

3. The Nature and Form of Parabrahman

The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta entails two essential entities, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, that ever prevail beyond *māyā*. After expounding upon Akṣarabrahman in the second chapter of *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā*, Sadhu Bhadreshdas discusses the nature and form of Parabrahman in its third chapter titled “Parabrahmadhārā.” As mentioned earlier, Sadhu Bhadreshdas reveres Swaminarayan, his beloved deity (*īṣṭadeva*), as Parabrahman.

The earlier chapter elucidates the auspicious virtues of Akṣarabrahman and its supremacy over all mobile and immobile life forms. Despite its greatness, Akṣarabrahman remains ever subordinate to the Supreme Being Parabrahman. Parabrahman is thus the highest entity, the realisation of which is the ultimate goal of all endeavours. It represents the term ‘nārāyaṇa’ in the mantra ‘Svāminārāyaṇa,’ signifying the subject of worship and devotion upon the realisation of ‘svāmī’ or Akṣarabrahman.

This chapter discusses the various *Upaniṣadic* references presented in the *Sudhā* that throw light on the form and various extraordinary attributes of Parabrahman. It begins with the elucidation of the term ‘Parabrahman’ and other such terms used to denote the Supreme Being. It then examines Parabrahman’s nature through the exegetical analysis of the famous aphorisms from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. Through this analysis, the chapter sheds light on Parabrahman being singular and the ultimate cause and driving force of all actions. The chapter further explicates Parabrahman’s supremacy by highlighting the ontological superiority to Akṣarabrahman and other entities. This discussion leads to the debate of free will and determination and *Sudhā*’s response to the apparent discrepancy between the individual’s agency and Parabrahman’s all-doership. The chapter then examines Parabrahman’s form as being both immanent (*anvaya*) and transcendent (*vyatireka*), with attributes (*saguṇa*) and without attributes (*nirguṇa*), yet never being formless (*nirākāra*). The chapter ends by exploring two essential aspects of Parabrahman in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta as ever before one’s eyes by assuming a human form on earth bereft of human flaws, ever pure and divine. Each of these sections focuses on the *Upaniṣadic* exegesis offered in the *Sudhā*.

3.1. ‘Parabrahman’ and Other Like Terms

The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta refers to the Supreme Being with the term ‘Parabrahman.’ Other terms such as ‘Paramātmān,’ ‘Puruṣottama’ are also synonymously used. This section briefly examines these terms and also draws attention to certain other terms used in the *Sudhā* based on the philosophical doctrine of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta.

In most Vedāntic traditions, the term ‘Brahman’ is commonly used to refer to the highest eternal entity. However, the *Sudhā* does not identify this term as alluding to the supreme entity in all contexts. It is also used to allude to Akṣarabrahman, or in some contexts, as a collective reference to both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. In his commentary of the *Brahma-Sūtra*, Sadhu Bhadresdas specifies the significance of the contextual use of the term ‘Brahman’ through a classical analogy of the term ‘saindhava’—just as the word ‘saindhava’ can be used to refer to two different objects—a horse and salt—depending on the context; likewise, the term ‘Brahman’ in the *Prasthānatrayī* may refer to two different entities—Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman—depending on the context.³³³ Thus, in the *Upaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣya*, the term ‘Brahman’ in aphorisms like “brahma vidāpnoti param”³³⁴ is comprehended in terms of Akṣarabrahman, while in other aphorisms like “tadbrahmeti”³³⁵ it is comprehended as Parabrahman, and in instances such as “sarvaṁ khalvidam brahma,”³³⁶ it is understood as alluding both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. Accordingly, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta does refer to the highest eternal entity only as ‘Brahman,’ but specifies it as ‘Parabrahman,’ that is, Brahman that is superior (*para*) to Akṣarabrahman and all other entities.

Though such contextual distinction is also found in the Advaita Vedānta, which specifies Brahman as *saguṇa* Brahman and *nirguṇa* Brahman in different contexts, the *saguṇa* Brahman is not understood as ontologically distinct from *nirguṇa* Brahman. The absolute *nirguṇa* Brahman, when associated with *māyā*, takes the form of *saguṇa* Brahman. However, in Akṣara-Puruṣottama Vedānta, there are no two orders or levels of the same Brahman but a complete ontological distinction between the two in every way at all times. The prefixes

³³³ (Bhadresdas, *Brahmasūtrasvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 4–5)

³³⁴ “One who knows Brahman attains the Supreme.” (Tai. Up. 2.1.1)

³³⁵ “That is Brahman.” (Tai. Up. 3.1.1)

³³⁶ “All this is indeed Brahman.” (Ch. Up. 3.14.1)

‘para’[brahman] and ‘apara’[brahman] do not merely suggest an apparent hierarchy, but an ontological hierarchy between two real metaphysical entities Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, respectively.

Another term used for the supreme entity is ‘Paramātmān,’ which means the supreme *ātman*. The supreme entity is the in-dweller of all animate and inanimate beings. It pervades all that prevails and thus is superior to all, even Akṣarabrahman. Other similar terms that suggest such supremacy are ‘Puruṣottama,’ the supreme person; ‘Sarveśvara,’ the supreme *īśvara* and ‘Māyin,’ the controller of *māyā*.

Further, these nouns ascertain the Supreme Being to be beyond the boundaries of gender:

[G]od is equally identified by other names and images throughout Hindu texts, such as Puruṣottama (male), Paramātmān (male), Parabrahman (neuter), Devatā (female) and many others. Thus, to attribute any particular gender to God would be incorrect.³³⁷

Being beyond gender is not, however, understood as being formless. Parabrahman is described to ever possess a human-like shape, which is pure and divine. This aspect is elaborated on later in this chapter.

As the *Sudhā* identifies Swaminarayan as the Supreme Being, it often uses the various names of Swaminarayan to denote this Supreme Being. Apart from the term ‘Svāminārāyaṇa,’ it also uses Swaminarayan’s initiation name ‘Sahajānanda’ and his other names like ‘Hari’ and ‘Nīlakaṇṭha.’ Along with these, Sadhu Bhadreshdas also uses the term ‘Nārāyaṇasvarūpa’ through which he not only denotes the Supreme Being but also reminisces his Guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj whose initiation name was ‘Sādhu Nārāyaṇasvarūpadās.’ This way, while elucidating the form of Parabrahman, Sadhu Bhadreshdas expresses his devotion to his *īṣṭadeva* and Guru.

3.2. One without a Second

Parabrahman, as the Supreme Being, is singular and unparalleled. He remains eternally singular as no entity can ever overpower or even match his supremacy. Such unmatched

³³⁷ (Paramattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* 129)

singularity is ascertained through the *Upaniṣadic* aphorism “sadeva somyedamagra āsīd ekamevādviṭīyam.”³³⁸ This section throws light on *Sudhā*’s novel explanation of this aphorism and understands Parabrahman’s eternal ontologically supremacy over the individual *ātman*.

The *Sadvidyā*, as taught by Uddālaka to his son Śvetaketu in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, begins with the aphorism “sadeva somyedamagra āsīdekamevādviṭīyam.”³³⁹ Most commentators interpret the term ‘sat’ of this verse as the pure Being or the Highest Person. For instance, those following the Advaita tradition assent:

“Sat” denotes pure Being which is extremely subtle, undefinable, all-pervading, one, taintless, indivisible, pure consciousness.³⁴⁰

While some other schools of Vedānta accept the term ‘sat’ to denote the Highest Person with all his extraordinary attributes (*saguṇa*):

Hence the term ‘Sat’ denotes the highest Brahman, the all-knowing highest Lord, the highest Person...the Brahman, which forms the object of inquiry, possesses attributes of thinking and so on in their literal sense.³⁴¹

Sudhā identifies the term ‘sat’ not only as the Highest Person, Parabrahman, but also as denoting the entity Akṣarabrahman. Thereby, both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman prevailed before the beginning of all creation.³⁴² However, such an understanding may seem to contradict the singularity of “sat” as one, without a second. This contradiction is avoided as the number ‘one’ is applied to both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman individually. There exists only *one* Akṣarabrahman and *one* Highest Person, Parabrahman. As one ontological entity, Parabrahman performs various functions through his extraordinary powers and divinity. In his commentary, Sadhu Bhadreshdas specifies that though Parabrahman indwells in countless individual *ātmā* and even various *avatāras*, he as one entity regulates all that prevails. Similarly, Akṣarabrahman pervades the universe as *Cidākāśa*, is the residence of Parabrahman as the divine abode, serves him eternally in that abode and guides aspirants as

³³⁸ “In the beginning there was only sat, one without a second.” (Ch. Up. 6.2.1)

³³⁹ “In the beginning there was only sat, one without a second.” (Ch. Up. 6.2.1)

³⁴⁰ (Jha, *The Chhandogya Upanishad and Sri Sankara’s Commentary* 102)

³⁴¹ (Thibaut 207)

³⁴² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 100)

the Akṣarabrahman Guru, yet, by the will of Parabrahman, regulates the cosmic creation as a single entity.³⁴³

The *Sudhā* likens the term ‘sat’ to the term ‘īśa’ of the *Īśāvāsyā Upaniṣad*, which also alludes to both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman.³⁴⁴ The *Īśāvāsyā Upaniṣad*, as its name suggests, is centred on the nature of ‘īśā.’ The term ‘īśā’ is derived from the verbal root ‘īś’ which means *to rule, govern, or command*. Accordingly, its instrumental declension ‘īśā’ means *through that who rules and governs*. Sadhu Bhadresdhas, in his commentary, states this power to rule and govern (*īśitṛtvam*) lies in both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman as both these entities reign over all creation.³⁴⁵ This way, just like the term ‘īśā,’ ‘sat’ is also understood as denoting two entities.

The term ‘advitīya’ is emphasised to showcase the eternal singularity of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman. Before, during or after any cycle of creation, no being is capable of ever becoming Parabrahman or Akṣarabrahman. It is further stated:

*Na muktāvapyabhedah syād brahmaṇā parabrahmaṇā |
Brahmasādharmyamāptānām tatra bhakti sadā sthitā ||*³⁴⁶

Accordingly, even on the attainment of liberation, no released *ātman* becomes Akṣarabrahman or Parabrahman. Though encompassed with auspicious virtues, the released *ātman* continues to serve and worship Parabrahman. The greatness attained upon liberation does not diminish or match the infinite greatness of Parabrahman.

A constant ontological difference between the individual *ātman* and the Supreme Person is a fundamental facet of certain schools of Vedānta. The Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, for instance, specifies:

The desires of an emancipated soul are fulfilled as a matter of course, and its resolves never fail. But even these powers of such a soul are not unlimited. Absolute power rests with the All-mighty alone.³⁴⁷

³⁴³ (Bhadreshdas, *Chāndogyopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 254)

³⁴⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 101)

³⁴⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 5)

³⁴⁶ “Even in the state of liberation, one never attains ontological identity with Brahman and Parabrahman. Here [in the divine abode], one acquires qualitative oneness with [Akṣara]Brahman and eternally remains engaged in devotion [of Parabrahman].” (*Kārikā* 189)

The released *ātmā*, with their limited powers, always remain subordinate to the Supreme. The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta, however, not only affirms their subordination to Parabrahman but also to Akṣarabrahman. The ontological distinction between the released *jīvātman*, released *īśvarātman*, Akṣarabrahman, and Parabrahman remains intact in the divine abode.

The *Sudhā* raises a possible objection that the *Upaniṣads* themselves deny such any ontological distinction as reflected in “paramam sāmyamupaiti.”³⁴⁸ Sadhu Bhadreshdas responds by claiming that such oneness should be understood as centring all thoughts on Parabrahman but not as becoming Parabrahman. It is also explained to suggest the oneness with Akṣarabrahman whereby the *jīvātman* or *īśvarātman* does not become ontologically identical to Akṣarabrahman but gain auspicious virtues like that of the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Only in this state of becoming like Akṣarabrahman (*akṣararūpa*) can one constantly centre thoughts on Parabrahman.³⁴⁹ This understanding of attaining oneness with Parabrahman is a unique contribution to the Vedānta thought. It is focused on developing a profound attachment with the Akṣarabrahman Guru is not found in other traditions like the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta:

For Swaminarayan, this identification [with Akṣarabrahman] is identified as attaining *brahmabhāva* or becoming *brahmarūpa* or *akṣararūpa*. There is no mention of a similar goal for the *jīvātman* in Ramanuja’s doctrine. This does not come as a surprise since Ramanuja does not understand Brahman (Akṣarabrahman) as a distinct ontological entity from Puruṣottama or Parabrahman.³⁵⁰

In this way, with its novel explanation of the above-cited *Upaniṣadic* aphorisms, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta upholds the eternal ontological difference between the *jīvātman*, *īśvarātman*, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.

