

## 6. Conclusion

This chapter of the thesis provides an overview of the project of study by outlining the subject matter of each chapter. It then offers certain conclusions in the form of mapping the philosophy of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana in light of its understanding of the *Upaniṣadic* teachings. This section submits the fundamental principles of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana by juxtaposing them with those of the Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita Darśana. The chapter then presents certain areas of criticism of this thesis and clarifies the nature and limitations of the thesis in responding to the critique. The chapter ends with offering avenues for future projects based on the unexplored areas of this study.

### 6.1. The Project at Hand

This thesis focuses on the study of a topical text *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā* that systematises the fundamental principles of the novel Vedānta Darśana, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana. The *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā* is a *vādagrantha* whereby the author Sadhu Bhadrashdas expounds upon the ontology, epistemology, ethics, and soteriology of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana through the teachings of the *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma-Sūtra*, *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Vacanāmṛta*. This thesis studies the fundamental aspects in the light of the various *Upaniṣadic* teachings and engages in an examination of the *Sudhā*'s exegesis along with a comparative analysis of primarily the Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita schools of Vedānta. Through such an examination and analysis, the thesis brings forth the philosophical principles of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana and its position in the various philosophical debates prevalent the Vedānta tradition and the Indian philosophy at large. It thereby concludes that the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, the principles of which are embedded in the *Upaniṣads* and other authoritative scriptures, forms a distinct school of Vedānta.

The thesis traces *Sudhā*'s chronological path and accordingly begins with the examination of the ontological entities Akṣarabrahman, Parabrahman, *māyā*, *jīva* and *īśvara*, followed by the soteriological endeavours and nature of liberation. As a *vādagrantha*, the *Sudhā* engages in a philosophical discussion with the aim to realise the ultimate truth. The thesis, thus, in each chapter unfolds the various discussions, particularly those focused on the ten principal *Upaniṣads*.

The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana recognises five metaphysical realities, namely, *jīva* (the countless individual *ātman*), *īśvara* (deities), *māyā* (the power of the Supreme Being), Akṣarabrahman (the entity ever above *māyā* and subordinate only to the Supreme) and Parabrahman (the Supreme Being). These five metaphysical entities are eternally real and true. While *jīva*, *īśvara*, Akṣarabrahman, and Parabrahman are essentially sentient (*cit*) entities, *māyā* is essentially non-sentient (*acit*). Further, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman are the only two entities that are eternally pure and beyond the aversions of *māyā*.

The chapter on Akṣarabrahman examines the nature and form of Akṣarabrahman as a separate ontological entity. The terms ‘akṣara’ and ‘brahman’ are stated innumerable times in the *Upaniṣads*. The other Darśanas, like Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita, at many instances explain ‘akṣara’ (imperishable) as an adjective or description for the ultimate entity Brahman. The *Sudhā*, on the other hand, understands ‘akṣara’ as essentially distinct from the Supreme Being Brahman, which remains ever subordinate to the Supreme Being. This aspect is examined through the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* that discusses two kinds of knowledge, the lower (*aparā*) and the higher (*parā*). The description of *parāvidyā* begins with “akṣaram adhigamyate.”<sup>899</sup> The term ‘akṣara’ refers to the entity Akṣarabrahman, the knowledge of which, along with Parabrahman (*puruṣa*), is necessary for the realisation of the highest spiritual knowledge. Consequently, that first *muṇḍaka* of the *Upaniṣad* is explained in terms of Akṣarabrahman. The entity that is the material and efficient cause of the universe, as described in the following few verses of the *Upaniṣad* through aphorisms like “akṣarāt sambhavaṭīha viśvam,”<sup>900</sup> is also identified as Akṣarabrahman.

Further, one of the most important aphorisms of this *Upaniṣad* is stated as “akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ.”<sup>901</sup> Here, the Supreme Being, Parabrahman, is described as being higher than Akṣarabrahman. Thus, this is cited to establish the subordination of Akṣarabrahman to Parabrahman along with the ontological distinction between the two. The second chapter of the thesis reads these aphorisms in light of other commentators, like Shankaracharya and Ramanujacharya. While Shankar interprets ‘akṣara’ as an adjective of Brahman and at the same time as *avidyā*, Ramanuja interprets it as an adjective of Brahman and later as denoting *Hiraṇyagarbha*.

<sup>899</sup> “Through which Akṣara is known.” (Mu. Up. 1.1.5)

<sup>900</sup> “This world proceeds from Akṣara.” (Ch. Up. 1.1.7)

<sup>901</sup> “Parabrahman is superior to the supreme Akṣara.” (Mu. Up. 2.1.2)

The term ‘akṣara’ is synonymous with the term ‘brahman,’ which etymologically means *great or vast*. Accordingly, the term ‘brahman’ is identified as denoting the entity Akṣarabrahman. However, it is also, at times, depending upon the context of the discussion, identified as the Supreme Being Parabrahman. Akṣarabrahman as Brahman is elucidated through the *Praśna Upaniṣad* that outlines the sacred sound “Om” as entailing both lower (*apara*) Brahman and higher (*para*) Brahman.<sup>902</sup> The *Sudhā* identifies the lower Brahman as Akṣarabrahman and the higher Brahman as Parabrahman, and thereby shows that both these distinct entities are referred to with the term ‘brahman.’ Further, the term ‘akṣara’ is also at times understood synonymous with the term ‘avyakta,’ etymologically meaning *the unmanifest*. This is illustrated through the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, which asserts the hierarchy of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman through the aphorism “avyaktāt puruṣaḥ paraḥ.”<sup>903</sup> The *Sudhā* clearly denies the identification of ‘avyakta’ as *prakṛti* or *mūla-prakṛti* or even *śarīra*. It endorses Akṣarabrahman as ‘avyakta,’ beyond which lies only Parabrahman. Thus, through such illustrations, the entity of Akṣarabrahman is shown to be rooted in the *Upaniṣads*.

Based on the several authoritative scriptures, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta identifies four forms of Akṣarabrahman. These four forms are: Akṣarabrahman as *Cidākāśa* (the sentient pervasive space), as Akṣaradhāman (the divine abode of Parabrahman), the ideal servant in this abode, and as the Guru on earth guiding aspirants to liberation. While the *Cidākāśa* form is referred to as the *anvaya* or the pervasive form, the remaining three—the ideal servant, supreme abode, and Guru—are referred to as the *vyatireka* or the transcendental form of Akṣarabrahman. However, despite such diverse roles and forms, Akṣarabrahman is regarded as a single ontological entity.

