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2) INTRODUCTION

A good starting point for the study of a theological system is the basis upon which its ideas are established and articulated. When venturing to provide an example of Hindu theology by way of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, this is as good a place as any to set off on our project, by asking: What are its sources and the tools by which we can understand its theological foundations and, indeed, theologise within the tradition? But like many of the matters we encounter in Hindu theology – as in any other theological system perhaps – this is a deeply complex subject requiring considerable foundational knowledge and consequential discussion to be able to understand it even somewhat satisfactorily. Here, then, in this first real introduction to Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, we are quickly faced with a tricky paradox: this initial discussion about the basis of our theological exposition can only properly become clear after the exposition itself. This interdependency among the various doctrines is in many ways characteristic of a functioning theological system, as we shall soon and repeatedly discover throughout this thesis.

For the topic of ‘Sources and Tools of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu Theology’ especially, we should know that some of the most intricate interlocking occurs with the sections on Parabrahman as Pragaṭa (chapter 6.5), Akṣarabrahman as the Brahmasvarūpa Guru (7.4.4), Māyā as ignorance (10.1.7), and Mukti as a whole (11), to which we shall allude wherever necessary. In the interest of economy and coherence, it would not make sense of course to repeat all of those overlapping ideas in this Part, especially as they will be far more appreciable in
their proper context alongside other important aspects of their respective themes. But nor is a healthy dose of recapitulation necessarily a bad thing, particularly if it helps us tie together the intricate workings of the theological whole. Indeed, sometimes it will be unavoidable; even though we shall be engaging with certain discussions and sermons in detail later, it might be necessary to introduce them here, if only to better understand them again in their full hereafter. In this sense, this part, Part 2, functions rather like a preview of the chapters to follow in Part 3. Many of the topics we begin to tackle are more fully discussed at their appropriate juncture in later sections among the themes of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology. This explains the many instances we will encounter here of “as we shall see later” or “as will be discussed in more detail in the chapter on...”. This patient deferral of some discussions (or some aspects of a discussion) calls us to provisionally accept certain ideas now in order for them to be tested more rigorously in the coming exposition, leaving open the opportunity to return to this ‘prolegomenon’, if it can be called that, and understanding it more fully afterwards. Again, this is another salient feature of what we might mean (and shall soon cover) as ‘appealing to revelation’; revelation is accepted to begin the theological project, even if it becomes a focus of discussion and investigation later, which often argues for its authority and validity. This fittingly introduces this section on the sources and tools of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.
But before we can proceed to answering the question ‘How can we know about God?’ a still more fundamental and provocative question awaits us: Can God be known at all?

2.1) The Imperceptibility and Ineffability of God

The Upaniṣads famously extol the imperceptibility and ineffability of the highest reality. For example:

From where speech returns with the mind having not grasped it... (TU 2.4.1).

It cannot be grasped by the eyes, nor even by speech, nor by other senses or by austerities or work (MuU 3.1.8).

Not by speech, not by mind, nor by the eyes is it possible to reach him (KaU 6.12).

There the eyes go not. Speech goes not. Nor the mind (KeU 1.3).

In picking up on each of the three key tools of perception mentioned in this last verse – cakṣus (eyes), vāk (speech), and manas (mind) – the Bhāṣyakāra offers a basic epistemological analysis of why perception, worldly testimony and inference cannot serve as independent means to valid knowledge of God. In summary, it is as follows:

- cakṣus (eyes): The eyes are representative here of all cognitive senses, which are instrumental in directly cognising tangible objects. For example, the sense of sight allows eyes to perceive physical form, the sense of hearing allows ears to perceive sounds, and so forth with the
senses of touch, taste and smell and their respective sense organs, the skin, tongue, and nose. However, their scope is firmly confined within the realm of the physical world, composed as it is, like the senses and sense organs, of māyā. They cannot possibly perceive anything which is beyond māyā, such as the form and virtues of the divine, transcendental and limitless Parabrahman. Parabrahman is thus “atītindriya” – beyond the senses; intangible.

- vāk (speech): This represents the faculty of speech and the capacity of words. While everyday patterns of speech (vyavahāra) or vivid descriptions may be able to elucidate the qualities of worldly objects and events, they cannot fully describe God, his form and his qualities, because he is absolutely not of this world. Besides, the Bhāṣyakāra adds, worldly testimony still relies on the senses of perception and physical organs, whose limitations have already been indentified above.

- manas (mind): The mind is the ‘inner sense’, and here indicates the means of inference. With inference also predicated upon direct perception, it, too suffers from the same limitations highlighted above. [The role of ‘reason’ as a tool or an ancillary source for theological knowledge is discussed in more detail later in this Part, hence any further elucidation on this topic has been reserved for then.]

While spelling out the scope and limitations of these means of cognition and articulation, the Bhāṣyakāra is careful to make two important points. Firstly, in his refutation of sensory and mental means, he is sure to qualify them with the
term 'laukika', relating to this world, i.e. anything composed of māyā. This has important implications for the authority of divinely inspired and divinely spoken words which constitute Scripture (verbal testimony), and also for the state of liberation when the liberated soul is endowed with brahmic mind and senses by which it enjoys the direct realisation of Parabrahman. A more general denial of sensory perception of Parabrahman would preclude this climactic experience as well as the possibility of Scripture as an authentic source of theological knowledge. (We shall be covering both of these topics in some detail in the chapter on Mukti and further in this chapter, respectively.)

Secondly, the Bhāṣyakāra invariably adds that the senses and mind return from Parabrahman not entirely empty-handed, so to speak, but having not grasped him fully. With each of the three means mentioned at KeU 1.3, for example, the Bhāṣyakāra adds “sampūrṇatayā”, “sākalyena” and “kārtsnyena” – each meaning “completely” – to emphasise that the eyes, speech and mind cannot have a complete perception of Parabrahman. But this does not deny them any perception of Parabrahman whatsoever. After all, the Bhāṣyakāra adds, if that were not the case, the following statements instructing individuals to know, see, realise or contemplate upon Parabrahman would be rendered futile:

Verily, that Self [Paramātman] is to be realised, heard, reflected and contemplated upon (BU 2.4.5 & 4.5.6).

Seek to know that. That is Brahman (TU 3.1.1).

37 TU-SB 2.4.1, p. 370.
Seek indeed to know that Truth [Parabrahman] (CU 7.16.1).

Know that Puruṣa who should be known (PU 6.6).

Equally, descriptions of knowing, seeing, realising Parabrahman would also have to be non-veridical. For example:

Your most auspicious form, that I see (IU 16, BU 5.15.1).

When he knows him thus... (CU 1.9.2).

It [the Self] is seen by the pointed, subtle intellect of those discerning seers (KaU 3.12)

The wise who perceive him residing within the soul, theirs alone is eternal peace, not others’ (KaU 5.13).

When a person knows God... as that cause, he is liberated from all sins (SU 6.13).

They continuously extol me (BG 9.14).\(^{38}\)

But then how can these two sets of statements be reconciled? On the one hand they attempt to describe God and urge that he should be known, and yet, on the other, he is described as ineffable and not completely knowable. But that is precisely the thrust of the Vedāntic argument, the Bhāṣyakāra observes. Even after knowing all that one can know about God, what one really needs to know – indeed, what one can know – about God is that he is unlimited, unfathomable. In

\(^{38}\) The Bhāṣyakāra also cites many of these passages in response to the objector's claim at BS 1.1.1 that it is futile to desire to know 'Brahman', simply because 'Brahman' is unknowable. See BS-SB 1.1.1, pp. 11-12.
fact, when concluding this comment, the Bhāṣyakāra questions whether the limited human mind and senses can ever fully grasp even meagre, tangible objects such as a pot or rag (or describe everyday human experiences\textsuperscript{39}). What, then, can be said of their inadequacy in comprehending someone as subtle and transcendental as Parabrahman?\textsuperscript{40} What this ensures is that any authentic knowledge or description of Parabrahman, even while being useful and meaningful, is never exhaustive; he remains that much beyond the limited capacity of māyic faculties and this-worldly means of cognition and articulation. In other words, any knowledge of God does not subvert his unlimited nature (or ‘mystery’).\textsuperscript{41} Even the fullest realisation will always be of the form ‘neti neti’ – “Not this much; not this much.”\textsuperscript{42} The experience is so staggeringly overwhelming that any sincere attempt to articulate it in words seems woefully inadequate. Whatever eloquence one can muster and however many superlatives one can summon, human language and devices of expression seem certain to fall short of fully describing the greatness, power, charm, beauty, and auspicious qualities of God.

\textsuperscript{39} We are reminded here of Wittgenstein’s argument that if human words are incapable of describing the distinctive aroma of coffee, how could they possibly cope with something as subtle as God.

\textsuperscript{40} KeU-SB 1.3, pp. 35-37. See also BS-SB 1.1.1, pp. 11-12.

\textsuperscript{41} We shall be expounding upon the unlimited nature of Parabrahman in detail in the next Part (chapter 6.2.2), and discussing it again in the chapter on Mukti when surveying the state of liberation (11.2.3) and the relationship of the liberated souls with Parabrahman (11.2.4).

\textsuperscript{42} While still apophatic, this interpretation is markedly different from the entirely negating "Not this; not this." The difference is between totally (and lazily) denying any descriptive power or worth to theological language, and realistically and humbly acknowledging its inadequacy even while continuing to endeavour in theology (or ‘God-talk’).
This seems to be the inevitably humble realisation candidly shared by the seers of the Kena Upaniṣad:

_We know not, we cannot understand how one can expound him_ (1.3).

The Bhāṣyakāra explains here that the sheer transcendence or other-worldliness of Parabrahman means that there is no known tangible reference point with which to begin describing him. He is simply incomparable to anything that can be found in this māyic world or can be perceived by māyic senses. Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises these two points at considerable length in Vac. Pan.4 when he begins:

_The Vedas, the Purāṇas, the Mahābhārata, the Smṛtis and the other scriptures proclaim that the original form of God – which is eternal, without a beginning and divine – resides in his Akṣaradhāma. They also mention what that God is like. His form is not like any form that can be seen by the eyes. His sound is not like any sound that can be heard by the ears. His touch is not like any touch that can be felt by the skin. His smell is not like any smell that can be smelt by the nose. The tongue cannot describe that God. He cannot be conceived by the mind; he cannot be contemplated upon by the citta; he cannot be comprehended by the buddhi, nor can the ahaṃkāra fully claim, ‘I am God’s, and God is mine’. In this manner, God remains beyond the reach of the senses and inner faculties._

_Moreover, the beauty of that God is such that it cannot be compared to any other object in this brahmāṇḍa ['world' or planetary system] – including everything from Brahmā to the smallest blade of grass. His sound is such that it cannot be compared to any other sounds in this brahmāṇḍa. The smell of God is such that it cannot be compared any other smell in this brahmāṇḍa. The touch of God is such that it cannot be compared to any other touch in this brahmāṇḍa. The tastes related to God are such that they cannot be compared to any other taste in this brahmāṇḍa. The abode of God is such that it cannot be compared to any other place in this brahmāṇḍa. Specifically, out of all of the various places in the seven dvīpas and the nine khaṇḍas, the extremely beautiful places of Brahmā and others on Meru, the_
various places on Mount Lokāloka, the realms of Indra, Varuṇa, Kubera, Śiva and Brahmā, and many other places, not one can compare to the abode of God. The bliss experienced by the devotees of God residing in that abode is such that it cannot be compared to any other type of bliss in this brahmāṇḍa.