Furthermore, along with the exegetical validation, Sadhu Bhadreshdas also puts forward a logical inference for ascertaining the singularity of Parabrahman. He argues that the order prevailing in the universe itself reflects that Parabrahman is one. For if there existed more

³⁴⁷ (Bharadwaj 219)

³⁴⁸ “Attaining equality with the Supreme.” (Mu. Up. 3.1.3)

³⁴⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 103)

³⁵⁰ (Bhadreshdas, ‘Swaminarayan’s Brahmjñāna as Akṣarabrahman-Parabrahman-Darśanam’ 184)

than one Parabrahman, it would lead to a difference of opinions and thereby difficulty in performing functions like controlling and creating.³⁵¹ Such disputes in governance would make it challenging to maintain constant stability and regularity in the universe. Thus, through these various arguments, *Sudhā* strongly affirms the existence of a singular, unparalleled, and indisputable Parabrahman.

3.3. Ultimate Cause

The unparalleled Parabrahman is stated as the ultimate cause of creation. He engages in creation by his will, pervades and regulates its sustenance and thus is recognised as both the efficient and material cause. As the sole creator and supporter, he is the ultimate cause and executor or doer, and thus this function of Parabrahman is often referred to as Parabrahman's all-doership. This section explores Parabrahman's role as a creator and the benevolent purpose of his creation.

All schools of Indian Philosophy accept the doctrine of *creatio ex materia*, that is, creation from matter, as opposed to *creatio ex nihilo*, that is, creation from nothing. Based on the rational premise that every effect has a cause, every object is assumed to be produced out of some material and an instrumental cause that uses the material with other required accessories to produce it. Accordingly, three causal factors are identified—the material cause (*upādāna kāraṇa*), the efficient cause (*nimit kāraṇa*) and accessory cause (*sahakāri kāraṇa*). Many schools of the Vedānta tradition, which uphold Brahman as the Supreme entity, admit Brahman as both the material and efficient cause of the universe.³⁵²

The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta also upholds the Supreme Being Parabrahman as the material and efficient cause of the universe. The *Sudhā* notes that Parabrahman as the material cause is affirmed through the statement of Uddālaka, “sadeva somyedamagra āsīt,”³⁵³ discussed in the previous section. Before creation, there existed only “sat,” that is, Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman. After the annihilation (*pralaya*) of the prior universe, it dissolved in this “sat,” that now once again will engage in cosmic creation. Since Akṣarabrahman is subordinate to Parabrahman and executes only upon his will, Parabrahman is recognised as the singular material cause of the universe.

³⁵¹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 103)

³⁵² The *sahakāri kāraṇa* is usually taken as part of the *nimit kāraṇa*.

³⁵³ “In the beginning there was only sat, one without a second.” (Ch. Up. 6.2.1)

The process of cosmic creation is initiated with the absolute independent will and power of Parabrahman, asserting Parabrahman as the efficient cause of the universe. This is validated through the statement of the same *Upaniṣad* as Uddālaka continues his discourse on “sat” and states, “tadaikṣata bahu syām prajāyeyeti.”³⁵⁴ Here ‘tad’ (that) is specified as the “sat” wherein the world lies unmanifested without its multiplicity of name and form.³⁵⁵ Parabrahman transforms this unmanifested world from its causal state to the effected state. This transformation is explained to begin when Parabrahman looks at Akṣarabrahman with an intention to create. Akṣarabrahman, with an intention to fulfil Parabrahman’s wish of creation, glances at *mūla-puruṣa* who then engages with the *mūla-prakṛti* to unfold the universe.³⁵⁶

The *Sudhā* specifies that as the material cause, Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman pervade and regulate every animate and inanimate being of the universe. However, despite their pervasion, Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman do not undergo any modification. It explains their unchanging state through an analogy—just as the *jīvātman* remains unchanged when pervading a body of a particular class or creed; likewise, Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman remain unchanged upon pervading the universe.³⁵⁷ This specification is made to highlight the distinction between Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana’s understanding of causation from that of the Sāṅkhya and Advaita schools.

Whilst the Sāṅkhya and Advaita schools, like the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, admit that the effect is latent in the cause, often referred to as the position of *satkāryavāda*, they differ in their understanding of creation. The classical Sāṅkhya school admits a transformation of *prakṛti* whereby *prakṛti* undergoes modification and transforms itself into the universe (*prakṛti pariṇāmanavāda*). On the other hand, the Advaita school upholds an illusive transformation of Brahman into the multiplicity of name and form (*vivartavāda*). The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana notes that Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman do not undergo transformation but remain ever unchanging. The transformation occurs in *prakṛti* that unfolds into the manifold universe with the will and power of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman.

³⁵⁴ “It saw—may I be many, may I grow forth.” (Ch. Up. 6.2.3) (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 108)

³⁵⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Chāndogyaupaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 256)

³⁵⁶ This process of cosmic creation is discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

³⁵⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 101)

As the material and efficient cause of the universe that pervades and regulates, Parabrahman is deemed the ultimate cause and executor. He may seem dependent on Akṣarabrahman and *prakṛti* for creation, but *Sudhā* argues that if Parabrahman so wills, he may surpass all stages of creation and create single-handedly. Moreover, all entities can perform their respective function by the will of Parabrahman. Thus, Parabrahman is affirmed as the all-doer (*sarvakartā*).

Sadhu Bhadreshdas elaborates on the nature of this all-doership by discussing Parabrahman's purpose of creation. He begins by raising a possible objection that Ramanuja also deals with in his commentary of the *Brahma-Sūtra*.³⁵⁸ The objection claims that Parabrahman has no purpose for creation. This objection is based on the premise that the purpose behind any action is either for oneself (*svārtha*) or others (*parārtha*). Parabrahman could not have created the universe for itself as it is fulfilled and absolute. Nor did it create for others, as if this were the case, then all beings would experience only happiness.³⁵⁹

Ramanuja responds to this objection by arguing that God does have a purpose behind creation, that of personal amusement and not of any personal gain:

The motive which prompts Brahman—all whose wishes are fulfilled and who is perfect in himself—to the creation of a world comprising all kinds of sentient and non-sentient beings dependent on his volition, is nothing else but sport, play.³⁶⁰

Carman presents an additional perspective as he notes that in the commentary on the *Gītā*, Ramanuja states the purpose of creation as oriented towards the good of others (*parārtha*):

[t]he manifest state of creation gives finite spirit the opportunity...to attain release from the transient realm of saṃsāra and to attain eternal communion with the Lord.³⁶¹

Sadhu Bhadreshdas, on the other hand, clearly upholds the purpose of creation as mainly for the liberation of others:

Kalyāṇam param bhuyānnaika jīveśvarā'tmanām |

³⁵⁸ (Thibaut 476–77)

³⁵⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 108)

³⁶⁰ (Thibaut 477)

³⁶¹ (Carman 122)

Parabrahman engages in creation to liberate all, the *jīva* and *īśvara*, who are influenced by *māyā*. The universe is seen as a platform for all beings to perform virtuous actions. Parabrahman grants the fruits of all the actions that are performed by both *jīva* and *īśvara*. The word ‘līlā’ is mentioned, but only to showcase the creation as an effortless deed of Parabrahman. Thus, the creation of the universe is an effortless expression of his grace for granting liberation to countless beings.

If the universe is for the good of others, the question remains—why do they experience misery and pain? This question has generated endless debates, particularly in Western theological and philosophical discussions. Many such discussions have led scholars to deny the very existence of God. According to most theistic schools of Indian philosophy, creation with various sufferings and pains does not undermine the benevolent nature of God. This assertion is based on the premise of the consequential understanding of action—any action will bring about its respective consequences. The non-theistic schools of Indian philosophy also reinforce this understanding to account for the *ātman's* transmigration to the next life and the differences found amongst beings.

Sadhu Bhadreshdas also puts forward this consequential understanding of action to eliminate the possibility of a wrathful God or of God being partial (*vaiṣamya*) and prejudiced (*nairghṛṇya*).³⁶³ Parabrahman bestows the fruits based on the actions performed by the respective being. This theory of action is also identified to be rooted in the *Upaniṣads*. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* states “yathākārī yathācārī tathā bhavati—sādhukārī sādhubhavati, pāpakārī pāpo bhavati.”³⁶⁴ Accordingly, good actions bring about good consequences, while bad actions lead to bad consequences. This is often illustrated with the example of a seed—a seed of a mango tree begets only a mango tree, while that of a neem tree begets only a neem tree.³⁶⁵

Such an understanding of action validates all the prescriptive scriptures, which demarcate the various injunctions and prohibitions to be followed.

³⁶² “To grant ultimate liberation to countless *jīva* and *īśvara*. This alone is the purpose of the compassionate one for creation.” (*Kārikā* 198)

³⁶³ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 109)

³⁶⁴ “One becomes as one acts and practices—by doing good, one becomes good, and by doing bad one becomes bad.” (Br. Up. 4.4.5)

³⁶⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 109)

Therefore, good and bad deeds are the cause of its [self's] transmigratory existence. Scriptural injunctions and prohibitions are directed to this.³⁶⁶

However, an individual's choice between good and bad actions may diminish the all-doership of Parabrahman. Parabrahman no longer remains the all-doer but only the bestower of the fruits of the individual's actions. This pertinent philosophical and theological quandary is discussed later in this chapter.

3.4. Superior in Every Way

Though Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman engage in similar functions and encompass similar virtues, Parabrahman remains eternally supreme. This section focuses on the supremacy of Parabrahman over Akṣarabrahman and other entities, which is highlighted by elucidating the supremacy of Parabrahman as *sat-cit-ānanda*. The section also discusses the importance of the Akṣarabrahman Guru for grasping the supremacy of Parabrahman.

Parabrahman existed before creation, subsequently engaging in the creation and sustenance of the universe. As discussed in earlier sections, these epithets are also attributed to Akṣarabrahman, which seems to bring forth an equivalence between the two. In order to dispel this confusion, the *Sudhā* insists on being mindful of the aphorism “akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ”³⁶⁷ which asserts the unequivocal supremacy of Parabrahman. The *Sudhā*, therefore, always uses the prefix ‘para’ to ‘brahman’ when denoting the Supreme Being to differentiate from and showcase its supremacy over Akṣarabrahman.

Sadhu Bhadreshdas specifies that though both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman encompass auspicious virtues and pervade the universe, Parabrahman is superior in every way (*sarvo'api viśeṣa eva*).³⁶⁸ All his auspicious qualities and functions are infinitely greater than Akṣarabrahman, and as a corollary also greater than *jīva* and *īśvara*. While emphasising the supremacy of Parabrahman over *īśvaras*, who administer the universe, *Sudhā* offers an analogy of the king and his subjects. A king and his subjects have the same physical form with eyes, arms etc., yet a significant difference between them is of the ruler and the ruled.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁶ (Swami Madhavananda 715)

³⁶⁷ “Superior to the supreme Akṣara.” (Mu. Up. 2.1.2)

³⁶⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 102)

³⁶⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 128)

Likewise, though entities like *īśvara* and Akṣarabrahman engage in the orderly sustenance of the universe, they remain ever subordinate to and ruled by the supreme ruler Parabrahman.

This supremacy is also shown to prevail over the essential qualities that characterise all the sentient entities, *jīva*, *īśvara*, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. All these four sentient entities are essentially real, eternal, and blissful (*sat-cit-ānanda*). Since Parabrahman is metaphysically distinct and superior to all entities, he is infinitely greater as *sat-cit-ānanda*, in every way and at all times. *Sudhā* explains ‘sat’ or ‘satya’ as eternal existence (*nitya*) and not subject to any modification (*nirvikāra*). Parabrahman’s eternal unchanging existence is stated in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, “ayaṁ puruṣo bhāḥ satyaḥ.”³⁷⁰ In the commentary, Sadhu Bhadreshdas describes ‘satyaḥ’ to denote the eternal unchanging existence of not just the form of Parabrahman but also his various auspicious virtues.³⁷¹ Some of these virtues are enumerated in the *Sudhā* as encompassing his compassion, doership, and regulation over all creation. Thereby, ‘satya’ alludes to the existence of a Supreme Being who is ever *saguṇa*, that is, qualified with divine auspicious attributes.