Each of these forms of Akṣarabrahman is elaborated through *Upaniṣadic* exegesis. Akṣarabrahman as the *Cidākāśa* form, pervading everything that prevails, is showcased through the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*<sup>904</sup> where Akṣara is proclaimed as the “praśāsaka” or the ruler of the Sun, Moon, Heaven, etc. *Cidākāśa* as pervading the *ātman* of every being stems from the assertion of the *daharākāśa*, accounted in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*,<sup>905</sup> as residing in the inner cavity of the heart. This *daharākāśa* is identified as the *Cidākāśa* form of Akṣarabrahman and not as the material *ākāśa* or ether, one of the five gross elements. It is

<sup>902</sup> (Pr. Up. 5.2)

<sup>903</sup> “Puruṣa is superior to avyakta.” (Ka. Up. 3.11)

<sup>904</sup> (Br. Up. 3.8.8-9)

<sup>905</sup> (Ch. Up. 8.1.1)

argued that ether is a product of *māyā* and thereby has a point of beginning and dissolution. Moreover, the *daharākāśa* is later described as “ātman” suggesting a sentient entity; ether, on the other hand, is essentially non-sentient. Even as described as “ātman,” the *Sudhā* warns against identifying *daharākāśa* as individual ātman for the later mantras describe the “ātman” as the cause of all creation. Further, the *Sudhā* also denies the identification of *daharākāśa* in terms of the Supreme Being as submitted by many commentators. The *Sudhā* argues that the very same mantra states that the one residing in this *daharākāśa* must be inquired, that is, Parabrahman. *Cidākāśa* pervades all creation, and also all that lies beyond creation, which is affirmed by the term ‘bāhyataḥ.’<sup>906</sup> Thus, Akṣarabrahman in its *Cidākāśa* form pervades each and everything, the seen and the unseen.

Akṣarabrahman as the divine abode of Parabrahman is stated in the *Upaniṣads* through various terms, such as ‘brahmaloka,’ ‘brahmadhāman,’ ‘paramvyoman,’ and ‘padam.’ In each of these cases, the *Sudhā* understands these terms to refer to the supreme abode and not as any other realm, like the abode of Brahmā, or merely as a state of realisation. Sadhu Bhadreshdas prefers to split the compound terms like ‘brahmaloka’ or ‘brahmadhāma’ in terms of *Karmadhāraya Samāsa*, that is, the *loka* is Brahman or Akṣarabrahman. He notes that if the term is split through *Tatpuruṣa Samāsa*, that is, the *loka* of Brahman, it should be understood in terms of “the head of Rāhu.” This implies that Akṣarabrahman is never ontologically separate or distinct from the abode. For this reason, the supreme abode in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana is known as “Akṣaradhāman,” which means the “dhāman” or abode is Akṣara that ever upholds the Supreme Being.

This abode is described as upholding the divine human-shaped form of Parabrahman along with his ideal servant, Akṣarabrahman, and surrounded by countless released *ātman* (*akṣara mukta*). Being a form of Akṣarabrahman, the abode is specified as being made of Brahman and not of any spiritual substance like “śuddha sattva,” as claimed by the Viśiṣṭādvaitins. Moreover, this abode is eternal, sentient and, unlike other Darśanas, has a divine human-shaped form. On this ground, this abode form of Akṣarabrahman is distinct from its all-pervasive *Cidākāśa* form and is categorised as its *vyatireka* form.

Akṣaradhāman is the highest abode from where there is no return. It ever transcends the *guṇas* of *prakṛti* and thus can be attained only upon overcoming these *guṇas*. Such a state can

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<sup>906</sup> (Īśa Up. 5)

be attained through the association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru. The Guru enables one to develop detachment with the material world and engage in the selfless worship of Parabrahman. Thus, profound association with the Akṣarabrahman Guru invariably secures the attainment of Akṣaradhāman.

Akṣarabrahman, as mentioned above, also dwells in this divine abode as the ideal servant of Parabrahman. The divine human-shaped form of Akṣarabrahman in the abode is understood through the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*,<sup>907</sup> where being “samarpit” or dedicatedly worshipping in the “padam” or abode is explained as Akṣarabrahman being dedicated to Parabrahman. The verse further describes this entity in service of Parabrahman as walking (*ejat*), breathing (*prāṇat*), and blinking (*nimiṣa*), which validates Akṣarabrahman possessing a human-like body. This explanation differs from those provided by other commentators, who identify it as Brahman that supports various beings that walk, breathe, and blink on earth.

Further, this form of Akṣarabrahman is considered the ideal for all released *ātman*. The famous aphorism “so aham asmi” (I am that) of the *Īśa Upaniṣad*<sup>908</sup> is explained as “I am Akṣara,” affirming that the worship and service performed by Akṣarabrahman is worthy of emulation. The released *ātman* enjoys the bliss of Parabrahman as experienced by the servant form of Akṣarabrahman. This is supported through the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, which affirms the released *ātman* to attain the fulfilment of all desires (*sarvān kāmān aśnute*) in the form of such supreme bliss, which it experiences along with Akṣarabrahman (*brahmaṇa saha*).<sup>909</sup> This form of Akṣarabrahman is believed to engage in the function of comic creation as per the will of Parabrahman.

The form of Akṣarabrahman as the Guru has great significance as it is the only form that manifests on earth and thus is accessible to all aspirants. Such a Guru is deemed as possessing the qualities of “śrotriyam,” “brahma,” and “niṣṭham.”<sup>910</sup> Accordingly, the Akṣarabrahman Guru is described as realised in the essence of the scriptures (*śrotriyam*); hence he alone can impart their true meaning. He alone is the manifest form of Akṣarabrahman, thus referred to as “brahma.” And he is ever immersed (*niṣṭham*) in the worship, service, and bliss of Parabrahman. Thus, *brahmavidyā* as presented in the following

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<sup>907</sup> (Mu. Up. 2.2.1)

<sup>908</sup> (Īśa. Up. 16)

<sup>909</sup> (Tai. Up. 2.1.1)

<sup>910</sup> (Mu. Up. 1.2.12)

mantra of this *Upaniṣad*, “yenākṣaram puruṣam veda satyam provāca tām tattvato brahmavidyām,”<sup>911</sup> can be realised only through the association and conviction in such a Guru. He is the human-abode of Parabrahman, through whom Parabrahman imparts bliss and liberation to countless *ātman*. Only through him can one attain Parabrahman, and hence is understood as the “setu”<sup>912</sup> or bridge that enables one to overcome the endless cycles of transmigration. Thus, the association with the Akṣarabrahman Guru is vital in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana.

In this way, Akṣarabrahman is ascertained as a separate ontological entity, which not only differs but regulates and controls the *jīva*, *īśvara*, and *māyā*. The *Sudhā* insists that Akṣarabrahman must not be coalesced with an individual *ātman* or *prakṛti* or even Parabrahman. The relationship between Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman is ever of a servant (*sevaka*) and the master (*svāmī*), and of a worshipper (*upāsaka*) and the worshipped (*upāsya*). Akṣarabrahman remains subordinate to Parabrahman in every way. Thereby, Akṣarabrahman encompasses the extraordinary powers and virtues only with the will of Parabrahman, who alone reigns supreme.

