Part-1

METAPHYSICS OF LORD SWAMINARAYAN
Chapter : i

VIŚISTĀDVAIT PRINCIPLE OF SPIRITUAL PHILOSOPHY

In the realm of spirituality, numerous philosophers and spiritual figures have propounded different theories, principles and doctrines - all with a view to understand the relationship of the soul with God, and also for attaining the ultimate salvation. Each doctrine has been formed according to the background, vision, knowledge and personal experience of its propounder. Since these factors are relative, all theories vary in their definitions and principles. In all these theories, a common factor is that of māyā (illusion) being the biggest impediment in the relationship of the Soul with God. So it is equally essential in all the theories to know the form and function of māyā.

The Vedānta expounds different principles of spiritual paths such as the Kevalādvaita (Absolute monism), the Viśiṣṭādvaita (Qualified non-dualism), the dvaita (dualism), the Dvaitādvaita (Identity and difference), the Ācintya bhedābheda (Inconceivable identity in difference) and Śuddhādvaita (Pure non-dualism). Here, it is necessary to discuss three prominent views namely Kevalādvaita (absolute monism) of Śankarācārya, Śuddhādvaita (pure non-dualism) of Vallabhācārya and Viśiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānujācārya (qualified non-dualism) as compared to the Navya Viśiṣṭādvaita (neo qualified non-dualism) of Lord Swaminarayan.

KEVALĀDVAITA (Absolute Monism) OF ŚANKARĀCĀRYA

Vedic literature depicts different views regarding the nature of reality that is considered to be either personal or impersonal, either transcendent or
empirical, either universal or particular, either static or dynamic, either cosmic or supra-cosmic.

According to Śankarācārya, the absolute reality is impersonal, transcendent, ineffable, without attributes (nirguṇa), immobile and formless.

Śankarācārya’s interpretation of the Vedic scriptures is known as Kevalādvaita (Absolute Monism) because he believed that the soul is identical with God. Although there are many scriptural statements describing the absolute truth as the Supreme Person and the souls as His subordinate eternal parts, Śankarācārya believed that the souls are themselves the absolute truth, and that there is ultimately no diversity, separate individuality, or personality in spiritual existence. He believed that the supposed separateness of individuality of both, the Supreme Being and the soul, is false.

In interpreting the Vedic verses describing ‘Īśvara’ – the Supreme Being, Śankarācārya presented the theory of two aspects of Brahma: the Nirguṇa brahma (the pure impersonal Brahma that is without attributes) and the Sagun Brahma (the Brahma that manifests in the universe as the Lord, and is therefore with attributes).

The saguna Brahma is within the domain of avidyā (nescience) and is the object of meditation. The nirguṇa brahma is free from all illusory and limiting adjuncts and is the object of knowledge. Śankarācārya holds that while meditation on saguna Brahma cannot lead to liberation, knowledge of the nirguṇa brahma alone leads to liberation.

The Advaita Vedānta propounded by Śankarācārya is based on these four Mahāvākyas (great sayings) of the Shruti:

1) ‘Sarvam khalvidam Brahma’ ('Everything there is Brahma.')

2) ‘Tatvamasi’ ('that thou art.')
3) ‘Aham brahmāsmi’ (‘I am Brahma.’)

4) ‘Ekameva dvitiyam brahma’ (‘Brahma is the one and only reality.’)

In the Čhāndogya Upaniṣada the Mahāvākyā ‘Tatvamasi’ has been illustrated through a dialogue between father and son respectively Uddālaka and Śvetaṅketu. The father explains to his son that in the beginning Brahma alone existed. Then it decided to evolve itself into the world, and that evolution includes all of us. Therefore, man is not essentially different from Brahma. Just as, the subtle seed is the cause of tree. Similarly, the subtle reality Brahma (tat) is the cause of human being (tvam) the soul. Although in this teaching there is a blending of the Supreme subject and the object, everything is a part of Brahma, and Brahma runs through all that exists. This dialogue brings out the immanent character of Brahma. This Brahma is regarded as the cause of the creation, maintenance and transformation of the world.

This statement implies that creation is not a reality in the sense of new things being created, nor is destruction a reality since all that arises from Brahma eventually gets absorbed in it.

Śankarācārya held that questions about the origin of the cosmos are unanswerable and that the nature of avidyā is inexplicable. He asserted two theories about the status of avidyā: Vivartavāda (theory of appearance) and Adhyāsvāda (theory of super imposition) which is also known as Māyāvāda.

**VIVARTAVĀDA (Theory of Appearance)**

Śankarācārya’s theory regarding the status of the world is that of Vivartavāda. He criticizes the theory of Brahma-parināmavāda according to which Brahma is the real cause of the world. Śankarācārya’s own theory regarding the world is known as Brahm-Karanvāda. This theory regards
Brahma as the cause of the world in the sense that Brahma is the background of everything that exists. The world of things is the result of the interaction of Brahma with its power of avidyā. Thus, the phenomenal world is a Superimposition upon Brahma. It is not real but an appearance of Brahma and like all appearances it is unreal. Thus, this theory brings out the transitory or relative character of the material world.

