

1. Introduction

1.1. Vedic Indian Thought and Darśana Tradition

The roots of Indian Philosophy can be traced to the ancient *Vedic* literature that has guided the development of profusely variegated yet systematised schools of thought. S. Radhakrishnan characterises the *Vedopaniṣadic* sources as “vehicles of the great systems of thought”¹ that fulfilled the curiosity of the subtle intricacies of creation, its ultimate cause, and purpose. The final truth of the seen and the unseen as embedded in the *Vedas* and associated literature formed the foundations of major systems of Indian philosophy. These systems are known by the term ‘darśana,’ which is derived from the Sanskrit verbal root ‘dṛṣ’ meaning *to see*. Thus, the term ‘darśana’ suggests a perspective or reasoned insight on the ultimate truth. These diverse perspectives reflect the richness of the Indian philosophical thought.

The *Vedas*, recognised as the oldest literature of India, are an amalgamation of several sections that are believed as a divine revelation heard by seers. This revelation was then transmitted orally across generations. For this reason, the *Vedas* are also referred to as ‘Śruti,’ derived from the Sanskrit verbal root ‘śru,’ which means *to hear*. Each of the four *Vedas*, *Rg*, *Yajura*, *Sāma*, and *Atharva*, constitute four sections namely, *Samhitā* or the collections of hymns and sacrificial prayers, *Brāhmaṇa* or the prose texts highlighting the significance of the various hymns and prayers, *Āraṇyaka* or the forest texts that emphasised on subjective speculation that finally paved the way for the *Upaniṣads* or the philosophical discussions articulating ontology that encompassed great soteriological importance. The *Upaniṣads* are collectively alluded to as “Vedānta” for they teach the ultimate or the fundamental principles of the *Vedas* (*vedānām antaḥ*). Etymologically, the term ‘Upaniṣad’ means sitting (*sad*) devotedly (*ni*) near (*upa*), denoting a group of passionate students assembled around a teacher who imparts a secret instruction.² In addition to this etymological meaning, many scholars identify the *Upaniṣads* as synonymous to a secret or a mystery (*rahasya*), a meaning that was seen to surface from the *Upaniṣads* themselves.³ Certain commentaries explain this

¹ (Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* 25)

² (Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* 50; Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* 19)

³ (Deussen 10–13; Dasgupta 38; Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* 50; Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* 19)

knowledge as the knowledge of Brahman⁴ or as *brahmavidyā* that forms the fundamental subject matter of the *Upaniṣads*.⁵

The *Muktikopaniṣad* states the existence of at least 108 *Upaniṣads*. Of these, the first ten, *Daśopaniṣads*, are considered as the most significant:

Īśa-kena-kaṭha-praśna-muṇḍa-māṇḍūkya-tittirīḥ|
*Aitareyaṁ ca chāndogyam bṛhadāraṇyakam tathā||*⁶

The secret embedded in these *Upaniṣads* was recognised as revealing the ultimate truth of Brahman and *ātman*. The essence of this truth was systematised by Bādarāyaṇa in the form of terse aphorisms (*sūtras*) under the name *Brahma-Sūtra* or *Vedānta-Sūtra*. Further, one of the most revered sections of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which is described as a *Upaniṣad*,⁷ teaches a more practical application of this ultimate truth. Thus, since both, the *Brahma-Sūtra* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, are grounded in the *Upaniṣadic* philosophy, they are also recognised as authoritative texts. These three together form a canon known as *Prasthānatrayī*, literally meaning *the three sources*.

This canonical literature is originally in Sanskrit; its lucid grammatical rules and vocabulary characterised by rich agglutination, contextual semantics, and syntax generated several interpretations and understandings. These diverse interpretations formed the foundation of the orthodox schools of Indian Philosophy, particularly of the Vedānta Darśana and its sub-schools. The *ācāryas* who founded the various schools of Vedānta Darśana sought to ensure that their doctrines accommodated with the teachings of the *Prasthānatrayī*. To validate their doctrines, certain founders of their respective Vedānta Darśana or their adherents composed commentaries, for instance, Śāṅkarācārya (Shankaracharya) wrote on the ten principal *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma-Sūtra*, and the *Gītā*; Rāmānujācārya (Ramanujacharya) wrote on the *Brahma-Sūtra* and *Gītā*. Shankara's understanding of the *Prasthānatrayī* as advocating one ultimate attributeless principle as the only reality became widely popular and soon was recognized as “the view of the general body of the earlier *Upaniṣad* doctrines,”⁸ so much so

⁴ (S. Shastri, *The Aitareya & Taittiriya Upanishads and Sri Sankara's Commentary* 70)

⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 58)

⁶ (*Muktikopaniṣad* 1.30) (*Īśādivimśottaraśatopaniṣadaḥ* 657–64)

⁷ Each chapter of the *Gītā* ends with the words “iti śrīmadbhagavadgītāsūpaniṣatsu” [“Thus is said in the Śrīmad Bhagavad Gītā, the Upaniṣad”]

⁸ (Dasgupta 42)

that the term ‘Vedānta’ became synonymous to Shankara’s monism. However, other alternative understandings of the *Prasthānatrayī* also emerged, which formed the schools of Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita, Dvaitādvaita, Śuddhādvaita, and Acintyābheda.

The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, which is now recognised as a distinct school of Vedānta, contributes to this Darśana tradition by presenting a novel understanding of the *Prasthānatrayī*. The fundamental principles of this new school, as propounded in the *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*, form the subject matter of this thesis. The subsequent sections of this chapter will discuss the brief history of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana and its founder, followed by an introduction to the treatise of study, the *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*, and its author Sadhu Bhadrashdas. The chapter then provides an overview of the methodology, sources, and structure of this thesis. The last section of this chapter examines the epistemology of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana.

1.2. Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana and Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya

The *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā: Parabrahma Svāminārāyaṇa Prabodhitam ‘Akṣarapuruṣottamadarśanam’* [henceforth, *Sudhā*], authored by Sadhu Bhadrashdas, forms one of the topical scholastic works that argumentatively lays out the fundamental principles (*siddhānta*) of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana.⁹ This Siddhānta is explained as being rooted in the canonical texts, the *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma-Sūtra*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The essence of their teachings was revealed by Svāminārāyaṇa (Swaminarayan) (1781-1830 CE) in the early nineteenth century.

Swaminarayan, also known as Sahajānanda Svāmī (Sahajanand Swami), is recognised as the founder of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya. Swaminarayan’s life and work are documented in five comprehensive volumes by Harshad. T. Dave, an author renowned as “one of the most prolific and eminent scholars of the Swaminarayan tradition.”¹⁰

Swaminarayan, Dave recounts, was born as Ghaṇśyāma (Ghanshyam) in 1781 CE to his parents, Dharmadeva and Bhaktidevī, in the village of Chapaiyā in Uttar Pradesh, India. Ghanshyam is described as exhibiting divinity from the very early days of childhood. He mastered the various authoritative scriptures such as *Vedas*, *Purāṇa*, *Itihāsa* at a very young

⁹ The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana is also referred to as ‘Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta’ in the thesis.