Svāminārāyaṇa then goes on to explain the basis of this incomparability, ironically, with the help of several similes.

The form of that 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 which evolved from Prakṛti-Puruṣa are māyic, whereas God is divine. So, since the two are totally different, how can they possibly be compared? For example, we can compare a man to something by saying, ‘This man is like a buffalo, like a snake, like a sparrow, like a donkey, like a dog, like a crow or like an elephant.’ But in reality, such comparisons are not appropriate for humans. Why? Because all of those animals are of a totally different category than humans. Even between a human and a human, there is no exact similarity whereby one can claim, ‘This person is exactly like that person.’ If he were exactly like the other person, then how could the original person be recognised? Therefore, despite the fact that all humans belong to the same category, no two are exactly alike. Just look at Bhago and Mūlo. The two are said to be identical [twins], but if one stays with them for a few days, one can distinguish between them and say, ‘This is Bhago and this is Mūlo.’ But if there were no difference, how could they be recognised? So, if there is no great similarity between human and human, how can there be similarity between that which is māyic and that which is not māyic? What can possibly be compared to God and the abode of God?

Svāminārāyaṇa thus concludes again:

After all, all scriptures claim, ‘God is beyond the reach of the senses and the inner faculties.’

But if God is not knowable as an object of sensorial perception, empirical investigation or intellectual speculation, how indeed – even in the limited sense possible – can he be known? Svāminārāyaṇa provides the answer himself in Vac.
Pan. 4 and other sermons, but before we go on to discuss this in detail, let us firstly see a more general answer from Vac. Gaḍh. I.24 which will help us frame this discussion. Svāminārāyaṇa explains that the conviction of a devotee with intense faith is always of the form,

‘The manifest form of Puruṣottama has compassionately revealed his form to me’ (Vac. Gaḍh. I.24).

This is similar to a statement found identically in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad and Kaṭha Upaniṣad:

Nā'yam ātmā pravacanena labhyo na medhayā na bahunā śrutena |
Yam evaiṣa vṛṇute tena labhyas-tasyaiṣa ātmā vivṛṇute tanūm svām ||

This Self [Paramātman] cannot be attained by instruction, nor by intellectual power, nor even through much hearing [i.e. learning]. He is attained only by the one whom the Self [Paramātman] chooses. To such a one, the Self [Paramātman] reveals his own form (MuU 3.2.3 & KaU 2.23).

Quite simply, both statements explain, God can be known only when he chooses to be known; or, to paraphrase them even more closely, when God graciously “reveals” (“vivṛṇute”) himself. We find here the clearest possible reference to what is commonly termed in theology as ‘revelation’.

With this background and starting point, we can now proceed with the following chapter as we attempt to unfold the complex doctrine of revelation as it is conceived in its various forms within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition and understand its role as the exclusive source of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.
3) REVELATION – THE EXCLUSIVE SOURCE OF SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA HINDU THEOLOGY

Acknowledging the limited scope of human cognition impaired by our māyā-corrupted senses and mind is the first step in accepting revelation as the exclusive source of authentic theological knowledge. The divine, transcendental and unlimited nature of God means that he is hardly, if at all, accessible by human intelligence, imagination and ingenuity. So we need to be told what God is like. Indeed, God needs to tell us what he is like. Better still: God needs to show us who he is. And so he reveals himself.

For the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, this points to the three modes of revelation discernible within the tradition. They are:

1) Revelation as the self-manifestation of Parabrahman in the person of Svāminārāyaṇa

2) Revelation as Parabrahman being substantively present in and made known by the Brahmasvarūpa Guru

3) Revelation through Scripture, i.e. Svāminārāyaṇa’s sermons documented in the Vacanāmrut, and the Brahmasvarūpa Gurus’ teachings, such as the Svāminī Vāto

As we expand upon each mode in turn, we shall also look to address some important questions and useful discussions that we can further develop in Part 3 concerning the themes of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.
3.1) Revelation as Self-Manifestation

The actual appearance or ‘self-manifestation’ of Parabrahman on earth in an accessible, endearing human form is the most decisive, explicit and direct form of revelation possible. It allows God to not only tell us and show us what that ultimate reality is, but to present it in himself. This self-presenting to humanity of the God who cannot be seen or reached by human effort alone is thus a supreme act of God’s loving and liberative grace. Svāminārāyaṇa iterates this repeatedly throughout his sermons, most often while explaining the purpose of this human manifestation in terms of granting ultimate liberation to countless souls. To cite a few brief statements:

- That God himself... becomes like a human for the purpose of granting liberation to the jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).
- That God... becomes like a human, out of compassion, to liberate the jīvas (Vac. Pan.7).
- Out of compassion, that very same God is manifest... for the purpose of granting ultimate liberation to jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.31).
- It is that same supreme Puruṣottama Bhagavān who manifests on this earth out of compassion, for the purpose of granting liberation to the jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

Added to this is the distinctive, fundamental belief of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya that this earthly manifestation of Parabrahman occurred in the person of Svāminārāyaṇa between 1781 and 1830 CE. The specificity of Parabrahman as Svāminārāyaṇa is what lends the concept of revelation its power and authority to the faithful of the tradition. For them, Parabrahman is
Svāminārāyaṇa; or, even more personally, Svāminārāyaṇa is Parabrahman. He appeared *himself* so that humans may identify who God is and begin to know and relate to him, even within their limited human capacity.

As we shall see in some detail towards the end of the chapter on Parabrahman, followers find instances of Svāminārāyaṇa referring to himself as this highest reality in several of his sermons (Vac. Gaḍh. II.9, Vac. Gaḍh. II.13, Vac. Gaḍh. III.38, Vac. Amd.6, Vac. Amd.7). At this point, it will suffice to quote just one statement cited from old manuscripts of the tradition, personalising the more general statements excerpted above. It reads, firstly using Svāminārāyaṇa’s original north-Indian Hindi:

Dūsarā avatār hai so kārya-kāraṇ avatār huā hai, aur merā yah avatār hai so to jivoku brahmarūp karke ātyantik mukti dene ke vāste Akṣarātīt Puruṣottam jo haṃ vah manusya jaisā banyā hu.

While other avatāras had manifested to fulfil a particular task, my manifestation is to make souls brahmarūp ['like Brahman'] and grant them ultimate liberation. That is why I, Puruṣottama who transcends even Akṣara, have become like a human.44

43 In his later years, Svāminārāyaṇa’s extensive stay in Gujarat meant he became well-versed in Gujarati, and thus delivered sermons (many of which are now documented in the Vacanāmrut) to his local audience in Gujarati rather than Hindi or Sanskrit.


See also a similar statement found in one of Svāminārāyaṇa’s few extant letters, written to his lay and monastic devotees:


The unequivocal proclamation in this statement of the purpose and person of Parabrahman as Svāminārāyaṇa is something that will require a lot more elucidation, which we shall cover in its proper place in the chapters on Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman and Mukti.
The striking but apparent contradiction of Parabrahman being beyond eyes, speech and mind, as described in the Upaniṣads and by Svāminārāyaṇa himself, suddenly becoming “pratyakṣa” (‘manifest before the eyes’), as Svāminārāyaṇa also claimed, was not lost on his followers. How could both be possible? Was indeed the one before the eyes that same imperceptible, transcendental Parabrahman? This appears to be the pointed question posed by Daharānanda Svāmī in Vac. Gaḍh. I.78. He asks:

God transcends Akṣara; he is beyond mind and speech; and he is imperceptible to all. Why, then, can everyone see him as manifest before the eyes?

Svāminārāyaṇa replies:

God – who transcends Akṣara, who is beyond mind and speech, and who is imperceptible – himself, out of compassion, resolves: ‘May all the enlightened and unenlightened people on Mṛtyuloka behold me.’ Having resolved in this manner, God – whose will always prevails – becomes perceivable to all people on Mṛtyuloka out of compassion (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

Svāminārāyaṇa thus confirms that the human manifestation of Parabrahman is indeed wholly real and transcendental, made possible only by his loving and gracious will.

A similar question initiates the discussion in Vac. Gaḍh. I.51. After establishing the māyic composition of human senses and the inner faculties (by which we think, reason, contemplate, identify, etc.), Pūrṇānanda Svāmī asks:

God, however, transcends māyā. How, then, can one cultivate the conviction of God through the māyic inner faculties? How also can one perceive God with one’s māyic eyes and other senses?

Svāminārāyaṇa first sought to clarify the question by asking:
Māyic objects can be realised by māyic means, and if one has realised God through the same māyic inner faculties and senses, then it implies that God must also be māyic. That is your question, is it not?

Pūrṇānanda Svāmī and the other paramhansas in the audience confirmed:

Yes Mahārāja, that is precisely our question. You have clarified it for us.

Śvāminārāyaṇa then began a lengthy exposition of the impassable supremacy of Puruṣottama, the highest Being among all other realities and cosmic elements.

He then concluded:

It is this very God who, out of compassion for the liberation of the jīvas, gives darśana in a manifested form to all of the people on this earth.

Then moving to explain how it can be possible for humans to not only perceive that God but to hold a firm conviction of him, he states:

At that time, if a person realises this greatness of Puruṣottama Bhagavān by profound association with the Sant [i.e. Guru], then all of his senses and inner faculties become divine like Puruṣottama Bhagavān’s senses and inner faculties. Then, through those senses and inner faculties, he can develop the conviction of that God.

To help his audience understand, Śvāminārāyaṇa employs a useful analogy.

For example, a diamond can be cut only by a diamond; it can never be cut by anything else. Similarly, the conviction of God can only be cultivated through God. In the same way, the darśana of God is also possible only through God, but it is not possible through the māyic senses and inner faculties.

Śvāminārāyaṇa’s explanation here is relevant to our understanding of his conceptualisation of revelation because it confirms that, firstly, revelation leads to a resolute conviction or realisation of God, and, secondly, that such a realisation is only made possible by God himself or through the help of the Guru,
whom Svāminārāyaṇa refers to here and elsewhere as ‘the Sant’. This has important implications about the ontological position of the Guru within the five-reality system of the Svāminārāyaṇa School which we shall consider at length in the chapter on Akṣarabrahman. His role in leading devotees to a realisation of Parabrahman is something we shall turn to shortly in this chapter.

The striking revelation also worth noting from both these last sermons is the declaration of the utterly transcendental becoming wholly personal – he is different yet among us – which is something that makes this self-manifestation especially gracious and powerful for the followers of the tradition and, unsurprisingly, what permeates and guides the whole of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology. It is the self-expression of the supremely divine on māyic earth, the eternal in time, the universally pervasive in a particular human form.

The paradox, of course, is that in showing us what he is like, God has to become like us, partially concealing (not curtailing or abandoning) his divinity and presenting himself as human. As we shall see, this is the conscious and supremely gracious choice God makes in order for humans to be able to relate to him. It seems it is more important to God that humans can love him rather than be impressed by an exhibition of his lordly powers.

This brings us to an important aspect of what it means to know God and how it can be possible. At the heart of Svāminārāyaṇa’s conceptualisation of complete knowledge of God is the entering of the devotee into a direct and intimate
relationship with him, made possible now because of his self-manifestation (and, as we shall see, continued presence through the Guru). This is brought to light in an important epistemological and soteriological discussion that ensues between Svāminārāyaṇa and his senior paramahansas in Vac. Loyā.7. It is worth citing here in some detail to help also demonstrate the theological and dialogical nature of the Vacanāmrut. The discussion is initiated by Muktānanda Svāmī citing from the Hiraṇyakeśiyaśākhāśruti –

Rte jñānān na muktiḥ |

There is no liberation without jñāna

– and the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad –

Tam eva viditvā’timṛtyum eti nānyaḥ panthā vidyāte’yanāya ||

Only by knowing him does one pass beyond death; there is no other path for attaining [liberation] (SU 3.8).