ADHYÅSVADA (Theory of Super Imposition)

Śankarācārya starts his Śārīrika Bhāṣya with the description of Adhyāsvada. Adhyās means superimposition. The mind tends to superimpose the qualities of the unreal on the real and that of the real on the unreal. The concept of Adhyās is explained through the analogy of snake and rope. When a rope is mistaken for a snake, the mind superimposes the qualities of a snake on the rope. One’s reaction to the object is also as if it were a real snake. This is a case of perceptual error where the real nature of the object (rope) is obscured from one’s understanding, and the object that is not real or existent (snake) is perceived instead of the real object (rope). This superimposition of the false on the truth occurs due to the condition of darkness. This darkness is a symbol of ignorance – the darkness of ‘māyā’ – avidyā that is present in the human mind. This theory infers that the reality of the world is only a projection of the human mind where the material and transitory world is taken as real by the human mind. Māyā is both āvarana and vikṣepa, an envelop as well as new projection.

When the light is switched on, the darkness is immediately dispelled and it is clearly revealed that the object present is a rope and not a snake. Thus, light is a symbol of knowledge, and in its presence darkness of ignorance (māyā) immediately disappears.

Śankarācārya has described the whole human experience as adhyās since we continuously superimpose the qualities of the real on the unreal and
the unreal on the real. We treat the transitory objects of the world as real and permanent and all that is truly real and permanent remains beyond our grasp.

Śankarācārya believes that the knowledge of nirguna brahma is the sole means of attaining liberation and that rituals prescribed in the Vedic literature are irrelevant and redundant.

**ŚUDDHĀDVAITA (Pure Monism) OF VALLABHĀCĀRYA**

Vallabhācārya propounded the doctrine of Śuddhādvaita (pure non-dualism) in his book *Anubhāṣya*. According to this theory Brahma is the only existing entity, and His desire to create the universe is called Māyā. Thereby Brahma is the Cause, and creation of the universe is the Effect. This Māyā has two forms: (1) Vidyā (knowledge) and (2) Avidyā (ignorance).

Souls are parts of Brahma, separated from their origin as sparks from fire. Thus, being identical with Brahma, the souls are also eternal entities. The universe is born out of Brahma's desire, and the souls have originated from its basic form. Thus both Māyā and Jīvas are an extension of Brahma itself. Thereby it is believed that the interplay of both these forms is actually the pastimes (līlā) of Brahma himself with His own forms.

The soul, controlled by Avidyā (ignorance), becomes entrapped in the bondage of samsara (the worldly life). Vallabhācārya makes a distinction between samsara and jagat and holds that it is samsara which is unreal whereas jagat is real. Vidyā (knowledge as 'Aham shuddho brahmāsmi', 'I am pure Brahma') enables the soul to transcend māyā and by surrendering unto Brahma, it attains a closer relationship with Brahma. Ultimately, just as a flame merges into another flame, the soul merges into Brahma. This union is believed to be the ultimate spiritual salvation according to Vallabhācārya’s philosophy.
Vallabhācārya incorporated the path of Bhakti into the spiritual basis of his doctrine. In the divine abode (Golok) of Lord Kṛṣṇa there are innumerable devotees experiencing the bliss of liberation. When an aspirant’s loving devotion is combined with pure knowledge of the glory of the Supreme, he attains the grace of God. This grace results in the seeker achieving the knowledge of Śuddhādvaita (Pure Monism). This ultimate grace is termed ‘Puṣṭi’, and this Faith is also known as the ‘Puṣṭi-Mārg’. Shrimad Bhagavat is the main scripture of this Faith.

Just as the Gopis were totally absorbed in the person of Lord Kṛṣṇa with loving devotion, this path advocates for a devotee to let all his senses be submerged in the love of God. The seeker should strive to channelise his sense-gratification towards his Lord.

**VĪṢĪṬĀDV&AITAI** (Qualified non-dualism) OF RĀMĀNUJĀCĀRYA

Rāmānujācārya has propounded the philosophy of Vīṣīṭādvaita (qualified non-dualism). He believed in three realities called ‘Tattvatraṇaya’ namely īt (living beings - souls), aĉit (inanimate things), Īśvara (Brahma/absolute).

Chit living beings are of three kinds: 1) ‘baddha’ (souls in bondage), 2) ‘mukta’ (released souls), 3) ‘nitya’ (eternally free souls). They are atomic in size and are subordinate and subservient to the Supreme Being. They are His ‘sesa’ – they exist and work for His purpose. They are ruled by ‘karma’; the pleasure and pain experienced by the souls are the effects of their ‘karma’.

Aĉit – (inanimate things) is called prakṛti or māyā. It is composed of the three qualities – satva, rajas and tamas. It is all-pervasive. For Rāmānujaacārya, Māyā is the wonderful power of God by which He creates this world. By the term ‘avidyā’ he conveys ignorance of the individual or
Jiva. ‘Avidyā’ makes an individual identify himself wrongly with the transient and illusory nature of the world.

RāmānujaČārya regards the souls and māyā (prakṛti) as constituting the two aspects of the body of God. The Supreme Being pervades, controls, and directs the chit as well as the aćit. He is called their ‘atman’ (soul), and they are His body. Thus, there is a Body-Soul Relationship (sarīr-śarīrī bhāv) between them. This is considered to be the most important of the fundamental doctrines of Viśistādvaita of RāmānujaČārya.

