

Synopsis

**A Study of Swaminarayana-Siddhanta-Sudha
in Light of the Dasopanisads**

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Synopsis

This thesis titled “A Study of Swaminarayana-Siddhanta-Sudha in Light of the Dasopanisads” is a detailed study and examination of the treatise *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā* (2017) (henceforth *Sudhā*) in light of the teachings of the ten principal *Upaniṣads*. This treatise is a topical *vādagrantha* composed by Mahamahopadhyaya Sadhu Bhadreshdas wherein he systematises the fundamental principles of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana through the teachings of four authoritative scriptures (*prasthānām catuṣṭayam*), namely, the *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma-Sūtra*, *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Vacanāmṛta*. This study focuses primarily on *Sudhā*'s understanding of the *Upaniṣads* and engages in an exegetical analysis along with a comparative analysis of certain schools of Indian Philosophy, mainly the Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Akṣara-Puruṣottama schools of Vedānta. Through such an exposition and analysis, the thesis not only brings forth the philosophical principles of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana but also understands the Darśana's position in the pertinent philosophical debates and discussions.

Major objectives of this thesis:

- To characterise the unique elements of the *Sudhā* as a *vādagrantha*; its style, form and content.
- To engage deeply with the treatise of study and bring forth the essential doctrines endorsed by the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, primarily with respect to metaphysics, ethics, and soteriology.
- To carry out a comparative analysis of the perspectives offered by other schools of Vedānta, such as Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita, and those offered in the *Sudhā*. Such an analysis aims to understand the nuanced differences between these schools and consequently the distinguishing features of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana and its novel contributions.
- To engage in an exegetical analysis of certain *Upaniṣadic* statements and examine the understanding offered in the *Sudhā*.
- To contribute to the growing academic research on this Darśana based on the topical text of the *sampradāya*.

Outline of thesis:

Chapter 1: Introduction

The “Introduction” of thesis sketches an outline of the Darśana tradition of Vedānta and its allegiance towards the *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma-Sūtra* and the *Bhagavad Gītā* as the authoritative scriptures, which are collectively known as the *Prasthānatrayī*. The chapter then offers a brief introduction of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya and its founder Sahajānand Svāmī (Sahajanand Swami), who is also widely known as Svāminārāyaṇa (Swaminarayan). This section presents an overview of the Sampradāya’s formative years that witnessed Sahajanand Swami bestowing the ‘Svāminārāyaṇa’ mantra and philosophical teachings that are compiled in the text titled ‘Vacanāmṛta.’ It traces the history of the Sampradāya that continues till today through various denominations; one such denomination is the Bacasanavāsī Śrī Akṣara-Puruṣottama Svāminārāyaṇa Sansthā (BAPS), which published the treatise of study, the *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*.

The chapter further provides an introduction of the *Sudhā* by understanding its form and content as a *vādagrantha*. It lays down the various characteristics of *Sudhā* as a *vādagrantha* with respect to Radhavallabh Tripathi’s characterisation of a *vāda* and a *vādagrantha* in his work *Vāda in Theory and Practice*. This section also demonstrates *Sudhā*’s originality and distinctiveness. This is followed by an introduction of the author Sadhu Bhadrashdas, who has also composed commentaries on the ten principal *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma-Sūtra* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which are collectively known as the *Prasthānatrayī-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya*.

The subsequent sections of the chapter offer the methodology and sources of the thesis, along with its structural overview. The chapter ends with an explication of the epistemology of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana as presented in the *Sudhā*. It understands the various epistemic principles of the Darśana that would enable to understand Darśana’s metaphysics and soteriology, which form the primary subject-matter of the thesis.

Chapter 2: The Nature and Form of Akṣarabrahman

The second chapter of the thesis examines the ontological entity Akṣarabrahman based on *Sudhā*'s "Akṣarabrahmadhārā." It attempts to understand the nature and form of this entity as presented in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta. This entity forms one of the distinguishing features of the Siddhānta, which the *Sudhā* validates through the authoritative scriptures. The chapter studies the aphorisms of certain *Upaniṣads*, particularly of the *Muṇḍaka*, *Praśna* and *Kaṭha Upaniṣads*, that either distinctly mention the term 'akṣara' or other synonymous terms while portraying its characterisation. This study demonstrates the distinctiveness of Akṣara as an entity, separate from the sentient entities *jīva* and *īśvara*, and from the non-sentient entity *māyā*. Further, when identified as the lower Brahman and *avyakta*, Akṣara or Akṣarabrahman is showcased to be eternally distinct and subordinate to the entity Parabrahman. Some of the *Upaniṣadic* aphorisms that the chapter discusses are "akṣaram adhigamyate,"¹ "akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ,"² "etadvai satyakāma param cāparaṁ ca brahma,"³ "avyaktāt puruṣaḥ paraḥ."⁴ These aphorisms are read in light of other commentators like Śankarācārya and Rāmānujācārya, and the various arguments put forth by *Sudhā* to disapprove other readings.