¹⁰ (Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* 17)

age.¹¹ His academic proficiency was honoured by the distinguished scholars gathered for a scholastic debate at Kāśī. The debate concluded with the ten-year-old Ghanshyam offering a lucid and coherent understanding of the scriptures and advocating a unique system of philosophical thought.¹²

After the passing of his parents, Ghanshyam renounced home and travelled relentlessly for seven years across the Indian sub-continent. During this journey, Swaminarayan was known by the name, Nīlakaṇṭha (Neelkanth). He visited several pilgrim places such as the Badrinātha and Mānasarovara in the north, Jagannāth Purī in the east, Rameśvarama in the south. He finally halted his journey in Loj, Gujarat at the *āśrama* of Rāmānanda Svāmī (Ramanand Swami), who then initiated Neelkanth as ‘Sahajanand Swami.’ Sahajanand Swami was soon handed over the reins of Ramanand Swami’s *āśrama*, after which Sahajanand Swami went on to establish the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya. The *sampradāya* received its name after the mantra ‘Svāminārāyaṇa,’ which Sahajanand Swami had revealed to his followers.¹³ In the mantra, the term ‘svāmī’ reflects the ideal devotee, Akṣarabrahman, or the goal of attaining the state of Brahman, while the term ‘nārāyaṇa’ reflects worship to Parabrahman Puruṣottama with deep humility (*dāsa bhāva*) after attaining such a state.¹⁴ Thus, it represents the very essence of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta, which understands *brahmavidyā* as entailing the realisation of both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. Due to such a theological and philosophical significance of this mantra, Sahajanand Swami became recognised by the name ‘Swaminarayan.’

In this way, this new mantra contributed to the intellectual history of the Vedānta tradition that accentuated the worship of God along with his choicest disciple. The *Pañcarātra Āgamās* express the significance of the mantra ‘Lakṣminārāyaṇa,’ similarly, the Ramanuja Sampradāya advocates the mantra ‘Śrimate Nārāyaṇaya namaḥ.’¹⁵ The ‘Svāminārāyaṇa’ mantra, however, insists on the worship of God like that of his closest disciple, that is, engaging in selfless worship of the Supreme Being Parabrahman as performed by the Akṣarabrahman Guru. The mantra, thus, lays a soteriological foundation for enabling the aspirants to fulfil and attain the essential purpose of human life—liberation (*mokṣa*)—by

¹¹ (H. Dave, *Bhagvāna Śrī Svāminārāyaṇa* 44-45,75)

¹² (Shrutiprakashdas, *Akṣarapuruṣottamamāhātmyam: Part 1* 33.1)

¹³ (H. Dave, *Bhagvāna Śrī Svāminārāyaṇa* 387–90)

¹⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 8)

¹⁵ (Shrutiprakashdas, *Svāminārāyaṇa Mahāmantra: Marma ane Mahimā*. 13)

acquiring the auspicious qualities of Akṣara (*svāmī*) and engaging in service of Puruṣottama (*nārāyaṇa*).

Such philosophical teachings by Swaminarayan on liberation, the path of attaining and realising it, were compiled by his contemporary disciples with the title ‘Vacanāmṛta’ (the nectar in the form of divine discourses). As the sourcebook of Swaminarayan’s teachings, recorded with historical precision and reviewed by Swaminarayan himself, the *Vacanāmṛta* constitutes the fundamental authoritative text of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, across all its denominations. Each discourse, forming a separate chapter that is also known as a Vacanāmṛta (henceforth Vac.), is compiled chronologically, numbered and sectioned based on the location of the discourse. These 274 discourses, imparted in the course of 10 years (1819-29), were delivered in vernacular Gujarati across seven villages of Gujarat, Gaḍhaḍā, Sārangapura, Kāriyāṇī, Loyā, Pancālā, Varatāla, and Amdāvāda. The discourses are in dialogue form, a classical tool of pedagogy, which is implemented diversely in the *Vacanāmṛta* and is thereby identified as a unique *Praśnopaniṣad*.¹⁶ One of the primary teachings imparted in the *Vacanāmṛta* is the existence of five ontological entities:

These five entities—Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, *māyā*, the *īśvaras* and *jīvas*—are eternal.¹⁷

Through their respective understandings of the authoritative scriptures such as the *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma-Sūtra*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, various Indian philosophers have propounded the existence of either one real and eternal metaphysical entity (Shankaracharya), or two (Madhvacharya), or even three (Ramanujacharya). Swaminarayan, however, accepts the existence of five real and eternal metaphysical entities, namely, *jīva* (the individual *ātman*), *īśvara* (higher beings or gods), *māyā* (the creative force), Akṣarabrahman (the second-highest entity that transcends all these three), and Parabrahman (the highest entity that transcends everything, even Akṣarabrahman). The elucidation of these entities and their relationship with Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman constitutes the core of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana. Sadhu Bhadreshdas states:

Swaminarayan presents a unique discussion of the nature of brahmajñāna in the *Vachanamrut*, a compilation of his discourses. In doing so, he offers a

¹⁶ (Agarwal 156)

¹⁷ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā I.7, III.10)

metaphysical distinction between the two brahmans—Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, a distinction that both uniquely and aptly identifies a new theological doctrine—the Akṣarabrahma-Parabrahma-Darśanam.¹⁸

Thus, though most schools of Indian philosophy explore the nature of Brahman, what distinguishes Swaminarayan's philosophy from the other Vedānta schools, is the assertion of two Brahmans. These two Brahmans, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, are not two forms of the same Brahman but are ontologically distinct and metaphysically unique. Moreover, each of the *śaḍdarśana* schools is known by their foundational principles, such as Shankara's Kevalādvaita, Ramanuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita, Madhva's Dvaita, likewise the unique and foundational principle of Swaminarayan's philosophy is Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman and therefore the name, Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana or Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta. Further, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta identifies Swaminarayan as Parabrahman Puruṣottama himself, who out of immense compassion had manifested on earth to grant liberation to all aspirants through his association and teachings.

Swaminarayan propagated these philosophical principles in the society through the initiation of over two thousand sadhus who followed the eight-fold path of celibacy,¹⁹ construction of six temples for enhancing one's *bhakti* and conviction towards the divine,²⁰ advocacy of non-violent sacrifices and rituals,²¹ and other social developments and reforms that drew the attention of the British rulers and even Christian missionaries. Moreover, one of the most vital works of Swaminarayan that is underlined as enabling the nourishment of the *sampradāya* and its principles until today is his promise of eternally manifesting on earth through the Akṣarabrahman Guru. The legacy of the Akṣarabrahman Gurus, as found in the *Bocāsaṇavāsi Śrī Akṣara Puruṣottama Svāminārāyaṇa Sansthā* (BAPS) also recognised as the “new school”²² and as one of the main denominations of the *sampradāya*,²³ are viewed as embodying the very form and principles of Swaminarayan. Swaminarayan, worshipped as the supreme Parabrahman, is revered as ‘Bhagwan Swaminarayan,’ who is believed to remain present on earth and bestow liberation through the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

¹⁸(Bhadreshdas, ‘Swaminarayan's Brahmjñāna as Akṣarabrahman-Parabrahman-Darśanam’ 172)

¹⁹ (H. Dave, *Bhagvāna Śrī Svāminārāyaṇa* 59)

²⁰ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā II.28)

²¹ (H. Dave, *Bhagvāna Śrī Svāminārāyaṇa* 310–13)

²² (Williams, *Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* 54)

²³ (Bhatt 151)

The BAPS branch of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya upholds the following lineage of the Akṣarabrahman Gurus: Guṇātītānanda Svāmī (Gunatitanand Swami) (1785-1867), Bhagatī Mahārāja (Bhagatji Maharaj) (1829-1897), Śāstrījī Mahārāja (Shastriji Maharaj) (1865-1951), Yogījī Mahārāja (Yogiji Maharaj) (1892-1971), Pramukha Svāmī Mahārāja (Pramukh Swami Maharaj) (1921-2016) and the current Guru, Mahanta Svāmī Mahārāja (Mahant Swami Maharaj) (b. 1933). Gunatitanand Swami, the first spiritual successor of Swaminarayan, was revealed by Swaminarayan himself as the manifest form of Akṣarabrahman.²⁴ From then, each Guru has contributed to safeguarding the *sampradāya*, which ultimately led to its proliferation and prominence and has therefore come to be recognised as “one of the rapidly growing and most visible forms of contemporary Hinduism.”²⁵

Among these Gurus, Shastriji Maharaj’s contribution is celebrated in the current work of study, *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*, due to its great philosophical significance. Shastriji Maharaj, whose initiation name was Yajñapurūṣadāsa (Yagnapurushdas), was warmly referred to as “Śāstrī” (scholar) by virtue of his profound knowledge of *Vedic* scriptures, logical reasoning, and far-sighted wisdom. He played a monumental role in the growth of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya and in the history of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana. This included his departure from the Varatāla diocese and subsequently constructing a mandir in Bocāsaṇa, Gujarat, with the *murtis* of Akṣara and Puruṣottama in the central dome in 1907. The installation of the *murtis* of Akṣara and Puruṣottama at Bocāsaṇa marked the beginning of the BAPS school of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya,²⁶ thus the name, *Bocāsaṇavāsi Śri Akṣara-Puruṣottama Svāminārāyaṇa Sansthā* (BAPS).