Further, the eternal existence of these qualities of all-doership and regulation implies the eternal existence of those he regulates, *jīva*, *īśvara*, *māyā* and Akṣarabrahman. This is stated as being reflected in the aphorisms like “satyasya satyam.”³⁷² The *Sudhā* notes that this aphorism performs the dual function of showcasing the unchanging eternal existence of Parabrahman and other ontological entities and the latter’s subordination to Parabrahman.³⁷³ In the commentary of this statement, Sadhu Bhadreshdas clarifies how Parabrahman as “satya” is greater than the individual *ātman* as “satya.” The *jīvātman* and the *īśvarātman* are eternally existent ontological entities. However, Sadhu Bhadreshdas notes that the *ātman* remains influenced by *māyā* and attains a material body in accordance with its past actions. Moreover, the *ātman* undergoes expansion and contraction of knowledge as per the body it acquires.³⁷⁴ Parabrahman, on the other hand, is eternally untouched by *māyā* and encompasses infinite knowledge, which is not subject to any expansion or contraction. In this way, Parabrahman’s eternal existence is greater than *jīvātman* and *īśvarātman*. This explanation can also be extended to explain Parabrahman’s *satya* as superior to that of

³⁷⁰ “This puruṣa is luminous and true.” (Br. Up. 5.6.1)

³⁷¹ (Bhadreshdas, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopiṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 310)

³⁷² “Truth of the truth.” (Br. Up. 2.1.20)

³⁷³ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 104)

³⁷⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopiṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 107)

Akṣarabrahman. Even though Akṣarabrahman is eternally beyond *māyā*, it encompasses various auspicious virtues only by the will of Parabrahman. Thus, Akṣarabrahman is subordinate to Parabrahman in every way.

The term ‘cit’ is explained as denoting Parabrahman’s essential knowledge of his own self (*jñāna-svarūpa*).³⁷⁵ Parabrahman, as a sentient entity, can engage in self-reflection of his supreme nature and form. Likewise, ‘ānanda’ denotes the blissful nature of Parabrahman, which bestows bliss to all beings. This blissful form is elucidated at length in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*. Accordingly, the *Sudhā* cites “raso vai saḥa rasam hyevā’yaṁ labh dhvā”ānandī bhavati.”³⁷⁶ Parabrahman is described as “rasa,” the embodiment of infinite bliss. The worship of this form verily leads to the experience of immense bliss. To emphasise that Parabrahman is the singular source of bliss, Sadhu Bhadreshdas compares the search for bliss elsewhere to the search for milk in a goat’s neck. The endeavour of searching bliss elsewhere other than Parabrahman is as futile as milking a goat’s neck with the intent of acquiring milk.³⁷⁷ Parabrahman, thus, is the singular source of all worldly and other-worldly bliss.

The *Sudhā* also upholds Parabrahman’s supreme bliss through the famous *ānanda mīmāṃsā* that offers a scale comparing the bliss of humans, deities, and Brahman in ascending order. At the lowest end of the ladder is the bliss of a human who has the greatest degree of health and wealth possible on earth. The bliss of the *manuṣya gandharvas* is hundred times greater than this bliss of humans, which again is hundred times greater than that of *deva gandharvas*, followed by the *pitṛs*, *Ājānājā*, *karmadevas*, Indra, Bṛhaspati and Prajāpati. The bliss of Brahman is a hundred times greater than the bliss of Prajāpati.³⁷⁸ Sadhu Bhadreshdas identifies this Brahman as Akṣarabrahman in order to emphasise Akṣarabrahman’s greatness and then states Parabrahman’s bliss to be infinitely greater than that of Akṣarabrahman. This scale, thus, ascertains the infinite bliss of Parabrahman.

Sadhu Bhadreshdas accentuates the bliss of Parabrahman as being essential and inseparable from the form of Parabrahman. He notes that though the term ‘bliss of Parabrahman’ appears in the genitive case, it must be understood in terms of ‘the head of Rāhu.’³⁷⁹ Just as Rāhu and his head are one and inseparable, likewise, Parabrahman and his bliss are inseparable. The

³⁷⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 104)

³⁷⁶ “He is rasa. Intake of this rasa will verily lead to bliss.” (Tai. Up. 2.7.2)

³⁷⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 382)

³⁷⁸ (Tai. Up. 2.8.2)

³⁷⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 107)

infinite bliss can also be identified as an attribute (*guṇa*) of Parabrahman when explaining its relation (*sambandha*) to other entities. Parabrahman, whilst enjoying the bliss of his own form, also imparts this bliss to others.

Though the *Upaniṣads* expound the form of Parabrahman, they also seem to deny the inability of the speech and intellect in grasping this nature as stated in “yato vāco nivartante aprāpya manasā saha.”³⁸⁰ Rejecting this apparent contradiction, the *Sudhā* responds that Parabrahman’s form described in the *Upaniṣads* is immensely great such that it cannot be entirely grasped by the bodily senses and intellect.

Vedānta Deśika, an exponent of the Ramanuja tradition, also offers a similar argument:

The true implication of *avācya* or indescribability is that words are inadequate to describe the infinite nature of Brahman and that mind also cannot comprehend its nature.³⁸¹

In this way, the Supreme Being can be a subject of knowledge but cannot be realised in its absoluteness through our worldly perspective.

Parabrahman’s immensity is not assumed to imply its unintelligibility. Sadhu Bhadreshdas specifies that the Parabrahman’s form is graspable through the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Though the scriptures describe his true form, their true meanings can be comprehended only from discourses of the Akṣarabrahman Guru.³⁸² Thus, association and firm conviction in the Guru enables one to grasp the true form of Parabrahman through speech and mind.

Thus, like his predecessors, Sadhu Bhadreshdas validates God's existence and the possibility of grasping its true form and nature through the means of the scriptures. He, however, enhances the argument by emphasising the authority of the Akṣarabrahman Guru. In fact, elsewhere in the *Sudhā*, he places the Akṣarabrahman Guru over the scriptures.

Guruharibalaṁ śreṣṭhaṁ śāstravacobalādapi |

³⁸⁰ “Which cannot be described through speech or understood by the mind.” (Tai. Up. 2.4.1)

³⁸¹ (S. Chari 218)

³⁸² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 106)

The Guru is superior to the scriptures as the scriptures alone do not bestow the bliss of God. This is illustrated with the *Upaniṣadic* dialogue between Nārada Muni and Sanatkumār of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. Despite possessing the correct knowledge of all the scriptures, the grief-stricken Nārada Muni comes to a guru, Sanatkumār, for enlightenment.³⁸⁴ The reason behind the spiritual emptiness experienced by the learned is discussed in the *Vacanāmṛta*. One of the sadhus, Gopālānanda Svāmī, asks Swaminarayan about the inability of the learned to understand the true greatness of God despite reading all the *śāstras*. To this, Swaminarayan responds by showing that such learned persons lack true refuge of God:

Thus, his [learned person's] *jīva* has been overpowered by lust, anger, avarice, jealousy and *matsar*; and the inner enemies in the form of lust, anger etc. never allow him to raise his head...So, even though they read the *śāstras* and *Purāṇas*, they fail to realise the glory of God and his *Sant* [Akṣarabrahman Guru] as it really is.³⁸⁵

Accordingly, the Guru alone can correct one's wrongdoings, can personally monitor the intensity of one's vices enabling their eradication and gradually strengthening one's faith in God. The greater the association and attachment with the Guru, the greater is one's correct understanding of the scriptures. The Guru resolves all doubts and clarifies apparent contradictions that one may encounter in the scriptures. Such understanding invariably leads to a greater conviction in God and the experience of his divine bliss.

Thus, Parabrahman ever reigns supreme over all entities, including Akṣarabrahman. His supremacy prevails amongst the sentient entities as he alone is the source of knowledge and bliss. Though it is difficult to grasp such supremacy of Parabrahman due to the limitations of the bodily intellect, it can be realised through the association and grace of the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

³⁸³ "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)

³⁸⁴ (Ch. Up. 7.1.2, 3)

³⁸⁵ (Vac. Varatāla 11)

3.5. Free Will and Determinism

The supreme Parabrahman, as the singular efficient and material cause, initiates and pervades the universe with his own will. He, thus, is the cause of all actions and is deemed as the benevolent all-doer. His absolute doership can conflict with the freedom of *jīva* and *īśvara*, for Parabrahman is recognised as the bestower of fruits of all actions. If Parabrahman is independent and the master of all actions, can one have agency at all? This dilemma echoes the widely debated problem of free will and determinism. Do individuals have free will, or are they dependent on the will of Parabrahman?

The *Sudhā* states that the individual's choice does not undermine the all-doership of Parabrahman. Parabrahman is entirely independent, not dependent upon the action of the individual. Sadhu Bhadrashdas upholds the complete independence and all-doership of Parabrahman by citing the opening verses of the *Kena Upaniṣad* “*keneṣītām vācamimāṃ vadanti cakṣuḥ śrotraṃ ka u devo yunakti śrotrasya śrotraṃ manaso mano yadvāco ha vācam sa u prāṇasya prāṇāścakṣuḥ*.”³⁸⁶ Here, Parabrahman is shown to enable the functioning of the mind and the senses and is thereby asserted as the force behind every thought and action. The *Sudhā* notes that these words also reveal Parabrahman's benevolence and compassion.³⁸⁷ By his will, he endows all beings the capacity of willing, thinking and feeling. He not only creates the universe where the fruits of actions can be experienced but also facilitates a release from the cycles of birth and death.

However, stating Parabrahman as the cause behind all actions would make him morally responsible for all actions. Consequently, no being would be deemed as bound or released in the absence of any moral responsibility. Since one would not be held accountable, positively or negatively, one would not remain proactive to perform fruitful endeavours. As a result, all scriptural prescriptions would no longer remain relevant. On the contrary, the various dos and don'ts would apply then to Parabrahman.

As a response to such difficulties, the theistic schools endorse compatibility between God as the all-doer and the individuals possessing the freedom of choice. Ramanuja, for instance, establishes this through a correlation between an act and approval of the act:

³⁸⁶ “By whom does the speech enable all to talk, who directs the eyes and ears? It is the ear of the ear, mind of the mind, speech of the speech and breath of the breath.” (Ke. Up. 1.1,2)

³⁸⁷ (Bhadrashdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 110)

The inwardly ruling highest Self promotes action in so far as it regards in the case any action the volitional action made by the individual soul, and then aids the effort by granting its favour or permission (*anumati*).³⁸⁸

He explains this with an illustration of a property owned by two owners. If one of them wants to donate it to a third person, he will need the other owner's approval. Though the other owner gives consent, the fruit of donating is enjoyed by this owner. Likewise, the individual is responsible and the enjoyer of the fruit of his actions. The Supreme Person, *īśvara*, offers consent but never becomes the doer (*kartā*).³⁸⁹ This illustration shows the individual and the Supreme Being on the same level as the two owners. If the Supreme Being, as the other owner, needed to donate the property, does he require the individual's consent? Moreover, the illustration presents the Supreme Being as only the approver; what happens when he disapproves? Julius Lipner, observing such difficulties, remarks:

A little reflection will show, of course, that this is hardly a resolution of our dilemma concerning the Lord's universal causality and the possibility of the finite free action.³⁹⁰

The *Sudhā* seems to avoid such difficulties as it offers a different illustration to establish the compatibility between independence and dependence. This illustration is of a king and its subjects—a king upholds sovereign power, yet he allots certain regions of his kingdom to his ministers. These ministers then have the freedom to administer their respective regions. If they perform well, the king rewards them else punishes them. Likewise, Parabrahman is like the sovereign king who bestows the faculties of cognition, conation, and volition to all beings. The beings then have the freedom to use these faculties. If they perform good actions, Parabrahman rewards them, else punishes them.³⁹¹ Thus, Parabrahman is compared to a sovereign king and all *jīva* and *īśvara* as his subjects. They enjoy independence to the extent of taking their own decisions, but since Parabrahman grants this independence, they are also dependent on him.