The Supreme Being is known by the terms of ‘Viśnu’, ‘Nārāyaṇa’ and ‘Vāsudeva’. RāmānujaČārya declares in the first sutra of Śrībhāṣya that Brahma – the Supreme Being is by nature devoid of all evil, and He possesses innumerable auspicious virtues. These qualities are unsurpassed in excellence. He is transcendental (‘para’) and easily accessible (‘sulabh’).

The Supreme Being is believed to be a personal God full of affection and concern for the creation. Commenting on the Bhagavad Gītā:

‘jnānī tvātmaiva me matam’

RāmānujaČārya states that the Lord cannot ‘live’ without His loving devotee who forms His own ‘atman’ (soul).

RāmānujaČārya advocates ‘prapatti-mārg’ as the easiest means of salvation. One who surrenders himself at the feet of God is liberated from bondage and misery. Liberation involves the engagement of intense remembrance or devotion towards God. Videha mukti is attained after the soul leaves the body and migrates to vaikunth, the divine abode of God, Lord Vishnu.

The ‘Viśistādvaita’ of RāmānujaČārya is also known as the theory of ‘Identity in difference’ for it shows a combination of the ‘advaita’ doctrine
with the ‘dvaita’. In ‘Vaikunth’ the Lord and the devotee are united and the liberated soul attains the auspicious qualities and the supreme powers as those possessed by the Lord Himself. In spite of this union, the devotee remains apart (bhinna) from God in that he performs devotional worship as a sevak (servant) unto Shri Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa.

**NAVYA VIŚISTĀDVAITA (Neo Qualified Non-Dualism) OF LORD SWAMINARAYAN**

Lord Swaminarayan accepted the doctrine of Viśistādvaita as Śrī Rāmānujaācārya originally propounded it, and He introduced a modified version of this theory by adding extremely significant and nuances to the definitions of metaphysical realities. Hence the ‘Qualified non dualism’ of Rāmānujaācārya is termed the ‘Neo qualified non dualism’ (‘Navya Viśistādvaita’) as expounded in the Swaminarayan philosophy.

“...Matam Viśistādvaitam me...”

(The spiritual principle of our philosophy is ‘Qualified Non-dualism’.)

Lord Swaminarayan’s philosophy is based on the path of devotional worship just as Rāmānujaācārya’s theory does. In both the doctrines, the Lord and Devotee relationship is characterized with the principle of ‘Identity in difference’, a combination of the ‘advaita’ doctrine with the ‘dvaita’. The devotee is one with the Lord; yet at the same time, he retains a separate identity in his servitudinal devotional worship of the Supreme. Thus this relationship is chiefly based on the ‘Swāmī-sevak bhav’ (Master-servant relationship).

The subtle modifications introduced by Lord Swaminarayan differentiate His philosophy from Rāmānujaācārya’s doctrine in a number of ways. While Rāmānujaācārya has defined three basic entities, the
‘Tattvatreya’ namely, chit (living beings - souls), acit (inanimate things – māyā), Isvara (Brahma - the Supreme Being), Lord Swaminarayan defines five entities as being the fundamental realities, all distincts from one another. These entities are – (1) Jīva (Soul) (2) Īśvara (cosmic being) (3) Māyā (prakṛti) (4) Brahma (Super soul) (5) Parabrahma (the Supreme Personality of Godhead). Each of these entities is separate, have existed since time immemorial, and will continue to exist forever. They are real and not imaginary. They are never destroyed, and never merge to become one.

Lord Swaminarayan defines the five eternal realities as follows:

1) 'Jīva'

Jīva or the soul is the finite individual self-conscious spirit, knower, enjoyer and doer. ‘Jīvas’ are innumerable, each distinct from the rest. In Śiksāpatrī, Lord Swaminarayan defines:

“‘Jīva’ as imperceptible, atomic, subtle entity, residing in the heart.
It is indivisible and intangible. Its nature is sentience and it pervades the whole body. It is conditioned by the adjuncts of māyā.”

2) ‘Īśvara’

Īśvara is the cosmic conscious spiritual being conditioned by the adjuncts of Mahā (higher) māyā. There are innumerable Īśvaras, each of which is assigned the duty of taking care of a universe, or at least a region of it, they are involved in the creation, sustenance and destruction of the universe as willed and controlled by the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

3) ‘Māyā’

Māyā or ‘prakṛti’ is an inert primordial principle from which the universe of names and forms comes into being. It is the subtle and material cause of creation, and it is also the cause of bondage to ‘Jīva’
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and 'Īśvara'. It is one and unique; but when transformed into the products of creation, it assumes infinite number of forms. In Śikṣāpatrī, Lord Swaminarayan defines:

"Māyā as being 'trigunatmika' i.e constituting the three 'guna' (qualities) - 'rajas, tamas, satva'. Ignorance and darkness compose the basic aspects of its nature. Māyā is the power of God that creates for the 'Jīva,' bondage of attachment to the body and its relations."  