The *Sudhā*, in the section titled “Yajñapurūṣa-stavaḥ,” prays to and praises the efforts of Shastriji Maharaj, who had coined the Swaminarayan philosophy as the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana. Accounting the same on the *Sudhā*, Sadhu Brahmasētudas notes:

Shastriji Maharaja gave the name and form to Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s philosophy by entitling it ‘the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana’ and consecrated the murtis of Akṣara and Puruṣottama in majestic, stone mandiras. The Yajñapurūṣa-

²⁴ (H. Dave, *Bhagvāna Śri Svāminārāyaṇa* 221–23)

²⁵ (Williams, ‘Introduction’ xix)

²⁶ See Williams 2001 for details on the various schools of Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya.

stava, specifically, recounts Shastriji Maharaj's erudition, courage, and tireless efforts to establish and spread the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana.²⁷

In this way, by recollecting almost every aspect of Shastriji Maharaj's life, particularly his conviction in the form of Akṣara and Puruṣottama (*nīścīya brahmaparabrahmasvarūpatattvam*) and laying deep roots of the Siddhānta and *sampradāya* (*saṁsthāmahō'yamakarot suvirūḍhamūlām*),²⁸ the author expresses his immense indebtedness and obligation.

The author, Sadhu Bhadreshdas, ends his homage to Shastriji Maharaj by showcasing his gratitude for bestowing his guru, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the fifth spiritual successor of Swaminarayan. This section is followed by a prayer to Pramukh Swami Maharaj titled "Nārāyaṇasvarūpa-abhidhyānam" after the latter's initiation name 'Nārāyaṇasvarūpadāsa' (Narayanswarupdas). The author reminisces the various virtues of his guru and presents his gratefulness for his guru's association that enabled him to embark on the path of liberation (*mokṣo brāhmī sthitiścaiva karāgre te prasāṅgataḥ*).²⁹ In fact, at various places in the *Sudhā*, Sadhu Bhadreshdas uses the term 'Nārāyaṇasvarūpa' (literally meaning *the form of Nārāyaṇa*) to refer to Parabrahman, which not only reflects his reverence for his guru but also his competence as a writer.

Narayanswarupdas was nominated as the administrative head (*pramukha*) of the BAPS organisation by Shastriji Maharaj and later upheld the spiritual reins of the *sampradāya*. Under his leadership, the *sampradāya* flourished with the construction of over 1500 mandirs worldwide, the initiation of around 1000 learned sadhus, and the cultivation of over one million followers across the globe. He inspired the composition of *Svāminārāyaṇa Bhāṣyas* on the *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma-Sūtra*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which Sadhu Bhadreshdas completed at the end of 2007.³⁰ The *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*, a comprehensive treatise justifying and defending the philosophical principles of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana,³¹ was completed by the same author in 2017. He offered this treatise to Mahant Swami Maharaj, the current spiritual leader of the *sampradāya*, under whom the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana continues to flourish. Accordingly, the *Sudhā* also offers a prayer to

²⁷ (Brahmasetudas Swami 2)

²⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 2)

²⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 3)

³⁰ (Paramtattvadas, 'Educational Insight: Akshar-Purushottam School of Vedanta')

³¹ (Paramtattvadas, 'Educational Insight: Akshar-Purushottam School of Vedanta')

Mahant Swami Maharaj and describes him as the current torchbearer of the highest knowledge of Brahman (*brahmavidyāprabodhaka*).³²

1.3. *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*

The *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā* and *Svāminārāyaṇa Prasthānatrayī Bhāṣyas*, composed by Sadhu Bhadreshdas in the 21st century, substantially contribute to the scholastic heritage of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya. Based on the teachings of Swaminarayan, they provide an authentic reflection and engagement with Swaminarayan's philosophical principles.

The text of this study, *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*, is recognised as a *vādagrantha*. As a *vādagrantha*, the *Sudhā* is a “grantha” or a text that engages in “vāda” or a discussion or debate. Radhavallabh Tripathi, while examining the nature of *vāda*, remarks:

It [*vāda*] is accepted as a type of *kathā* (discussion) involving debates, dialogues and discussions on a philosophical, religious, social or ethical issue.³³

Vāda as a type of discussion is distinct from the other two types of discussions: *jalpa* (wrangling) and *vitaṇḍa* (cavil). While in the former, the main aim is to attain victory, the latter form aims primarily to defeat the opponent without the need to establish one's own position. Of the three, *vāda* is accepted as the preferable and superior form of discussion, as it aims to attain the ultimate truth. Though this form began as a way of discussion between a student and the teacher, it was later accepted among scholars as a legitimate form of asserting one's intellectual superiority³⁴. Its significance is also revealed by Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītā*, when he states, “vādaḥ pravādatām aham.”³⁵ Its cogency is also reflected in the well-known dictum amongst scholars: “vāde vāde jāyate tattvabodhaḥ”, that is, the essence of knowledge is attained only through a discussion in the form of *vāda*. Tripathi notes that this aim of attaining the ultimate truth or *mokṣa* is what “distinguishes the Indian tradition of *vāda* from Western dialecticism.”³⁶

³² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 4)

³³ (Tripathi 6)

³⁴ (Harshanand 474)

³⁵ “Within the discipline of debate, I am vāda.” (BG 10.32)

³⁶ (Tripathi 2)

While engaging in *vāda*, the exponent (*vādi*) and the proponent (*prativādi*) attempt to establish their positions through logical reasoning supported by the statements from the authoritative texts. Many texts following this form of *vāda* are found across the various schools of Indian Philosophy, such as in the Nyāya school, which recognises *vāda* as a part of its sixteen categories (*padārtha*), several *vāda* texts or *granthas* are found in the name of Gadādhara Bhaṭṭācārya like *Muktivāda*, *Vidhivāda*, etc. Amongst the *śādadarśana* schools, there is Cītasukha's *Tattva Pradīpikā* of the Advaitin tradition, and Vedānta Deśika's *Śatadūṣaṇi* of the Viśiṣṭādvaitin tradition. The creation of *vāda* texts continues into the 21st century, as witnessed by the Sadhu Bhadreshdas' *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*.

The *Sudhā* encompasses the typical features of a *vāda* as described by Tripathi, which includes aiming true knowledge or liberation, theory building, a thorough understanding of the *pūrva-pakṣa*, a meaningful argument, and adopting certain literary styles. *Sudhā*, however, goes beyond these typical features, which showcases its distinctiveness and originality.