Parabrahman thereby is recognised as the bestower of the faculties of cognition (*jñāna śakti*), conation (*kriyā śakti*) and volition (*icchā śakti*). These faculties empower the mind and the

³⁸⁸ (Thibaut 557)

³⁸⁹ (Thibaut 557; S. Chari 201)

³⁹⁰ (Lipner 71)

³⁹¹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 113–14)

senses, as echoed in the *Kena Upaniṣad*.³⁹² The *Sudhā* defines each of these faculties, as explained by Swaminarayan in his discourse:

When a *jīva* enters such a state (of deep sleep), God awakens it from unconsciousness through his ‘jñāna śakti’ and makes it aware of its actions. This is known as ‘jñāna śakti,’ the faculty of cognition. Furthermore, whatever action a *jīva* engages in, it does so with the support of what is known as God’s ‘kriyā śakti,’ the faculty of implementation. Finally, whatever object a *jīva* desires, it acquires with the help of what is known as God’s ‘icchā śakti,’ the faculty of volition.³⁹³

The awareness, desire and execution of an action is made possible only through the grace of Parabrahman. The actions thus performed are then evaluated by Parabrahman. Parabrahman is, therefore, also recognised as the giver of fruits of all actions (*karma-phala-pradātā*). However, bestowing fruits does not make Parabrahman dependent upon the actions. Alluding to the king analogy, the *Sudhā* remarks that just as awarding or punishing the subjects does not make the king dependent on their action, likewise Parabrahman remains eternally independent.

This analogy of the king is also drawn on by a commentator of the Advaita tradition:

[t]hough it may be said that since He depends on the acts of the soul, He is not free to do what he likes; for a king who presents or punishes his subjects according to their acts does not cease to be sovereign thereby.³⁹⁴

Though the analogy is similar, the resultant principle is significantly different. The “He” in the above quotation refers to the lower or *saguṇa* Brahman of Advaita Vedānta, while Sadhu Bhadreshdas alludes to the highest entity, Parabrahman.

The independent Parabrahman, if he so wills, may also bestow fruits without accounting for the actions. The *Sudhā* further specifies that the pain and suffering experienced by the devotees are not due to their past actions but due to the will of Parabrahman.³⁹⁵ He allows the

³⁹² (Ke. Up. 1.1,2)

³⁹³ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā 1.65)

³⁹⁴ (Swami Vireswarananda 262)

³⁹⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 115)

devotees to endure pain and suffering for many reasons, such as to observe their patience and conviction. Though Parabrahman allows such pain or suffering, it is ultimately directed towards imparting supreme bliss. Accordingly, in every sorrowful circumstance, the devotee must introspect on the inherent will of God and remain cheerful. Suffering is reasoned as an integral part of the material world and thereby an inevitable but temporal occurrence arising by the will of God, which eventually leads to supreme bliss. Thus, Parabrahman not only bestows the fruits of one's actions but can also overpower these actions and bestow bliss to his devotees as per his will.

Parabrahman's actions of creation, sustenance and the like are also beyond the fixed causal law. He does not have to experience the consequences of his actions like the bound *ātman*. He independently engages and experiences the creation, sustenance, and other such activities as per his own will. Thereby, *Sudhā* refers to Parabrahman as a *viśiṣṭa bhoktā* (unique enjoyer).³⁹⁶

An important tangent to the debate of free will and determinism is of Parabrahman's omniscience which is a natural consequent of his all-doership:

Kartutvājñātrtā siddhā jñānyeva kurute yataḥ |
*Karuṇādyanapekṣam tu jñānam sākāraṇasya tat ||*³⁹⁷

Being the cause of all creation, Parabrahman is also affirmed as the knower of all that prevails. He creates and knows all that he creates. The *Upaniṣads* cited to ascertain his omniscience are “eṣa sarvajña,”³⁹⁸ “yenedam sarvaṁ vijānāti, tam kena vijānīyāt.”³⁹⁹ Being omniscient, Parabrahman is said to know everything, the past, present and future, all at once. In the commentaries of both the above-cited *Upaniṣads*, Sadhu Bhadreshdas notes that the Paramātmā knows everything at all times as he resides in every being as the regulator.⁴⁰⁰

Parabrahman's omniscience can be seen as an impediment to the contingent actions of beings. If God already knows how one will act, does one have freedom of choice? Sadhu

³⁹⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 115)

³⁹⁷ “Doership establishes knowership as only through knowledge one acts. Though Parabrahman has a form with sense-organs, he does not need any as a medium for acquiring knowledge.” (*Kārikā* 202)

³⁹⁸ “He is the all-knowing.” (Ma. Up. 6)

³⁹⁹ “How can one fully know the One who knows everything.” (Br. Up. 2.4.14)

⁴⁰⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 316–17; Bhadreshdas, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopiṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 132–33)

Bhadreshdas does not address this question directly nevertheless insists that the knowledge of Parabrahman is direct or spontaneous, which is expressed by the term ‘pratyakṣa.’ Here, the meaning of this term is understood not so much as ‘before the eyes’ but rather ‘seeing or knowing as it is.’ Upholding this meaning, the term ‘pratyakṣa’ is used to denote the omniscience of Parabrahman, which is different from the worldly sense of perception. Parabrahman “sees as it is” all that he creates, by his own will, at all times.⁴⁰¹ Since the world is designed and created by his will, Parabrahman is simultaneously and effortlessly aware of the past, present and future.

Thus, this omniscient Parabrahman is recognised as the all-doer who enjoys absolute independence. Though individuals also enjoy independence and freedom of choice, they do so only due to the grace of Parabrahman. In this sense, they are dependent on Parabrahman. Their pain and suffering is a consequence of their own past actions. But Parabrahman may surpass this causal law and, by his will, allow one to endure pain and suffering, eventually leading to supreme bliss.

3.6. *Anvaya and Vyatireka*

Parabrahman, by his own will, pervades all animate and inanimate beings as their in-dweller and at the same time ever possesses a divine human-shaped form. This section examines *Sudhā*’s explanation of Parabrahman’s immanence and transcendence, referred to as his *anvaya* and *vyatireka* forms, respectively. While doing so, it also focuses on Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta’s understanding of Parabrahman as *vyāpaka* and *sākāra*.

As discussed in the earlier chapter, Swaminarayan endorses the *anvaya* (pervasive/immanent) form and the *vyatireka* form (distinct/transcendent) form of each ontological entity. He describes the *anvaya* and *vyatireka* form of Parabrahman as:

[t]he *antaryāmī* of and the controller of Akṣarabrahman, the *īśvaras*, the *jīvas*, *māyā* and the elements risen from *māyā*—the *brahmāṇḍas*—that is said to be the *anvaya* form of God. When he is distinct amidst the light of Brahman in his abode...is said to be the *vyatireka* form of God.⁴⁰²

⁴⁰¹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 116)

⁴⁰² (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā I.7)

Accordingly, the *Sudhā* refers to the all-pervasiveness of Parabrahman as its *anvaya* form. Parabrahman is ever-present in the universe as its *ātman* (*śarīrī*). Thus, he not only knows everything but also pervades everything. God's immanence is accepted in almost all Bhakti Vedānta schools. Ramanuja explains this relationship between God and the universe as the *śarīra-śarīrī sambandha*. This relation is explained through an illustration—just as the *ātman* is the life-force of the body, God is the life force of all that exists. Though the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta accepts this relation, Parabrahman is the *śarīrī* of not just the *jīva*, *īśvara*, *māyā* and but also Akṣarabrahman.⁴⁰³ Just as the *ātman* controls the body, Parabrahman resides in and controls all that prevails, including the supreme Akṣarabrahman.

In this view, Parabrahman is referred to as all-pervasive (*sarvavyāpaka*) and the *ātman* of all (*sarvātmā*), which is affirmed through the aphorisms “*ātmāntaryāmyamṛtaḥ*,”⁴⁰⁴ “*sarvabhūtāntarātmā*.”⁴⁰⁵ Shankar and the other Vedāntins differently explain these aphorisms. Since Shankar endorses only one ontological principle, he notes that the inner ruler is the immortal *ātman* itself, “who controls all beings from within, the Internal Ruler, your own immortal self.”⁴⁰⁶ Certain other schools of Vedānta endorse the distinction between the *jīva* and Paramātmā, thereby explain these verses as showcasing the distinction between the *jīva* and the *antaryāmī* Paramātmā residing within the *jīva*. Understanding this aspect of Parabrahman is considered vital in one's journey to liberation. Sadhu Bhadrashdas specifies the ethical benefits of such an understanding that one refrains from thinking or doing ill of others and is not overcome by ego on performing any task as he or she is aware of being regulated by Paramātmā residing within.⁴⁰⁷ This way, understanding Paramātmā as one's inner dweller inspires inner stability and social harmony.

In the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, the inner controller is described as having certain dimensions, “*aṅguṣṭhamātraḥ puruṣo'ntarātmā*.”⁴⁰⁸ The pervasive Parabrahman is asserted as residing in the heart with a size of a thumb. Such a description seems to limit the all-pervasiveness of Parabrahman. The *Sudhā* responds to this objection with the claim that such a description is

⁴⁰³ The difference between the Viśiṣṭādvaita Darśana's understanding of the *śarīra-śarīrī sambandha* from that of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana is explained further in the next chapter under the discussion on *jīva* in relation with Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.

⁴⁰⁴ “Dwells within and pervades the body and is immortal.” (Br. Up. 3.7.15,23)

⁴⁰⁵ “The in-dweller of all beings.” (Ka. Up. 5.9–12)

⁴⁰⁶ (Swami Madhavananda 507)

⁴⁰⁷ (Bhadrashdas, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopīṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 185)

⁴⁰⁸ “The puruṣa, dwelling within, is the size of the thumb.” (Ka. Up. 6.17)

mainly for the purpose of worship (*upāsanā-sukhāya*).⁴⁰⁹ This response is in agreement with the Ramanuja tradition:

The term used ‘*Aṅguṣṭhamātra*’ is only for the sake of meditation. The awareness of the in-dweller apart from the Body-Soul equipment is essential for worship.⁴¹⁰

Sadhu Bhadreshdas also explains this *Upaniṣadic* description as an awareness of the distinction between Parabrahman and the body-apparatus, that is, the essential distinction between the material body, *ātman* and the Parabrahman dwelling within the *ātman*. This indwelling Paramātman, as discussed in the earlier chapter, resides within the *Cidākāśa* pervading the cavity of the heart. Thereby, Sadhu Bhadreshdas adds the importance of being aware of the distinction of not just the *ātman* and Paramātman, but also of the *Cidākāśa* form of Akṣarabrahman and the Paramātman dwelling in this *Cidākāśa*.⁴¹¹ While the individual *ātman* enjoys the fruits of the various actions performed by the body, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman remain ever uninfluenced and unaffected.

Furthermore, the *Sudhā* notes that it is difficult to imagine Parabrahman residing in the atomic *ātman*. This difficulty is explained to occur when one thinks of a gross object residing in the partless *ātman*. But the subtle Parabrahman resides in the *ātman* with his extraordinary powers. For this reason, Parabrahman is proclaimed as the smaller than the smallest particle (*aṇoraṇiyān*).⁴¹²

This way, the subtle form of Parabrahman as the controller and support of all is understood as its *anvaya* form. Here, Sadhu Bhadreshdas specifies that Parabrahman, while pervading every aspect of the universe, manifests or expresses himself in varying degrees. He expresses his powers in certain beings to a greater extent than other beings.

Anvito naganadyādau jīveśvarā'tmasamsthitaḥ |
Pratimāsu viśeṣaśca vibhaveṣvapi tiṣṭhati ||
Sarvā'dhikyena samyak tu brahmaṇyevā'nvito hariḥ |

⁴⁰⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 118)

⁴¹⁰ (Acharya Narasimha 264)

⁴¹¹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 118)

⁴¹² (Ka. Up. 2.20)

Parabrahman resides in all material objects, such as lakes, rivers, and mountains. He resides in the individual *jīvātmā* as a witness and inspirer of their various actions. However, among the material beings, Parabrahman manifests in his *murti* or image to a greater extent as these various *murtis* and images are installed as per the Vedic injunctions. Thus, the manifestation or expression of Parabrahman in the material world is greatest in the *murti* and images of God, followed by humans, animals, and other inanimate objects.⁴¹⁴

Further, Parabrahman is said to manifest his powers in *īśvaras* to a greater extent than all beings on earth. While analysing Parabrahman's presence in the entity *īśvara*, it is noted:

Parabrahman pervades these *īśvaras* and expresses aspects of his divine qualities that are necessary to fulfil particular tasks. Once these tasks are fulfilled, Parabrahman withdraws his powers.⁴¹⁵

īśvaras, unlike *jīvas*, possess greater power with the purpose of carrying out various administrative tasks of the universe. Parabrahman is believed to pervade *īśvaras* by manifesting some aspects of his divine powers for the performance of such tasks. He may manifest such powers even in certain *jīvas* if he so wills.