The third chapter of the thesis delves into the nature and form of the Supreme Being Parabrahman. Parabrahman is also referred to as *Paramātman*, *Puruṣottama*, *Sarveśvara*, and *Māyin*. The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana endorses a divine human-shaped form of Parabrahman that eternally resides in the divine abode, Akṣaradhāman. This very form is believed to have manifested on earth as Sahajanand Swami, widely known as Swaminarayan (1781-1830 CE). This form is referred to as the *vyatireka* or transcendental form of Parabrahman. The divine human-shaped form is asserted through the *Upaniṣadic* aphorisms like “hiraṇmayaḥ puruṣo”<sup>913</sup> that expresses the magnificent and illustrious human-like form of Parabrahman and “tad ikṣat,”<sup>914</sup> which attributes an act of seeing to Parabrahman. Such depictions thus point to a human-shaped form with functioning sense-organs.

Parabrahman, at the same time, also pervades all creation as the inner-dweller, which is recognised as the *anvaya* or the immanent form of Parabrahman. Here, Parabrahman is understood to pervade (*anupraveśa*) a being depending on its capacity to uphold

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<sup>911</sup> “Through which the true forms of Akṣara and Puruṣa are known is brahmavidyā.” (Mu. Up. 1.2.13)

<sup>912</sup> (Ka. Up. 3.2)

<sup>913</sup> “The golden Person.” (Ch. Up. 1.6.6-7)

<sup>914</sup> “He saw.” (Ch. Up. 6.2.3)

Parabrahman. In other words, Parabrahman manifests in all that prevails but expresses his powers in varying degrees depending on the being it pervades. Accordingly, Parabrahman is described to manifest his powers in varying degrees, ranging from *īśvara*, humans, animals, and inanimate beings. However, unlike other beings, Parabrahman resides in the Akṣarabrahman Guru in entirety (*samyak*), with all his powers and virtues, at all times. Hence, through the legacy of the Akṣarabrahman Gurus, Parabrahman Swaminarayan is believed to remain ever-present on earth.

Furthermore, Parabrahman is asserted as the all-doer (*sarva-kartā*), the material and efficient cause of all creation. This is explained through the *Upaniṣadic sadvidyā* that asserts that in the beginning only “sat,”<sup>915</sup> Parabrahman along with Akṣarabrahman, prevailed. Within this “sat” eternal entity *māyā*, along with the *jīvas* and *īśvaras*, lay dormant. Upon his will, Parabrahman decides to transform *māyā* to its manifest form, leading to the formation of the universe. Despite the all-doership of Parabrahman, all individuals have the free will to perform actions of their choice. The power to perform these actions is bestowed by Parabrahman. Thereby, although beings have the freedom to perform any action, they are ever dependent on Parabrahman. This is explained through the analogy of the king and his minister—the king attributes certain power to the ministers for administering a portion of the kingdom. The ministers are then rewarded or punished for their performance. In the same manner, Parabrahman endows the faculties of thinking, willing and desiring to every being, and bestows the fruits of their individual actions.

The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta believes in the continued presence of Parabrahman on earth. Parabrahman Swaminarayan is believed to remain present on the earth through the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Thus, Parabrahman remains ever manifest (*pratyakṣa*) not only through his *murtis* or images but in person by eternally residing in the Akṣarabrahman Guru. The association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru is thereby considered equivalent to the association with the manifest form of Parabrahman.

The fourth chapter of the thesis discusses the nature and form of the *māyā*, *jīva* and *īśvara*. Each of these entities is considered real, eternal and ontologically distinct. *Māyā* is essentially an inert entity that is transformed into the universe upon the will of Parabrahman. Parabrahman transforms it into the diverse creation which evokes wonder (*vismayakāriṇī*).

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<sup>915</sup> (Ch. Up. 6.2.1)

*Māyā* is also known as “avidyā” and “vāsanā” as it covers the knowledge of *jīvas* and *īśvaras* in the form of desires and attachment towards the various sense-objects. This attachment, among other things, diverts the *jīvas* and *īśvaras* from the knowledge of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, leading them to endure cycles of birth and death.

The process of creation begins with Parabrahman, who expresses his will to create by glancing at Akṣarabrahman, who then glances at a released *ātman* (*akṣara mukta*) amongst the countless released *ātman* dwelling in Akṣaradhāman. This appointed *akṣara mukta*, identified as “mūla-puruṣa,” stirs *māyā* or *mūla-prakṛti* from its dormant state and together they produce countless pairs of *pradhāna-puruṣa*. From each pair of *pradhāna-puruṣa* proceeds a universe that eventually takes the form of the manifold objects with different names and forms. The transformation progresses from the most subtle element to gross element, transforming from *mahatattva*, *mana*, *buddhi*, *indriyas*, *prāṇa*, *pañca tan mātrā* and *pañca bhūta*. Each element, affirmed through various *Upaniṣadic* aphorisms like “etasmājjāyate prāṇo manaḥ sarvendriyāṇi ca khaṁ vāyurjyotirāpaḥ,”<sup>916</sup> is essentially inert and temporary.

During the time of dissolution, various elements dissolve into *mūla-prakṛti* till the next creation. This flow of creation and dissolution is eternal, and this eternity often leads to the illusion of the eternity of time. Time, according to the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, is dependent upon the respective object. It is posited for carrying out day-to-day activities. It is not recognised as a separate category and does not have metaphysical significance.

The *Sudhā*, through scriptural and logical reasoning, disapproves other theories of creation like the *svabhāvavāda* of the Cārvāka, *aṇuvāda* of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika schools, *prakṛtivāda* of the classical Sāṅkhya school, *śūnyavāda* of the Buddhists and *anekāntavāda* of the Jains. It insists that the *māyā* or *prakṛti* transforms only through the will of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman and not on its own or by its *svabhāva*. Moreover, based on *Upaniṣadic* teachings,<sup>917</sup> the *Sudhā* asserts that all gross objects are composed of the gross elements, ether (*ākāśa*), air (*vāyu*), fire (*teja*), water (*jala*) and earth (*pṛthvi*) through the process of quintuplication (*pañcikaraṇa*) and thereby rejects the *aṇuvāda* of the Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika schools. The creation of complex objects through the part-less atoms is deemed to be

<sup>916</sup> “From Paramātman is born the vital breath, mind, senses, ether, wind, water.” (Mu. Up. 2.1.3)

<sup>917</sup> (Ch. Up. 6.3.3; Tai. Up. 2.1.1)

inherently contradictory and thus lacking logical validity. The principle of *śunyavāda* is also argued to be invalid as it cannot be proven by any means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*). If, on the other hand, it is proven through any means, the principle contradicts itself. In this way, the process of cosmic creation transforming through the will and manifestation of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman is explained to be true and real.