The chapter further explores the *anvaya* or immanent and *vyatireka* or transcendental forms of Akṣarabrahman. The *anvaya* and *vyatireka* forms encompass the four forms of the single entity Akṣarabrahman as upheld by the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta. These four forms are Akṣarabrahman as *Cidākāśa* (sentient space), as the supreme abode of Parabrahman, as the ideal servant in this abode and as the Akṣarabrahman Guru on earth. The chapter examines how the *Sudhā* validates each form through the *Upaniṣadic* teachings. In doing so, these sections of the chapter discuss the principle of two *ākāśas* and their essential distinction, and the presence of Akṣarabrahman within the *ātman* along with Parabrahman. It also sheds light on the nature of the supreme abode and its distinct understanding in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta as opposed to other schools of Vedānta. This section ends with the *Sudhā*'s understanding of a true Guru and characteristics of such a Guru. These sections discuss several *Upaniṣadic* aphorisms, such as the famous aphorism from the *Kaṭha*

¹ "That by which Akṣara is attained." (Mu. Up. 1.1.5)

² "The Supreme is beyond the supreme Akṣara." (Mu. Up. 2.1.2)

³ "Om, O Satyakāma, entails both the higher and the lower Brahman." (Pr. Up. 5.2)

⁴ "The puruṣa is superior to Akṣara." (Ka. Up. 3.11)

Upaniṣad, “ṛtaṁ pibantau sukṛtasya loke,”⁵ and other aphorisms like “so aham asmi”⁶ and “tadvijñānārthaṁ sa gurumevābhigacchetsamitpāṇiḥ.”⁷

The chapter on Akṣarabrahman ends with the elucidation of the relation between Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. While both these entities are eternally divine and pure, they remain ontologically distinct. Their relation as depicted in the *Sudhā* rules out any other relation type that would present Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman as equivalent, identical or only superficially distinct.

Chapter 3: The Nature and Form of Parabrahman

The third chapter of the thesis focuses on the Supreme Being that prevails above all other ontological entities. It is based on *Sudhā*'s “Parabrahmadhārā” that provides an extensive analysis of the nature and form of Parabrahman. The chapter of the thesis thereby examines the characterisation of Parabrahman, particularly in relation with the individual *ātman* and its role in creating and regulating the universe. This is mainly discussed through the aphorisms of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, such as “sadeva somyedamagra āsīd ekamevādvitīyam”⁸ and “tadaikṣata bahu syāṁ prajāyeyeti.”⁹ The discussions on these aphorisms shed light on the principles of causation, the purpose of creation and the essential singularity of the Supreme Being and Akṣarabrahman.

The chapter further presents the essential form of Parabrahman as *sat-cit-ānanda*. This section delves into the distinction and superiority of Parabrahman to other sentient entities like *jīvātman*, *īśvarātman* and Akṣarabrahman that are also essentially *sat-cit-ānanda*. It thereby discusses the superiority of Parabrahman and *Sudhā*'s clarification on the apparent *Upaniṣadic* contradiction that instructs to realise Parabrahman while at the same time asserting the inability of grasping Parabrahman's supreme form.

Another important debate discussed in this chapter is of free will and determinism. This section offers *Sudhā*'s contribution to this debate and, in doing so, also understands the relation between the embodied *ātman* and the eternally independent

⁵ “The two enjoyers in the abode attained through good deeds.” (Ka. Up. 3.1)

⁶ “I am he.” (Īśa Up. 16)

⁷ “For knowing that ceremoniously approach a Guru.” (Mu. Up. 1.2.12)

⁸ “In the beginning there was only sat, one without a second.” (Ch. Up. 6.2.1)

⁹ “It saw—may I be many, may I grow forth.” (Ch. Up. 6.2.3)

Parabrahman. The chapter then studies Parabrahman’s eternal form presented in the *Sudhā* as the *anvaya* or immanent and *vyatireka* or transcendental. It attempts to comprehend the manner of Parabrahman’s immanence and the presence of Parabrahman’s eternal human-like form. The famous *Upaniṣadic* aphorisms like “aśarīram,”¹⁰ suggesting formlessness and those like “hiraṇmayaḥ puruṣo,”¹¹ asserting a definite form are deliberated upon. This is followed by a discussion on an associated topic of Parabrahman’s *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* forms, an important point of difference between the Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita schools. This section offers *Sudhā*’s unique understanding of the terms ‘saguṇa’ and ‘nirguṇa.’ The chapter ends by understanding *Sudhā*’s insistence on the continued manifestation of Parabrahman on earth in a human-life form, while being essentially divine (*divya*). It highlights the significance of the Akṣarabrahman Guru and worship of the manifest form of Parabrahman referred to as *pratyakṣa bhakti*.