The manifestation of Parabrahman in *jīvas*, *īśvaras* and various inanimate objects is referred to in the *Sudhā* as “anupraveśa,”⁴¹⁶ a type of entering. Parabrahman, while already pervading them, distinctly enters them in varying degrees to fulfil certain tasks. The manner of such entering is mentioned in the *Upaniṣads*. The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, for instance, while describing the Supreme Being's will of creation states, “tatsṛṣṭvā tadevānuprāviśat.”⁴¹⁷ This statement clearly states that the Supreme Being, after creating the world with name and form, enters within. Since Shankar believes the world as a mere appearance, he understands the term ‘anuprāviśat’ only in the figurative sense.⁴¹⁸ Ramanuja, who advocates the reality of the

⁴¹³ “In the anvaya form, [Parabrahman pervades] mountains, rivers and other such objects, dwells within the *jīva* and *īśvara*. Specially within the images and also within the incarnations.” (*Kārikā* 204)
He manifests within Akṣarabrahman in the highest extent, entirely. Amongst all, Akṣara has the greatest capacity to uphold him.” (*Kārikā* 205)

⁴¹⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 120)

⁴¹⁵ (Thacker 91)

⁴¹⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 120)

⁴¹⁷ “After creating, he enters.” (Tai. Up. 2.6.3)

⁴¹⁸ (S. Shastri, *The Aitareya & Taittirīya Upanishads and Sri Sankara's Commentary* 173)

world, explains the term ‘anuprāviśat’ as denoting a literal meaning of entering through which the Supreme Being is known as existing in each entity separately and giving each the capacity to exist and function.⁴¹⁹ Sadhu Bhadreshdas specifies that the all-pervading Parabrahman with the will of manifesting as various name and form enters each life form.⁴²⁰ This way, Parabrahman specially enters and expresses his powers in each mobile and immobile life form.

Parabrahman, in his *anvaya* form, also pervades Akṣarabrahman. His manifestation in Akṣarabrahman is greater than even *īśvaras*. Hence, it is not referred to as “anupraveśa” but as “samyak,”⁴²¹ meaning *entirely*. The term ‘anupraveśa’ or entering suggests an entrance to a place where one was not formerly present. Moreover, upon entering other beings, Parabrahman expresses only some aspects of his powers. On the contrary, in Akṣarabrahman, Parabrahman is believed to manifest at all times, with all his extraordinary powers, thus, *samyak*. Such absolute manifestation prevails as Akṣarabrahman alone is recognised as the most suitable vessel for upholding the true and complete form of Parabrahman.

The manifestation of the Supreme Being through various forms is admitted by most of the Bhakti Vedānta schools. In the Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy, for instance, the Supreme Being is recognised to be present as the transcendental form (*para*), as manifesting for the purpose of creation and meditation (*vyuha*), as other universal manifestations like Rāma and Kṛṣṇa (*vibhāva*), entering into substances chosen by devotees like idols and the like (*arcā*) and residing in the inner recess of the hearts of the individual *ātmā* (*antaryāmī*).⁴²² However, despite identifying such manifestations, there is no precise specification within the Viśiṣṭādvaitin philosophy of the Supreme Being’s manifestation in varying degrees as endorsed in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta.

Further, the Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy does not accept an ontological distinction between the Supreme Being and other manifestations like Rāma or Kṛṣṇa, which is clearly demarcated in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta. According to the latter, when Parabrahman manifests his powers in other incarnations and performs certain tasks, an ontological distinction is always

⁴¹⁹ (S. M. S. Chari, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* 110–11)

⁴²⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 379)

⁴²¹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 120)

⁴²² (S. Chari 239)

maintained.⁴²³ Moreover, the *Sudhā* claims that Parabrahman is never affected by the flaws of all that he pervades. Just as gold unearthed from the depths of the earth maintains its purity, likewise, Parabrahman present in every being maintains his divinity.⁴²⁴ The ontological distinction is critical as only Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman are affirmed as ever unaffected by the adversities of *māyā*, while all other beings, including *īśvaras*, remain influenced by *māyā* till they attain ultimate liberation.

More significantly, there is a complete absence of Akṣarabrahman in the Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy. While the Supreme Being is manifest in the inner recess of the hearts and in the different idols, his presence in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta can be said to go a step further. Parabrahman is claimed to remain present on earth, with all his divine virtues, through the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Through this *anvaya* form of Parabrahman in the Akṣarabrahman, God ever remains accessible to all beings in a human form:

[T]he lineage of these Akṣarabrahman gurus is understood to continue to serve as a means through which numerous *ātmans* (self) may experience divine bliss of the transcendental form of Parabrahman and attain ultimate liberation.⁴²⁵

However, one may argue, then why does not Parabrahman manifest in all in a uniform manner? Why is that he manifests in Akṣarabrahman to a greater extent than in other entities? Such variance in Parabrahman's manifestation is explained on the basis of the capacity of each animate and inanimate being. Swaminarayan illustrates that just as large pieces of wood have a greater capacity to uphold fire in its latent form. Similarly, the greater the capacity of an entity to uphold Parabrahman, the greater the manifestation of Parabrahman.⁴²⁶ Akṣarabrahman is thereby claimed to possess the greatest capacity to uphold Parabrahman (*pātrāṇāmākṣaram sarvato'dhikam*).

However, Parabrahman's omnipresence is according to his own will. He pervades varyingly as per his wish. For this reason, the *Sudhā* warns that Parabrahman's omnipresence differs from that of space (*ākāśa*).⁴²⁷ The latter is non-sentient so pervades unknowingly, but

⁴²³ (Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* 131)

⁴²⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 119)

⁴²⁵ (Thacker 96)

⁴²⁶ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā I.41)

⁴²⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 117)

Parabrahman is sentient and cognizant of his omnipresence. Hence, in his *anvaya* form, Parabrahman, as per his will, expresses his powers in the universe in varying degrees.

Further, the *Sudhā* states that, despite his immanence, Parabrahman ever resides in his transcendent form known as Parabrahman's *vyatireka* form. This form of Parabrahman is characterised by his distinguishing nature, distinct from all sentient beings and the material world. Sadhu Bhadreshdas defines the term 'vyatireka' as distinctive and residing at a particular place.⁴²⁸ Accordingly, he identifies two aspects of Parabrahman's *vyatireka* form, one residing at the supreme abode and the other on earth:

Dhāmnī muktairanantairyat sevyamānam virājate |
*Loke'sminnavatīrṇam ca vyatireki prakīrtitam ||*⁴²⁹

Parabrahman resides in his supreme abode, Akṣaradhāman, possessing a divine youthful human-like form. While residing in this abode, this same form is said to have incarnated on earth as Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

This *vyatireka* form of Parabrahman showcases his shape and physical form. As endorsed by many Vedānta schools, the Supreme Being has a divine human-shaped form (*sākāra*). Ramanuja, for instance, gives an imagistic description of God's physical form:

His eyes and His forehead and His nose are beautiful. His coral-like lips smile graciously, and His soft cheeks are beaming. His neck is as delicately shaped as a couch-shell and His bud-like divine ears, beautifully formed, hang down on His stalwart shoulders.⁴³⁰

Such insistence on the human-like form of God can be argued to contradict the *Upaniṣadic* statements that seem to deny any form to the Supreme Being, such as "aśarīram,"⁴³¹ "aśabdamaśparśamarūpamavyayam."⁴³² Many Vedānta scholars explain these statements as a denial of a material body to God:

⁴²⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 121)

⁴²⁹ "In the abode being served by the countless released ātmā that surround him and having descended on this place are the vyatireka forms [of Parabrahman]." (*Kārikā* 206)

⁴³⁰ (Buitenen 34)

⁴³¹ "Without a body." (Ka. Up. 2.22)

⁴³² "Beyond words, beyond sound and without a form." (Ka. Up. 3.15)

The Lord is abiding in all creatures as the indweller of their souls. He is without a Form constituted by Physical Elements.⁴³³

Sadhu Bhadresdhas also responds in a similar manner. He cites other *Upaniṣadic* statements that affirm a divine human-like form of God, such as “hiraṇmayāḥ puruṣo dṛśyate hiraṇyāśmaśrurhiraṇyakeśa āpraṇasvātsarva eva suvarṇaḥ tasya yathā kapyāsaṁ puṇḍarīkamevamakṣiṇī tasyoditi nāma sa eṣa sarvebhyaḥ pāpmabhya uditā.”⁴³⁴ Here, the Supreme Being is described as having a golden human-shaped form, with eyes like soft lotus petals. This form is divine, transcending all vice or evil. In fact, as historically alleged, it was on the interpretation of this very statement that Ramanuja parted ways with his then guru, Yādavapakṣa.⁴³⁵ The words under contention were “kapyāsaṁ puṇḍarīkaṁ,” where ‘kapyāsaṁ’ is the adjective used to describe the lotus flower, ‘puṇḍarīkaṁ.’ Sadhu Bhadresdhas, like the Ramanuja tradition, interprets ‘kapi’ as that which drinks water. Accordingly, ‘kapyāsaṁ’ is read as ‘that which is supported by the stem which absorbs water’ or ‘that which is supported by the sun which absorbs water.’⁴³⁶ This interpretation responds to Shankar, who has interpreted ‘kapyāsaṁ’ as the seat of a monkey.⁴³⁷ Sadhu Bhadresdhas, however, does not engage in a detailed refutation of such an interpretation as it is obscene and thus not deemed worthy of even refutation.

Through such statements, the *Sudhā* affirms a divine human-like form of Parabrahman. Further, Sadhu Bhadresdhas specifies that this human form essentially possesses only two arms.⁴³⁸ Parabrahman may assume four or eight arms as per his will or for the purpose of fulfilling certain functions. Here, Sadhu Bhadresdhas differs from Ramanuja, who describes the form of Viṣṇu as ever possessing four arms.

The *Sudhā* argues for the transcendental human-like-shape of Parabrahman with statements such as “tadaikṣata bahu syāṁ prajāyeyeti.”⁴³⁹ The term ‘that’(*tad*) is interpreted as both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, who are ever distinct from the *prakṛti* and its creation.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³³ (Acharya Narasimha 194)

⁴³⁴ “He is perceived as golden whose entire form, from the tip of his hair to the end of his toe, is magnificently golden. His eyes are like soft lotus petals; he is untouched by any evil or vice.” (Ch. Up. 1.6.6,7)

⁴³⁵ (Swami Tapasyananda 4)

⁴³⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Chāndogyopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 38–39)

⁴³⁷ (Jha, *The Chhandogya Upanishad and Sri Sankara's Commentary* 46)

⁴³⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 124)

⁴³⁹ “It saw—may I be many, may I grow forth.” (Ch. Up. 6.2.3)

⁴⁴⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 125)

The verb ‘saw’ (*īkṣata*) is used to argue against not just the Sāṅkhya school who believe in the non-intelligent *Pradhāna*, but also against all those who accept the Supreme Being as formless. The Ramanuja tradition reads ‘īkṣata’ as ‘saṁkalpa,’ that is, the will of the Supreme Being.⁴⁴¹ Sadhu Bhadresdhas interprets it as not just the will but as an act of seeing with will (*saṁkalpapurvakaṁ dadarśa*).⁴⁴² Through the verb ‘saw,’ Sadhu Bhadresdhas suggests that Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman are intelligent and have a divine human-shaped form.

Parabrahman is described as seeing Akṣarabrahman as per his own will. Akṣarabrahman then, with the will of Parabrahman, is described as seeing a released *ātman* (*akṣara-mukta*). Then this *akṣara-mukta*, along with *mūla-prakṛti*, is said to engage in the process of creation. In this way, the seeing of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman is the source of the creation process.