In his analysis of the *vāda* tradition, Tripathi begins unfolding its nature with one of the most important features: “Vāda leads to true knowledge which would culminate in salvation (mokṣa).”³⁷ This aspect is stated at the beginning of the *Sudhā* and, more so, is reflected in the title itself. The title ‘Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā’ translates as the principle or Siddhānta of Swaminarayan is like nectar or *sudhā*, the intake of which leads to immortality or liberation. Each chapter is titled as a “dhārā,” which aims to symbolise every chapter as a stream of nectar. Brahmasētas Swami notes:

The analogy here thus signifies that the *Siddhānta-Sudhā*'s chapters constitute streams of immortalising nectar. By providing knowledge of the Divine, these *dhārās* lead us towards enlightenment, ultimate liberation, and eternal bliss.³⁸

Thus, each chapter being a stream of nectar is essential and contributes to attaining liberation. Moreover, in “Mangaladhārā,” the introduction chapter of the *grantha*, Sadhu Bhadreshdas states the principle that he would be building upon and the fruit of realising it:

Jīvastatheśvaro māyā brahma paramabrahma ca |

³⁷ (Tripathi 2)

³⁸ (Brahmasētas Swami, "Overview")

Nityāḥ satyāḥ sadaivaite mitho bhinnāḥ svarūpataḥ ||

Svāminārāyaṇenaivam padārthāḥ pañca kīrtitāḥ |

*Yajñānāt kṛtsnatām yāti brahmavidyā'pavargadā ||*³⁹

The principle that the *Sudhā* builds upon is on the five eternal, true, and mutually distinct ontological entities: *jīva*, *īśvara*, *māyā*, Akṣarabrahman, and Parabrahman. Realising this Siddhānta as revealed by Swaminarayan, one attains the highest spiritual knowledge, *brahmavidyā*, and thus the state of liberation.

For systematising this Siddhānta, the author uses the acclaimed authoritative texts *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma-Sūtra*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the authoritative *sampradāyic* text *Vacanāmṛta*. Thus, the *Sudhā* systematises the path to liberation not only through the *Prasthānatrayī* but through the *Prasthānacatuṣṭayam*.⁴⁰

In outlining the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta, the *Sudhā* engages in a discussion, often tempered with debate in terms of the objections raised by the opposing viewpoints (*pūrvapakṣa*) and the counterarguments offered by the *Sudhā*. It follows the classical manner of debate where an objection begins with “nanu” (article suggesting interrogation) and ends with “iti cet” (“if thus”) followed by a response to the same. At times the author, to give a greater clarification on the topic at hand, anticipates an objection with the words “na ca vācyam,” (“and now do not say”) or even makes special notes usually sub-titled as “īdamatrā'vadheyam” (“now here please note”) The author focuses on specific philosophical principles than on any particular school of thought, and thus, in most cases, does not explicitly reveal the name or the school of the opposing position. This suggests that the *Sudhā* aims to focus more on understanding the truth rather than refuting its opponent. Echoing the same, the renowned Grammarian, George Cardona observes:

Now another thing that characterizes Bhadreshdas’ work in contrast to other comparable works is the lack of animosity. Typically [found] in other works, you’ll find a presentation such that you have what you call a *purva paksha*, then you have to destroy that and show that only your *Siddhānta* is acceptable. Now in the *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā* this is done in a very, very subtle manner.

³⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 9) “Jīva, īśvara, māyā, (Akṣara)Brahman and Parabrahman are eternal, true and ever ontological distinct. Swaminarayan revealed these five entities, understanding them leads to fulfilment of the highest spiritual knowledge and bestows liberation.” (*Kārikā* 3,4)

⁴⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 5)

You never realise that he is really arguing against anyone... Instead of calling it a *sangrah* or calling it a *bindu*, as other texts call themselves, this is called a *Sudhā*, and it deserves that title.⁴¹

Indeed, the *Sudhā* maintains the sense of amiability and amity at all times. It is maintained even in those rare instances where the author states the opponent explicitly. One such instance occurs during the discussion on the process of creation.⁴² While describing the creation of the universe, Sadhu Bhadreshdas analyses the various viewpoints asserted by both the orthodox and heterodox schools of Indian Philosophy. The process of creation is one of the themes that is addressed by almost all schools of Indian Philosophy, including the materialists. The *Sudhā* thereby presents the perceptive of each school with great depth and precision. Such a presentation mainly aims to place the author's viewpoint in conversation with that of others, making his argument more apparent by showcasing the grounds for not adhering to other prevalent views. Nevertheless, both the implicit and explicit engagements reflect the author's thorough understanding of his *pūrva-pakṣa*.

Further, in denying the arguments of the *pūrva-pakṣa*, Sadhu Bhadreshdas does not resort to mockery or sharp satirical attacks but primarily disapproves of their exegetical understanding and scriptural reasoning. Though his arguments are strong and logical, he maintains the ethics of the debate by refraining from what Tripathi refers to as “violence of speech.”⁴³ Throughout the text, *Sudhā* maintains poise in speech and thought.

This poise is further consolidated with the expressions on the divine for, as and when the opportunity arises, Sadhu Bhadreshdas recalls his *īṣṭadeva* and Guru. For instance, while arguing against those who deny the *jīva* as atomic, the author offers the illustration of applying a tilak of sandalwood paste on the image or *murti* of God. Just as the tilak is on God's forehead, but its fragrance pervades the surroundings; likewise, the atomic *jīva* pervades the whole body.⁴⁴ When the topic of memory comes up, the author reminisces the *darśana* of his Guru at Sārangapura, Gujarat—the memory of him sitting, walking, and delivering discourses.⁴⁵ His devotion is also reflected in his choice of words. For instance, every chapter begins with the term ‘akṣarapuruṣottama,’ placing Akṣarabrahman and

⁴¹ (‘HH Mahant Swami Maharaj Inaugurates Swaminarayan-Siddhanta-Sudha’ 49)

⁴² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 226–49)

⁴³ (Tripathi 20)

⁴⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 259)

⁴⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 152)

Parabrahman at the forefront of every topic. Likewise, by using the term ‘nārāyaṇasvarūpa,’ meaning the form of God, for the term ‘Parabrahman,’ he invokes his Guru, whose initiation name was Narayanswarupdas. Thus, Sadhu Bhadreshdas not only refrains from any “violence of speech” but sanctifies his speech with the invocation of the divine.

One of the most beautiful and enriching literary styles adopted in the *Sudhā* is the composition of *kārikās*. A *kārikā* is a “memorial verse” or a collection of such verses on subjects of grammar, philosophy, or science.⁴⁶ They convey “the gist of the explanation of a topic” (*saṃkṣiptasūtrabāhvarthasūcakaḥ ślokaḥ kārikā*).⁴⁷ This form of writing is prevalent in the Sanskrit grammar and philosophy tradition, which had didactic purposes, as seen in *Sāṅkhya Kārikā*, *Gaudapāda Kārikā*, and the like. These *kārikās* were laden with essence and could be easily memorised. However, these texts are more expository than dialectic. Sadhu Bhadreshdas brings these two forms together; he not only uses the medium of prose adopted by those who engage in *vāda* but also the verse-form of the expository texts. The purpose of such an amalgamation aims to encourage memorising and internalisation along with a comprehensive understanding of the Siddhānta. This is reflected in the *kārikā* explaining the purpose of the composition of *kārikās*:

Svādhyāyasyā'nukūlyāya muhurabhyasanāya ca |
*Ślokeṣu saṃgrahēṇa siddhānto grathyate śubhaḥ ||*⁴⁸

Even at the end of the *Sudhā*, the author reminds the reader of the importance of the *kārikās*:

Siddhāntasaṃgrahēṇaivam kārikā racitā imāḥ |
*Abhyāse manane pāṭhe vāde mahopakārikāḥ ||*⁴⁹

There are over 560 such *kārikās* in total, usually presented at the conclusion of each topic. They serve as a lyrical summary and are intended to facilitate study, reflection, repetition, and argumentation. An interesting point to note here is the purpose of *kārikās* in debates and discussions (*vāde*). In this sense, the *Sudhā* serves a dual purpose—it is not only a text offering a thorough analysis of a particular principle but also instructing others on how to

⁴⁶ (V. S. Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary* 351)

⁴⁷ (Abhyankar 111)

⁴⁸ “For the convenience of learning and repeated study, the auspicious fundamental principles are woven together in the form of ślokas.” (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 5)

⁴⁹ “These *kārikās* are composed as a collection of the fundamental principles. They are greatly helpful in study, reflection, repetition and argumentation.” (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 413)

carry out *vāda* on that principle. The *Sudhā* can rightly be called what Tripathi terms as a “manual on *vāda*,” a manual for training others in debate.⁵⁰ Reciting or quoting the appropriate *kārikā* in the context of a debate or discussion would enrich and strengthen one’s argument.