The fourth chapter of the thesis also examines the nature and form of the *jīvātman* and *īśvarātman*, who are eternally (without a beginning) influenced by *māyā*. The term ‘self’ or ‘ātman’ in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana encompasses both the *jīvātman* and the *īśvarātman*, that is, the individual *ātman* on the earth and the various deities, respectively. The Darśana upholds the nature of this *ātman* as atomic (*aṇu-parimāṇa*), which is situated in the heart of the material body. It regulates the body but remains essentially pure, luminous, and blissful (*sat-cit-ānanda*). The *ātman*, however, is firmly attached to three kinds of bodies composed of *māyā*. These bodies that firmly envelop the *jīvātman* are identified as the *sthūla* (gross), *sukṣma* (subtle), and *kāraṇa* (causal) bodies. The corresponding bodies that envelop the *īśvarātman* are identified as *virāja*, *śutrātmā*, and *avyākṛta*. The gross body encompasses the material body, along with its flesh, blood, bones, etc. It is born either from sweat, seed, egg, or womb. The subtle body includes the internal and external senses that support the functioning of the gross body. The cause and support of these two bodies is the causal body, which is the cause of one’s desires, passions, and attachments. The causal body is eternal and the root of reincarnation. Ultimate freedom is identified as the release from the causal body. This description also extends to the three bodies of *īśvarātman*; however, for liberation, they need to acquire the subtle and gross bodies of *jīvātman* as the association with the Akṣarabrahman Guru is possible only on earth.

While in bondage—enveloped by the three bodies—the *ātman* resides within three states in which it performs various actions. The three states of the *jīvātman* are the *jāgrata* (waking), *svapna* (dream), and *suṣupti* (deep sleep) state. The corresponding states of *īśvarātman* are *sthiti*, *utpatti*, and *pralaya*. When one overcomes the bondage of the three bodies, the *ātman* moves beyond these three states and experiences the fourth (*turīya*) state, which is characterised by the experience of Parabrahman’s eternal bliss.

The *ātman* is the *adhikārī* and, as a result, has the ability to attain the highest spiritual knowledge. This aspect is emphasised by highlighting two forms of knowledge essential to

the *ātman*, namely, *svarūpa bhūta jñāna* or knowledge-of-itself and *guṇa bhūta jñāna* or knowledge of others apart from itself. Thereby, the *ātman* is not only aware of itself but also acquires knowledge from without, which is affirmed through the various instructions given in the *Upaniṣads*, such as of inquiring (*vijijñāsva*),<sup>918</sup> to learn (*nibodhata*).<sup>919</sup> The *ātman*, thus, is not merely pure consciousness but is also the knower (*jñātā*).

Despite this common characterisation, *jīvātman* and *īśvarātman* are ontologically distinct entities. While the former comprises of the various beings on earth, the latter comprises of the *pradhāna-puruṣa*, *vairāja-puruṣa*, the four *vyuhas*, namely, Vāsudeva, Śankaraṣaṇa, Pradyumna and Aniruddha, the trinity of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Maheśa, and other deities such as Sūrya, Varuṇa, etc. The *īśvarātman* are essentially endowed with greater power and knowledge than that of the *jīvātman*. Parabrahman endows these powers and knowledge such that they can perform various administrative functions related to creation. This aspect also highlights the ontological distinction between Parabrahman and the *īśvara*. Parabrahman is the support of all *īśvara*, hence is referred to as “sarveśvara.” By his will, Parabrahman engages the various deities in creation, sustenance, and other such functions. The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana identifies this distinction clearly through its use of ‘*avatāra*’ and ‘*avatārī*.’ An *avatāra* is the being in whom Parabrahman enters or pervades (*anupraveśa*) for fulfilling certain tasks. The *avatārī*, on the other hand, is described as Parabrahman Swaminarayan, who descended (*avatarāṇa*) on earth out of deep compassion for all *jīvas*, without *anupraveśa*. The *avatārī* is the ultimate cause of all *avatāra* but remains essentially distinct from them.

The fifth chapter of the thesis understands the soteriological endeavours necessary for realisation and the nature of the state of realisation or liberation. The purpose of all soteriological endeavours in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana is to earn the divine approval (*prasannatā*) of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. This divine approval alone enables one to attain their grace, leading to the practice of supreme devotion (*parābhakti*) and the ultimate state of liberation. The divine approval of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman is secured through the cultivation of *brahmabhāva* or qualitative oneness with the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Such oneness or identity with the Akṣarabrahman Guru is validated through the various

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<sup>918</sup> (Tai. Up. 3.1.1)

<sup>919</sup> (Ka. Up. 3.14)

*Upaniṣadic* aphorism, such as “brahmaveda brahmaiva bhavati,”<sup>920</sup> “aham brahmāsmi.”<sup>921</sup> These aphorisms are thus not understood as endorsing an ontological identity between the self and the *nirviśeṣa* Brahman like the Advaitins. Nor are understood as the self upholding the same inherently present virtues of Brahman in the state of *videha-mukti* like the Viśiṣṭādvaita. On the other hand, they are explained as attaining the auspicious virtues of the Brahman, that is, the Akṣarabrahman Guru. It involves a profound association with the Akṣarabrahman Guru and thereby cultivating intense adoration (*param anurāga*) and constant contemplation (*manana*). Such profound association eventually leads to the self's purification and identification with the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

The state of *brahmabhāva* is realised through the deep attachment and selfless *bhakti*, known in the Darśana as “Ekāntika Dharma.” *Ekāntika Dharma* entails *bhakti* accompanied with the other three components, *dharma*, *jñāna*, and *vairāgya*. *Dharma* is explained as mainly obeying the commands of Parabrahman and the Akṣarabrahman Guru; *jñāna* is knowledge of one's *ātman* as distinct from the material body but being one with the manifest Akṣarabrahman Guru, and *vairāgya* is detachment from all material possessions along with a firm attachment with Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. *Bhakti* is to be performed with all these three components. One is to worship and cultivate selfless love for Parabrahman residing in the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Most importantly, this *bhakti* must be accompanied with the knowledge of the greatness and divinity of Parabrahman. This knowledge is a thorough understanding of the form of Parabrahman as being the all-doer (*sarva-kartā*), ever possessing a divine human-shaped form (*sākāra*), the cause of all (*sarva-kāraṇa*), and ever manifest on earth (*pragaṭa*).

One of the most fundamental aspects of *bhakti* in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana is *pratyakṣa bhakti*, that is, service, worship, and refuge of the manifest form of Parabrahman. Thus, the Guru is to be worshipped as he ever upholds Parabrahman with all his extraordinary virtues and powers. For this reason, *bhakti* of the Akṣarabrahman Guru is stated as equivalent to the *bhakti* of Parabrahman himself. This aspect is accentuated through the famous aphorism from the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, “yasya deve parābhaktiḥ yathā deve tathā

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<sup>920</sup> “One who knows Brahman verily realises Brahman.” (Mu. Up. 3.2.9)

<sup>921</sup> “I am Brahman.” (Br. Up. 1.4.10)

guru.”<sup>922</sup> The fruit and bliss attained from the *bhakti* towards the Guru correspond to that attained from the *bhakti* of Parabrahman himself.