Thereupon he asks:

These Vedic verses proclaim that the jīva attains liberation only when it realises the true ‘jñāna’ of God. If liberation can only be attained by ‘jñāna’, why do the scriptures also prescribe other spiritual endeavours for attaining liberation?

Hearing this question, Svāminārāyaṇa simply stated that “jñāna” means ‘to know’, to which Nityānanda Svāmī raises a doubt.

If jñāna means merely ‘to know’, then the whole world ‘knows’ God through the scriptures, yet everyone does not attain liberation.

Acknowledging the point, Svāminārāyaṇa raised a further question:

Just as one does not attain liberation by knowing the previously incarnated forms of God through the scriptures, do you think all

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45 This is a non-extant Vaiṣṇava text, but the phrase is attributed to it in the Setumālā commentary on the Harivākyasudhāsindhu at 115.7.
those who actually had the darśana of Rāma, Kṛṣṇa and the other avatāras of God with their own eyes attained liberation?

Muktānanda Svāmī replied:

Those who merely see the manifest form of God attain liberation only after several lives.

To this, Svāminārāyaṇa added:

Those who know God through the scriptures also receive liberation after several lives. Why? Because whom these people know through the scriptures is whom the other people see with their eyes; and whom the other people see with their eyes is whom these people know through the scriptures. Thus, the resulting fruits of both are equal, and both attain liberation after several lives.

Svāminārāyaṇa’s point here is that mere information about God from the scriptures – even though they are considered revelatory – is inadequate to secure one’s liberation because it is not constitutive of theological knowledge. He equates this sterile data to merely seeing God without a true and clear understanding of his glory. To reiterate his point, he continues with a series of rhetorical questions.

After all, is not hearing God with one’s ears ‘jñāna’? It is, but that can be said to be merely hearing God. Is not touching God with one’s skin also ‘jñāna’? It is, but that can be said to be merely touching God. Is not seeing God with one’s eyes ‘jñāna’? It is, but that is merely seeing God. Is not smelling God with one’s nose ‘jñāna’ as well? It is, but that is merely smelling God. Does not describing God with one’s tongue also constitute ‘jñāna’? It does, but that is merely having described God. In this way, ‘jñāna’ can be received through the senses. It can also be received through the mind as well as directly from a spiritual experience of the jīva, which transcends both the senses and the mind.

In conclusion to this point, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

To know God perfectly is to know the manifest form of God before the eyes through the senses, the inner faculties, and experience.
Only then can one be said to be a perfect jñānin. However, if any one of these three aspects is lacking, one cannot be said to have realised ultimate jñāna, nor can one thereby overcome [the cycle of] births and deaths.

Svāminārāyaṇa thus explains that God can indeed be (partially) known by the senses and the mind, but the ultimate realisation of God can only be complete when it climaxes in full experience within the soul. Nevertheless, all three ways of relating to God are essential. It is important to note here early on Svāminārāyaṇa’s emphasis on the manifest, or “pratyakṣa”, form of God – the ‘one before the eyes’ – for only such a form can be known by all three means, including directly through the senses. Furthermore, Svāminārāyaṇa goes on in the same sermon to frame this formulation of theological knowledge in terms of “serving”, explaining that complete knowledge irrevocably manifests itself as a personal, devotional relationship with God. This clearly distinguishes the mere accumulation of brute facts concerning God, that is, ‘knowing about God’, from ‘knowing God’ personally, as one would another living being.

Faith is thus not simply an assent to a set of doctrines, but the entering into a devotional, liberating relationship with God which transforms the recipients of that revelation. In this sense, revelation can sometimes be difficult, because it calls upon the changing of the person in light of what has been revealed,

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46 We shall pick up on this important formulation in the next Part, drawing upon it several times: in the Introduction as a tool to explain why the study of all five eternal entities is a necessary part of the theological project in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology (chapter 5.1), in the chapter on Parabrahman to frame our exposition of God (6), and finally in the chapter on Mukti when elucidating the way to liberation (11.3).
especially her previously held notions about understanding and serving God.\(^{47}\)

Svāminārāyaṇa thus senses potential for resistance and rejection, making revelation all the more valuable and meaningful when it is willingly accepted. Equally, though, he sees no option but to share his vision of the truth about God’s nature, so fundamental it is, he believes, to a devotee’s spiritual existence and welfare.

To develop the conviction\(^{48}\) of God is more difficult than anything else. Because this topic of conviction is extremely complicated, I am afraid of discussing it. I feel, ‘Upon discussing this topic, what if someone were to take it wrongly? If, due to this discussion, any personal understanding that one may have firmly cultivated were to be broken, the person would be uprooted.’ Yet, there is no alternative but to reveal this fact. If one does not know how to understand it correctly, many problems can arise. Yet, until one has not understood this fact, much deficiency will remain in one’s conviction [of God]. That is why I wish to deliver this discourse (Vac. Loyā.18).

This apprehension also helps explain why Svāminārāyaṇa spoke of himself in varying ways, reportedly in accordance to the receptivity and spiritual maturity of his varying audiences.\(^{50}\)

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\(^{48}\) Svāminārāyaṇa frequently uses the terms ‘niścaya’ or ‘niṣṭā’, meaning ‘conviction’, when talking of one’s beliefs about or in God. These words can be understood as referring to faith, but of a much stronger and resolute sort.

\(^{49}\) This rather literal translation of ‘koine aṇḍu pade’ has been chosen because it allows the broad, open-ended meaning of the original Gujarati that can incorporate such connotations as misunderstanding or even taking offence.

\(^{50}\) Brahmadarshandas offers an extensive analysis of these statements in his *Vacanāmrut Rahasya*, II, pp. 257-333. To this, Shruti-prakashdas adds a useful historical perspective and contextualises several other sampradāyic sources in another in-depth interrogation in Svāminārāyaṇa’s *Sampradāyāma Avatār-Avatāri Nirūpaṇ*, pp. 242-453.
This leads us to an associated discussion about the receptivity of revelation and understanding it now from the perspective of the individual soul.

3.1.1) Revelation as Unveiling of the Soul

Members of the Svāminārāyaṇa faith community will see the self-manifestation of Parabrahman on earth as a supremely significant, gracious and unprecedented event. Apart from being an objective occurrence, though, it is also a subjective experience for all those who encounter that revelation (in its various modes), even today. Seen from the perspective of the individual soul, we are offered an opportunity to understand ‘revelation’ anew from within a Hindu theistic context, especially if we are to take the basic meaning of apokalypsis, the Greek word usually translated for “revelation”, as the ‘removing of a veil so that something can be seen’.

The basic idea is this: if God is indeed hidden, as the term ‘unveiling’ would presuppose, it is not God who is doing the hiding under some intractable disguise or sheath of darkness. Rather, it is the soul’s veil of ignorance – māyā – which is obstructing or obscuring a full vision of Parabrahman. In other words, the veil that is removed in apokalypsis is not shrouding Parabrahman, but the individual

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51 According to the Svāminārāyaṇa theological system, as we shall learn in the next Part, the avatāras are metaphysically īśvara, whereas Svāminārāyaṇa is believed to be Parabrahman, the Avatārin (or source of the avatāras). The ontological distinction and supremacy of the latter makes Parabrahman’s manifestation on earth all the more unique, significant, and powerfully liberative. Svāminārāyaṇa is recorded as revealing that this self-manifestation of Parabrahman has never occurred before in this brahmāṇḍa (planetary system), nor shall it ever occur again (SV 4.10, SV 4.13). Guṇāṭītānanda Svāmī and other ordained and lay disciples have also noted this revelation several times in their own works. See Shruti-prakashdāsa, Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāyaṃ Avatār-Avatāri Nirūpaṇ, pp. 194-215.
ātman. In unveiling (or ‘de-veiling’) the soul of its ignorance, God is there to be seen, as he always was. The realisation thus takes the form of not God saying, ‘Look, here I am!’ but the soul discovering God: ‘Oh, there you are!’ That is why ‘sākṣātkāra’ or ‘darśana’ – the highest state of enlightenment, possible upon liberation from māyā – is, literally, the direct realisation or vision of God, as if ‘before the eyes’. Svāminārāyaṇa describes this state as follows:

One who has attained God-realisation... experiences the following: Wherever he casts his eyes – among all the mobile and immobile forms – he sees the form of God as if it is before his eyes, the same form that constantly remains in Akṣaradhāma even after the dissolution of the body, the brahmāṇḍa and Prakṛti-Puruṣa. Other than that form, he does not perceive even an atom (Vac. Kār.7).

We have already seen above that it is by the gracious resolve of Parabrahman that he manifests on earth and makes himself perceptible to humans, notwithstanding their still-māyic senses. However, we also learned from Vac. Loyā.7 that the actual realisation of that Parabrahman – in all his transcendental glory – only occurs when that initial outer perception culminates in an internal liberative experience. It is how well one appropriates this grace of revelation bestowed by Parabrahman that determines the final outcome of realisation. In between these two points on the spiritual journey – from revelation to realisation – lies the process of religious praxis, or sādhanā (literally ‘means’).

A good example of the soul’s need to properly appropriate the grace of God’s revelation can be found in the eleventh canto of the Bhagavad-Gītā, often cited by Svāminārāyaṇa in the Vacanāmrut (Vac. Kār.8, Vac. Pan.6, Vac. Var.18; especially Vac. Gaḍh. I.25 and Vac. Pan.4).
When Arjuna prays Kṛṣṇa show him his divine, lordly form (11.4-5), Kṛṣṇa reveals his viśvarūpa (cosmic form). But even then, Arjuna is unable to see it with his own eyes. Kṛṣṇa states:

> It is not possible to see me with these [māyic] eyes of yours. I therefore grant you divine eyes. [Now] see my yogic powers (11.8).

We see here two rounds of grace at play: firstly, the gracious revealing of the transcendental form; and secondly, the gracious granting of divine eyes by which to see that form which is otherwise “sudurdaṛśa” (11.52), very hard to see, and “durnirīkṣya” (11.17), difficult to discern. Arjuna, however, was unable to properly receive that grace and hence could not appreciate the divine form. He found the vision astounding and terrifying (11.20, 11.23, 11.24, 11.25, 11.35, 11.45). Unnerved and bewildered, he beseeches Kṛṣṇa once more, this time to retract the revelation and appear to him as he was (11.45-46). Kṛṣṇa does so, explaining that this vision is not attainable by mere scriptural study, nor by severe austerities, generous gifts, sacrificial rites, or any other means (11.48, 11.53). He explains:

> O Arjuna the Oppressor! Only by singular devotion is it possible to thus perfectly see me, know me, and enter into me (11.54).

Here we must summon an important verse from the final canto of the Bhagavad-Gītā to make better sense of the method suggested by Kṛṣṇa. He explains how such devotion, of the very highest form, can be attained:

> Brahmabhūta... mad-bhaktim labhate parām |

> He who becomes like Brahman [i.e. brahmarūpa]... attains the highest devotion to me (18.54).
So why was Arjuna unable to enjoy the divine form so readily and graciously revealed to him? Because he was not ready to receive that type of grace. He was not yet brahmarūpa – spiritually pure and mature like Brahman – which is the prerequisite to offering devotion par excellence to Parabrahman. And only with such devotion, according to BG 11.54, is the perfect ‘vision’ or realisation of Parabrahman possible. In many ways, this is, as we shall learn, the core doctrine of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, that one must because like Brahman to perfectly realise and offer devotion to Parabrahman.