Further, analysing the nature of *vāda*, Tripathi notes the pride and arrogance that accompanies debates:

It is difficult to judge the subtle levels of ego and prejudices that percolate any debate.⁵¹

The *Sudhā* pleasantly lacks this aspect of *vāda*. The author ascribes his scholastic achievement to the letter written by his guru:

Patravyākhyānarūpo'yaṁ sudhāgrantho hi kevalam |
*Tadupadeśavākhyānām syānmananamahotsavaḥ ||*⁵²

Pramukh Swami Maharaj, in 2008, had penned a letter elucidating the five ontological principles that constitute the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana. The text *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā* opens with this letter written in vernacular Gujarati, which is later translated in Sanskrit under the heading “Siddhāntasamāmnāyaḥ,” the totality of the Siddhānta. The author takes his work only as an explication of this letter. He calls it a “mananamahotsava,” an inner celebration, a celebrative occasion to contemplate the teachings of the letter. Thus, this work is not a platform through which the author showcases his intellectual prowess; instead, he sees it as a joyous opportunity to further his own spiritual journey, to reinforce his conviction.

The author’s humility surfaces even more at the end of the *Sudhā*. Sadhu Bhadreshdas ends his *magnum opus* by submitting it as merely a written word on the Siddhānta and thus inferior to those members of the *saṃpradāya* who are living the Siddhānta.⁵³ Following the principles of the Siddhānta and living in association with the manifest Akṣarabrahman Guru is deemed to be far greater than simply writing about it. For this reason, the author ends with a final

⁵⁰ (Tripathi 36)

⁵¹ (Tripathi 28)

⁵² “The *Sudhā* is only an elucidation of this letter. It is a reflective celebration of the letter’s teachings.” (*Kārikā* 10)

⁵³ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 415)

prayer to Akṣara-Puruṣottama for bestowing him with the constant divine association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Thus, the *Sudhā* can be seen as a *vāda* where each chapter brims with the joy of realising the Siddhānta, which overtakes the pride of defeating the opponents.

1.3.1. About the Author

Sadhu Bhadreshdas, the author of the five-volume *Prasthānatrayī Svāminārāyaṇa Bhāṣya* and the *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*, is one of the most academically accomplished and renowned scholars of the BAPS Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya. His academic prowess has been widely recognised and honoured with various titles and awards, such as Śāḍdarśanācārya, Navyanyāyācārya, and Vyākaraṇācārya. Furthermore, the acclaimed titles of ‘Mahāmahopādhyāya’ by Kavikulaguru Kalidas Sanskrit University, Nagpur; ‘Darśanakesarī’ by the Akhil Bharatiya Vidvat Parishad, Varanasi; and ‘Vedānta-Mārtaṇḍa’ by Silpakorn University, Bangkok, at the 16th World Sanskrit Conference are conferred upon him.⁵⁴ The Somnath Sanskrit University honoured his outstanding literary and analytical prowess with the title ‘Abhinava Bhāṣyakāra’ in October 2017. His work was critically examined by the eminent scholars of Sri Kashi Vidvat Parishad, who endorsed the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana as a *Vedic* Siddhānta, contributing to the philosophical lineage of the *śāḍdarśana*.⁵⁵ Sadhu Bhadreshdas is recognised as an “ācārya” following the esteemed lineage of other *śāḍdarśana ācāryas* like Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya, Madhvacharya, Nimbarkacharya, and Vallabhacharya.

The contribution of Sadhu Bhadreshdas is acknowledged as novel and of greater significance as commentaries on all the ten principal *Upaniṣads*, the *Brahma-Sūtra* and *Bhagavad Gītā* have been written by a single *ācārya* after more than 1200 years. More so, the composition of a *vādagrantha* along with the *Prasthānatrayī Bhāṣya* completed by the same *ācārya* is witnessed for the first time in the history of Indian Philosophy.⁵⁶ This novelty is celebrated by various esteemed scholars today. Dr S.R. Bhatt, the former Chairperson of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research, opines:

⁵⁴(Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* 20)

⁵⁵ (‘Historical Acclamation of the Akshar-Purushottam Doctrine in Kashi’ 53)

⁵⁶ (Paramtattvadas, ‘Educational Insight: Akshar-Purushottam School of Vedanta’)

Through the *vāda granth* he [Sadhu Bhadreshdas] had established something new. The former *acharyas* had written *bhashyas* but they had not written *vāda granths*. The *vāda granth* written by Bhadreshdas Swami fosters the Sampradāya's original and fundamental principles.⁵⁷

Sadhu Bhadreshdas has been facilitated by several national and international universities and academic institutes for this novel contribution. Most recently (2021), several eminent scholars of South India engaged in a weeklong scholarly discussion with Sadhu Bhadreshdas at the National Sanskrit University, Tirupati. After this symposium, the scholars lauded Sadhu Bhadreshdas' invaluable work and accorded him the title of 'Bhāṣyakāra Mahācārya.'⁵⁸

Despite such profound commemoration, Sadhu Bhadreshdas attributes his success in writing the commentaries and the *Sudhā* to the blessings of his Guru, Pramukh Swami Maharaj. While narrating his journey in writing the commentaries, he begins with his Guru: "Mine is a story about what mammoth work can be accomplished by the guru's grace."⁵⁹ He understands himself as merely an instrument attaining inspiration from his Guru:

Whatever I have written, it has only been possible through the blessings, love and constant guidance of guruhari Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj. Whenever I sit down to write, I pray to them and I feel their presence, as if they were writing through me. So, I have no hesitation in acknowledging—without their wish none of this would be possible.⁶⁰

Sadhu Bhadreshdas, in *Hinduism Today*, narrates his spiritual and academic journey as guided by his Guru at every step. Born in 1966 in Maharashtra, India, Sadhu Bhadreshdas was initiated as a sadhu by Pramukh Swami Maharaj at the tender age of 14 in 1981. He studied the Sanskrit language and Nyāya, Sāṅkhya, and other philosophical systems for 25 years. In 2005, he acquired a PhD titled *Paramātmāpratyakṣasvarupayogaḥ*: a comparative analysis of the *Vacanāmṛta* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Upon completing his PhD, Pramukh Swami Maharaj asked him to write the commentaries that Sadhu Bhadreshdas completed at

⁵⁷ ('HH Mahant Swami Maharaj Inaugurates Swaminarayan-Siddhanta-Sudha' 34)

⁵⁸ (*South Indian Scholars Recognize the Akshar-Purushottam Darshan as a Distinct Vedic Sanatan Darshan, Tirupati, India*)

⁵⁹ (Bhadreshdas, 'Guru's Grace Empowers Philosophical Treatise')

⁶⁰ (qtd. in Paramtattvadas, "Educational Insight: Akshar-Purushottam School of Vedanta")

the end of 2007. This journey, he recounts, was not free of trials and hurdles. One of the most deterrent incidents was the damage of all his notes and drafts in the flash flood that struck Sārāṅapura in 2007. He started afresh with the inspiration of his Guru and completed all the commentaries in just six months, which he then offered to his Guru in the Centenary celebrations of BAPS in December 2007. The lesson he imparts from his journey is on the wonders one can achieve by utilising one's innate capacities through faith and guidance of a genuine Guru.⁶¹

Sadhu Bhadreshdas' research and work does not end with the *Sudhā* but is a head start to many such works as he continues to research and write on the *Vedas*, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, and other areas of philosophical research. He is also involved in surveying Indological research across the world, for which he has already visited 81 universities in 18 countries. At the same time, he offers his services in various academic and research institutes, such as serving as a member of the project committee of the Maharshi Sandipani Rashtriya Veda Vidya Pratishthan, Ujjain; as the head of the BAPS Swaminarayan Research Institute, Delhi; and as a senior advisor for the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya which is in collaboration with the Somnath Sanskrit University, Veraval, Gujarat.⁶²

1.4. Methodology and Sources

This thesis is an attempt to “study” or, in other words, examine and provide a comprehensive exposition of Sadhu Bhadreshdas' recent work *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*. In doing so, the thesis aims to unfold the main arguments of the philosophical debates by carefully examining the scriptural reasoning offered in the *Sudhā*. As mentioned earlier, the *Sudhā* offers affirmative aphorisms from four authoritative texts: the *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma-Sūtra*, *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Vacanāmṛta*. However, this study of the *Sudhā* primarily focuses on the author's usage of the ten principal *Upaniṣads* for validating and systematising the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta. Thus, the thesis can be said to offer a systematic textual study of the *Sudhā*, its argumentative framework, and outline the fundamental principles of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana.