This action of seeing is also mentioned in the *Praśna Upaniṣad*. The statement reads “parātparam puriṣayaṁ puruṣamīkṣate.”⁴⁴³ However, here, the act of seeing (*īkṣate*) is by the released *ātmā* residing in the divine abode, Akṣaradhāman. They “see” Parabrahman, who is “parātparam,” that is, higher than the supreme Akṣara. While many commentators assert the *ātman* as beholding the Supreme Being,⁴⁴⁴ Sadhu Bhadresdhas affirms that the released *ātman* “sees” both, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. This is explained through an analogy—when one says, “The man with the stick is going,” it implies that he sees both man and the stick. In the same way, the *Upaniṣad* asserts that the *ātman* sees “jīvaghnāt parātparam,” that is, Parabrahman with Akṣarabrahman who is beyond all *jīva* and *īśvara*.⁴⁴⁵ Moreover, Sadhu Bhadresdhas takes this as an opportunity to emphasise the presence of a form of both, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. The released *ātman* “sees,” which implies the presence of some shape or form before it, and not an abstract or attributeless principle.

This divine human-shaped form of Parabrahman is stated to be necessary for his worship and meditation.⁴⁴⁶ The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta strongly insists on worshipping and meditating upon the physical form of Parabrahman. Denial of his divine human-like form is recognised as ignorance:

⁴⁴¹ (S. M. S. Chari, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* 77)

⁴⁴² (Bhadreshdas, *Chāndogyaupaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 256)

⁴⁴³ “Puruṣa, who is higher than the high, in the divine abode sees.” (Pr. Up. 5.5)

⁴⁴⁴ (S. Shastri, *The Katha and Prasna Upanishads and Sri Sankara’s Commentary* 166; Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* 665; H. Apte 130)

⁴⁴⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 219)

⁴⁴⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 125–26)

Puruṣottama Bhagavān always possesses a form; he is not formless. Those who believe him to be formless just do not understand.⁴⁴⁷

The *Sudhā* also accentuates:

Sākṛtireva kartā'yam sākṛtirvyāpako mataḥ|
*Sākṛtireva śāstā sa nityam sākṛtiko hariḥ||*⁴⁴⁸

It is argued that while engaging creation, control and sustenance of the universe, Parabrahman eternally possesses a definite form. Moreover, even in the *anvaya* form, Parabrahman is believed as having a definite form. The pervasiveness of Parabrahman does not imply his formlessness. Parabrahman is described to prevail in every aspect of the universe while possessing a definite form. This aspect of Parabrahman can only be perceived upon attaining the highest spiritual state of liberation. Explaining the same, Swaminarayan remarks:

Wherever he [the released *ātman*] casts his eyes—among all the mobile and immobile forms—he perceives the manifest form of God.⁴⁴⁹

Elsewhere Swaminarayan also describes Parabrahman as pervading the *ātman* to possess a definite human-shaped form.⁴⁵⁰ Sadhu Bhadreshdas highlights this aspect in his commentary of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*. Here, the *Śikṣāvallī* states the Supreme Being as pervading the cavity of the heart and is then described as “manomayaḥ amṛto hiraṇmayaḥ.”⁴⁵¹ Various commentators explain the term ‘manomaya’ to mean that which can be known through the mind.⁴⁵² Sadhu Bhadreshdas, however, explains it as denoting the divine mind of the Supreme Being. Likewise, ‘amṛta’ is explained as transcending death and ‘hiraṇmaya’ as the brilliant divine body of the Supreme Being. Therefore, Sadhu Bhadreshdas concludes that even in his pervasive form, Parabrahman is ever *sākāra*, possessing a divine human-shaped form.⁴⁵³ While other commentators, through this aphorism, focus on the pervasive Brahman’s immortality and effulgence, Sadhu Bhadreshdas, in addition to this, ensures that the divine

⁴⁴⁷ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā I.45)

⁴⁴⁸ “As the all-doer he has a definite form, even while being all-pervasive, he has a definite form. He governs all while possessing a definite form. Hari thereby eternally possesses a definite form.” (*Kārikā* 212)

⁴⁴⁹ (Vac. Kāriyāṇī 7)

⁴⁵⁰ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā II.13)

⁴⁵¹ (Tai. Up. 1.6.1)

⁴⁵² (S. Shastri, *The Aitareya & Taittirīya Upanishads and Sri Sankara’s Commentary* 89; Thibaut 258)

⁴⁵³ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 344)

human-shaped form of Parabrahman remains eternally unchanged. This form is immortal and does not change even whilst Parabrahman pervades all animate and inanimate beings.

The other aspect of Parabrahman's *vyatireka* form is his manifestation on earth. As discussed earlier, Sadhu Bhadreshdas accepts Swaminarayan as his beloved deity (*īṣṭadeva*). Accordingly, the manifestation of Swaminarayan on earth in the eighteenth century is also recognised as his *vyatireka* form. This form, like that one residing in Akṣaradhāman, is considered divine and devoid of any flaws.

This manifest form of Parabrahman is distinct from his manifestation in the form of other incarnations (*īśvara/avatāras*) and also from his presence in the Akṣarabrahman Guru. In this respect, Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta significantly differs from the other Vedānta schools. Many schools accept the descent of the Supreme Being only through other incarnations. Even those who accept the descent of the Supreme Being himself along with other incarnations, do not recognise these incarnations as ontologically distinct from the Supreme Being.

The purpose of Swaminarayan's manifestation is for the purpose of granting liberation to countless individual *ātmā*.⁴⁵⁴ It is recognised as showcasing Parabrahman's immense compassion and benevolence. Furthermore, Parabrahman's manifestation is accompanied by his choicest devotee, Akṣarabrahman. Swaminarayan reveals:

When God incarnates for the purpose of granting liberation to the *jīvas*, he is always accompanied by his Akṣaradhāman, his attendants—who are formed of *caitanya*—and all of his divine powers.⁴⁵⁵

In this way, Akṣarabrahman is ever in service of the *vyatireka* form of Parabrahman on earth, as in the supreme abode. Thereby, while explaining this form of Parabrahman, the *Sudhā* immediately mentions the *vyatireka* form of Akṣarabrahman.⁴⁵⁶ It not only accompanies Parabrahman on earth but continues to uphold the transcendental form of Parabrahman across the legacy of the Akṣarabrahman Gurus.

The classification of Parabrahman's form as *anvaya* and *vyatireka* is characteristic of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta. *Sudhā* declares that such a classification does not imply a

⁴⁵⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 97)

⁴⁵⁵ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā I.71)

⁴⁵⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 121)

duality in Parabrahman.⁴⁵⁷ The *anvaya* and *vyatireka* forms do not suggest the presence of Parabrahman in an immanent form to be essentially different from the Parabrahman in the transcendent form. The absence of any duality or difference in Parabrahman is affirmed through the *Upaniṣadic* statements such as “*tasyai tasya tadeva rūpaṁ yadamuṣya rūpaṁ.*”⁴⁵⁸ In that form or this form, Parabrahman is the same. This mantra equates the Parabrahman residing within to the Parabrahman in the other realms. Sadhu Bhadreshdas, unlike other commentators, understands the scope of this mantra as denying any difference in Parabrahman with respect to place or form.⁴⁵⁹ Parabrahman, whether situated in the individual *ātman*, in other realms and even the highest abode, Akṣaradhāman, is the same in divinity, power and virtues. Though Parabrahman becomes many by entering into beings in his *anvaya* form, he does not become many. Parabrahman ever remains the single cause, distinct from the universe.

Since Parabrahman is the same in both forms, there is no difference in degree. Neither is higher or lower than the other. Both forms are equally divine and supreme. In fact, perceiving any difference in the form of Parabrahman is claimed to nullify one’s journey to liberation, “*mṛtyoḥ sa mṛtyumāpnoti ya iha nāneva paśyati.*”⁴⁶⁰ One is bound to remain in the cycles of birth and death (*mṛtyumāpnoti*). Thus, it is critical to have the correct understanding of Parabrahman’s true nature and form.

Thus, Parabrahman, in his *anvaya* form, ever pervades every animate and inanimate being as their *śarīrī*. He manifests or expresses his powers varyingly in different beings by distinctly entering them (*anupraveśa*). However, he eternally manifests within Akṣarabrahman to the greatest degree with all his powers and virtues (*samyak*). In his *vyatireka* form, Parabrahman not only dwells in Akṣaradhāman with a divine human-shaped form but had also descended on earth as Bhagwan Swaminarayan whilst remaining in his supreme abode. Despite a seeming duality of his *anvaya* and *vyatireka* forms, Parabrahman eternally remains one singular entity with a divine human-like form.

⁴⁵⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 122)

⁴⁵⁸ “The form of this person same as that of that person.” (Ch. Up. 1.7.5)

⁴⁵⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Chāndogyopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 41–42)

⁴⁶⁰ “One will go from death to death, if one perceives in this.” (Br. Up. 4.4.19)

3.7. *Saguṇa and Nirguṇa*

The form of the Supreme Being is also explained in terms of *saguṇa* (with attributes) and *nirguṇa* (without attributes). The Advaita Vedānta tradition gives importance to the *nirguṇa* form of Brahman, which is considered higher than Brahman's *saguṇa* form. The Advaitins thereby accept two levels of Brahman—the lower or *saguṇa* and the higher or *nirguṇa*. This is negated by the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta that denies the existence of such gradation. Ramanuja, in the *Śrī Bhāṣya*, and his disciple Vedānta Deśika, in the *Śataduṣani*, offer various arguments against the possibility of an attributeless Brahman. Accordingly, Chari concludes:

The Viśiṣṭādvaitin therefore rejects the concept of *nirguṇa* Brahman and upholds that the Ultimate Reality is only *saviśeṣa* Brahman which is the same as the personal God of religion.⁴⁶¹

On the other hand, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta neither ranks nor rejects the *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* forms of Parabrahman. Both these forms are explained to belong to the single entity, Parabrahman, through his own divine will.

Saguṇam nirguṇam ceti param brahma nirupitam |
Saguṇam tu guṇaudhatvānmahattvāt sarvatastathā ||
Nirguṇamapi tajjñeyam śūnyatvānmāyikairguṇau |
*Sūkṣmā'tisukṣmatāyāśca yajjñānānmucyate 'śubhāt ||*⁴⁶²

Based on the teachings of Swaminarayan, the *Sudhā* offers a two-fold meaning to both the terms 'saguṇa' and 'nirguṇa'.⁴⁶³ Each term has two meanings where the first meaning alludes to nature of attributes and the second to the magnitude of the form. In this respect, 'saguṇa' is said to suggest "encompassing divine attributes" as well as being "greater than the great." Thus, Parabrahman, in his *saguṇa* form, not only encompasses divine attributes but is also immensely vast. Likewise, 'nirguṇa' is said to suggest "absence of any material attributes" as well as being "subtler than the subtle." Thereby, Parabrahman, in his *nirguṇa* form, is not

⁴⁶¹ (S. Chari 232)

⁴⁶² "Parabrahman expounded the meaning of 'saguṇa' and 'nirguṇa.' Saguṇa is an aggregate of virtues and greatest of all." (*Kārikā* 209)

"Understand nirguṇa as absence of the guṇas of māyā, and as being the subtler of the subtlest. With this knowledge one is released for the inauspicious." (*Kārikā* 210)

⁴⁶³ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 123)

only devoid of any material attributes but is also immensely subtle and exists as the in-dweller of all.

The immensely vast form of Parabrahman is an aspect of Parabrahman's power. Parabrahman, upon his will, has the capacity of assuming a vast form. This power also entails the capacity of attributing the vastness of the subtle objects.⁴⁶⁴ Accordingly, upon his will, Parabrahman can transform any subtle object into a large object. Further, the immensely subtle form is not simply an expression of Parabrahman's power but his eternal form pervading all creation. In this respect, Parabrahman's *nirguṇa* form corresponds to his *anvaya* or immanent form whereby he pervades every being as their in-dweller, which was discussed in the earlier section. However, another aspect of Parabrahman's *nirguṇa* form is his capacity of attributing subtlety to large objects.⁴⁶⁵ Accordingly, Parabrahman, upon his will, can transform any large object into a subtle object. In this way, Parabrahman's *nirguṇa* form not only entails his eternal all-pervasive form but also his power to grant subtlety.

The *Sudhā* further specifies that the *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* forms of Akṣarabrahman should also be understood in this manner. However, Parabrahman, with his extraordinary powers, is subtler and also greater in size than Akṣarabrahman.⁴⁶⁶ This specification emphasises Parabrahman's supremacy in every aspect and form.