What Arjuna’s example shows is that even with the unmerited grace of God, his revelation cannot be fully appreciated without the necessary receptivity and spiritual maturity. Even while Parabrahman can be fully in sight, he cannot be seen if the māyic veil has not been removed. This leads to the interesting discussion of divine grace and the role of human effort in being ready or able to properly receive that grace, which we shall rightly reserve for the chapter on Mukti.

Sometimes, though, Parabrahman is described as “hidden”. For example, KaU 3.12 begins:

Eṣa sarveṣu bhūteṣu gūdhotmā na prakāśate |

This hidden Self [Paramātman] in all these beings does not shine forth.

Even so, it goes on to explain how the individual soul can see that God by way of a focused, spiritually elevated mind. The verse is completed thus:
Dṛṣṭye tvagryayā buddhyā sūkṣmayā sūkṣmadarśibhiḥ |
It is seen by the pointed, subtle intellect of those discerning seers (KaU 3.12).

Similarly at MuU 3.1.8, the verse opens with the familiar Upaniṣadic proclamation that Parabrahman
cannot be grasped by the eyes, nor even by speech, nor by other senses or by austerities or work,
but then is immediately qualified by saying that those who are of pure spirit ("viśuddhasattva") do indeed see him, by the grace of knowledge ("jñanaprasādena").

Other references to the covertness of God, such as being 'hidden within the cave of the heart', can be found in several Upaniṣads (KaU 1.14, 2.20, 3.1, 4.6, 4.7, TU 2.1.1, MuU 2.1.10), but here too, even if God is “difficult to see” (durdarśa), he can still be realised by those with a correct spiritual understanding (“adhyātmayogādhigamena”). The paradox of God being so tantalisingly near and yet beyond grasp is brought home especially in MuU 3.1.7. Parabrahman is both “farther than the farthest” and “here at hand”. The wise seers find him hidden within the cave of their own souls. The Bhāṣyakāra makes the important point that God resides equally in the hearts of all beings – indeed, he is pervasive throughout creation – yet it is only the brahmajñānins who can see him, for they are the “seers” (“paśyatsu”).

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52 KaU-SB 2.12, pp. 96-97.
53 MuU-SB 3.1.7, p. 288. While this verse is directly denotative of Akṣarabrahman, it equally applies to Parabrahman as well.
We shall be examining further on several sermons in which Svāminārāyaṇa brings together the correct seeing of both the transcendental form of Parabrahman, immanent throughout the universe, and the personal, human form before the eyes. Here, for the purpose of our discussion on revelation as the soul’s discarding of its māyic vision, it is worth citing Vac. Pan.7. Svāminārāyaṇa begins:

One should realise the manifest form of God before the eyes to be exactly the same as the form of God resplendent with infinite lordly powers and divine light in Akṣaradhāma at the end of final dissolution. One who realises this is said to have known God perfectly.

Since not everyone has such a realisation of the manifest form of God, Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to explain why this is so, and how it can be resolved.

However, when an ignorant person looks at that manifest form of God before the eyes with a māyic vision, he perceives a human like himself. Just as he himself is born, becomes a child, becomes a youth, becomes old and dies, in the same way, he believes God to undergo the same process. But when one sincerely worships God having faith in the words of the Ekāntika Sant of God, one’s māyic vision is resolved. Thereafter, one realises that same form of God as being the supreme conscious being [paramacaitanya], characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss [saccidānandamāya].

Svāminārāyaṇa clearly distinguishes those who are ignorant, whose perception of God’s fully divine reality is clouded by their māyic vision, and the devotees who have learned from the Brahmasvarūpa Guru how to correctly see and serve that God. With the use of an extended analogy here and also in Vac. Amd.4, Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to elaborate at great length the absolute divinity of the

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54 See section 6.5.2.2 where these analogies are discussed in detail.
revealed, self-manifested God while reiterating the erroneous perception of him as borne of the seer's own ignorance, as opposed to the correct and complete theological knowledge of a true devotee made possible by the Ekāntika Sant, or Brahmaśvarūpa Guru.

This neatly leads us to the next mode of revelation: God revealed in and by the Guru.

3.2) Revelation in and by the Guru

A thorough study of the Vacanāmrut and Svāmīnī Vāto leads to a patent observation that Svāminārāyaṇa did not intend the words ‘God manifest before your eyes’ to be restricted to his own relatively short time on earth. Nor did he wish to limit the promise of final liberation to only those who had encountered revelation through his own self-manifestation of Parabrahman. For Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, revelation is not a one-off event, but a continuing occurrence. This is because Svāminārāyaṇa reveals the continuing substantive presence of Parabrahman through Akṣarabrahman, which presents itself on earth in human form as the Brahmaśvarūpa Guru (referred to variously in the Vacanāmrut and Svāmīnī Vāto as the ‘Sant’, ‘Śādhu’, ‘Bhakta’ and ‘Satpuruṣa’, and often qualified with such terms as “Ekāntika” (“ultimate”), “great”, “God’s” or alongside the soteriological imperative). The reality of Akṣarabrahman in it various forms is a central aspect of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, but one that may seem novel to even those familiar with the other
schools of Vedānta. We shall have ample opportunity to discuss this topic and question its assertions in the following chapters. Here, we can proceed to briefly introduce it in light of the doctrine of revelation, reserving the more detailed elucidation for its proper context.55

If the self-manifestation on earth of Parabrahman himself is a supremely gracious and benevolent act of revelation, this revelatory grace is no more demonstrated and made available than through the Brahmasvarūpa Guru. This is seen to be active within the faith community in two highly related ways which are sometimes difficult to tell apart. Nevertheless, they can be explained in simple terms thus: Firstly, the Guru is the ‘vessel’ which perfectly holds the complete presence of Parabrahman and therefore through whom Parabrahman liberatively works and relates to humans. Because of this, the Guru is, secondly, by whom others can know God, i.e. relate to and serve him, as correctly and completely as possible. God is thus made known both in the Guru and by the Guru.

To briefly elaborate upon the first of the Guru’s revelatory roles, we see numerous references in the Vacanāmrut where Svāminārāyaṇa reveals Parabrahman living on and working through the Guru, and therefore making it possible to personally encounter God via ‘the Sant’. For example, Svāminārāyaṇa states:

55 See, for example, chapter 7.4.4.
Since it is God who sees through his [the Sant’s] eyes…. Since it is God who walks through his legs,… Since it is God who resides in all of the senses and limbs of such a Sant… (Vac. Gaḍh. I.27), it therefore follows that

When one has the darśana of such a Sant, one should realise, ‘I have had the darśana of God himself’ (Vac. Sār.10).

This striking proclamation by Svāminārāyaṇa confirms that even while the Guru neither is nor ever becomes God, God is substantively revealed in the Guru. Quite simply, according to Svāminārāyaṇa: to see the Guru is to see God; to relate to the Guru is to relate to God.

This revelatory presence is the reason why Svāminārāyaṇa and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī repeatedly and emphatically reiterate in the Vacanāmrut and Svāmīnī Vātō the need to know, serve, love, obey, trust and surrender to the Guru as one would to God (when he is not personally present on earth), the fruit of which is still realising God, overcoming māyā, and securing liberation. For example, in Vac. Var.10 Svāminārāyaṇa states:

One who aspires for liberation should recognise God through these characteristics and seek the refuge of that God…. However, when God is not manifest on this earth before the eyes, one should seek the refuge of the Sant who is absorbed with that God, because the jīva can also secure liberation through him.

This clearly evidences Svāminārāyaṇa’s intention that the liberative work of God is to extend beyond his own self-manifestation on earth and continue by way of the Guru.
As another example, in Vac. Jet.1 Svāminārāyaṇa firstly describes the insurmountability of the binding forces of māyā. But then revealing “the means to transcending māyā”, he states:

When the jīva meets the manifest form of Śrī Puruṣottama Bhagavān – who is beyond māyā and who is the destroyer of māyā and all karmas – or the Sant who is absorbed with that God, then, by accepting their refuge, the jīva can transcend māyā.

What is important to note is that both God and Guru are invariably mentioned in tandem in these important soteriological statements. This liberative function of the Guru confirms his person as Akṣarabrahman and his direct, complete and substantive relationship with Parabrahman. Indeed, Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. Ill.27 that

such a Sant has a direct relationship [sākṣāt saṃbandha] with God.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī reinforces this relationship in his sermon at SV 5.392 when he states:

The association of the Sādhu is a direct relationship with God and leads to the bliss of God. Why? Because God fully resides in the Sādhu.

That it is possible to experience the bliss of God when associating with the Guru implies it is God who is granting the bliss through the Guru. This is an idea that can also be found in the Bhagavad-Gītā. The Bhāṣyakāra notes that while God is described in the final verse of the fourteenth canto as the “foundation of the highest, eternal bliss” (14.27), it is stated at 5.21:

Sa brahmayogayuktātmā sukham akṣayyam aśnute |
He who has joined his soul with Brahman [i.e. the Brahmasvarūpa Guru] enjoys undiminishing bliss.

The two statements find their internal coherency, according to the Bhāṣyakāra, in the proof that it is God who is granting the blissful experience to the soul through his presence in the Guru.56

The same blissful, liberative experience is also reiterated in the Praśna Upaniṣad. When asked by Satyakāma about the after-life upon meditating on ‘Aum’, Pippalāda replies:

Etad vai satyakāma param cāparam ca brahma yad aumkāraḥ |
Tasmād vidvān etenaīvā’yanenaikataram anveti ||

That which is the sound of ‘Aum’, O Satyakāma, is verily the higher and lower Brahman. Therefore, with this support alone does the knower attain either (PU 5.2).

After showing that the dual classification of ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ Brahman confirms the ontological distinction between Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, and the superiority of the former over the latter, the Bhāṣyakāra emphasises that this verse also enjoins the meditation of Parabrahman on par with that of Akṣarabrahman, since ‘Aum’ is equally denotative of both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman. Furthermore, because the fruit of such meditation is described as the attainment of “either” (“ekatara”) of them, this is further evidence of Parabrahman’s liberative presence in Akṣarabrahman. The meditation of

56 BG-SB 5.21, pp. 126-27. Note the important observation from the BG-SB that ‘Brahman’ never refers to God anywhere in the Bhagavad-Gītā.
Akṣarabrahman leads to no lesser an experience or result than that of meditating on Parabrahman himself.\(^5\)

We therefore see similar calls to serving the Guru in order to attain God in final liberation. For example, Svāminārāyaṇa instructs at Vac. Gaḍh. III.26:

Those who are eager to secure their liberation should thus serve such a Sant.

Why? Because such a Sant should not be thought to be like a human nor should he be thought to be like even a deva.... Such a Sant, even though he is human [in form], is worthy of being served like God.

Svāminārāyaṇa elaborates with examples in Vac. Var.5 on how to serve the Guru “like God” by instructing perfectly “equal service” of both, further establishing the revelation of God in the living Guru. Serving the Guru is thus serving God.

Such an instruction of “equal service” resonates with the famous declaration at the end of the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad:

\begin{quote}
Yasya deve parā bhaktir-yathā deve tathā gurau |
Tasyaite kathitā hyarthāḥ prakāśante mahātmanaḥ ||
\end{quote}

All objectives declared [in the sacred texts] shine forth [i.e. become attainable] for the great soul who offers the highest devotion to God and, as he does to God, also to the Guru (SU 6.23).

