PREFACE

0.1 Background

My academic journey took a turn and, in some ways, actually began when I had the privilege to be one of the first students at the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya, Sarangpur, Gujarat. The Sanskrit language and the Vedānta school of Indian philosophy provided an engaging and fascinating discussion, opening doors for me to the intellectual aspect of the practice I inherited. Unbeknownst to me, this was not merely an academic journey; from the beginning, it had been a spiritual journey. Drafting this thesis is one of the outcomes that have come about as a result of this voyage. The title of the thesis reads: "A Critical Analysis of Consistency in the Prasthānatrayī's Vedāntic Principles in Light of the Svāminārāyaṇa Bhāṣyam." In this thesis, I examine the three texts that comprise the canonical Vedāntic corpus known as the Prasthānatrayī – the Upaniṣads, Śrīmad-Bhagavad-Gītā, and Brahmasūtras – while understanding the texts, as these texts must be understood, through the lens of a commentary, the Svāminārāyaṇa Bhāṣyam. I cannot, by any means, claim that I have exhausted my exploration of the consistency found in these texts, not least because I approach them through the lens of a single commentary. It is common knowledge that these texts have been analyzed and interpreted throughout several centuries; nonetheless, it is impossible for a single work to claim to represent the variety of perspectives the texts have inspired. I chose the Svāminārāyaṇa Bhāṣyam as a lens because it is the most recent of the interpretations offered on the Prasthānatrayī and necessarily the least explored by current academia. The profound nature of this compelling and groundbreaking work has not yet been investigated, and I contribute, albeit modestly, to this goal in the hope that it will be accomplished, however slightly. To emphasize, though, when one approaches these texts intending to discover consistency, one may and will always find more, but I have tried to cover a substantial amount of the territory in this thesis. To commence this study, I provide an introduction to the Svāminārāyaṇa Bhāṣyam, its author – Mahāmahopādhyāya Bhadreshdas Swami, Bhagavān Svāminārāyaṇa (or Swaminarayan), the founder of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama

Darṣana (or Svāminārāyaṇa Darṣana), and his spiritual successors who have propagated this *siddhānta* for the enlightenment, upliftment, and liberation of all.

0.2 Notes on Transliteration and Italicization

I have followed the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) system for transliterations in this work, ensuring consistency with the conventions of scholarly writing. Diacritics have been used wherever appropriate. Additionally, Sanskrit terms are italicized, except for proper nouns such as Śaṅkarācārya, Bhagavān Swaminarayan, and Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana. However, commonly used terms like jīva, īśvara, ātman, adhikaraṇa, and sūtra have been left unitalicized to maintain readability and ease of reference.

I present a fresh and comprehensive exposition of the Prasthānatrayī and Svāminārāyaṇa Bhāṣyam, citing both the original texts and their commentaries for clarity. Sanskrit references are included for accessibility, with transliterations provided for those who prefer them. Rather than translating key terms like *siddhānta*, Akṣara, and Puruṣottama, I use transliteration to preserve their precise meaning, as translations often introduce unintended connotations.

Additionally, I apply the English suffix -ic to certain Sanskrit words, such as vicāra and darśana, forming terms like vaicāric, dārśanic, māyic, Upaniṣadic, śāstric, kārmic, and brāhmic, which I use without italicization.

0.3 Citations

For citations of the Prasthānatrayī and Svāminārāyaṇa Bhāṣyam, I follow traditional conventions. For example, Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 3.2.9 refers to the ninth mantra of the second section of the third Muṇḍaka. Additionally, for references to the Svāminārāyaṇa Bhāṣyam and Svāminārāyaṇa-Siddhāntā-Sudhā, I include page numbers, such as Brahmasūtras Svāminārāyaṇa Bhāṣyam 3.2.30, p. 304.

0.4 Sources and Titles

This research is textual and explores ten of the famous Upaniṣads, Śrīmad-Bhagavad-Gītā, and the Brahmasūtras – together, the Prasthānatrayī. To support some principles, I also use the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, though it is not counted among the ten. The commentary on the Prasthānatrayī called the Svāminārāyaṇa Bhāṣyam, is authored by Mahāmahopādhyāya Bhadreshdas Swami. I use the commentator's name with its honorific.