These extremely subtle and vast forms of Parabrahman do not in any way nullify his divine human-shaped form. In other words, Parabrahman eternally pervades the creation and may assume an immensely vast form as per will, whilst ever seated in supreme abode with a divine human-shaped form. With this understanding, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta accepts both the *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* forms of Parabrahman.

Further, the realisation of such an understanding releases one from all material bonds (*yajjñānānmucyate aśubhāt*). The *Sudhā* refers to the teachings of Swaminarayan, where he stresses the necessity of a correct understanding of Parabrahman's *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* forms:

⁴⁶⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 123)

⁴⁶⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 123)

⁴⁶⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 123)

If a devotee realises the *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* aspects in God's form...then *kāla*, *karma* and *māyā* would be incapable of binding him, and throughout the day he would continuously experience wonder in his heart.⁴⁶⁷

Thus, the *Sudhā* offers its understanding of the terms 'saguṇa' and 'nirguṇa,' along with their significance in one's attainment of liberation.

3.8. Eternally Manifest

The realisation of Parabrahman not only requires “knowing” his true form but also “seeing” his form in person. This section elucidates the importance of experiencing the manifest form of Parabrahman and how he continues to remain present on earth in a human form.

The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta upholds an eternal manifestation of Parabrahman and is thereby referred to as “pratyakṣa.”⁴⁶⁸ The term ‘pratyakṣa’ denotes that which can be grasped with the *indriyas*, in contrast to the term ‘parokṣa’ denoting that which cannot be grasped in person. Though the *pratyakṣa* form of Parabrahman can be experienced through his images and *murtis*, the *Sudhā* insists on a more profound experience of Parabrahman as a living human-like form. This manifest Parabrahman is described as “sajātīya,”⁴⁶⁹ literally meaning as *belonging to the same generic class* and thereby in this context means “in a human form among humans.”

Parabrahman, out of immense compassion and with his own will, descends upon the earth as a human and guides all those who associate with him towards liberation by imparting the knowledge of his own form. Association and attachment with the manifest form of Parabrahman are considered vital for spiritual growth and liberation. This form of worship is referred to as “pratyakṣa upāsana,” whereby one takes refuge, has firm conviction, devotionally serves, and meditates upon the manifest Parabrahman that one beholds. Further, one beholds his various exploits and listens to his discourses.⁴⁷⁰ Such “pratyakṣa upāsana” entailing listening (*śravaṇa*), meditation (*manana*), and constant contemplation (*nidhidhyāsana*) of the form of Parabrahman lead to his realisation (*sakṣātkāra*). The *Sudhā* notes that all the authoritative scriptures, including the sacred texts like *Rāmāyaṇa*,

⁴⁶⁷ (Vac. Kāriyāṇī 8)

⁴⁶⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 130)

⁴⁶⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 130)

⁴⁷⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 131)

Mahābhārata, *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Bhāgavat Purāṇa* affirm the practice and fruits of such worship of the manifest form of Parabrahman.

The *Sudhā* identifies this manifest Parabrahman as Swaminarayan who incarnated on earth in the eighteenth century and had revealed his true form as Parabrahman:

It is that same supreme Puruṣottama Bhagavān who manifests on this earth out of compassion—for the purpose of granting liberation to the *jīvas*. He is presently visible before everyone; he is your *īṣṭadeva*, and he accepts your service.⁴⁷¹

This supreme Parabrahman continues to remain present on earth for imparting supreme bliss and liberation to countless beings through his divine association:

Sevitaḥ sahaajānando bhaktaistatkālikairmudā |
*Pratyakṣam samprati jñeyam gururūpeṇa samsthitam ||*⁴⁷²

In the above *kārikā*, Sadhu Bhadreshdas explains that after his physical departure, Swaminarayan, by his own will, chooses to remain present on earth through the Akṣarabrahman Guru. The lineage of the Akṣarabrahman Gurus began with Gunatitanand Swami, which was then continued by Bhagatji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, and currently through Mahant Swami Maharaj.

Parabrahman Swaminarayan is stated as prevailing within the Akṣarabrahman Guru with all his powers and virtues. The Akṣarabrahman Guru is thereby referred to as “pratyakṣa nārāyaṇa svarūpa,” the manifest form of Nārāyaṇa. One must then associate with the Akṣarabrahman Guru and engage in the *pratyakṣa upāsana* of the Parabrahman ever manifesting within him. Due to such eternal manifestation of Parabrahman through the Akṣarabrahman Guru, the service, meditation, and contemplation of the Akṣarabrahman Guru are considered equivalent to that of Parabrahman, consequently yielding the supreme fruit of liberation.

The emphasis on the worship of the manifest Parabrahman through the Akṣarabrahman Guru is reflected in Sadhu Bhadreshdas’ commentary on the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*. The *Upaniṣad*

⁴⁷¹ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā III.38)

⁴⁷² “During the time of Sahaajānand, the devotees had joyously served him. His presence should be known as prevailing through the Guru.” (*Kārikā* 222)

begins with a prayer to various *devatās* and Brahman, the cause and regulator of these *devatās*. Sadhu Bhadresdhas identifies ‘Brahman’ as denoting both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. The prayer further invokes “pratyakṣa” Brahman, “tvameva pratyakṣaṁ brahmā’si.”⁴⁷³ This “pratyakṣa” form of Brahman, that is, the manifest form of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, is identified as the Akṣarabrahman Guru.⁴⁷⁴ Such a Guru is not only the manifest Akṣarabrahman himself, but also eternally upholds Parabrahman. This way, the manifest forms of both the ontological entities Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman prevail in the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

Amongst all the animate and inanimate beings, Parabrahman manifests to a greater extent in his *murtis* and images.⁴⁷⁵ Yet, the Akṣarabrahman Guru is deemed to be superior to these *murtis* and images. The *Sudhā* explains this superiority through mainly two reasons.⁴⁷⁶ Firstly, Parabrahman does not manifest in the *murti* with all his extraordinary virtues, as he does in the Akṣarabrahman Guru. The *murti*, in fact, becomes worthy of worship after it is ceremoniously installed by the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Moreover, the Guru inspires and grants sanctity to not just the *murtis* but also to the various other aspects that impart the bliss of Parabrahman, such as scriptures and pilgrim places:

[t]he three—*murtis*, scriptures and pilgrim places—together do not equal a Sadhu [Akṣarabrahman Guru]. And such a great Sadhu is able to make all three—*murtis*, scriptures and pilgrim places. Therefore, such a Sadhu, in whom God fully resides, is the manifest form of God.⁴⁷⁷

The Akṣarabrahman Guru is the root cause of the Parabrahman’s bliss attained through *murtis*, scriptures and pilgrim places.

Secondly, unlike the *murti*, the Akṣarabrahman Guru imparts bliss through his various divine human exploits. The Guru being *sajātīya* enables greater association and attachment in the manifest form of Parabrahman.⁴⁷⁸ The superiority of the Akṣarabrahman Guru to the *murtis* should not be understood as lowering their importance. In fact, the *sampradāya* has thousands of mandirs across the globe that are home to richly carved *murtis* of Parabrahman

⁴⁷³ “You verily are the manifest Brahman.” (Tai. Up. 1.1.1)

⁴⁷⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 329)

⁴⁷⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 120–21)

⁴⁷⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 133–34)

⁴⁷⁷ (*Svāmīnī Vāto* 5.392)

⁴⁷⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 133)

Swaminarayan and the Akṣarabrahman Gurus. These mandirs not only nourish the devotional aspirations but also embody *sampradāya*'s fundamental philosophical principles of Parabrahman ever with a human form (*sākāra*) and of worshipping the Akṣarabrahman Guru as the manifest form of Parabrahman. Here, the *Sudhā* primarily accentuates Akṣarabrahman Guru, the living embodiment of Parabrahman in his entirety, as the ultimate source of supreme bliss and spiritual nourishment.

The *Sudhā* also upholds the presence of Parabrahman before his manifestation on earth as Swaminarayan through the various incarnations (*avatāras*).⁴⁷⁹ Parabrahman, by his will, “entered” (*anupraveśa*) the incarnations whose various exploits were described by Vyāsa and Vālmiki. The various *Smṛti* texts, attributed to Vyāsa and Vālmiki, in narrating the exploits of the incarnations present during the time of their author, offer teachings on taking refuge of the manifest form of Parabrahman. However, the manifestation of Parabrahman through these incarnations is distinct from his manifestation through the Akṣarabrahman Guru. This is because Parabrahman manifests through them temporarily, only for performing certain particular functions. Further, during this temporary duration of manifestation, Parabrahman manifests only certain powers and virtues. In Akṣarabrahman, on the other hand, he prevails eternally with all his powers and virtues. For this reason, the *Sudhā* notes that while the worship of these incarnations may bear spiritual and moral benefits, liberation is possible only through the *pratyakṣa upāsanā* of Parabrahman through the Akṣarabrahman Guru. This way, “*pratyakṣa upāsanā*” is considered to yield far greater fruits than “*parokṣa upāsanā*.”

One of the most critical factors of *pratyakṣa upāsanā* is to understand that the manifest form of Parabrahman manifesting through the Akṣarabrahman Guru has the same extraordinary divine powers as the form of Parabrahman eternally residing in the divine abode Akṣaradhāman. The *Sudhā* cites the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, “*parāśya śaktir vividhaiva śrūyate svābhāvikī jñānabalakriyā ca*”⁴⁸⁰ which describes the immense power of Parabrahman. *Sudhā* enumerates these inherent powers as encompassing the power to regulate *māyā* and its creations, of attributing sentiency to the non-sentient, creating the wondrous world of mobile and immobile life forms, as the cause and controller of every

⁴⁷⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 133)

⁴⁸⁰ “The Śruti texts reveal the immense power of the Supreme, and his essential knowledge and might are revealed to be manifold.” (Sve. Up. 6.8)

being, including the supreme Akṣarabrahman etc.⁴⁸¹ All such powers essentially prevail in the manifest Parabrahman present through the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Realising this manifest form of Parabrahman terminates all inherent attachments leading to the experience of supreme bliss and liberation.

3.9. Divine

The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta states that all forms of Parabrahman, *anvaya* and *vyatireka*, *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa*, including his manifestation on earth as a human being are “divya.” This section examines the definition of the term ‘divya’ as offered in the *Sudhā* and, in that light, understands the divinity of various forms of Parabrahman. It also highlights the ethical and soteriological significance of such an understanding.

The term ‘divya’ or divine is defined as that which is liberative (*kalyāṇakāri*), invoking wonder (*āścaryamayatvam*), unaffected by any material or *māyika* elements (*alaukika*).⁴⁸² Accordingly, Parabrahman’s body, his arms, legs etc. and virtues of all-doership, omniscience, omnipotence etc., are all ever immensely wondrous, extraordinary, undefiled, and liberative to all those who gain his association.

Upaniṣads that reveal the divinity of Parabrahman, which otherwise seem to assert his formlessness, are explained in terms of the above-mentioned definition of “divya.”⁴⁸³ The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, for instance, when describing the form of the Supreme Being in the supreme abode, states “divyo hyamūrtaḥ puruṣaḥ.”⁴⁸⁴ The terms ‘divya’ (divine) and ‘amūrtaḥ’ (formless) are juxtaposed. The Advaita tradition interprets these terms as describing Parabrahman as “bright,” “distinct from all that is worldly,” and “formless.”⁴⁸⁵ The Ramanuja tradition translates ‘divya’ as “unlimited Effulgence” and ‘amūrtaḥ’ as “no form” but specifies that Brahman has no form “of Material origin or a body due to Karma.”⁴⁸⁶

Sadhu Bhadreshdas, on the other hand, while explaining the term ‘divya,’ focuses on the liberative and otherworldliness of Parabrahman. Further, he explains ‘amūrtaḥ’ as not

⁴⁸¹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 137)

⁴⁸² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 139)

⁴⁸³ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 139–40)

⁴⁸⁴ “The divine and formless puruṣa.” (Mu. Up. 2.1.2)

⁴⁸⁵ (S. Shastri, *The Isa, Kena and Mundaka Upanishads and Sri Sankara’s Commentary* 126)

⁴⁸⁶ (Acharya Narasimha 403)

possessing a material form and virtues.⁴⁸⁷ Thus, this aphorism of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* is understood as referring to an ever divine immaterial human-shaped form of Parabrahman as residing in Akṣaradhāman.