Svāminārāyaṇa similarly explains:

Intense love for the Satpuruṣa is itself the means to realising one’s ātman, is itself also the means to realising the greatness of the

\(^5\) PU-SB 5.2, pp. 214-16.
Satpuruṣa, and is itself also the means to having the direct realisation of God (Vac. Var.11).

Again, the remarkable and instructive revelation here is that devoutly relating to the Guru leads to the realisation of God.

Because Parabrahman is revealed in the living Guru, it seems natural that he should also be an authentic and vital source of theological knowledge. This is the second revelatory role of the Guru, by whom God is revealed or made known. The Guru leads the faithful to the realisation of God, without whom, such a realisation would remain elusive. Svāminārāyaṇa thus instructs that one should develop faith in Parabrahman – or ‘the conviction of God’ (“niṣṭā” or “niścaya”), as he often terms it – only by the Brahmaśvarūpa Guru. Indeed, he bases his very definition of niścaya around the Guru. After asking the question,

What is the conviction of God?

Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to say in Vac. Gaḍh. III.27:

The attributes of the Sant – being free of lust, avarice, egotism, taste, attachment, etc. – are described in the scriptures. The Sant who possesses these attributes has a direct relationship with God. Therefore, one should develop the conviction of God based on his words. In fact, to have firm faith in the words of the Sant is itself the conviction of God.

It is interesting to see here that the starting point is scripture, at least in identifying the spiritually pure Brahmaśvarūpa Guru. Svāminārāyaṇa seems to be suggesting that the Guru then takes over. One is properly convinced about the existence and nature of God only after having faith in the Guru, because, again, it is in the Guru that God himself chooses to be fully present and so by whom God
can be revealed. In fact, Svāminārāyaṇa goes as far as to omit the causal connection and equate the two: faith in the Guru is the conviction of God.

Of course, God is not restricted to the Guru and is still free to reveal himself independently, though, as shall be explained, the Brahmavāraṅa Guru remains his most accessible and endearing “medium” through which to personally interrelate with humans.

Nor, of course, does Svāminārāyaṇa mean to discount the role of scripture in revealing God, as we shall shortly learn. There, too, though, the role of the Guru in relation to scriptural revelation will become evident when Svāminārāyaṇa stresses the ‘reading’ of Scripture only through the Guru if one is to arrive at the most accurate understanding of God. If Svāminārāyaṇa is not elevating the Guru above scripture, he is surely positioning him as a living scripture of the most authoritative kind.

It comes as no surprise that the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā – themselves treaties richly steeped in the ancient Vedic tradition of guru-disciple learning – also emphasise the need of the Guru in order to avail of true theological knowledge, or, in other words, to realise God and be liberated. For example:

Only knowledge learned from the Guru leads one to the goal (CU 4.9.3).

Arise, awake, and understand [this liberative knowledge] having approached the best [teachers, i.e. the Guru] (KaU 3.14).
Some of these calls to imperatively seek the Guru also include vital hints about the essential credentials of such a bona fide spiritual teacher, as opposed to others of an “inferior” sort.

It [liberative knowledge] is difficult to grasp when taught by an inferior man, even though one may be highly contemplative. Yet there is no way to it without it being taught by the non-inferior [i.e. superior teacher, the Brahmasvarūpa Guru], [for] it is subtler than an atom [and] beyond the realm of reason. Nor can this knowledge be grasped by argumentation. Yet, Dearest [Naciketas], it is well known when taught by the other [the Brahmasvarūpa Guru] (KaU 2.8-9).

To realise that [higher knowledge], imperatively go, with sacrificial wood in hand, to only that guru who is Brahman, who is the knower of the true meaning of revealed texts, and who is firmly established [in God] (MuU 1.2.12).

Learn that [knowledge] by obeisance, inquiry, and service. Those enlightened [Gurus] who ‘see’ the truth will teach you that knowledge (BG 4.34).

While we shall be discussing these later in much more detail, it is important to note here that in all these verses, the Bhāṣyakāra stresses that they refer only to the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, for only he is capable of making known God perfectly because of his own perfect, eternal and sublimely inherent God-realisation.

This returns us to the Upaniṣadic statement with which we began this discussion of “revelation”.

This Self [Paramātman]… is attained only by the one whom the Self chooses. To such a one, the Self reveals his own form (MuU 3.2.3 & KaU 2.23).
The Bhāṣyakāra explains that God is attainable by grace alone ("kṛpaikasādhyā"), and only when and how he chooses to reveal himself. Apart from his self-manifestation on earth, one way that Parabrahman chooses to graciously reveal himself is by providing earnest seekers of the truth the association of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, within whom he substantively resides, who can then lead them to him. Therefore, when elaborating upon the “form of his [Paramātman’s] grace”, the Bhāṣyakāra states:

God, the ocean of grace that he is, grants that devotee access to the profound association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru... so that his devotee can easily realise him [Paramātman].

In conclusion to this section, we can end with a simple analogy to help summarise and further elucidate the unique revelatory dual-function of the Guru and his relationship with God. Consider a cup of water. The cup itself is not made of water, but as its container, it is normal to refer to it, especially when full, as ‘a cup of water’. Without dismissing the value of the cup itself, it is its contents to which attention is drawn. Similarly the Guru, though ‘composed of’ Akṣarabrahman, holds – is brimming with – the divine presence of Parabrahman. Only such a Brahmasvarūpa vessel could perfectly hold Parabrahman, and that, too, only by Parabrahman’s will, and so, it is the God within who ultimately becomes the focus of devotional attention. Nevertheless, the cup and contents never become one. In the same way, the Guru never becomes God; he forever remains ontologically distinct and infinitely subordinate to God.

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58 KaU-SB 2.23, p. 119.
This also means that earnest seekers can be liberated and can enjoy the limitless bliss of God by associating with the Guru, just as those who drink from the cup experience the contents, not the cup. The Guru becomes the indispensible means, or medium, by which to encounter God. Without the cup though, such an experience or encounter would hardly be possible, for how else would one partake of the water considering its fluidity? While water in its various forms may be available elsewhere – in freshwater lakes or even in the air as vapour – it is found in its fullest, most ‘handy’ form when contained in the cup. Here, too, the transcendental, all-pervasive God becomes available and readily accessible by his substantive presence in the Guru.

Consider further now a perfectly transparent cup. It not only holds the water but also reveals what it is holding. In a similar way, the eternally māyā-free, all-divine Guru makes God known through his own perfectly pure Akṣarabrahmic being.\textsuperscript{59}

### 3.3) Revelation through Scripture

The third mode in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology by which God reveals himself is through teachings, which, for ease and consistency, we can refer to as ‘Scripture’. In this section, we can address the scope of Scripture within the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, pertaining to the Vacanāmrut and the wider Vedic

\textsuperscript{59} Like all analogies, the similarity breaks down when considering the wider, active role of the Guru. The Guru is not a passive vessel; as we shall see, he plays an important dynamic function in leading seekers to liberation and bestowing his brahmic qualities in making them brahmarūpa.
canon, its role as the cornerstone upon which all doctrines of the faith are articulated, and the sanctioned way to ‘read’ this primary source. First, then, what do the faithful of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition primarily mean when they speak of ‘Scripture’, and why is it so important to them?

Svāminārāyaṇa’s manifestation on earth in human form allowed for him to teach his ideas about God, liberation, and the meaning of life. It is not difficult to appreciate the extraordinary religious significance of this event for members of the Svāminārāyaṇa faith. The sacred perennial wisdom of the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Bhagavad-Gītā, and other canonical texts, which ancient seers had received by way of divine inspiration, was now available in person. Parabrahman was not inspiring those wise words remotely through some distant medium, but speaking them himself, here on earth, in human form. These ‘immortal, immortalising words’ were meticulously documented by some of Svāminārāyaṇa’s most learned and closest disciples, themselves also advanced seekers of liberation, and the compilation later presented to him for personal authentication (see, for example, the mention in Vac. Loyā.7). This set of 274 sermons is the Vacanāmrut (‘the immortalising words’). Its abiding status in the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition as the most authentic source of scriptural revelation lies in the distinctive belief that Svāminārāyaṇa, as the self-manifestation of Parabrahman, is both the source and subject of revelatory knowledge comprised within the Vacanāmrut. For the Svāminārāyaṇa community this means, quite literally, it is God talking about God – “theology” (if essentially ‘God-talk’) in its fullest sense.
Equally, the Vacanāmrut attests to the self-manifestation of Parabrahman as Svāminārāyaṇa, but its faithful readers would see it as more than a witness to that revelation. As a receptacle of the spoken words of Svāminārāyaṇa, the Vacanāmrut is not a mere book. A footing for this belief can be found in an important sermon where Svāminārāyaṇa implicitly identifies himself as “the avatārin”, not a form of the past avatāras but “the cause of all of the avatāras.” In conclusion, he adds:

Although these talks are extremely subtle, even a person of average intelligence can understand them. It is as if these talks are personified ['mūrtimān'] (Vac. Gaḍh. II.9).

Svāminārāyaṇa emphasis here seems to indicate that the sermons are not to be considered a dead letter, because they speak of a living God ‘manifest before the eyes’ in person, in human form (“mūrtimān”), rendering even the most abstract of ideas tangible and easier to grasp. Elsewhere he adds that “My words are my form”, implying that a proper engagement with these teachings can be evocative of relating to God in person, and should, in fact, lead to a personal encounter with his living form.

Of course, ‘revelation’ as the manifestation of Svāminārāyaṇa cannot itself be equated to the text of the Vacanāmrut.60 It is Parabrahman self-revealed as Svāminārāyaṇa who lends the Vacanāmrut its authority and sanctity, not vice versa. And it is God who grants liberation, not a text. In this sense, it might be

more accurate to say that the theological truths of the Svāminārāyaṇa faith are revealed not in the text but through the text, by Svāminārāyaṇa himself. If the Vacanāmrut as a ‘book’ is holy, it is because of its divine author, or rather, orator.61

The above can also be applied to the sermons of Guṇātītānanda Svāmī compiled in the Svāmīnī Vāto and other teachings of the subsequent Brahmāsvarūpa Gurus. The community of faithful recognises the authority that these texts already inherently hold on account of them being spoken by Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman. This authority is not imposed upon them by any external source; their veradicality is intrinsically certified, i.e. they are ‘svataḥ-pramāṇa’. This divine oratory is why other religious works – such as the biographical accounts of Svāminārāyaṇa and the Gurus, or the thousands of devotional songs of praise and moral teaching composed by Svāminārāyaṇa’s disciples – while still rich in theological content, cannot, strictly speaking, be considered a direct source of theological knowledge on par with “revelation”. They can certainly be useful tools that help one reflect upon and illumine revelation (as we shall see in the next chapter). But alone, they are not the foundation upon which the faith of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition stands and grows. To reiterate, the revelatory value

61 Although the Vacanāmrut comes to us in textual form, it is regarded and revered within the tradition for the spoken words of Svāminārāyaṇa it holds. Correspondingly, it receives its authority from Svāminārāyaṇa speaking and authenticating the words that are documented in it, not the transcribers or compilers of those words (even if they were assumed to be divinely inspired to complete their task as accurately as possible).