4) **Brahma**

The *Swaminarayan Vedanta* describes 'Aksarbrahma' or 'Brahma' as the fourth entity that transcends the three realities of Jīva, Īśvara, and Māyā. It is the supporter of these three entities, pervading and transcending them at the same time. It is the substratum of all that is subservient to it. However, Aksarbrahma is still subservient to Parabrahma. It is the highest eternal reality beyond which exists only Parabrahma or the Lord Puruṣottama.

Aksarbrahma is one, unique and matchless. In its personal aspect, Aksarbrahma possesses a personal (human-like) form with auspicious qualities and divine volition, and personifies supreme knowledge and absolute reverential devotion unto Lord Puruṣottama. In its impersonal aspect, Aksarbrahma is the infinite divine abode of God in spatial terms. Lord Swaminarayan describes these two forms of Aksara Brahma:

"The element of Aksarbrahma has dual aspects simultaneously. Firstly, it is the formless homogeneous absolute consciousness described as 'cidākāś' (sentient space) or 'Brahma-mahol'; secondly, the same Aksarbrahma is always in the proximity and
service of Lord Purusottama as His closest and highest devotee.\textsuperscript{5}

\textit{Aksarbrahma} in its impersonal aspect also serves as an all-pervasive immanent element; i.e. it pervades and supports all things sentient and insentient in the universe. It is immanent even in the smallest part of an atom. While \textit{Aksarbrahma} has this infinitesimal form, simultaneously it also has a contrasting vast form that is infinite like space and has no barriers. The vastness of this \textit{Brahmapur} extends to infinity, and in this aspect, it serves the Lord in the form of the divine abode that is effulgent and infinite, holding innumerable liberated souls who also serve the Lord. \textit{Lord Swaminarayan} describes these two forms thus:

“In this impersonal (\textit{nirguna}) form, it is subtler than the subtlest atom; and in its (\textit{saguna}) form as the divine abode of God, its vastness is greater than the greatest of objects. Every pore of His being contains infinite number of microcosms as if they were atoms. It is not as if these universes become small in His proximity; but the infinite greatness and vastness of \textit{Aksarbrahma} make them seem as small as atoms.”\textsuperscript{6}

\textit{Aksarbrahma} also serves the Lord in a personified form both in His divine abode – ‘\textit{Aksara Dham}’ - and also wherever Lord Purusottama incarnates. \textit{Lord Swaminarayan} says:

“When God descends on earth and assumes a human form for the redemption of souls, He appears along with His divine abode ‘\textit{Aksardham}’, liberated souls from the kingdom of God, and with all His divine and supreme powers.”\textsuperscript{7}
Thus, *Aksarbrahma* serves in four forms: as an all-pervasive immanent element, the impersonal (*nirguna*) form; the *saguna* form as the divine abode of God; as the closest and highest devotee of *Lord Purusottama*; and finally, as a simultaneous incarnation on earth with the Lord.

*Lord Swaminarayan* has defined the entity of *Aksarbrahma* as the highest among devotees. Therefore *Aksarbrahma* has a prominent and essential place in the *Swaminarayan Upāsanā* (mode of worship). This *Upāsanā* cannot be successful without the presence and guidance of *Aksarbrahma*.

*Lord Purusottama* dwells in all the metaphysical elements in the form of His omnipotent energy; yet *Aksarbrahma is the only absolute manifestation of the image, glory and grace of Parabrahma Paramātman*. Therefore, only through the medium of *Aksarbrahma* can the divine form and resplendent glory of *Lord Purusottama* be realized, *mâyā* be eradicated, and ultimate liberation be attained. Hence, any spiritual aspirant, seeking to realize God in all His greatness and glory, has to emulate and follow *Aksarbrahma* to attain his goal. *Aksarbrahma* is the ideal devotee performing submissive and reverential devotion (*dāsa-ybhakti*) in an constant communion with God, and therefore he is the perfect medium for spiritual aspirant striving to realize God.

*Lord Swaminarayan* presented easiest way by giving explicit and precise definitions where soul attains the privilege to perform devotional worship for *‘Aksarbrahma’* only by identifying and uniting with the entity of *Aksarbrahma*. When the entity of *Aksarbrahma* is not known and understood as distinct from *Aksarbrahma*, the path of
‘Upāsanā’ (mode of worship) is deprived of its crystal purity, and the aspirant (Jīva) cannot attain the virtues, qualities and relationship as those of Akṣarbrahma.

5) PARABRAHMA (The Supreme Personality of Godhead):

Parabrahma – Lord Puruṣottama is the highest ontological reality. Akṣarbrahma is immediately next to Parabrahma in order, subordinate to Him, but transcendent to Jīva, Īśvara, and Māyā. Both Akṣarbrahma and Parabrahma are distinct from each other. Parabrahma is described as distinct (‘anya’), superior (‘uttam’) and transcendent (‘parātpara’) to Akṣarbrahma. Although Parabrahma is immanent in Akṣarbrahma, yet -

“...Parabrahma - Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa is distinct from Akṣarbrahma, and is also the cause, support, and inspirer of Brahma.”