The chapter titles are based on a small part of an Upaniṣad mantra, Gītā verse, or a Brahmasūtra. These title quotes refer to one of the most significant references shaping the chapter. Moreover, it might allow some readers to see what the chapter offers. One can immediately see the titles of the chapters in the section below. Additionally, while thinking about my audience, I understood the complexity of my task. I thus chose to keep it simple by not providing translation unless necessary, as it distorts the idea that a scholar might have based on their field of expertise. This project should convey the thesis and proofs to an English-speaking audience with intermediate to advanced levels in Vedānta and Sanskrit.

0.5 Chapter Outline and Structure

The thesis that I propose under the title: "A Critical Analysis of Consistency in the Prasthānatrayī's Vedāntic Principles in Light of the Svāminārāyaṇa Bhāṣyam" consists of seven chapters, including the introduction and conclusion chapters. These chapters are titled based on mantras from the Upaniṣads, a verse from the Gītā, or a sūtra from the Brahmasūtras. This novelty of the title also ties to the loyalty of the presented work to the original Prasthānatrayī, which also acts as my research's primary source.

The titles of my thesis, along with a short abstract of each chapter, are as follows:

The **Introduction** – Chapter 1 – explains the thesis and its position in the broader circle of Vedānta. Then, it dives deeper into each aspect of the title, which also, in turn, is the methodology—textual study. The primary and secondary sources for this thesis are the

Prasthānatrayī – the collective trio of the Upaniṣads, Gītā, and Brahmasūtras, and the Svāminārāyaṇa Bhāṣyam – the novel commentary authored by Mahāmahopādhyāya Bhadreshdas Swami, respectively. I also discuss the background of where the Vedāntic principle of Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana comes from. In this discussion, I present an introduction to Parabrahman Bhagavān Swaminarayan and his forever-lasting legacy of Guṇātīta Gurus that are the manifest form of Akṣarabrahman beholding Parabrahman absolutely and consistently. The final part is an introduction to the author of the Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣyakāra and the opinions of scholars on the commentaries and the *vādagrantha* he has penned.

The second chapter, titled – **"tadetad akṣaram brahman" – Akṣarabrahman**, is about a reality ignored in the scholarly world despite knowledge of its existence. Akṣarabrahman is mentioned, discussed, and praised as the support, basis, creator, protector, and soul of all, only lower to Parabrahman, the absolute ultimate reality. The Śrīmad-Bhagavad-Gītā also appraises the beauty of Akṣarabrahman as one of the most critical exploration topics. Also, as interpreted by the Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣyakāra, the first and establishing sūtra of the Brahmasūtras is about the exploration of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. This entity is discussed in each step, confirming the consistency of the Prasthānatrayī. The four forms—Akṣaradhāman, *Sevaka*, Cidākāśa, and Brahmasvarūpa Guru—are studied in the mantras of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad and the *ślokas* of the Śrīmad-Bhagavad-Gītā. The Brahmasūtras, too, dedicate various *adhikaraṇas* to it.

The third chapter – **"parataḥ paraḥ" – Parabrahman** – is about the entity that presides even over Akṣarabrahman, i.e., Parabrahman. Parabrahman is the only one, as most schools of thought would agree. Parabrahman's relationship with jīvas and īśvaras, māyā and Akṣarabrahman are of central importance in this chapter. The other forms of Parabrahman, his not being without a form, and his roles as the supreme reality and the master of all, including Akṣarabrahman, are discussed in the latter part of this chapter. Parabrahman possesses divine virtues and is devoid of all characteristics born of māyā.