⁶¹ (Bhadreshdas, 'Guru's Grace Empowers Philosophical Treatise')

⁶² (Brahmasetudas Swami 217–18)

In doing so, the thesis engages in a comparative analysis with other schools of Indian Philosophy, primarily some of the widely recognised Vedāntic schools: Shankaracharya's Kevalādvaita and Ramanujacharya's Viśiṣṭādvaita. These two schools offer antithetical philosophical perspectives and varied readings of the *Prasthānatrayī*. The thesis attempts to study the exegetical understanding of the *Sudhā* through a comparative analysis with the perspectives and readings of these schools. Such an analysis aims to bring forth a thorough understanding of the distinguishing principles of these schools, particularly of the novel Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana and its contribution to the Vedānta tradition.

The sources used for Shankaracharya's commentaries are mainly the volumes published by V. C. Sheshacharri, translated by Sitaram Shastri and Ganganath Jha. The Shankaracharya commentaries published by the Advaita Ashrama and S. Radhakrishnan's translation of the principal *Upaniṣads* are also used for a holistic understanding. The sources used to grasp Ramanujacharya's interpretation of the *Upaniṣads* are his commentary on the *Brahma-Sūtra* as translated by Thibaut, the commentary by Rangaramanujacharya and a more recent work adhering to the Viśiṣṭādvaita tradition by Acharya Narasimha, and the philosophy of the *Upaniṣads* as elucidated by S. M. Srinivaschari.

Additionally, the comparative analysis with Ramanujacharya's Viśiṣṭādvaita aims at understanding the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana as a distinct Vedānta school and not merely an extension of Viśiṣṭādvaita. As noted by the Vice-Chancellor of Lal Bahadur Sanskrit University, Prof. Ramesh Kumar Pandey:

People misunderstand that the Swaminarayan tradition follows the Vishishtadvaita doctrine. Bhadreshdas Swami had performed admirable work by authoring the first complete epistemological work on the Swaminarayan tradition.⁶³

Thus, a careful study of the *Sudhā* enables one to examine the nuanced differences that underlay the principles of both the early and recent Vedānta schools.

Research on the various aspects of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana is not abundant but also not negligible. Some of the recent and comprehensive studies on the same are found in the Swami Paramtattvadas' *Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* (2017) and a

⁶³ ('Historical Acclamation of the Akshar-Purushottam Doctrine in Kashi' 56)

compilation edited by Raymond Williams and Yogi Trivedi titled *Swaminarayan Hinduism: Tradition, Adaptation and Identity* (2017). More recently, the BAPS Swaminarayan Research Journal, initiated in 2018, has published academic articles on Swaminarayan philosophy by eminent research scholars. In addition, two explanatory texts have been published in English, namely, *The Akṣara-Puruṣottama-Darśana-Kārikā-Saṅcaya* (2020) by Acharya Brahmasēdhas Swami and *The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad Svāminārāyaṇa Bhāṣyam* (2020) by Acharya Paramvivekdas Swami. The former translates and explains certain selected *kārikās* of the *Sudhā*, while the latter work is an English rendering of the Sadhu Bhadreshdas' commentary on the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*.

Swami Paramtattvadas' work provides a great source of an in-depth overview of the Swaminarayan Theology as it surveys various *sampradāyic* works. This thesis aims to contribute to such academic research by focusing on one particular text and outlining the main arguments that would facilitate a student of philosophy to understand the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana in conversation with other Indian philosophical schools and how it situates itself within the primary philosophical debates.

1.5. Structure of the Thesis

The first chapter of the thesis is an introduction to the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana and the treatise of study, the *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*. This chapter traces, in brief, the history of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, the life, and work of its founder, and the legacy of various spiritually realised Akṣarabrahman Gurus that continues till today. This is followed by an analysis of the form of a *vādagrantha* and how this topical *vādagrantha*, *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*, contributes to this rich philosophical tradition. Subsequently, the author of this *vādagrantha*, Sadhu Bhadreshdas, his life and achievements are briefly outlined. The chapter then spells out the methodology adopted in the writing of this thesis and the various sources used for the same. It ends with a brief description of the epistemology of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana. The various epistemic principles endorsed by the Darśana offers a necessary substratum before the plunge into its metaphysics.

The structure of the thesis largely reflects the structure of the *Sudhā*: the discussion on the five ontological entities *jīva*, *īśvara*, *māyā*, Akṣarabrahman, and Parabrahman, followed by the necessary endeavours for comprehending this highest spiritual knowledge and the

ultimate result of truly realising the eternally supreme entities, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.

The second chapter of the thesis is on the entity of Akṣarabrahman that is discussed in *Sudhā's* “Akṣarabrahmadhārā.” The chapter discusses the nature and form of Akṣarabrahman and its relationship with other entities. This chapter begins with an etymological understanding of the terms ‘Akṣara’ and ‘Brahman’ that are widely used in the authoritative scriptures. It then understands this entity through the cited *Upaniṣadic* references, mainly from the *Muṇḍaka*, *Praśna*, and *Kaṭha Upaniṣads*. These references are examined in the light of other commentators of the Advaitin and Viśiṣṭādvaitin traditions. This analysis is followed by the exploration of the functional division of Akṣarabrahman into four distinct forms: as the formless *Cidākāśa*, the divine residence of Paramātmā, the ideal servant in this divine abode, and as the realised Guru on earth. Each of these forms is understood through the reading of sacred texts and their analysis. The chapter ends by articulating the relationship between the eternally pure yet distinct entities, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.

The third chapter of the thesis delves into the supreme and sovereign entity, Parabrahman, as discussed in *Sudhā's* “Parabrahmadhārā.” This entity is the ultimate and highest; nothing reigns beyond its power and supremacy. The epistemology, ontology, and soteriology of most schools of Indian Philosophy are directed towards understanding and realising the nature and form of this ultimate entity. The *Upaniṣads* allude to this entity through various terms, such as ‘Brahman,’ ‘Sat,’ and ‘Parama.’ This chapter begins by exploring *Sudhā's* understanding of these terms. The chapter also engages with the role of Parabrahman in the creation of the universe, its purpose, and Parabrahman's relationship with this creation. This discussion brings forth the issues of free will and determination, evil and suffering, and *Sudhā's* contribution to these ongoing debates. The chapter also explains the apparent contradiction concerning the form of Parabrahman, of possessing a form yet being formless, as asserted in the various aphorisms of the *Upaniṣads*. This is explained through *Sudhā's* description of Parabrahman's *anvaya* or immanent form and *vyatireka* or transcendental form, along with Parabrahman's *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* forms. The chapter ends with examining the nature and form of the manifest form of Parabrahman, which *Sudhā* affirms as remaining present on earth through the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

The fourth chapter of the thesis focuses on the remaining three eternal ontological entities: *jīva*, *īśvara*, and *māyā*. The chapter, following the chronology of the *Sudhā*, first canvases the only non-sentient entity *māyā*. It is explained as the raw material with which Parabrahman, with his own will, creates the universe. The chapter outlines the entire cosmic process that begins with Parabrahman's will to create, the role of Akṣarabrahman, *mūla-puruṣa* and *mūla-māyā*, and *mūla-māyā's* complete manifestation from the subtle to the gross elements eventually leading to the formation of the various animate and inanimate life forms. The chapter discusses the nature and function of each element of this cosmic process. This section elucidates many philosophical concepts such as *satkāryavāda*, *pañcikaṛaṇa*, and *ākāśa*. The chapter then examines *Sudhā's* unique understanding of time, followed by a study on the various arguments raised in the *Sudhā* for disapproving the theories of creation asserted by the respective schools of Indian Philosophy.