Chapter 4: The Nature and Form of *Māyā*, *Jīva* and *Īśvara*

The fourth chapter of the thesis engages with the remaining ontological entities endorsed by the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta, namely, *māyā*, *jīva* and *īśvara*. Adhering to the realist model of creation, the Siddhānta upholds the reality of the universe and the various individual *ātmanā* inhabiting this universe. The first section of the chapter examines the entity *māyā*, the material cause of the universe, and the manner in which it transforms into various elements to form the universe as we perceive. It provides a detailed analysis of each element of this process of cosmic creation and in doing so sheds light on the principles of *pañcīkaraṇa* as opposed to *aṇuvāda* advocated by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika schools, the nature of *ākāśa* and the ephemeral nature of the universe. This aspect is further extended in understanding *Sudhā*’s unique understanding of the concept of time (*kāla*). These deliberations engage with several *Upaniṣadic* aphorisms, such as “manaḥ pragrahameva ca indriyāṇi hayānāhuḥ”¹² and “etasmājjāyate prāṇo manaḥ sarvendriyāṇi ca kham vāyurjyotirāpaḥ.”¹³

¹⁰ “Without a body.” (Ka. Up. 2.22)

¹¹ “The magnificent golden person.” (Ch. Up. 1.6.6)

¹² “The mind is verily the reins, and the senses are the horses.” (Ka. Up. 3.3,4)

¹³ “From Paramātman is born the vital breath, mind, senses, ether, wind, water.” (Mu. Up. 2.1.3)

The section on *māyā* brings forth various different theories of creation that are advocated by the various schools of Indian Philosophy. Creation is an important factor discussed by every school as it forms one of the fundamental ways of understanding and explaining the indubitable presence of various life forms. This section presents *Sudhā*'s arguments that disapproves the various other theories creation, such as Cārvāka's *svabhāvavāda*, Sāṅkhya's *prakṛtivāda*, the Vaiśeṣika's *aṇuvāda*, Buddhist *śūnyavāda* and the Jain relativism. These arguments place the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta in dialogue with the other schools of Indian Philosophy and enables to understand its process of creation in light of alternative perspectives.

The section on *jīva* or *jīvātman* examines the nature of the individual *ātman* or self and unfolds the discussion on the self being essentially sentient, conscious and blissful. This is followed by the debate on the measure of *jīva*, which engages with *Sudhā*'s response to the prevalent perspectives of *jīva* being atomic (*aṇuparimāṇa*), or as equal to the size of its respective body (*madyamaparimāṇa*) or as all-pervasive (*vibhu*). Through several *Upaniṣadic* references and logical reasoning, *Sudhā* supports the atomic measure of *jīva*. Likewise, the section also sheds light on the various arguments offered against the non-existence of *jīva* and against the materialists who reduce the *jīva* to the material body.

The section then understands the nature of the embodied *jīvātman* by examining the *jīva*'s association with the three bodies: *sthūla* (gross), *sukṣma* (subtle) and *kāraṇa* (causal). It delves into the source of the *jīva*'s constant transmigration and the *jīva*'s essential distinction from these bodies. Further, the embodied *jīva* engages in several actions and experiences the fruits of these actions in all the three states of *jāgrat* (waking), *svapna* (dream) and *susupti* (deep sleep). Accordingly, the following section deliberates upon the nature and experience of each state through various *Upaniṣadic* aphorism, such as “*dr̥ṣṭam cādr̥ṣṭamca śrutam cāśrutam*”¹⁴ and “*tejasā hi tadā sampanno bhavati*.”¹⁵

An important aspect in examining the nature of *jīvātman* is its relation to the Supreme Being Paramātman. This aspect is discussed by presenting *Sudhā*'s response to other

¹⁴ “Sees the unseen, hears the unheard.” (Pr. Up. 4.5)

¹⁵ “He is surrounded by light.” (Ch. Up. 8.6.3)

relation types advanced by the other Vedānta traditions, like the Śuddhādvaita tradition along with the *Avaccedavādins* and *Bimb-Pratibimbavādins* of the Advaita tradition. This discussion is further extended to include the debate on the multiplicity of *jīvas* and *Sudhā*'s response to certain opposing explanations.