The *Sudhā* highlights that such divinity of Parabrahman is not subject to place or time. Accordingly, this divine Parabrahman continues to be equally divine when he, whilst remaining in his abode, descends on earth in a human-like form. As Swami Paramtattvadas specifies, “[P]arabrahman does not become human *per se* but *assumes* a human form.”⁴⁸⁸ This human-shaped form of Parabrahman is ever pure and divine. This divinity is recognised as one of the most distinguishing facets of Parabrahman. For his physical shape appears just like an ordinary human being yet is significantly different. Accordingly, despite the apparent similarity, the form of Parabrahman is said to be indescribable and incomparable:

The form of God is such that it cannot be compared to the form of anyone in this *brahmāṇḍa*. Why? Because all of the forms in this *brahmāṇḍa* that formed from *prakṛti-puruṣa* are *māyika*, whereas God is divine.⁴⁸⁹

Thus, all action and traits observed in the manifest Parabrahman on earth are divine. He behaves just like ordinary humans, shows human-like qualities of fear, hunger, thirst etc. However, in all these aspects, Parabrahman remains divine. His body, unlike the ordinary human body, is not made up of gross elements (*pañca bhūta*). This absolute divinity of Parabrahman’s human-like form is often explained through the analogy of a sugar coconut⁴⁹⁰—just as a coconut that is formed entirely of sugar crystals can be consumed entirely. Its outer covering or any other aspect need not be removed or discarded as every aspect of the coconut is composed of sugar. Likewise, every aspect of the human-like form of Parabrahman is absolutely divine. It does not consist of any material element or traits.

As the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta upholds Swaminarayan as the manifest Parabrahman, the *Sudhā* specifies that at every phase of his life Swaminarayan was divine. This specification seems important as certain schools of Vedānta, like that of Vallabhacharya, attribute greater divinity to the childhood exploits of their Godhead Kṛṣṇa than to his later

⁴⁸⁷(Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 139–40) (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 258)

⁴⁸⁸ (Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* 141)

⁴⁸⁹ (Vac. Pancālā 4)

⁴⁹⁰ (Vac. Pancālā 7)

life.⁴⁹¹ Ruling out such a difference, the *Sudhā* notes that every exploit of Swaminarayan's life is equally divine.

Another unique aspect of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta is the eternal manifestation of Parabrahman as the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Since the Akṣarabrahman Guru eternally upholds Parabrahman, every aspect of such a Guru's life is deemed as divine as the life of Parabrahman Swaminarayan.

Perceiving divinity in Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman is vital for developing a profound attachment with the Akṣarabrahman Guru. The absence of such a divine perception (*divya bhāva*) is understood to hamper one's conviction and eventually mislead one from the path of liberation. Its significance also reflects when the *Sudhā* discusses the epistemology of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta. Perception of Parabrahman or Akṣarabrahman as an ordinary individual *ātman* is explained as a categorical error called *Cit Khyāti*.⁴⁹² Equating Parabrahman or Akṣarabrahman to an ordinary human is misapprehending their true divine form and nature. Though Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman and the ordinary individual *ātman* (*jīva*) are essentially sentient (*cit*) eternal (*nitya*), Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman are ever divine, pure and far more superior and powerful than the ordinary *ātman*.

Parabrahman's immense divinity in all his forms (*svarūpa*) and virtues (*svabhāva*) is cherished in words as:

Divyo divyā'tidivyo'yaṁ svasaṁgād divyatāpradaḥ |
*Divye dhāmnī sadā divyo divya iha samāgataḥ ||*⁴⁹³

The *Sudhā* here submits that anything or anyone that gets associated with the manifest Parabrahman is regarded as divine (*svasaṁgād divyatāpradaḥ*). Not only the objects that are personally used or touched by the manifest Parabrahman, but all aspirants who have attained his association are divine. Accordingly, all devotees who have associated with the Akṣarabrahman Guru are divine and worthy of respect. This way, the metaphysics of Parabrahman's divinity has a substantial impact on the ethical endeavours to be practised:

⁴⁹¹ (Swami Tapasyananda 224)

⁴⁹² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 193)

⁴⁹³ "Parabrahman is divine, supremely divine than the divine, granting divinity through his association. He is ever divine in his divine abode, also divine when he descends here [on earth]." (*Kārikā* 224)

The only means of becoming such a staunch devotee is by behaving as a servant of the servants of God and by realising, ‘All devotees are great; I am inferior compared to them all.’⁴⁹⁴

In fact, in *Satsang Dikṣā*, the recent *Dharmaśāstra* text of the *sampradāya* composed by the spiritual head Mahant Swami Maharaj, devotees are repeatedly advised to maintain fraternity, divinity and respect towards the fellow members as all have embarked on the spiritual journey towards liberation through the association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru.⁴⁹⁵

One who does not realise so, and perceives this-worldliness in Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman and the devotees, is considered a fool with a demonic mind. The way to change and cultivate such a perception and perceive divinity is with the association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru.⁴⁹⁶ Thus, a true devotee is one who understands the divinity of not just Parabrahman and the Akṣarabrahman Guru but also of the fellow devotees. It is important to note, the insistence on perceiving the divinity in the devotees is due to their association with the Guru that upholds Parabrahman.

Thus, Parabrahman, in every form and nature, is essentially divine. This divinity is not limited to his form in the supreme abode but also prevails in every aspect of his life on earth. As Parabrahman continues his presence on earth through the Akṣarabrahman Guru, every aspect of such Guru’s life is equally divine. His divine presence and association impart divinity. The absence of such an understanding of his divinity affects one’s approach towards fellow devotees and one’s association with Akṣarabrahman Guru and thereby one’s ultimate spiritual goal of liberation.

3.10. Summary

Parabrahman, as the prefix ‘para’ suggests, is the supreme Brahman and the highest ontological entity in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta. This entity is also referred to by other like terms such as Puruṣottama, Paramātman, Sarveśvara and Māyin, which suggest its supremacy over all entities. The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta upholds Swaminarayan as

⁴⁹⁴ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā 1.58)

⁴⁹⁵ (*Satsang Dikṣā* 140, 168, 233, 306)

⁴⁹⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 142–43)

this Supreme Being who had descended on earth in the eighteenth century and founded the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya.

The Supreme Being, Parabrahman, is singular and unparalleled. No other entity can match his supremacy. Even after liberation, the *jīva* and *īśvara* remain ever subordinate to Parabrahman. The singular Parabrahman is the ultimate cause of all creation. He is recognised as the ultimate efficient and material cause of the universe. He not only inspires creation through his own will but also pervades, regulates, and sustains it. Though Akṣarabrahman, by the will of Parabrahman, also engages in the creation and sustenance of the universe, Akṣarabrahman is always inferior to Parabrahman in every way.

An important aspect of Parabrahman's supremacy is his essential nature of being *sat-cit-ānanda*. Parabrahman, as *sat* or *satya*, is ever unchanging, not subject to any modification. He is also the source of the unchanging eternal existence of other entities. He is also *cit*, that is, a self-reflective conscious entity and *ānanda*, that is, ever blissful. This unchanging blissful form of Parabrahman is difficult to grasp by one's limited intellect. The only way to grasp and realise it is through the Akṣarabrahman Guru. One's association with the Akṣarabrahman Guru facilitates a correct understanding of the scriptures and the experience of Parabrahman's divine bliss.

Parabrahman, as the cause of all actions, is not taken to undermine the agency of *jīva* and *īśvara*. Parabrahman bestows fruits on the basis of their freely performed actions. Since the power to think, feel and desire are attributed by Parabrahman, other entities are explained as dependent upon Parabrahman. Parabrahman, on the other hand, is absolutely independent and can even bestow fruits outside the causal law of action.

The independent Parabrahman pervades all beings as their in-dweller and at the same time possesses a transcendental human-shaped form. The immanent or pervasive form of Parabrahman is referred to as his *anvaya* form, while his transcendental form is referred to as his *vyatireka* form. In his *anvaya* form, Parabrahman pervades all animate and inanimate beings but manifests within them in varying degrees. Amongst various animate and inanimate beings on earth, he manifests to a greater extent in his *murtis* and images. He manifests in *īśvara* to even a greater extent in order to perform certain functions. He manifests in Akṣarabrahman to the greatest extent, with all his powers and virtues. The manifestation in other beings is described as “anupraveśa,” an act of entering, as opposed to the manifestation

in Akṣarabrahman, described as “samyak” or a complete manifestation at all times. Parabrahman’s *vyatireka* form is explained in two ways: residing in the supreme abode Akṣaradhāman with a divine human-shaped form and descending on this earth with this divine human-shaped form whilst remaining in his abode. Thus, while Parabrahman is emphasised as possessing a form, this form is eternally human in shape. In fact, in both his *anvaya* and *vyatireka* form, Parabrahman ever possesses a form (*sākāra*) and thereby is never formless (*nirākāra*).

Along with *anvaya* and *vyatireka*, Parabrahman is also described through his *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* forms. The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta through the term ‘saguṇa’ not only explains Parabrahman as encompassing divine attributes but also as being immensely vast. Likewise, the term ‘nirguṇa’ explains Parabrahman as devoid of any material attributes and as subtler than the subtle. Despite being extremely subtle, Parabrahman is stated as always possessing a divine form.

Nature and Form of Parabrahman	<i>Upaniṣadic</i> References
The singular and material cause of creation	“Sadeva somyedamagra āsīdekamevāditiyam” (Ch.Up.6.2.1)
The efficient cause of creation	“tadaikṣata bahu syām prajāyeyeti” (Ch. Up. 6.2.3)
Supremacy over Akṣarabrahman and other entities	“akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ” (Mu. Up. 2.1.2)
<i>Satya</i>	“ayaṁ puruṣo bhāḥ satyaḥ” (Br. Up. 5.6.1)
Source of unchanging existence of other entities	“satyasya satyam” (Br. Up. 2.1.20)
Blissful and source of bliss for others	“raso vai saḥa rasam hyevā’yam labdhvā”ānandī bhavati” (Tai. Up. 2.7.2)

<i>Anvaya</i>	<p>“ātmāntaryāmyamṛtaḥ” (Br. Up. 3.7.15,23)</p> <p>“sarvabhūtāntarātmā” (Ka. Up. 5.9-12)</p>
<i>Vyatireka</i>	<p>“hiraṇmayah puruṣo dṛśyate” (Ch. 1.6.6,7)</p> <p>“tadaikṣata bahu syām prajāyeyeti” (Ch. Up. 6.2.3)</p> <p>“parātparam puriṣayaṁ puruṣamīkṣate” (Pr. Up. 5.5)</p>
Unchanging in all forms	<p>“tasyaitasya tadeva rūpaṁ yadamuṣya rūpaṁ” (Ch. Up. 1.7.5)</p>
Fruit of not perceiving difference in forms of Parabrahman	<p>“mṛtyoḥ sa mṛtyumāpnoti ya iha nāneva paśyati” (Br. Up. 4.4.9)</p>
Divine	<p>“divyo hyamūrtaḥ puruṣaḥ” (Mu. Up. 2.1.2)</p>
Manifest	<p>“tvameva pratyakṣaṁ brahmā’si” (Tai. Up. 1.1.1)</p>

Table 3.10-1 Parabrahman: *Upaniṣadic* References

One of the unique aspects of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta is the continued manifestation of Parabrahman on earth. The manifest Parabrahman (*pratyakṣa*) can be experienced personally as he is *sajātīya*, that is, dwelling in a human form amongst humans. While he descended on earth as Swaminarayan, he eternally remains on earth through the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Though Parabrahman dwells on earth through his *murtis*, he manifests within the Akṣarabrahman Guru in entirety and imparts the bliss of personal association. Before the arrival of Parabrahman on earth as Swaminarayan, he manifested through the various incarnations. Such manifestations were temporary and exhibited limited powers. For this reason, Parabrahman’s manifestation through the Akṣarabrahman Guru is distinct to that through the various incarnations. Worship of the manifest Parabrahman through the

Akṣarabrahman Guru is known as “pratyakṣa upāsanā” which yields the fruit of attaining liberation.

Every form of Parabrahman, particularly the manifest form on earth, are equally divine. The scriptures that assert Parabrahman’s form as “divya” are not explained in terms of luminosity but rather as an other-worldly form that is pure and liberating. The manifest form on earth is as pure and liberating as the form residing in the supreme abode. Even when assuming a human-shaped form, Parabrahman remains essentially undefiled by human flaws and faults. Everything or person that associates with the manifest Parabrahman also becomes pure.