The second section of the same chapter expounds on the nature and form of *jīva* as endorsed by the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana. It begins by elucidating the *jīva's* nature that is ever self-luminous, sentient, pure, and blissful (*sat-cit-ānanda*). This section discusses, in particular, *jīva's* nature of knowledge-of-itself (*svarūpa bhūta jñāna*) and its ability to acquire knowledge-for-itself (*guṇa bhūta jñāna*). The chapter then examines *Sudhā's* understanding of the measure of *jīva* and its arguments against the materialist and Buddhist understanding of *jīva*. This is followed by the explanation of *jīva's* association with the three bodies: the *sthūla* (gross), *sukṣma* (subtle) and *kāraṇa* (causal) body, and with the three states: *jāgrata* (waking), *svapna* (dream), and *suṣupti* (deep sleep). The section on *jīva* ends with an exploration of *jīva's* relation with Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman and herewith examines the different relationships endorsed by other schools of Indian thought.

The last section of this chapter examines the nature and form of the entity *īśvara* in relation to the entity *jīva*. In doing so, it sheds light on the ontological distinction between *jīva* and *īśvara*. This section on *īśvara* ends with a discussion on the relation between the entities *īśvara* and Parabrahman along with the specification of the terms 'avatāra' and 'avatārī' as explained in the *Sudhā*.

The fifth chapter of the thesis is on the nature of the soteriological endeavours (*sādhana*) that would enable the realisation of this Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta and the fruits (*phala*) that are earned upon realisation. The *Sudhā* explains the primary endeavour as attaining

brahmabhāva, that is, acquiring the virtues of the Akṣarabrahman Guru. This aspect is then examined through the various statements of apposition (*samānādhikaraṇa*) affirmed in the *Upaniṣads* that suggest the oneness with Brahman and *Sudhā*'s understanding of the same. One of the essential elements of *brahmabhāva* is known as *Ekāntika Dharma* or *Ekāntiki Bhakti*, that is, *bhakti* that is supplemented with *dharma*, *jñāna*, and *vairāgya*. This section then elaborates on each of these components of *Ekāntika Dharma*. This discussion introduces concepts of *upāsanā*, *pativratā bhakti*, and *pratyakṣa bhakti* that form the core of *bhakti* in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana. The section ends with an enumeration of various supporting means to perfect one's *bhakti* towards Parabrahman.

The second part of the chapter examines the nature of *mukti*; the fruit earned upon attaining *brahmabhāva*. The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana is one of the few Vedānta schools that endorses *jīvana-mukti*. This section thus begins with the discussion on the nature of *jīvana-mukti* and how it differs from the Advaitin understanding. Further, the chapter elucidates the nature of *videha-mukti*, the state where the released *ātman* attains the divine abode of Parabrahman, Akṣaradhāman. The discussion on *videha-mukti* elaborates on the path towards this abode, the guides, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, who lead the *ātman* till this abode and the nature of the released *ātman* in this abode. The chapter ends with the emphatic note on the *Sudhā*'s denial of a metaphysical identity of the released *ātman* with Brahman as affirmed in the Advaitin tradition. This section explores the *Upaniṣadic* analogies that the Advaitins use to justify this metaphysical identity.

The last chapter concludes the thesis with a summary of the project at hand that offers a brief overview of all the main chapters of the thesis. It then discusses the distinguishing principles of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana in relation to the Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaitin schools of Vedānta. The chapter also raises certain potential problems with the thesis and responses to the same. Lastly, the thesis closes with suggestions for future projects on the unexplored avenues of research on the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana.

1.6. Epistemology

The *Sudhā* devotes an entire chapter on epistemology titled "Pramāṇadhārā" that spells out the various epistemic components, such as the nature of valid knowledge (*pramā*), the means of attaining such knowledge (*pramāṇa*), and the nature and form error in the same

(*khyātivāda*). These components are an important aspect as epistemology is taken as the foundation on which each school builds its metaphysical principles. J. Prasad, in his analysis of Indian epistemology, refers to it as a technique or method which systematises metaphysics:

[e]pistemology undertakes, provides, however, a *method* of metaphysical inquiry enquiry and criticism, and we find that, in the history of philosophy, whether consciously or unconsciously, it has been used as such.⁶⁴

For this reason, usually, each school of philosophy first lays down its epistemology or the methodology through which it submits its metaphysics. Sadhu Bhadreshdas, however, does not commence the *Sudhā* with “Pramāṇadhārā,” instead places it after the chapters on Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. Situating it thus is the author’s way of showcasing his allegiance to his Guru and *īṣṭadeva*. He begins “Pramāṇadhārā” by invoking Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman as beyond the limitations of epistemology, who regulate (*prāmāṇyanirṇetā*) and cause (*sarvaprāmāṇyakāraṇam*) all forms of validation and authority.⁶⁵ The various means of knowledge are thereby only for the bound *ātmā* through which all kinds of doubts or invalid knowledge is uprooted with the grace of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.

Pramā is explained as true cognition (*yathārtha jñāna*) of the five ontological realities. This intrinsically valid knowledge is shown to be gained through various valid means (*pramāṇa*) that can reveal it thoroughly. The *Sudhā* admits the primary means of knowledge, perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), and verbal testimony (*śabda*), along with other means like comparison (*upamāna*), presumption (*arthāpatti*), non-apprehension (*anupalabdhi*), implication (*sambhāva*) and conventional statements (*aitihyam*). Unlike other schools, like Viśiṣṭādvaita that accepts only the primary three *pramāṇas* and explains the remaining means as subsumed under those three,⁶⁶ the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana admits all of them as separate means of valid knowledge. In fact, the *Sudhā* does not put a number to its admitted *pramāṇas*:

Pratyanīkam bhaved yaddhi pramāyām karaṇam na hi |

⁶⁴ (J. Prasad 8)

⁶⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 146)

⁶⁶ (S. Chari 104)

All those valid means of knowledge that facilitate the correct understanding of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta are entitled as independent *pramāṇas*. In doing so, the *Sudhā* focuses on the acquisition of valid knowledge than on the discussion of fixing a number of independent *pramāṇas*.⁶⁸ Admitting all the above-mentioned *pramāṇas* as independent means is not deemed to hinder the integrity of the Siddhānta.

Though the *Sudhā* does not affirm a fixed number of the accepted *pramāṇas*, it gives primacy to *pratyakṣa*, *anumāna*, *upamāna*, and *śabda*. Amongst these four, *śabda pramāṇa* is considered as the “pramukha” or most significant means for realising the Siddhānta.⁶⁹ Such importance to *śabda pramāṇa* is witnessed across many schools of Indian Philosophy. As R. I. Ingalalli observes:

In the tradition of Indian thought, scriptural authority has always occupied an important position. Sometimes, the importance attached to it is so great that all other forms of knowledge are subordinated to it.⁷⁰

Śabda pramāṇa is taken as a valid means when the correct meaning of the words is grasped, leading to true knowledge; if not, it loses its authority as a valid means and thus is reduced to *apramāṇa*. The *Sudhā* accepts *śabda pramāṇa* as an independent means, different from *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna*, as its essential constituent (*sāmagrī*) is the conjunction between the word (*pada*) and its meaning (*padārtha*).⁷¹ For this, neither does it require the constituents of *anumāna* like *hetu*, *linga*, etc., nor does it always require a sense contact with an object. Moreover, even the resultant statement (*anuvyavasāya*) is shown to be different in all these three *pramāṇas*: it is “I see the pot” for *pratyakṣa*, “I infer the pot” for *anumāna*, and “I know or have knowledge of the pot” for *śabda*.