Such *bhakti* not only involves various physical forms of practice like performing regular rituals and reading the *sampradāyic* scriptures but more so encompasses the internal practice of maintaining firm faith (*viśvāsa*), enthusiasm (*utsāha*), patience (*dhairya*), forbearance (*saha*), and restraint (*saṁyama*). Apart from these, harbouring humility and perceiving the good in others is also given great importance as soteriological endeavours. Further, one is encouraged to engage in the visualisation of the form of God and Guru five times a day. This form of *bhakti* is known as *mānasī-pūjā*, an internal form of *pūjā*. Moreover, these aspects of *bhakti* are to be reinforced by engaging in six kinds of thoughts (*vicāra*), namely, the thought of one’s great fortune of attainment of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, that of one’s *ātman* being distinct from the material body, the all-doership of Parabrahman, the temporality of the material world, that good and divinity in all beings, and the thought of gaining the divine approval of the Guru. These thoughts are said to help overcome any obstacles that one may face while performing *bhakti*. Thus, the ethics of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana is primarily to perform various physical and mental practices in cultivating qualitative oneness with the Akṣarabrahman Guru. It entails realising *Ekāntika Dharma*, which invariably cultivates *brahmabhāva*.

Liberation in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana is transcendence of the *guṇas* of *prakṛti*, which is possible by earning the auspicious virtues and divine approval of the Akṣarabrahman Guru and performing the *bhakti* of Parabrahman in this state of *brahmabhāva*. The Darśana upholds both *jīvana-mukti* and *videha-mukti*. The various *Upaniṣadic* statements that use the terms “iha” or “atra” are explained to denote the experience of liberation in this body or lifetime. This explanation differs from the Viśiṣṭādvaitin explanation as a state like *mukti* during meditation or *upāsanā*. The *Sudhā* instead insists that with the grace of the Akṣarabrahman Guru, one can attain *brahmabhāva* in the embodiment of the gross and subtle bodies. Attainment of liberation marks the destruction of the root cause of transmigration, the causal body. The gross and subtle bodies, however, continue to prevail by Parabrahman’s will.

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<sup>922</sup> “Who has supreme love for Paramātman, of the Guru like that of the Paramātman.” (Sve. Up. 6.23)

After shedding the mortal body, the *ātman* acquires a divine body (*brāhmī-tanu*) and attains the supreme abode Akṣaradhāman. Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman are said to come as “*ātivāhika*” or guides that take the released *ātman* to its final destination through the *arci mārg*. Here, the released *ātman* in the new divine body acquires several powers, such as of being all-knowing. Nevertheless, it engages only in the eternal worship and bliss of Parabrahman. The *ātman* then never returns to the material world, unless upon the will of Parabrahman. Thus, the released *ātman*, even in the state of liberation, never becomes Akṣarabrahman or Parabrahman but remains always engaged in the *bhakti* of Parabrahman. Moreover, both forms of *mukti* are maintained to be equivalent as the released *ātman*, even whilst in the body, enjoys the supreme bliss of Parabrahman. There is no difference in degree between *jīvana-mukti* and *videha-mukti*.

## 6.2. A Synthesis of Conclusions

The *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*, as a *vādagrantha*, systematises the fundamental principles of the novel Vedānta school, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana. It does so by offering its understanding of the *Prasthānacatuṣṭayī*, that is, the *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma-Sūtra*, *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Vacanāmṛta*. It validates its arguments through several scriptural references and, in the process, disapproves of opposing positions and principles. Through such logical reasoning, it presents the metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and soteriology of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana.

### 6.2.1. Epistemology

Understanding the true nature and form of each of these five entities is recognised as *pramā* or valid knowledge. Whilst the Darśana upholds the validity of various *pramāṇas*, verbal testimony or, in other words, teachings of the scriptures as per the Akṣarabrahman Guru is recognised as the fundamental means of grasping the true nature and form of these entities. Any misunderstanding leading to predicating the nature of one entity to another is an instance of a categorical error (*Khyāti*). In this way, the metaphysics of the Darśana is closely associated with its epistemology.

### 6.2.2. Metaphysics

The philosophical principles of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, as its name suggests, are centred around the supreme entity, Parabrahman, and his ideal servant, Akṣarabrahman. The name of the Darśana is based on its understanding of the supreme entity “Brahman,” as presented in the authoritative scriptures. The term ‘Brahman’ is interchangeably used to refer to two ontologically distinct entities, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. In upholding both these entities as ever transcendental and bestower of liberation, the Darśana is not rigidly monist. However, in admitting the eternal subordination of Akṣarabrahman along with other ontological realities, to Parabrahman, it undeniably cannot be reduced to simple dualism. Along with Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, the Darśana also upholds the eternal reality of the *māyā*, the material cause of creation, and the multiple *ātmā* identified as *jīvātmā* and *īśvarātmā*. The Darśana thus upholds the reality of five ontological entities, *jīva*, *īśvara*, *māyā*, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, and maintains their ontological distinction across all the various philosophical debates and principles.

Thus, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta admits the two Brahmanas evident in the *Upaniṣads*. However, they are distinct from the two Brahmanas endorsed in the Advaita Darśana. Shankar understands “apara” Brahman as *saguṇa* Brahman, which is qualified by limiting adjuncts due to the influence of *avidyā*, while “para” Brahman is the *nirguṇa* Brahman that is free from such limiting adjuncts and is realised upon the removal of *avidyā*. Since the Advaita Darśana, as its name suggests, admits the ultimate reality of only one attribute-less (*nirviśeṣa*) Brahman, it describes the two Brahmanas as the effectively one *nirviśeṣa* Brahman perceived as *saviśeṣa* Brahman due to the influence of *avidyā*. Qualifications or attributes are superimposed on the otherwise attribute-less Brahman.

The Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta strongly argues against the affirmation of two Brahmanas. Accordingly, it identifies the “apara” Brahman as *Hiraṇyagarbha* and “para” Brahman as the Supreme Being Viṣṇu. The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana contributes to this debate of two Brahmanas by upholding the eternal existence of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. The Advaita, even while admitting the two Brahmanas, endorses the reality of only one attribute-less Brahman. The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, on the other hand, submits the two Brahmanas as not two aspects of the same Brahman but two ontologically distinct Brahmanas. Thus, by upholding the ontological reality of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, the Akṣara-

Puruṣottama Darśana consistently understands the various *Upaniṣads* grounded on both these Brahmans.