The fourth chapter concerns the **"jagatyām jagat" – Māyā** – the Creation. I start this investigation with the ideas of māyā that Parabrahman Bhagavān Swaminarayan presents in his Vacanāmṛta. I also explore all the cosmic creations of māyā as part of a primary and vivid introduction to these entities. Finally, I discuss the roles of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman in the Creation being the *abhinna-nimitta-upādāna-kāraṇa* – the inseparable efficient and material cause of all creation. At the same time, māyā is also said to be the material that everything is made up of. All of this and many other debates are clarified when the Brahmasūtras come together with the Śrīmad-Bhagavad-Gītā and Upaniṣads, thus establishing their consistency.

The fifth chapter is about us – **"kṣaraḥ sarvāṇi bhūtāni" – Jīvas and Īśvaras**. Jīvas are the individual souls in all mobile or immobile creation, and īśvaras are the empowered beings that, at Parabrahman's eternal will, engage in the tasks of the Creation – in all or a single *brahmāṇḍa* (roughly translated as a universe). The most vital feature of an ātman is reflected in its relationship with the body (in this case, a human body), Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, and its eternal bondage with māyā. Although bright and spotless as fundamental nature, it is enveloped by māyā from eternity. Jīvas and īśvaras staunch association with Akṣarabrahman makes them like Akṣarabrahman, and thus, the chance to offer ultimate *bhakti* to Parabrahman. This chapter is full of graceful Gītā verses and Brahmasūtras as they establish a platform for consistency in the Upaniṣads.

The sixth chapter is about the final liberation and the spiritual endeavor, titled **"anāvṛttiḥ śabdādanāvṛttiḥ śabdād" – Sādhanā and Mukti** to get a place in Parabrahman's Akṣaradhāman. First, for the sake of exploring *sādhanā*, I study the *brahmabhāva* (a state of being like Akṣarabrahman) from the Bhagavad Gītā and association with Akṣarabrahman Guru (*ātmagṛhīti*) as the most efficient medium to reach *brahmabhāva* from the Brahmasūtras. Then, establishing consistency with Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 3.2.9, I continue studying mukti – the final liberation and its two types – *jīvanmukti* and *videhamukti*. Finally, the process (*gati*) of mukti, Arcirmārga, the bliss of Akṣaradhāman, and a mukta's glory are discussed in establishing coherence

in the aphorisms of Brahmasūtras, verses of the Śrīmad-Bhagavad-Gītā, and the mantras of the Upaniṣads.

This thesis examines the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana through an in-depth examination of the Prasthānatrayī and the Svāminārāyaṇa Bhāṣyam, proving its consistency throughout Vedāntic scriptures. It analyzes how Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman are separate yet related and how by attaining Akṣaradhāman, to serve Parabrahman forever, the goal of any jīva or īśvara fulfills. I see this as more than philosophy; Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana offers a clear and practical way to spiritual fulfillment. It settles ancient controversies in Vedānta and offers a unified understanding of reality. Although this research provides a foundation, much remains to be examined—particularly how this darśana engages with other philosophical schools. Perhaps this work will encourage future scholars to delve more deeply into these issues and shed further light on this rich tradition.

Interestingly, I open my chapters with the relevant passages from the philosophical document letter penned by HH Pramukh Swami Maharaj declaring and expounding on the belief system and principles of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana. Authored on July 28th, 2008, this document serves as a base for all my chapters. Therefore, I suggested allowing my audience to get the gist of the chapter in just a page or two. The first section of any chapter is title Siddhāntasamāmnāya, the same as the Svāminārāyaṇa-Siddhāntā-Sudhā 1.6.4, pp. 10-14. The Sanskrit version is of the Sudhā itself. Moreover, I present a photocopy of the original document and a typed Gujarati version, along with the Sanskrit translation, as appendices at the end of the thesis.

To meet the project's requirements, I have frequently included bulleted lists of references to illustrate conceptual consistency through the original texts. Rather than providing broad translations – which may overlook contextual nuances and the interconnections between preceding and following mantras, ślokas, or sūtras – I present only transliterations and, sometimes, quick translations of these divine words of the Prasthānatrayī. This approach ensures that the thesis and supporting evidence are

effectively conveyed to an English-speaking audience with an intermediate to advanced understanding of Vedānta and Sanskrit.

More than a research project, this thesis is an homage to Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana.

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