inner faculties.'

But if God is not knowable as an object of sensorial perception, empirical investigation or intellectual speculation, how indeed – even in the limited sense possible – can he be known? Svāminārāyaṇa provides the answer himself in Vac.

Pan.4 and other sermons, but before we go on to discuss this in detail, let us firstly see a more general answer from Vac. Gaḍh. I.24 which will help us frame this discussion. Svāminārāyaṇa explains that the conviction of a devotee with intense faith is always of the form,

‘The manifest form of Puruṣottama has compassionately revealed his form to me’ (Vac. Gaḍh. I.24).

This is similar to a statement found identically in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad and Kaṭha Upaniṣad:

Nā’yam ātmā pravacanena labhyo na medhayā na bahunā śrutena |
Yam evaiṣa vṛṇute tena labhyas-tasyaiṣa ātmā vivṛṇute tanūm
svām ||

This Self [Paramātman] cannot be attained by instruction, nor by intellectual power, nor even through much hearing [i.e. learning]. He is attained only by the one whom the Self [Paramātman] chooses. To such a one, the Self [Paramātman] reveals his own form (MuU 3.2.3 & KaU 2.23).

Quite simply, both statements explain, God can be known only when *he* chooses to be known; or, to paraphrase them even more closely, when God graciously “reveals” (“vivṛṇute”) himself. We find here the clearest possible reference to what is commonly termed in theology as ‘revelation’.

With this background and starting point, we can now proceed with the following chapter as we attempt to unfold the complex doctrine of revelation as it is conceived in its various forms within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition and understand its role as the exclusive source of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.