The most fundamental text accepted as the valid source of knowledge by all the orthodox schools of Indian philosophy are the *Vedas*. There are, of course, debates within these schools

⁶⁷ “That which does not hinder the attainment of valid knowledge can be recognised as a *pramāṇa*. If a particular means of knowledge leads to valid knowledge, there is no insistence on accepting only a fixed number of *pramāṇas*.” (*Kārikā* 274)

⁶⁸ (Brahmasetudas Swami 126)

⁶⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 183)

⁷⁰ (Ingalalli, *Śabda Pramāṇa: An Epistemological Analysis* 1)

⁷¹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 178)

on the authorship of the *Vedas*, whether it is *pauruṣeya* or *apauruṣeya*, on its intrinsic or extrinsic validity, and so on. The *Sudhā* would agree that the *Veda* is *apauruṣeya*, having intrinsic validity. However, it emphasises more on comprehending the appropriate meaning of the *Vedas*. In responding to an objection against *Vedas* as a valid source since the *Upaniṣads* describe them as “aparā vidyā,”⁷² lower or inferior knowledge, the *Sudhā* specifies that they are inferior only when one engages with them superficially and is not able to grasp their true and appropriate meaning. Moreover, the distinction between the “vedic” or “alaukika” *śabda* and the “laukika” *śabda* is made in terms of their meanings. The meaning of the *Vedic* words, unlike the mundane words, is eternal and remains constant across all forms of creation.⁷³ Thus, though the words themselves may perish with every cosmic creation, the *Vedic* knowledge contained within them will eternally prevail.

In this way, the *Sudhā* highlights the importance of grasping the correct meanings of the scriptures and then specifies that this correct meaning can be acquired either through Parabrahman Swaminarayan or the lineage of the Akṣarabrahman Gurus. Imparted by the manifest forms of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, makes their revelations pure and supreme (*parā-vāṇī*). Accordingly, the *sampradāyic* texts, particularly the *Vacanāmṛta*, are considered as part of “vedic” or “alaukika” *śabda*. In fact, the *Vacanāmṛta* is described as a *Veda*, the chief source (*pramāṇarāja*) comprising the words of Parabrahman himself, and thereby intrinsically valid (*svataḥ-pramāṇa*). The Akṣarabrahman Guru, who is believed to eternally behold Parabrahman, is depicted as “pañcamo veda,” the fifth *Veda*. Thus, the *Vedic śabda* encompasses the *Veda*, that is, *Samhitā*, *Brāhmaṇa*, *Āraṇyaka* and *Upaniṣad*, the six Vedāṅgas, *Śikṣā*, *Kalpa*, *Vyākaraṇa*, *Nirukta*, *Canda* and *Jyotiṣa* necessary for understanding the purport of the *Vedas*, the *Brahma-Sūtra* of Bādarāyaṇa, the *Itihāsa* and *Purāṇa*. This also includes the *sampradāyic Prasthānatrayī*, that is, the *Vacanāmṛta*, *Svāmi ni Vāto*—discourses of Akṣarabrahman Gunatitanand Swami that serve as a commentary on the *Vacanāmṛta*, and the *Gurucaritra granthas*—texts documenting the life and works of all the Akṣarabrahman Gurus. Further, all those texts that align with the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta and are validated by the Akṣarabrahman Guru are accepted as *śabda pramāṇa*.

⁷² (Mu. Up. 1.1.5)

⁷³ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 180–81)

However, a distinctive characteristic of *śabda pramāṇa* in this Darśana is situating the Akṣarabrahman Guru above the scriptures.⁷⁴ The *Sudhā* presents:

Guruharibalaṃ śreṣṭhaṃ śāstravacobalādapi |
*Śāstrāttu kevalāt kvāpi na jñānaṃ niścayaḥ sukham ||*⁷⁵

Such unprecedented importance of the Akṣarabrahman Guru is asserted through the very form and content of the *Upaniṣads*—they are in the form of a dialogue where the guru imparts the spiritual knowledge to the student. Thus, the guru alone is stated to impart the essence of the scriptures. Moreover, unlike the scriptures, the guru can in person observe the ignorant, can repeatedly correct his or her mistakes, and show the right path.⁷⁶ In this way, the scriptures alone are deemed incapable of providing wisdom and supreme bliss. Hence the association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru is attributed greater importance than comprehending the scriptures with one's own mundane intellect.

The domain of epistemology that deals with the nature of valid knowledge invariably entails the nature of invalid knowledge, often referred to as *Khyātivāda*. Invalid knowledge in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana is an incorrect or incomplete understanding of the five ontological realities. This theory of error is identified as *Cidacitakhyāti*. As the name suggests, this theory consists of two parts, *Cit Khyāti* and *Acit Khyāti*. The latter is called *Acit Khyāti* as it deals only with the non-sentient entity *māyā* and its transformation into various objects. This error is grounded on the concepts of *satkāryavāda* and *pañcikaraṇa*⁷⁷ as all material objects are products of causation and composed of the quintuplication of the five gross elements (*pañca bhūta*). Accordingly, *Acit Khyāti* entails a delusion amongst objects that have proceeded from the transformation of *māyā*, which is the material cause of all creation transforming upon the will of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.⁷⁸ Though material objects possess a distinct name and form are essentially constituted of the five gross elements of *māyā*. For instance, when one perceives silver in a shell, one does not commit an error as such as both silver and shell are made of the same constituents as per the *pañcikaraṇa* theory. However, the error occurs in assuming the silver in the shell to be the same as the silver sold

⁷⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 188)

⁷⁵ “The strength of the Guru is greater than the strength of the words of the scriptures. The words of the scriptures alone cannot lead knowledge, conviction and bliss.” (*Kārikā* 272)

⁷⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 188)

⁷⁷ The process of causation and *pañcikaraṇa* are discussed in detail in chapter 4 of the thesis.

⁷⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 193)

in the market. The silver in the shell has no functional value as that bought and sold in the market.

Cit Khyāti, on the other hand, encompasses mainly the sentient ontological entities accepted by the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, namely, *jīva*, *īśvara*, Akṣarabrahman, and Parabrahman. These entities are real and eternal and thus not associated with the theory of causality and *pañcikaṛaṇa*. *Cit Khyāti* is a misapprehension of the true nature of these sentient entities and thereby mis-predicating the attributes of one entity to another. Thus, attributing qualities of an ordinary *jīva* or *īśvara* to Parabrahman is an instance of *Cit Khyāti*. Mis-perceiving the material body to be the sentient *jīva* is also an aspect of *Cit Khyāti*. The primary premise of the theory is that each of the five entities is real yet mutually distinct from each other. The attributes of an entity observed elsewhere are then mistakenly applied to another entity. It involves perceiving qualities that are completely absent and have no possibility of existing in an entity, like perceiving this-worldliness in the ever divine Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman or faults in those associated with these divine entities.⁷⁹ However, unlike *Acit Khyāti*, *Cit Khyāti* can only be eliminated through the association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Such Guru's guidance in understanding the true form of each entity not only eliminates any error but also leads one to liberation.

Thus, the *Sudhā's* epistemology is based on truly cognising the five mutually distinct ontological entities. Their nature can be fully grasped through *śabda pramāṇa*, which primarily encompasses the *Vedas* that are understood through the teachings of Parabrahman and the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Such teachings prevent one from any delusion or error, thus enabling true cognition and ultimately the realisation of valid knowledge.

⁷⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 193)