The last section of the chapter understands the nature and form of *īśvaras*, including their association with their respective bodies and states. Their nature is examined not only in relation to the *jīvas* but also in relation to the supreme Parabrahman. This discussion highlights the essential distinction between the entities *īśvara*, *jīva* and Parabrahman and introduces the principle of *avatāra* and *avatārī*.

Chapter 5: *Sādhana* and *Mukti*

The fifth chapter of the thesis focuses on the various soteriological endeavours (*sādhana*) presented for realising the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta and the result or fruit (*phala*) of realising the same. The section on the soteriological endeavours begins with the importance of divine approval and grace in the practise of such endeavours. In doing so, it brings forth the essential characteristic of a soteriological endeavour and the underlying purpose of their fulfilment. This is followed by the elucidation of *brahmabhāva*, the fundamental endeavour in acquiring the desired end of divine approval and, consequently, of liberation. This entails deliberation upon the famous *Upaniṣadic* statements of apposition, such as “brahmaveda brahmaiva bhavati,”¹⁶ “aham brahmāsi,”¹⁷ and “ayamātma brahman.”¹⁸ Accordingly it engages in the discussion on the *Upaniṣadic* teaching of becoming one with Brahman and the essential purport of this teaching. The discussion is extended to include the relation between the individual *ātman* and Akṣarabrahman and the role of the Akṣarabrahman Guru as the medium and the end of all endeavours. These sections also shed light on the practical ways of engaging and contemplating on the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

The endeavour of acquiring *brahmabhāva* is explained to entail the practise of *Ekāntika Dharma*, the four-fold system involving a holistic form of devotional practise. The subsequent sections accordingly examine each of the four components

¹⁶ “One who knows Brahman verily realises Brahman.” (Mu. Up. 3.2.9)

¹⁷ “I am that Brahman.” (Br. Up. 1.4.10)

¹⁸ “This ātman is Brahman.” (Ma. Up. 1.2)

of *Ekāntika Dharma*, namely, *dharma* or righteous actions, *jñāna* or ātman-realisation, *vairagya* or detachment and *bhakti* or selfless devotion accompanied with the knowledge of Parabrahman's infinite greatness. These sections bring forth the important principles of *upāsanā*, *niṣkāma bhakti*, and *pratyakṣa bhakti*. It also sheds light on the various daily rituals, virtues and devotional practises encouraged in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta to constantly reinforce one's endeavour of *Ekāntika Dharma*, which thus leading to cultivating *brahmabhāva* that marks the attainment of liberation.

The section on *mukti* or liberation focuses on the nature of liberation, involving the explication of both *jīvana-mukti* and *videha-mukti*. This section deliberates upon the nature on bondage, the distinction of *Sudhā*'s understanding *jīvana-mukti* from that of the Advaita tradition, and the path towards the divine abode. It discusses several *Upaniṣadic* statements, such as “atra brahma samaśnute,”¹⁹ “tatpuruso'mānavah sa enānabrahma gamayati”²⁰ and “sa etena prajñenātmanā'smālokād utkrāmya.”²¹ The subsequent section examines the nature and form of the released *ātman*, involving the characterisation of the released *ātman* offered in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. The section ends with the exposition of the analogies of the *Muṇḍaka* and *Praśna Upaniṣad* that depict a drop of water merging in the oceans. The section offers *Sudhā*'s understanding of the same and how it differs from the Advaitin and the Viśiṣṭādvaitin understanding.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The last chapter of the thesis, titled “Conclusion,” offers an overview of the project at hand by outlining the main themes and discussions of each chapter. This is followed by a section that brings forth the main principles of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana based on this study of the *Sudhā*. These principles are presented in light of the Advaitin and Viśiṣṭādvaitin schools of Vedānta, which underlines the distinctiveness of this novel school of Vedānta. The chapter then highlights certain potential areas of self-criticism and takes this opportunity to clarify the scope and methodology of the thesis.

¹⁹ “Realises Brahman here.” (Ka. Up. 6.14)

²⁰ “The puruṣa, not of material form, he guides them to Brahmāloka.” (Ch. Up. 4.15.5)

²¹ “He through the wise ātman comes out of this world.” (Ai. Up. 3.4)

The thesis thereby ends with a note on the future projects that can be carried out based on the unexplored aspects of the *Sudhā* and the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana.

Abbreviations:

Ai. Up.	Aitareya Upaniṣad
Br. Up.	Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad
Ch. Up.	Chāndogya Upaniṣad
Īśa Up.	Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad
Ka. Up.	Kaṭha Upaniṣad
Mu. Up.	Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad
Pr. Up.	Praśna Upaniṣad
Sudhā	Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā

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