Both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman are worthy of realisation also resonates in the definition of the highest spiritual knowledge, *brahmavidyā*. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, for instance, states “yenākṣaram puruṣam veda satyam provāca tām tattvato brahmavidyām.”<sup>923</sup> The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana identifies the *brahmavidyā* as the correct understanding of the form of “akṣaram,” that is Akṣarabrahman, and “puruṣam,” that is Parabrahman. This explanation is grounded on the teachings of the same *Upaniṣad*. In the opening mantras of the *Upaniṣad*, Ṛṣi Aṅgiras explains “parāvidyā” (*brahmavidyā*) as “akṣaram adhigamyate”<sup>924</sup> and then later continues to teach an entity higher than Akṣara with the aphorism “akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ.”<sup>925</sup> Thus, *parāvidyā* or *brahmavidyā* encompasses two distinct entities Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. Accordingly, even the *Brahma-Sūtra*’s aphorism “athāto brahma jijñāsā”<sup>926</sup> that instructs on embarking on the inquiry or comprehension of “brahman,” the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, cognizant of the *Upaniṣadic* teaching of two Brahmans, identifies this “brahman” as entailing both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.

Through the terms “para” and “apara,” the *Upaniṣads* affirm a hierarchy between both Brahmans. Accordingly, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana teaches that though Akṣarabrahman, like Parabrahman, is ever pure and beyond the aversions of the material world, Akṣarabrahman remains eternally subordinate to Parabrahman. This hierarchy is reinforced in the *Upaniṣads* through the aphorisms like “akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ”<sup>927</sup> and “avyaktāt puruṣaḥ paraḥ.”<sup>928</sup> In all such aphorisms, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana consistently understands “akṣara” and “avyakta” as Akṣarabrahman that is essentially superior to all *jīvas* and *īśvaras* but remains in service of the supreme *puruṣa*, Parabrahman.

The two Brahmans pervade all creation, but it is specified that Parabrahman as the ultimate cause pervades even Akṣarabrahman. The *Upaniṣads*, while asserting the inner dweller within the *ātman*, state the presence of two distinct entities. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, through the classic analogy of two birds perched on a tree, explains the presence of one entity that

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<sup>923</sup> “Through which the true forms of Akṣara and Puruṣa are known is brahmavidyā.” (Mu. Up. 1.2.13)

<sup>924</sup> “Through which Akṣara is known.” (Mu. Up. 1.1.5)

<sup>925</sup> “Parabrahman is superior to the supreme Akṣara.” (Mu. Up. 2.1.2)

<sup>926</sup> “Now, therefore, the inquiry into Brahman.” (BS 1.1.1)

<sup>927</sup> “Parabrahman is superior to the supreme Akṣara.” (Mu. Up. 2.1.2)

<sup>928</sup> “The Puruṣa is superior to avyakta.” (Ka. Up. 3.11)

enjoys the fruits while another entity prevails as a witness. The Viśiṣṭādvaita Darśana asserts this aphorism against the nonduality of the Advaitins to highlight the distinction of two entities, which according to the Viśiṣṭādvaitins are the *jīvātman* and Paramātman, respectively.<sup>929</sup> In contrast, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana identifies the two entities as the *ātman* (*jīvātman* or *īśvarātman*) and Akṣarabrahman. The exegetical soundness of this explanation is brought forth by taking into consideration the succeeding mantra of the *Upaniṣad*, “amāne vṛkṣe puruṣo,”<sup>930</sup> which highlights the presence of a third entity “puruṣa.” The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana identifies this *puruṣa* as Parabrahman that pervades even Akṣarabrahman. A similar explanation is given in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*<sup>931</sup> where the *daharākāśa* within the *ātman* is denoted as Akṣarabrahman and that within the *daharākāśa* as Parabrahman. Thus, though the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana denies the absolute identity of *ātman* and Brahman as claimed by the Advaitins, it also differs from the Viśiṣṭādvaitins by admitting both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman as dwelling (*antaryāmī*) within the *ātman*. This also highlights the difference in the concept of *sarīra-sarīrī sambandha*. The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, unlike the Viśiṣṭādvaita Darśana, upholds Parabrahman as the *śarīrī* of not just the *jīvātman* and *īśvarātman* but also of Akṣarabrahman that prevails within the *ātman*.

### 6.2.3. Ātman and its way to realisation

The *jīvātman* and *īśvarātman* are explained to be atomic in nature and essentially pure, sentient and blissful (*sat-cit-ānanda*). Yet, the *jīvas* and *īśvaras* remain under the influence of *māyā*. Both these entities are mutually distinct and separate from the eternally divine entities Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. Though the distinction between these entities is clearly asserted in the *Upaniṣads*, several *Upaniṣadic* aphorisms seem to indicate identity or non-duality. Such aphorisms like “aham brahmāsmi”<sup>932</sup> or “brahmaveda brahmaiva bhavati”<sup>933</sup> are accentuated by the Advaitins to endorse the ontological identity between *jīvātman* and *nirguṇa* Brahman. The Viśiṣṭādvaitins, however, understand these aphorisms as highlighting the organic unity of *ātman* and Brahman. The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana explain such aphorisms in terms of *sādhana vākyas* or the fundamental soteriological endeavour for

<sup>929</sup> (S. M. S. Chari, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* 253)

<sup>930</sup> “On the same tree lies the puruṣa.” (Mu. Up. 3.1.2)

<sup>931</sup> (Ch. Up. 8.1.1)

<sup>932</sup> “I am Brahman.” (Br. Up. 1.4.10)

<sup>933</sup> “One who knows Brahman verily realises Brahman.” (Mu. Up. 3.2.9)

attaining Parabrahman. The “brahman” in these aphorisms is identified as the Akṣarabrahman Guru. To attain the supreme bliss of Parabrahman, the *ātman* (*jīvātman* and *īśvarātman*) must identify with the Akṣarabrahman Guru by cultivating the auspicious qualities of the Akṣarabrahman Guru. In this state of qualitative oneness (*brahmabhāva*), the *ātman* remains ontologically distinct from Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. Thus, such *Upaniṣadic* aphorisms of apposition are important in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana as they emphasise the necessity of profoundly associating with the Akṣarabrahman Guru and consequently the significance of the Akṣarabrahman Guru in acquiring the state of liberation.

The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana denies the identity of the *ātman* with Brahman when explained as a limiting adjunct (*avaccedavāda*) or as a shadow (*bimb-pratibimbavāda*), along with the relation of *ātman* as an *aṁśa* of Brahman. The *ātman* is ever distinct and subordinate to Parabrahman. The Parabrahman pervades and dwells within the *ātman*, while the *ātman* worships the *upāsyadeva* Parabrahman before and after attaining liberation. This echoes in the *sādhana* mantra of the *sampradāya*, “akṣaram aham puruṣottama dāso’smi,”<sup>934</sup> which showcases the relation of the *ātman* with Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. The *ātman* endeavours to profoundly associate with the Akṣarabrahman Guru and eventually identifies itself with the Guru upon attaining *brahmabhāva* and in this state of *brahmabhāva*, the *ātman* remains in the service of Parabrahman.