Therefore, He is proclaimed as the Supreme Being – Puruṣottama – in the scriptures. He is transcendent to all the other metaphysical realities:

“yasmāt ksharam atīto ‘hum, akṣarād api ćottamaḥ 
ato ‘smi loke vede ēa prathitaḥ puruṣottamaḥ”

(‘I transcend the perishable (Kṣara), and I am even higher than the imperishable (Aksara), therefore I am worshipped as the Supreme Personality – Puruṣottama in the world and in the Vedas.’)

Jīva, Īśvara, Māyā and Akṣarbrahma are all supported, governed, and controlled by His omniscient potency; and at the same time, He is distinct and superior to all of them. They all are dependent on Him, and are incapable of doing anything without His inspiring force. Just
as *Aksarbrahma* is one, unique and matchless in its own right, *Aksarbrahma* is also one, unique and unparalleled. He is the Supreme Being with an infinitely auspicious and perfect personality; therefore He is also called *Pūrna Puruṣottama*.

*Jīva, Īśvara, Māyā and Aksarbrahma* together constitute the body of *Parabrahma*; thus He is the āmān (soul) immanent in all these entities. He is the Supreme object of worship and adoration for everyone.

Of His infinite attributes, the distinct qualities of *Parabrahma* are:

1. **Supreme** (*'Sarvopari')**: Of all the metaphysical entities, *parabrahma* alone is independent and transcendent, and the support of all elements subservient to Him. He is the cause of all incarnations, and He is the cause and support of every element including *Aksarbrahma*. Lord Swaminarayan describes the supremacy of God thus:

   “...all the incarnations have originated from God; and He Himself is the Incarnator (cause of all incarnations), and He is the omniscient indwelling Being in all. His idol is radiant and is eternally with a human-like form with infinite divine powers. He is the Sovereign Ruler of infinite number of microcosms, and He is the cause of *Aksarbrahma* too.”

The pinnacle of the supreme powers of *Parabrahma* is expressed thus:

   “...*Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa* ... is exceptionally powerful... He can merge the divine abode – *Aksardhām* – that He dwells in, and can stand sovereign all on His own. And if
He so wills, He has the supreme power to hold innumerable liberated souls by Himself without Aksardhām. ...Thus Nārāyaṇa remains supreme with His divine powers.”11

God is one, unique and unparalleled (‘Ekam eva advitiya’). 

Lord Swaminarayan says:

“God alone is like Himself. Many have attained virtues like those of God by means of worshipping Him; yet they can never become like God.”12

“...God is one and unparalleled. He has supreme powers. No one and even Aksara is capable of becoming like Him – this is an immutable principle.”13

2. The omnipotent and the all-doer (Sarvaśaktimāna, Sarvakartā). Parabrahma Paramātmā is the all-doer (Sarvakartā). Parabrahma is the all-controller and the sovereign ruler of all realities. Unless willed by Him, nobody can move even a dry leaf. Lord Swaminarayan says:

“...Parmēśvar (God) is the inspiring force of space, time, actions (karma) and Māyā; and He allows these factors to dominate out of His own volition, but they all rest on His support. ... Just as subjects are dependent on their King; and the minister and the chief minister can do only so much as the King allows them, similarly land, time, actions (karma) and Māyā can work only as much as God allows, but they cannot work an iota beyond His will. Therefore, God is the only all-doer.”14

On many occasions Lord Swaminarayan has Himself talked about His Supremacy. On one such occasion,
Paramahansa Premānanda Swāmī being a poet and inspired by the Lord, puts Lord’s glory in his religious poetry, “bolyā śrī hari re…” (Lord says thus)

“...jīva īśvara tano re, māyā kāla puruṣa pradhāna sahune vaśa karu re, sahuno preraka hu bhagawāna agaṇita viśvanī re, upatti pālana pralaya thāya mārī marajī vinā re, koithī taraṇu nava todāya...”

(The inspirer of jīva, īśvara, māyā, kāla, puruṣa, pradhāna, I control them all. I am the Lord. I create, sustain and dissolve countless worlds. Without My will, no one can pluck even a blade of grass.)

He is also Omniscient (‘Sarvajñā’) and Omnipresent (‘Sarvavyāpaka’). To all living beings, Lord Purusottama rewards the fruits of their actions (karma). Lord Swaminarayan says in the Śikṣāpatrī:

“As the Jīva resides in the heart, Parmātmā resides in the soul by means of His omniscient power. He is absolutely independent and determines the karma of all and confers the consequences accordingly (‘karmafalpradātā’).”

3. Having an eternally divine and human-like form (‘Sadā divya sākāra’). He is the reservoir of all forms of bliss (‘Sarvasukhnidhāna’) replete with innumerable auspicious virtues (‘Sarvagunāsampāna’).

“Rāmānujačārya resorts to the teachings of The Bhagavad Gītā to substantiate his own version of the Viśistādvaita Philosophy. In his commentary on the Bhagavad Gītā, he states his belief in the divine form and personal aspect of
God by saying that the Highest Reality is a Personal God, endowed with innumerable auspicious qualities.”

Lord Swaminarayan logically explains in the Vaśanāṁrta that God has a definite form:

“...Lord Purusottama has an eternal (human-like) form, and this idol is extremely lustrous. ... And the Shruti also says – ‘The Lord looks towards māyā (sa aikṣat)’. Is it possible that the Lord has eyes only? He has arms and legs too. Thus, the personal form of God is established.”