The Vacanāmrut thus follows in the wider aural tradition of Hindu sacred literature, where revealed texts are śruti – heard, not read. ‘Scripture’, therefore, in Hinduism, is not necessarily something written. See Thomas B. Coburn, “‘Scripture’ in India: Towards a Typology of the Word in Hindu Life”, Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 52.3 (1984), 435-59.
of the Vacanāmrut, Svāminī Vāto and Guru-teachings as authentic and authoritative sources of theological knowledge is undergirded by the self-manifestation of Parabrahman as Svāminārāyaṇa (the first mode of revelation we saw in this chapter) and his continued revelation in and by the Akṣarabrahman Guru (the second mode of revelation we saw). Thus, it is always Parabrahman who is revealing knowledge of himself, through the text of Scripture. It is in this sense that Scripture serves as “revelation”.

For the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, this extends the boundaries of scriptural revelation beyond the ancient canon of the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Bhagavad-Gītā, Brahmāsūtras, Purāṇas, etc. To be clear, though, Svāminārāyaṇa’s teachings in the Vacanāmrut represent for his devotees the most direct and authentic source possible of knowledge about God. What may have been germinal, scattered and abstract in other texts, has been able to be brought together more clearly and concretely than ever in the Vacanāmrut. To be even more explicit, for the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, the Vacanāmrut – personally delivered by the self-revealed Parabrahman and ‘heard’ (i.e. received) via the Brahmasvarūpa Gurus (as we shall shortly learn) – is the climactic primary revelatory text by which its theological doctrines are established and articulated.

This, however, in no way relegates the Vedic corpus to a secondary canonical tier; the revelatory status of the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Bhagavad-Gītā and Brahmāsūtras remains intact. The Vacanāmrut simply provides the proper perspective with which to correctly read them now. What may have been dim
and blurry before, is now bright and clear. With the Vacanāmrut, Svāminārāyaṇa has shone a new light onto the ancient teachings and brought them into sharper focus. The freshly illumined texts suddenly reveal meanings which appear as if anew. Of course, they have always been there, but this act of re-reading is the seeing of what was in sight but had been hitherto overlooked. So if we are to return to the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā to read them in light of what is learned from the Vacanāmrut – for example, that Akṣarabrahman (or ‘Akṣara’ and ‘Brahman’) is an ontologically distinct entity apart from Parabrahman – it can lead to that ‘Aha!’ moment of insightful theological discovery, sometimes accompanied with an elated exclamation of “Eureka!” – ‘I found it!’

In this sense, the Vacanāmrut serves as a natural commentary on the Upaniṣads, Bhagavad-Gītā and Brahmāsūtras, as it interprets, illuminates and sometimes expands upon many of the key themes and ideas latent within the ancient texts. As we shall see throughout the exposition in Part 3, the major themes of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology find resonance and grounding in these classical, canonical sources.

This is also attested to in the Vacanāmrut when Svāminārāyaṇa presents his teachings as a distillation of the many Hindu texts. For example, he proclaims in Vac. Gaḍh. III.10:

> From all the scriptures of the Vedas, Purāṇas, Itihāsa and Smṛti, I have gleaned the principle that jīva, māyā, īśvara, Brahman and Parameśvara are all eternal.
In another sermon, when addressing another point, he states even more emphatically:

> In the four Vedas, the Purāṇas and the Itihāsa scriptures, there is but one central principle, and that is that only God and his Sant can grant liberation (Vac. Gaḍh. II.59).

When in Vac. Gaḍh. II.21 Svāminārāyaṇa similarly stressed “the manifest form of God before the eyes and the manifest form of the Sant before the eyes as being the only grantors of liberation”, he concluded:

> This very fact is the essence of all of the scriptures (Vac. Gaḍh. II.21).

On the same topic again, Svāminārāyaṇa completed his address in Vac. Gaḍh. II.28 with the following emphatic addendum:

> What is this sermon like which I have delivered before you? Well, I have delivered it having heard and having extracted the essence from the Vedas, the Śāstras, the Purāṇas and all other words on this earth pertaining to liberation. This is the most profound and fundamental principle; it is the essence of all essences. For all those who have previously attained liberation, for all those who will attain it in the future, and for all those who are presently treading the path of liberation, this discourse is like a lifeline (Vac. Gaḍh. II.28).

Properly understood, then, it is not a question of whether the Vacanāmrut supplants or supersedes other Hindu texts. For the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition’s faithful, it provides the vital light and perspective needed to understand them correctly and completely in consonance with the revelation of Svāminārāyaṇa himself.
Having thus understood Scripture, particularly the Vacanāmrut, as a mode of revelation within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, we can now move on to understanding its primary position as a source of theological knowledge.

### 3.3.1) Primacy of Scripture

The priority and authority placed on the Vacanāmrut within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition as a source of theological knowledge can also be traced to Svāminārāyaṇa's own emphasis on appealing to authentic texts whenever possible. He often corroborated important points within his sermons by citing widely accepted scriptures. In the sermons compiled within the Vacanāmrut, 98 scriptural references are directly quoted a total of 110 times, including 45 verses or verse-portions from the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa and 33 from the Bhagavad-Gītā. Other scriptures directly referenced include the Aitareya Upaniṣad, Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, Chāndogya Upaniṣad, Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, Subāla Upaniṣad, Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, Taittirīya Upaniṣad, Taittirīya Āraṇyaka (Yajur Veda), Mahābhārata, Skanda Purāṇa, Hiraṇyakeśīyaśākhāśruti, Carpaṭapañjarī and Maṇiratnamālā. Indirectly, Svāminārāyaṇa refers to more than fifty works of religious and other significance, including some extremely remote texts, such as Sūryasiddhānta and Siddhāntaśiromaṇi.

When engaging his audience with theological questions, he would similarly insist that they, too, offer answers supported by scriptural testimony. For example, when asking in Vac. Gaḍh. I.69,

> What exactly is dharma?
he follows up immediately by requesting the respondents to

Please base your reply on the scriptures.

Similarly in Vac. Gaḍh. I.71 he requests:

Therefore, please base your answer on the principles of the scriptures (Vac. Gaḍh. I.71).

When in reply to one of his questions the sādhus did not substantiate their answer, Svāminārāyaṇa quickly responded:

From what principle in the scriptures do you claim that...? Please quote any reference from the scriptures (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

At the heart of this insistence to root all reflection in Scripture lies the principle of scriptural revelation as the only authentic knowledge-source of all things Godly. Svāminārāyaṇa makes this explicit in Vac. Sār.13 when describing how to develop faith in God.

Whosoever develops faith in God does so only through the scriptures. Why? Because the scriptures describe the characteristics of God as well as the characteristics of the Sant. So, only faith developed through the scriptures remains steadfast. On the other hand, faith developed by one’s own mind, without the help of the scriptures, eventually dissolves....

Only one who has faith in the scriptures is able to develop unshakeable faith in God, and only such a person attains liberation.

Svāminārāyaṇa goes on in Vac. Gaḍh. III.27 to assert Scripture as the ultimate source of all theological knowledge. In other words, all theological knowledge, wherever it exists, has its root in Scripture.
For Svāminārāyaṇa, then, scriptural testimony is the only knowledge-source ("pramāṇa") among all the epistemological means whereby one can properly know the nature of the transcendental, otherwise imperceptible Parabrahman (and Akṣarabrahman). To this, there is a useful (though untraceable) Sanskrit verse which reads:

Anekasanśayocchedi parokṣārthasya darśanam |
Sarvasya locanam śāstram yasya nāstyandha eva saḥ ||

Scriptures dispel all doubts and reveal intangible truths [literally, make visible that which is beyond the eyes]. They are the eyes of all. Without them, a person is indeed blind.

Here, though, we must pause to face a contention raised by the Bhāṣyakāra in his extensive commentary of BS 1.1.3. The sūtra itself –

Śāstrayonitvāt |

– affirms that Scripture is that by which one can know ‘Brahman’, which has already been identified as the subject of the Sūtrakāra’s inquiry (BS 1.1.1) and minimally referred to as the cause of the world’s origination, sustenance and dissolution (BS 1.1.2).

The objection takes this form: Upaniṣadic statements such as

Yato vāco nivartante aprāpya…

From where speech returns... having not attained it (TU 1.4.1 & TU 2.9.1);

Eṣa ta ātmā’ntaryāmyamṛto’dṛṣṭo draṣṭā’śrutaḥ śrotā…

62 We shall be considering in the following chapter the means of reason, praxis and tradition as, not sources of theology but, tools to illuminate and better receive revelation.
This Self, the immortal inner dweller, is the unseen seer, the 
unheard listener... (BU 3.7.23);

and

Yat tad adreśyam agrāhyam...

That which is unseeable, ungraspable... (MuU 1.1.6)

confirm that God is beyond the subject of speech and sound; he cannot be 
described nor can he be heard. He is therefore unknowable by scriptures, which, 
after all, are nothing but “a pile of words” [śabdarāśi eva śāstrāṇi].

To this the Bhāṣyakāra retorts that these are the ramblings of those who have 
not grasped the true import of the scriptures and rely solely on the imagined 
proficiency of their flawed reasoning. Statements such as the above serve simply 
to affirm the unlimited nature of God and the limited scope of human means. 
Indeed, it is by these very scriptures that this is established! How can those same 
scriptures, which you, too, cite, then become invalid? If you argue, on the basis of 
these statements, that God is not the subject of verbal testimony, then what will 
you make of other statements, in those same set of scriptures, which describe 
him as knowable through scriptures? Such statements include:

Tam tvāupaniṣadam puruṣam...

That Self extolled in the Upaniṣads... (BU 3.9.26);

Vedaiśca sarvair-aham eva vedyah...

I alone am to be known by all of the Vedas... (BG 15.15).

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63 According to the Bhāṣyakāra, these last two statements refer in particular to Akṣarabrahman, 
but can also apply to Parabrahman.
They assure that, even with all their usual limitations and imperfections, words, when divinely spoken or inspired, can invaluably serve as a reliable source of knowledge about God. As always, though, we must also accept that this revelation, even though adequate, is never exhaustive.

3.3.2) Essentiality of Guru in Receiving Scripture

As direct as the Vacanāmrut and the Svāmīnī Vāto are the words of Svāminārāyaṇa and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī, the inescapable fact remains that they still come to us as words, fraught with the potentiality of being misread (like other texts) by frail, imperfect human minds. Unlike ordinary texts, however, they are, according to the tradition, words spoken by Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman – divine speakers – and so any interpretation of them must also be faithfully undertaken. Indeed, reading and interpreting the Vacanāmrut as the authentic, normative source of theological knowledge for the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu community is an endeavour that must adhere to certain guidelines. The correct methodology of reading theological texts is a complex topic, though, deserving a lot more detail and discussion than is available here. Nevertheless, it is necessary to cover the most important guideline Svāminārāyaṇa repeatedly emphasised in the Vacanāmrut itself, that is, the ‘reading’ or ‘listening’ of Scripture from the Brahmasvarūpa Guru.