The fundamental endeavour in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana is the realisation of *brahmabhāva*. This greatly differs from the fundamental endeavours asserted in the Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita Darśanas. The Advaita Darśana gives importance to the knowledge (*jñāna*) of the identity of the *ātman* with Brahman. The Viśiṣṭādvaita Darśana asserts *upāsanā* that is described as *nidhidhyāsana* or meditation upon Brahman that leads to the realisation (*jñāna/darśana*) of Brahman. Though the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana insists on meditation and contemplation, it emphasises the meditation on the form, nature, and teachings of the Akṣarabrahman Guru, who eternally upholds Parabrahman. The Darśana, thus, maintains *pratyakṣa bhakti* (worship of the manifest form of Parabrahman) as an essential means. Such *bhakti* is to be practised whilst observing *dharma* in the form of obeying the commands of the Akṣarabrahman Guru, *vairāgya* in the form of profound attachment to the Guru and *jñāna* in the form of identifying one’s *ātman* with Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. Mastering these

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<sup>934</sup> “I am Akṣarabrahman and in service of Parabrahman.”

components, collectively referred to as *Ekāntiki Bhakti*, marks the realisation of *brahmabhāva* and invariably results in the attainment of Parabrahman.

#### 6.2.4. Creation

The material world wherein the *ātman* associates with the Akṣarabrahman Guru is also real. It is the product of *māyā*, which is a separate ontological entity. The term ‘*māyā*’ in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana does not suggest the Advaitin concept of *māyā* which is both real and unreal at the same time (*sad asad vilakṣaṇa*) but denotes the non-sentient entity that is transformed by Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman into the diverse creation with name and form. Both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman are considered to be the material and efficient cause of creation. Akṣarabrahman is the cause of creation based on the *Upaniṣadic* teachings of “akṣarāt sambhavatīha viśvam”<sup>935</sup> and “etasya vā akṣarasya praśāsane gārgi.”<sup>936</sup> These aphorisms lucidly describe the world as created and regulated by Akṣarabrahman. Based on such assertions, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana explains the term ‘sat’ of *sadvidyā* to entail both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. The *sadvidyā* of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* teaches that at the beginning of creation, there was only “sat.”<sup>937</sup> Accordingly, before the manifestation of creation, there was only Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman within whom the unmanifest *māyā* along with the latent forms of the *jīvas* and *īśvaras* lay dormant. In this sense, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman are understood as the material cause of creation. The same *Upaniṣad* further states that the “sat” decides to engage in creation.<sup>938</sup> This will to create affirms Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman as the efficient cause of creation.

Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman as the efficient cause decide to engage in creation and thus transform *mūla-māyā* from its dormant to its manifest form. This process shows the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana’s adherence to the causal principle of *satkāryavāda*. The Darśana maintains that the creation proceeds from *mūla-māyā* or *mūla-prakṛti* through the power and will of Parabrahman. It, thus, does not admit an independent transformation of *prakṛti*, as endorsed by the Sāṅkhya. The transformation of *mūla-prakṛti* is real and completely dependent on Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, who enter or pervade each created element without undergoing any real modification. Since Akṣarabrahman engages in creation upon

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<sup>935</sup> “This world proceeds from Akṣara.” (Ch. Up. 1.1.7)

<sup>936</sup> “Under the mighty rule of Akṣara, O Gargi.” (Br. Up. 3.8.9)

<sup>937</sup> (Ch. Up. 6.2.1)

<sup>938</sup> (Ch. Up. 6.2.3)

the will and power of Parabrahman, Parabrahman is referred to as the ultimate cause of the universe.

Though the Viśiṣṭādvaita Darśana admits Brahman as the material and efficient cause of the universe, it does not admit the entity of Akṣarabrahman and thus greatly differs from the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana.

### 6.2.5. Bondage and Liberation

The *jīvātman* and *īśvarātman* are firmly associated with the three bodies of *māyā* through which they engage in actions and remain bound in the cycles of transmigration. Through the association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru and practising *Ekāntiki Bhakti*, the *ātman* eventually detaches from the material desires and passions, aiming only for the divine approval of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. With the grace of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, the *ātman* attains *brahmabhāva* and continues to engage in the selfless worship of Parabrahman. Thus, even in the state of liberation, the *jīvātman* and *īśvarātman* remain essentially distinct from Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. There is no metaphysical mergence with the absolute attributeless Brahman as endorsed by the Advaitins. The *ātman*, instead, overcomes all material attachments and remains immersed in the bliss of Parabrahman. The *Upaniṣadic* analogy of the rivers merging with the ocean<sup>939</sup> is thus explained in terms of losing one's significance before the greatness of Parabrahman. The Viśiṣṭādvaita Darśana also rejects the Advaitin notion of identity of *ātman* and Brahman and asserts this *Upaniṣadic* analogy as explaining the equality (*sāmya*) of the *jīva* and Brahman in the divine abode. The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana denies any such equality of the *jīva* and Parabrahman.

Unlike the Viśiṣṭādvaita Darśana, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana upholds the state of *jīvana-mukti* wherein the *ātman* attains *brahmabhāva* and enjoys the bliss of Parabrahman. This attainment of *brahmabhāva* is acquired and is not merely a manifestation of the *ātman*'s inherent nature. The released *ātman* continues to remain in the material body upon the will of Parabrahman. This nature of *jīvana-mukti*, thus, differs from the Advaitin understanding of *jīvana-mukti*.

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<sup>939</sup> (Mu. Up. 3.2.8)

Both the Viśiṣṭādvaita Darśana and the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana agree that the released *ātman* upon departing the body travels to the supreme abode through the *arci mārg* from which there is no return and thereby does not merely merge with Brahman. However, the nature of *videha-mukti* as described in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana greatly differs from the Viśiṣṭādvaita Darśana. Upon the shedding of the mortal body, the *ātman* attains a divine body (*brāhmī-tanu*) and is guided to the supreme abode Akṣaradhāman by Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. Here in Akṣaradhāman, the released *ātman*, along with Akṣarabrahman, enjoys the bliss of Parabrahman. The Viśiṣṭādvaita Darśana, on the other hand, endorses that the released *ātman* in Vaikuṅṭha attains the same qualities of Brahman and enjoys all desired objects along with the bliss of Brahman. This is grounded in the *Upaniṣadic* aphorism “sarvān kāmān saha brahmaṇā vipaścītā.”<sup>940</sup> The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana understands this aphorism as the released *ātman* engaging in the *darśana* of Parabrahman (*vipaścītā*). All desires are fulfilled with this bliss of Parabrahman, which they enjoy with Akṣarabrahman (*brahmaṇā saha*). Thus, the released *ātman* in Akṣaradhāman does not desire anything apart from the bliss of Parabrahman and remains ever subordinate to Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.