Lord Swaminarayan stated the attribute of human-like personal form of God as an immutable principle in Vaśanāṁrta:

“...In the consciousness and radiance of the divine abode of God – Aksardhām, dwells the eternal idol (the image of man) of Śrī Kṛṣṇa vāsudev; and He is the all-doer in this personal form itself, as nothing can be achieved by the formless.”

His deep faith in this belief was also backed by His own experience:

“...In the space of my heart, I see an extremely bright light... Just as the sky is overcast with clouds during the monsoon season, there is only a brilliant light permeating in my heart. Within this luminous light (of the divine abode – Aksardhām), I see the idol of God as exclusively lustrous. Although this idol is dark, it does not seem so, due to its exceptional radiance; it seems remarkably fair. And that idol has two hands, and that idol is with two feet, and is extremely charismatic; but that idol does not possess
four arms or eight arms or a thousand arms. This idol is extremely serene, human-like in form, and youthful."^20

Lord Swaminarayan propounded His firm conviction and experience of the divine form of God, and expressed deep sorrow at the hint of any belief in the formlessness of the Lord. He says:

"...One who believes God to be formless and abstract is a sin that is more irredeemable than the five greatest sins (pancha mahā-pāpa). There is no atonement prescribed for this sin. ... A devotee should have an immutable conviction of the divine form of God and with this understanding he should perform firm worship (Upāsanā). This is what we are telling you; so follow this discourse with a firm resolution."^21

All the Vedic philosophies and commentaries accept Parabrahma as the highest and the most sublime entity. Although the form, attributes and glory of Aksarbrahma have been extensively expounded in the scriptures, and in certain Shrutis, Brahma is described as a distinct entity, the basic concept of this reality remains by and large ambiguous; at times even describing Brahma as synonymous with Parabrahma. Even in the theory formulated by Rāmānujaacārya, the entities of 'Brahma' and 'Aksarbrahma' are not specifically differentiated as independent realities.

Lord Swaminarayan interpreted the entities of Aksarbrahma and Parabrahma most explicitly for the first time in Vedic history. He threw light on all the ambiguities and presented a perfectly logical, comprehensive and definitive picture of the metaphysical realities. The forms, attributes, powers and glory of Aksarbrahma, and its relationship to Parabrahma as expounded by Lord Swaminarayan are the most significant and original contributions to the Navya
Visistadvaita (neo qualified non-dualism) theology of the Swaminarayan Faith. This philosophy is also looked upon as the 'Doctrine of Aksara' on the grounds of the indispensability of Aksarbrahma as advocated by Lord Swaminarayan.

According to Rāmānujācārya's theory, videha mukti for the devotee means taking on a divine form after leaving the earthly body and attaining the divine abode of God. Lord Swaminarayan's philosophy states that liberation can be attained in this living human form by offering devotion with the pure knowledge of the glory and grandeur of God.

Rāmānujācārya believes that recreation is the only motive prompting Brahma to create, sustain and destroy the universe. According to Lord Swaminarayan, God creates the world neither as a recreational activity nor for any purpose of His own. Creation is an act of sheer magnanimous grace and benevolence. The will of Brahma to create the universe is prompted by His compassion for giving the souls an opportunity to break the bondage of māyā and thereby attain the final salvation.

**LORD SWAMINARAYAN'S PHILOSOPHY**

**(AS COMPARED TO ŠANKARĀČĀRYA AND VALLABHĀČĀRYA)**

Lord Swaminarayan, as a propounder of a new Faith in the modern times, displays exceptional broadmindedness and magnanimity of vision in His philosophy and works. The quintessence of His philosophy is not borrowed from different 'isms' of Vedic doctrines; but it is a comprehensive and definitive system of sacred and immutable principles elicited from a direct and deep study of the Vedic scriptures.
The Kevalādvaita (Absolute Monism) advocated by Śankarācārya seems to have pointedly contradicted the principles of the Bhagavad Gītā and the Purāṇas by equating soul (‘Jīva’) with the Supreme Being. The entity of Brahma is one and unique, divine and unparalleled; yet it is considered to be identical to the variegated souls. Lord Swaminarayan does not agree with this belief:

“...and here we are stating our opinion in brief, that we do not favour the way Shankar Swami has propounded the Monistic Brahma (‘advait Brahma’).”

Śankarācārya presented the theory of two aspects of Brahma: the nirguna brahma and the saguna brahma, the latter being within the domain of Māyā (nescience). Lord Swaminarayan asserts that when the entity of Brahma is the fountainhead of supreme knowledge, without any limiting adjuncts, and is pure, independent, eternally divine and transcendent, it cannot be eclipsed by Māyā in any way whatsoever.

Śankarācārya also seems to have collected excerpts from the Shruti that only establish the formlessness and the impersonal attributes of Brahma or the Absolute Reality. He seems to have deliberately ignored the Śruti that substantiates the personal aspect of Brahma; for instance “God looked towards Māyā.” (‘Sa aikṣat’).