Firstly, it is important to clarify that we are allowed here a broader meaning of the terms ‘reading’ and ‘listening’. It is, of course, highly desirable to hear first-hand the Guru reading and exegetically elaborating upon Scripture. But when
that is not possible, the practice of reading personally or even when listening to a
text-based discourse from another expert, the exegetical import is always
derived from the Guru. The final, decisive responsibility of valid interpretation is
invariably deferred to the Brahmaśvarūpa Guru, because it is only he, as
(Akṣara)Brahman and being fully established in Parabrahman (“brahma
niṣṭham”), who has the most direct and perfect realisation of scriptural truths
(“śrotriyaḥ”) and is thus the most qualified and able to convey them.64 The Guru,
to be precise, is not only a knower of the revealed truth (“jñānī”), but a direct
seer (“tattvadarśin”)65 and embodiment of it. These attributes become all the
more vital when one appreciates the multivalency of scriptural words, and thus
the potentiality of their misreading, alongside the primacy of Scripture above all
other sources of theological knowledge. Others, even erudite scholars but who
are without a direct experience of God, would be prone to misinterpret or
incompletely understand scriptural teachings, and would therefore not be able to
fully and properly explain them as God intended them to be understood. This
would mean that experts theologising upon primary and secondary texts can still
be innovative and imaginative in their exegesis, insofar as it conforms to the
overarching reading provided by the Guru. Anything contradictory to or
divergent from the original revelation, however, would be deemed inauthentic.

64 See MuU-SB 1.2.12, pp. 253–56 for an elaboration of the words and this point. See also BS-SB
1.1.3, pp. 22–24.
65 See BG-SB 4.34, p. 110.
What is further clear from Svāminārāyaṇa’s sermons is that, in his mind, the reading of Scripture is not a barren, academic activity. When Gopālānanda Svāmī asks in Vac. Var.11,

Why is it that despite reading the Śāstras, the Purāṇas, and other scriptures, the pundits of the world still do not understand the greatness of God and the Sant as it really is?

Svāminārāyaṇa explains that the fault lies in their lack of refuge in God. As a result, the pundits, as learned as they may be, are “overpowered” by their own “inner enemies” of “lust, anger, avarice, jealousy,” etc., leading them to arrogantly misunderstand God and the Guru.

So, even though they read the Śāstras and Purāṇas, they fail to realise the greatness of God and his Sant as it really is.

To capitalise on its inherent liberative benefits, scriptural reading thus needs to be conducted with a firm grounding in faith. In the very next sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa warns against hearing the holy scriptures from faithless exponents. He likens someone who “does not have such firm faith coupled with the knowledge of God’s greatness” to an “impotent”, from whom no woman can ever beget a child. “Similarly,” Svāminārāyaṇa explains,

no one attains liberation by hearing even holy scriptures such as the Gītā and the Śrīmad-Bhāgavata from one who does not have faith in God coupled with the knowledge of his greatness (Vac. Var.12).

It is thus the fertile intercourse of faith with scripture that bears the liberative and joyous understanding of God.
Going even further in Vac. Var.12, Svāminārāyaṇa warns that receiving the holy texts from faithless readers can not only be fruitless, but gravely dangerous to one’s faith.

Just as death is assured to whoever drinks sweetened milk into which a snake’s venom has fallen, similarly, no one can ever attain liberation by listening to the Gītā or the Śrīmad-Bhāgavata from a person who does not have faith in God coupled with the knowledge of his greatness. On the contrary, it can be detrimental.

The natural culmination of this instruction can be found in Vac. Loyā.11 where Svāminārāyaṇa states simply and concisely:

One should only hear the sacred scriptures from the Satpuruṣa, but never from an unholy person.

Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises even more clearly in Vac. Gaḍh. II.13 the essentiality of the Guru in helping access revelatory truths from the scriptures. After delivering an exceptionally important sermon on the nature of God, in particular alluding to himself as Parabrahman, Svāminārāyaṇa appends his address with the following reminder:

However, such discourses regarding the nature of God cannot be understood by oneself even from the scriptures. Even though these facts may be in the scriptures, it is only when the Satpuruṣa manifests on this earth, and one hears them being narrated by him, that one understands them. They cannot, however, be understood by one’s intellect alone, even from the scriptures.

In another sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa adds categorically:

The words of the scriptures cannot be [fully] understood by anyone except an Ekāntika Bhakta.

“Which words?” he asks rhetorically, before elaborating:
Words such as ‘God is formless’, ‘universally pervasive’, ‘luminous’, and ‘nirguṇa’. On hearing such descriptions, a fool concludes that the scriptures describe God as being formless. On the other hand, an Ekāntika Bhakta realises, ‘When the scriptures describe God as being formless and nirguṇa, they are referring to the fact that he does not possess a māyic form or māyic attributes. In reality, his form is forever divine, and he possesses countless redemptive virtues’ (Vac. Gaḍh. I.66).

Thus, in Svāminārāyaṇa’s mind, the Vacanāmrut or any other scriptural text is only correctly interpreted when it is read under the loving, faithful tutelage of the Guru. Reading from the Guru ensures that each detail is understood ‘sampradâyically’ (i.e. ecclesiastically), so to speak, in conformation with the norms, faith and history of the tradition.

In conclusion to this chapter, this is what can be succinctly said of ‘revelation’ in the Svāminārāyaṇa system: God, out of his loving grace, has chosen to be revealed in person as Svāminārāyaṇa, in and by the Brahmāsvarūpa Guru, and through Scripture, which most directly means the Vacanāmrut when faithfully received via the Guru.
4) TOOLS OF SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA HINDU THEOLOGY

If it is by revelation alone – the gracious, loving act of God revealing himself in person or through Scripture and the Guru – that God can be known, the question then remains, what place do human reason and endeavour, both past and current, have in the quest to better understand that revealed God? This shall be the subject of inquiry in this chapter. In particular, I shall be touching upon the role of reason, praxis and tradition in the Svāminārāyaṇa system by which to understand God and progress towards the goal of liberation.

First, though, it is important to note the function of these factors as tools in relation to revelation. That is, unlike revelation, they are not independent sources of theological knowledge, nor are they complementary or supplementary to it, for revelation is not necessarily deficient in any way that they could add anything new to whatever is already inherent within revelation. Needless to say, reason, praxis or tradition neither function as correctives to what is axiomatically believed to be infallible and sacred. Nor would it be correct to say that they somehow hold a decorative role; the beauty of raw revelation can be just as joyous and rewarding. In fact, any embellishments to revelation are not only unnecessary, but possibly even distractive, or worse, damaging. Similarly, reason, praxis and tradition do not serve as condiments to ‘enhance’ revelation, spicing up an otherwise bland version of the truth.

What the tools do provide, however, is a new vigour of light with which to better appreciate revelation and its latent beauty and power. They help illuminate
revelatory truths, so that seeing the same in a new light sometimes leads to a
discovery of what had previously been missed. What may have been dim and
blurry before, is now bright and clear. In this sense, these tools can also function
like spectacles, bringing into sharper focus what – due to defects or deficiencies
in the observer, not the object (i.e. revelation) – may have seemed obscure or
indistinct. Rather than enhancing revelation, they enhance the capability of the
reader to access and receive revelation more intensely. They serve to clarify and
fortify its meanings, helping unlock deeper chambers of truth not immediately
apparent. Again, all these are highly complex topics, warranting far more detail
and discussion than is possible here. At the very most, we may be able to
fleetingly point to their basic function in the sections below as we briefly
introduce each in turn.

4.1) Reason

In his extensive commentary on BS 1.1.3, the Bhāṣyakāra strongly defends the
primacy of śabda (verbal testimony) and its irreducibility to an inductive
expression. In particular, he argues in some detail about the limits and defects of
rational induction when employed independently of Scripture to prove the
creatorship of Brahman. Using the Nyāyists' syllogism of ‘All effects have an
agent; the world (comprising of sprouts, etc.) is an effect, therefore it must have
an agent, as with a pot’, he systematically dismantles each technical constituent
of the argument and rejoins a series of counter-arguments before issuing a
warning: an overzealous application of reasoning or confidence in one’s intellect
can blind one from seeing one's own limitations and fallacious argumentation, leaving one empty of higher, more subtle truths.\textsuperscript{66}

Elsewhere\textsuperscript{67}, the Bhāṣyakāra adds that adeptness in argumentation alone is inadequate (“akiñcitkaram”), simply because the divine, not-this-worldly and sensorially imperceptible God can never become the subject of reason alone – just as the ears can never grasp the visual beauty of a rose and the eyes fail to apprehend the melody of a birdsong. Besides, all instances of inference are predicated on perception, and therefore the senses, whose limitations have already been well established.

The Kaṭha Upaniṣad, for example, clearly states that this highest theological knowledge is “atarkyam” (2.8), not of the realm of suppositional reasoning and thus not fully comprehendible by the intellect alone. The very next verse begins:

\begin{quote}
Naiṣā tarkeṇa matir-apaneyā...
\end{quote}

Nor can this knowledge be grasped by argumentation (KaU 2.9).

As the Bhāṣyakāra affords some extra elaboration on this topic, he again warns that reasoning left to its own devices can be dangerous, because, after all, argumentation is a skill. A strong argument can always be thwarted by a stronger argument. So there is no telling which incisive piece of logic might be superseded by a yet more rational objector or by the same thinker at a different time or

\textsuperscript{66} BS-SB 1.1.3, pp. 19-22, esp. p. 20.

\textsuperscript{67} The following is based on BS-SB 1.1.3, pp. 17-24; BS-SB 1.1.5, pp. 29-31; BS-SB 2.11, pp. 164-66; KaU-SB 2.9, pp. 92-94; and KaU-SB 6.12, pp. 164-65, with added personal reflection.
place. Such contestations and disputes are endless and ultimately meaningless, he asserts, for this is not the way to decide or judge siddhānta ('established principles'). Besides, reasoning is designated as a quality of the buddhi (intellect), which the Kaṭha Upaniṣad later concedes is increasingly inferior to the soul, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman (KaU 3.10-11). It is thus a futile if not perilous and ridiculously arrogant venture to attempt to grasp knowledge of the supremely divine by that which is still shackled by māyā.

In conclusion, the Bhāṣyakāra states: how can there be any other reliable means of knowing that which is not fully perceptible to human senses and graspable by human intellect? Therefore, rather than perception or inference, it is the intrinsically certified, divinely spoken or divinely inspired words constituting Scripture which we must solely rely upon to form a valid understanding of God. Among all the sources of knowledge, Scripture is thus “paramapramāṇa” (the principal knowledge-source)\(^{68}\), and God is, simply, “śāstraikagamya” (understandable by Scripture alone)\(^{69}\).

Even so, while the above places reasoned argumentation in its proper epistemological position, it need not be totally abandoned in order to defer to scriptural authority. In the same comment on KaU 2.9, the Bhāṣyakāra makes the crucial difference between correct reasoning (“sattarka”) and incorrect

\(^{68}\) KaU-SB 6.12, p. 165.

\(^{69}\) BS-SB 1.1.3, p. 22.
reasoning (”dustarka”). The former is that which is informed by and undergirded by śraddhā, which he describes at BS-SB 2.1.11 as “utmost faith in the Brahmāsvarūpa Guru and the śāstra and siddhānta he propounds”. Conversely, incorrect reasoning is that which is uncommitted to and independent of Scripture and Guru. Reason alone may be blind, but holding the hand of faith, it is able to reliably explore the wider contours of theological reflection. Faith gives it direction, leading it safely to fruitful ends.

Reason, therefore, becomes a valuable tool in understanding revelation when properly grounded in and guided by Scripture and the Guru. It helps not necessarily in discovering theological ideas anew, for their roots can always be traced to revelation, but exploring those ideas further and excavating from them deeper truths which had been within sight but not really seen. This is what we mean by reason providing ‘insight’, as it opens one to fresh, deeper, richer understandings of revelation.