The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, thereby, upholds the ontological distinction of the five eternal entities across the various philosophical debates and principles. It does not, like the Advaitins, engage in any postulations nor does it, like Viśiṣṭādvaitins, complicate its metaphysics by admitting any other metaphysical categories such as *nitya-vibhūti*, time, etc. Moreover, by claiming each of the five entities as eternally distinct, it does not have to admit a relational category such as substance-attribute, inherence (*samavāya*), or conjunction (*samyoga*). These five ontological entities also enable the Darśana to maintain consistency in scriptural exegesis, which is a significant factor in establishing one’s core Siddhānta.

The most unique component in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana is the entity of Akṣarabrahman. Since the abode of God is Akṣarabrahman itself, any other elements such as “suddha sattva” are not required. Further, upholding the Guru as the manifest Akṣarabrahman resolves any further doubts of the Guru being a special kind of *jīva* or *īśvara*. The Akṣarabrahman Guru eternally upholds Parabrahman; thus, the two Brahman, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, are always accessible to the bound *ātman*. The

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<sup>940</sup> “All desires are fulfilled along with Brahman.” (Tai. Up. 2.1.1)

Akṣarabrahman Guru as the ideal and the guide is instrumental in attaining liberation. He is also the result of all endeavours as the realisation of the auspicious virtues of the Akṣarabrahman Guru leads to the immense bliss of Parabrahman that eternally resides in the Guru. The state of *jīvana-mukti* that involves remaining in constant bliss and service of Parabrahman is, thus, possible through the Akṣarabrahman Guru. In this way, the Akṣarabrahman Guru has great significance in the metaphysics, ethics, and soteriology of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana.

The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana is a lived principle through the presence of the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Sadhu Bhadrashdas ends the *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā* by evoking all those who associate with the Akṣarabrahman Guru and are living by the principles of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana.<sup>941</sup> The association with the Akṣarabrahman Guru encompasses the teachings of all scriptures and the performance of all soteriological endeavours. All the fundamental principles of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana that are systematised in the *Sudhā* are realised through the association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

Thus, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana offers a unique contribution to the systems of Indian Philosophy. The Darśana develops on the basis of valid *pramāṇas*, particularly through the teachings of the authoritative scriptures. It contributes to the various philosophical debates pertaining to the nature of Brahman, *ātman*, the process of creation, liberation and clearly showcases its own standpoint. These aspects are given shape in the *Sudhā*, which aims to reach the ultimate truth through scriptural understanding and its logical explanation.

### 6.3. Self-Critique

In its pursuit of study, this thesis may be critiqued from particular perspectives, some of which are discussed in this section with an attempt to clarify the subject at hand and its limitations.

This thesis seems primarily expository in nature than analytical and thereby does not present any new findings than offered in the treatise at hand, the *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*. This criticism on the nature and findings of the thesis is justified provided that the thesis aimed at offering new findings outside the framework of its treatise of study, the

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<sup>941</sup> (Bhadrashdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 415)

*Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*. As its title suggests, the thesis aims to focus on the thorough study and examination of the *Sudhā*. Such a thorough study of a topical text composed in the Sanskrit language necessarily involves an exposition of its fundamental teachings and contributions. The treatise of study is a recently published *vādagrantha* that systemises the principles of a novel school of thought, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana. The novelty of the school, topicality and medium of the treatise's composition demands a lucid exposition of its subject matter.

Moreover, the thesis supports this exposition with exegetical and comparative analysis with other commentators like Shankar and Ramanuja. Through such analysis, the thesis puts into focus the novel contributions of the *Sudhā* in understanding the *Upaniṣadic* teachings and prevalent philosophical debates. Further, the thesis engages in an in-depth study of the *Sudhā* by contextually referring to the *Upaniṣat-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya* that the *Sudhā* alludes to time and again. The finding of this thesis is, thus, the fundamental principles of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana in light of *Sudhā*'s scriptural exegesis.

This thesis may also be criticised for referring only to the Vedānta schools for comparative analysis. This criticism is valid as in most instances of exegetical or conceptual comparison, the thesis primarily brings forth the Advaitin and the Viśiṣṭādvaitin perspective. The reason for such comparison is mainly that the schools of Vedānta uphold *Prasthānatrayī* as the fundamental means of valid knowledge. The *Prasthānatrayī*, encompassing the *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma-Sūtra* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, are considered as the authoritative scriptures, the teachings of which form the basis of the various schools of Vedānta. The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, like the other schools, such as the Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita, also establishes its Siddhānta on the basis of the *Prasthānatrayī*. However, each of these Darśanas put forth a different Siddhānta. In order to examine the nuanced differences amongst the understandings of these Darśanas, this thesis mainly focuses on the commentaries of Shankar, Ramanuja and Sadhu Bhadreshdas. Moreover, other schools are also referred to depending upon the subject of discussion and the school that the *Sudhā* takes as its *prima facie*. A detailed comparative analysis with other schools of Indian Philosophy can be taken as a separate research topic.

#### 6.4. The Next Step

Several research projects can be taken up based on the *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*. Future projects can be based on the avenues unexplored in this thesis, such as the study of the *Sudhā* in light of the *Brahma-Sūtra* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Projects can also focus on a detailed comparative analysis with Dvaitādvaita, Śuddhādvaita or Bhedābheda schools of Vedānta, or also with Nyāya, Sāṅkhya or other systems of Indian Philosophy. Research can be done on the form of the text as a *vādagrantha* and can be studied in light of the other *vādagranthas*. The *Sudhā* also uses various argumentative tools, such as *laukika nyāyas*, which can form a separate topic of research.

The *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*, apart from being a rich philosophical text, is also a remarkable literary text comprising both prose and poetry. Projects can be done on the over five hundred *kārikās* of the *Sudhā* that study their rich literary form and content. *Sudhā*'s linguistic style of being simplistic yet scholastic in nature can also be another topic of study. Sadhu Bhadreshdas, through the *Sudhā*, offers his devotion to his *īṣṭadeva* Swaminarayan and Guru. A project can be taken up on analysing the traces of *bhakti*, particularly in the “Mangaladhārā,” the invocations (*mangalācaraṇa*) of each chapter, the usage of terms for the *īṣṭadeva* and Guru, the illustrations used to explain complex philosophical concepts.

Future projects can also be carried out on the *Prasthānatrayī Svāminārāyaṇa Bhāṣya*. These projects can include translations of these *bhāṣyas* in the English language and significant research in terms of exegetical, comparative, and linguistic analysis, for instance, a project focusing on the concept of two Brahmins in the *Brahma-Sūtra*, or the classification of various *adhikaraṇas* in the *Brahma-Sūtra*, or the concept of the *mukti* in the *Bhagavad Gītā* as explained by the various Darśanas.

Such projects may enhance academic research on the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana and contribute to the study of Indian Philosophy and literature at large.

This project aspires to help future researchers delve deeper into the concepts of Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana. May this research initiate many new avenues of research in the field of Indian Philosophy, specifically the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana. May the light of this rich

heritage and wisdom continue to enlighten spiritual seekers and researchers, may its teachings continue to guide and inspire the seekers of knowledge and truth.