The great quotes (Mahāvākyas from the Shruti) adopted by Śankarācārya prescribe a path of spirituality for the seeker, For instance ‘Aham brahmāsmi’ (I am Brahma). But in this discipline the distinction between the worshipper and the Worshipped (seeker and God) ceases, for this path naturally infers that the aspirant seeks to realize his own self rather than the Absolute Reality. Lord Swaminarayan counters these beliefs by saying:
“...Lord Purusottama is transcendent to the Ksara (perishable) and the Aksara (imperishable elements). ... And we have ‘Upāsanā’ (devout worship) for that Lord Purusottama, and we have a profound devotion for that Lord Purusottama just as the Gopis did.”

Śankarācārya’s Kevalādvaita (absolute monism) is also strongly criticized by staunch advocates of the Bhakti cult, mainly by Vaiśnava Ačāryas like Rāmānujačārya and Vallabhācārya.

According to Vallabhācārya’s philosophy, Brahma’s desire to create the universe is Māyā. This makes māyā an extension of Brahma itself. In what is actually His playacting (‘Līlā’), the pure and unparalleled God (Brahma) takes on many static and dynamic forms in His creation - (‘Ekoham bahusyām’). By this principle, everything is Brahmaized and therefore nothing is touched by Māyā.

According to Lord Swaminarayan only the supreme entities of Brahma and Parabrahma are independent and transcendent to Māyā. All the other metaphysical realities (‘Jīva’ and ‘Īśvara’) are subservient to Māyā, and therefore controlled by it. ‘The static and dynamic forms caused by Māyā in its creation are a manifestation of God’ – this is not stated as a principle in any of the scriptures.

In the doctrine of Śuddhādvaita, the path of Bhakti He advocates channelizing the senses devotionally towards God as the way to liberation. But there is the present danger, the senses indulge in devotional surrender for divine playacting (līlā), may slip towards sensuous pleasures, leading the devotee towards a life of epicurean pleasures. Thus, instead of attaining the ultimate grace of God (pusti), the devotee is likely to lapse into a gross existence.
Lord Swaminarayan’s deep study of all the Vedic scriptures is reflected in His theology and in the code of ethical living (for example, Śikṣāpatrī) that He has prescribed for all His followers. This framework of ethical conduct is rooted in the spiritual vision of the totally spiritual personality of Lord Swaminarayan. At the same time it also shows His extremely practical and balanced discrimination in accepting religious principles and creeds with a profound insight into human nature and social conditions. As a result the tenets laid down in the Śikṣāpatrī work as universal protective shields against the evils threatening physical and mental health, social harmony and morality. This interpretation has led to Śikṣāpatrī being termed as Śūdarśana Čakra in the age of kaliyuga.

Human race, subject to its prevailing psychological and social conditions, is perennially in need of a protecting and guiding principle. Evolution or degeneration of humanity depends on this factor. When mankind is graced with the advent of divinity as its guiding principle, it is the most fortunate and auspicious phenomenon leading to its evolution and liberation.

THE PHENOMENA OF DIVINE INCARNATIONS

Man, by his innate nature, is drawn towards divinity. If the external conditions are conducive to spiritual pursuits, he is able to attain spiritual realization. But when the moral order of the world is disturbed, and evil threatens to bring about chaos, weak as he is in his human limitations, man needs a supreme power that could help him fight the forces of evil and lead him on the path of salvation. The phenomenon when divinity chooses this crucial time to descend on earth and conquer evil is called the event of ‘avatār’ in Hindu mythology and the person tāranhār.
While Jesus Christ is regarded as ‘the son of God’ and Mohammed is considered to be a messenger of God, the annals of Hinduism speak of several personages who are considered to be direct incarnations of the Supreme Being. The basic reason for their advent and the definite purpose they aim to achieve on earth are narrated thus, in *the Bhagavad Gītā*:

\[ \text{"yadā yadā hi dharmasya, glānir bhavati bhārata,}
\]
\[ \text{abhyaṭthānam adharmasya, tadātmānam srjāmy ahām;}
\]
\[ \text{paritṛnāy sādhūnām vinaśaya ča duskrām,}
\]
\[ \text{dharma-sansthapanarthaya sambhavāmi yuge yuge."} \text{24} \]

(‘O descendent of Bharat! Whenever there is decline in *dharma* and when *adhara* - evil reigns, at that time I manifest on earth. To deliver the pious and to conquer the evil, and to rejuvenate the dying spirit of *dharma*, I appear in every age.’)

The chief purpose of divine incarnation always seem to have been to conquer the evil and to protect the devout. This implies a caring concern in the heart of divinity for the pious souls.

While on the one hand the metaphysical aspects of the Supreme are His omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence, on the other hand there is love, compassion and grace that constitute the moral aspect of the divine personality. The creator of the world and the judge of the actions of all is also the saviour and the redeemer with His compassion and grace for humanity.

\[ \text{"...God so loves the world that He gives Himself to it. ... His love is}
\]
\[ \text{His essential nature, not a transitory quality. ... Love belongs to the}
\]
\[ \text{very core of God’s Being. Utter and complete self-giving is the}
\]
\[ \text{nature of divine activity. ...The great story of life on earth is in a}
\]
\[ \text{sense the ‘martyrdom of God’.} \text{25} \]
The story thus is not about how man reaches divinity, but it is about how God descends to the level of man, accepting imperfections for His own perfection, the finite realm for His own Infinity. The confluence of such extreme polarities cannot be possible without the magnanimous compassion, benevolent grace and divine love of God for man.

The history of Hinduism is enriched by a recurring confluence of humanity and divinity through the ages. Of the many divine incarnations, Lord Rāma and Lord Kṛṣṇa are the most noted figures who fought against evil, protected their devotees and played vital roles influencing their contemporary times. Lord Rāma conquered evil personified in the form of Rāvana and set high ethical standards of conduct for his subjects, Lord Kṛṣṇa appears in variegated roles. He was the loving companion of the Gopis, a compassionate saviour for the pure and the devout in the clutches of evil, a caring and guiding brother to the Pāṇḍavas and a gracious friend to Arjuna. At the same time, He was also the forbidding power determined to conquer evil and all those supporting evils. The problems, struggles and conflicts which prevailed in the age of Mahābhārata are universal in nature, born, as they are, out of the union of natural human instincts with prevailing social conditions.

Universal questions neither change nor recede with time. Therefore, man always needs a guide to help him through his struggles, and a Saviour to lead him to salvation. Lord Swaminarayan, the modern day incarnation of divinity, initiated a phenomenal movement that wrought unprecedented changes in the social landscape as well as the religious and spiritual domains. The 18th century society was infested with problems of superstition and blind faith, political unrest and economic strain, lack of education and rigidity of attitudes. Working against this backdrop, He inspired awareness
of true religion and spirituality. He instilled high ethical values even in the poor and the uneducated.

A mere philosopher and thinker could never have achieved the reforms and revolutions He initiated; as they are a result of His mystical vision and dynamic spiritual powers. He spoke of Himself not as a philosopher, but as the divine incarnation:

“‘the idol that is dwelling in the divine light (in Aksardhām - the abode of God) is the same as this Maharaj visible to you here.’ Believe in this; and if this cannot be believed, then at least know that ‘Mahārāj is able to see the idol of God dwelling in the divine light of Aksara.’ If you will believe this, you will retain your devotional love for me. This will lead you to ultimate salvation.”

With infinite compassion, Lord Puruṣottama descends upon the earth to open the road to eternal liberation. To keep this path always open for devotees and seekers for all time to come, Lord Swaminarayan has pledged a continuous manifestation of Himself in the form of Brahmaswarūpa Saints. As in the Vedic scriptures that celebrate the glory of saints, Lord Swaminarayan too gives them an indispensable place for the seeker on the path of salvation:

“…When God does not manifest on earth, one should surrender unto the Saint who is in communion with the Lord; this is also the means of salvation for the soul.”

The Brahmaswarūpa Saint can lead seekers towards liberation for his relationship with God makes him a manifestation of the Lord Himself.

“…'I dwell constantly in the heart of the Saint'- the Lord has said this Himself.”
Lord Swaminarayan has blessed mankind with a tradition of Gunâtî Saints who are embodiment of the Lord Supreme, and serve as medium for the spiritual aspirants.

“...Śrījī Mahārāj said, it is said in the four Vedas, Purāṇas and history that only God and His Saint are the cause of liberation. And the glory of the Saint is even more than that of the deities like the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh. When the soul attains the association of God or His Brahmaized Saint, he has no further redemption to aim for; this in itself is the ultimate salvation.”

Association and grace of the Brahmaśwarūpa Saint leads the aspirant to attain pure spiritual knowledge and devotional worship for God and His devotees. These are the virtues resulting in the ultimate salvation for a soul.

Lord Swaminarayan’s living tradition of the Gunâtî Saints is in effect a continuous phenomenon of divine incarnation whereby devotees and spiritual seekers are assured of a perennial spiritual shelter.

Notes & References:

1. The Bhagavad Gītā VII/18
2. Śikṣapatrī, 121
3. Śikṣapatrī, 105
4. Śikṣapatrī, 106
5. Vaćanāṁrta, Gadhadā First 21
6. Vaćanāṁrta, Gadhadā Middle 42
7. Vaćanāṁrta, Gadhadā First 71
8. Vaćanāṁrta, Gadhadā Middle 3
9. The Bhagavad Gītā, XV/18
10. Vaćanāṁrta, Amdāvād-6
11. Vaćanāṁrta, Lōyā 13
12. Vaćanāṁrta, Gadhadā Last 39
13. Vaćanāṁrta, Lōyā-4
14. Vaćanāṁrta, Gadhadā Middle 21
16. Śikṣapatrī, 107
18. *Vačanāmṛta*, Gadhada First 45
19. *Vačanāmṛta*, Gadhada Middle 39
20. *Vačanāmṛta*, Gadhada Middle 13
21. *Vačanāmṛta*, Gadhada Middle 39
22. *Vačanāmṛta*, Loyā-14
23. *Vačanāmṛta*, Loyā-14
24. *The Bhagavad Gītā*, IV/7-8
26. *Vačanāmṛta*, Gadhada Middle 13
27. *Vačanāmṛta*, Vadtāl-10
28. *Vačanāmṛta*, Gadhada First 68
29. *Vačanāmṛta*, Gadhada Middle 59