Reason can also help in confirming and consolidating what has already been learnt from Scripture and refuting claims contradictory to it. Early on in the Brahmāsūtra-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya, an objection is raised about the inquiry into ‘Brahman’. The question is this: If śāstra (Scripture) is the supreme authority of brahmic knowledge (theology), it is futile, then, to debate upon it because now there is no room for doubt and therefore there are no doubts to

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70 KaU-SB 2.9, p. 93.
71 BS-SB 2.1.11, p. 166.
dispel. The Bhāṣyakāra rejects that idea, asserting realistically that doubts can still occur even within Scripture. Moreover, he adds, once doubts are dispelled, it is useful and even necessary to test and consolidate what one knows, just as one shakes a peg which has been freshly hammered into the ground.\textsuperscript{72}

The very project of the Brahmasūtras testifies to the faithful employment of reasoned argumentation to harmonise meanings, clarify ambiguous content, refute contradictory interpretations, and rebut objections. Reason thus serves to consolidate and clarify that which has already been established by Scripture, to protect and embolden faith. The Bhāṣyakāra too defends his interpretations in the Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya as being “śrutiyuktisammata”, that is, in agreement with both revelation and reasoning.\textsuperscript{73} Ratiocination is still permissible and profitable, when deployed on the basis of Scripture ("śāstrād evānumitam"\textsuperscript{74}). Applying reasoned reflection, therefore, is not in contradistinction to the concept of sola scriptura, insofar as it is in consonance with and submission to revelation. Indeed, reason often works in the service of revelation, bolstering its authority and justifying its priority.

\textbf{4.2) Praxis}

Validation for reasoned argumentation or faithful inquiry can also be found at BG 4.34. The first half of the verse reads:

\textsuperscript{72} BS-SB 1.1.1, pp. 10-11.
\textsuperscript{73} BS-SB 1.1.1, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{74} BS-SB 1.1.3, p. 22.
Tad-viddhi praṇipātena paripraśnena sevayā |
Learn that [knowledge] by obeisance, inquiry, and service.

Importantly, though, ‘paripraśna’ (inquiry) is bookended by humble obeisance and sincere application. That is, the Bhāṣyakāra explains,

only such an inquiry is herein advocated which is doubly bound and refined by being preceded by surrender and succeeded by service. Otherwise, any questioning divorced of a faithful obeisance to begin with and not followed by a subsequent commitment to practice is not conducive to theological understanding; it is verily averse to it.75

True inquiry must thus not only be grounded in revelation; it must also follow through into ‘sādhanā’ (literally ‘means’ or liberative endeavours), also referred to as praxis76. Indeed, a sincere application of theological ideas is an integral and necessary part of the process of understanding theological teachings. It becomes clear from Svāminārāyaṇa’s sermons that he did not intend theological beliefs to be simply articles of faith for subscription. Rather, they are to be lived out and deeply integrated into every aspect of one’s actions, thoughts, intentions and being. They are to be experienced, because, as Svāminārāyaṇa stressed, only when one experiences what one has learned from Scripture by faith is one’s knowledge truly complete (Vac. Loyā.7).

75 BG-SB 4.34, p. 110.
76 This should not be confused with the "praxis" of Liberation Theology which binds together action, suffering and reflection.
In fact, Svāminārāyaṇa taught that theological concepts grow in their meaning as they are translated into personal theological praxis (which can take a physical and mental form). For example, in Vac. Sār.17 Svāminārāyaṇa states:

As the vision of a person who worships God becomes increasingly subtle, he realises the unlimited nature of God and he increasingly realises the greatness of God.

He goes on to elaborate:

When that devotee identifies himself with the body, he sees God as the witness of his waking, dream and deep sleep states. Later, when he realises himself as transcending the waking, dream and deep sleep states, he realises God as transcending them too. Then, as his vision becomes increasingly subtle, he realises God as being far beyond himself and understands the greatness of God even more. Then, as he becomes more and more lovingly attached to God, his upāsanā [loving worship informed by theological understanding] of God becomes even more firmly established.

Svāminārāyaṇa’s import here is that one’s understanding of God is predicated on a how well one understands one’s self. Importantly, as one progresses in a correct spiritual self-understanding, one grows not only in understanding God but, naturally and inevitably, a deeper, richer and loving relationship with him.77

In effect, Svāminārāyaṇa is saying: Along the path of theological understanding, one can only see from where one stands; as the aspirant walks further and rises higher, she advances in her theological vision and insights upon what had been accepted on trust from Scripture. This is the role of praxis in the task of theology.

Another example can be drawn from a particularly important sermon wherein Svāminārāyaṇa expounds the crux of his theological system with notable brevity

77 See chapter 8.2.1 for a fuller discussion of ‘Understanding the Self to Understand and Relate to God’.
and simplicity. He begins by explaining the nature and function of Brahman and then its ontological distinction from and subordination to Parabrahman.

Svāminārāyaṇa then states:

Having understood this [i.e. having accepted these beliefs], one should develop a oneness between one’s jivātman and that Brahman, and worship Parabrahman while maintaining a master-servant relationship with him.

What is noteworthy here is that Svāminārāyaṇa immediately calls for the highly theological concept (the Brahman-Parabrahman distinction and connection) to be implemented by way of a living relationship with Brahman (i.e. the Brahmāsvarūpa Guru) and God. Furthermore, he brings even such an application into the domain of ‘understanding’ as he goes on to conclude the sermon thus:

With such understanding, ‘brahmajñāna’ also becomes an unobstructed path to attaining the highest state of enlightenment (Vac. Gaḍh. II.3; emphasis added).

This interplay between understanding and praxis is a key feature of Svāminārāyaṇa’s teachings, revealing that he never intended faith to be passive. True faith is not an exercise in intellectual excogitation, but calls one to act, sincerely and devoutly. That is why Svāminārāyaṇa advocated and indeed engaged his followers in such endeavours as temple-building (Vac. Gaḍh. II.27) and works of religious service and public welfare (Vac. Gaḍh. I.31, Vac. Var.17).

He admonished those who “sat idly”, and urged those who wished “to attain the highest state of enlightenment” to “make an effort, but... not relax or lose courage” (Vac. Gaḍh. II.12). In one sermon he categorically stated:

All deficiencies which do remain in a devotee are due to his own lethargy (Vac. Gaḍh. I.20).
Moreover, Svāminārāyaṇa added, the location of this praxis is the crucible of the faith community itself. Reading of Scripture may be a deeply personal endeavour, but imbibing its teachings in daily life becomes inescapably a communal enterprise. To be clear, this remains an individual effort, but one made within a living community of practitioners. In fact, Svāminārāyaṇa emphasised patient praxis within the community as a mark of faith, whereas those who sought to escape the community and practise in isolation as lacking in an essential understanding of God and what it means to be a person of faith (Vac. Var.5).

Svāminārāyaṇa was also careful not to reduce faith to emotional outpourings or intellectual musings, nor confining acts of devotion to mechanical procedures bereft of love and reflection. The key term he used to describe one’s relationship with God, as noted above in Vac. Sār.17, was ‘upāsanā’, which, as we shall later discover more fully, is worship energised by loving devotion and informed by correct theological knowledge.

He often integrated the theoretical and practical aspects into what may be termed ‘Applied Theology’, that is, having seemingly abstract concepts brought to fruition through ways of practical application. For example, to gain in spiritual strength, Svāminārāyaṇa prescribes sincerely serving devotees of God through word, thought and deed (Vac. Gaḍh. II.63). To control or win over the mind, one should engage in acts of reverent devotion (Vac. Gaḍh. III.11). Dispassion towards material pleasures can be achieved by observing the basic code of conduct prescribed in religious texts, including physically serving other
devotees, listening to scriptural discourses, and performing other acts of
devotion (Vac. Gaḍh. III.34). And after describing the essentiality of a correct,
spiritual understanding of the self, Svāminārāyaṇa emphatically asserts that
observing the commands of the Guru is indeed tantamount to realising oneself as
the ātman (Vac. Gaḍh. II.51).

This emphasis on the pragmatic is also discernible in the questions posed by his
disciples who sought not only answers to their theological queries but clear
guidance for their sādhanā in progressing towards liberation. For example, when
Muktānanda Svāmī asks in Vac. Kār.8,

Mahārāja, the Vedas, the Śāstras, the Purāṇas and the Itihāsa
scriptures have described the saguṇa form of God and have also
described his nirguṇa form. So how should one understand the
nirguṇa form and how should one understand the saguṇa form of
Śrī Puruṣottama?

his question is not complete until he concludes with the following:

How much does a devotee of God benefit by understanding the
nirguṇa form of that God, and how much does he benefit by
understanding the saguṇa form of that God?

What is apparent is that the question being asked is not for mere data collection.
It is not enough to simply know a concept. Rather, the aspirant is keen to
incorporate the concept into his daily practice, and hence is seeking to
understand its practical significance as well. As mentioned above, in-between the
starting point of faith (based on revelation) and the finishing line of realisation
(i.e. experience) lies this journey of praxis, of physically and mentally applying
theological concepts until they come to full consummation.
This emphasis stems from the conviction that these theological ideas or beliefs are true, and the truth is to be lived. In living the truths, they in turn are vivified through personal experience. As we shall see frequently throughout the exposition of the main themes of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, Svāminārāyaṇa insists upon not just knowing about God, as in gathering cerebral information about him, but developing an intimate, personal relationship with him and his living medium, the Guru. Theology, for Svāminārāyaṇa, is not simply about ideas, but the transformation of the individual – progressing from material to spiritual, from bondage to liberation, from māyic to Brahmic.

This is why sheer textual information or theoretical knowledge was ever enough for Svāminārāyaṇa (Vac. Gaḍh. I.50, Vac. Gaḍh. I.35, Vac. Gaḍh. I.56, Vac. Gaḍh. III.36, Vac. Var.11, Vac. Gaḍh. III.2, Vac. Gaḍh. III.27). He insisted that only those who were making the sincere effort to reflect upon his teachings and imbibing them would be able to understand them (Vac. Gaḍh. I.18). Faith, then, which is operative, is attended by sincere and patient praxis, by which faith itself is fostered and fortified.

4.3) Tradition

If praxis is the application of scriptural teachings, how these theological ideas have been implemented and practiced over time provides further insight into their finer meaning. ‘ Tradition’, as we may call it, thus becomes another useful tool in better understanding revelation. A verse from the Mahābhārata (Ādi Parva 1.267) often cited to substantiate this concept reads:
Itihāsapurāṇabhyām vedam samupabṛhayet |

It calls us to draw upon historical and epical texts to clarify and consolidate the meaning of the Vedas.

Vedic literature itself also attests to the tradition of drawing upon previous authorities of verified knowledge, whose lineage is often narrated as way of substantiating its authenticity. We see this in practice in the beginning of the Bhagavad-Gītā’s fourth canto when Kṛṣṇa recounts preaching the yogic knowledge to Vivasvān, who in turn passed it on to Manu, who subsequently conveyed it to Ikṣvāku. He confirms:

Evaṃ paraṃparāprāptam imaṃ rājarṣayo viduḥ |

Thus this [knowledge] received by succession is known by the royal sages (BG 4.2).

Similarly in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (1.1.1-2), the author traces the transmission of brahmavidyā from Brahmā (not to be confused with Brahman) to his eldest son Atharvan, then successively on to Aṅgiras, Bhāradvāja Satyavāha, Aṅgirasa, and finally, to Śaunaka.

In other Upaniṣads we find the more general acknowledgement:

Iti śuśruma purveṣām ye nas-tad vyācacakṣire |

Thus we have heard from past [teachers], who explained it to us (KeU 1.4; similarly also IU 10 & 13).

Indeed, the very term ‘Śruti’ (literally ‘hearing’), used synonymously with the Vedas and to describe revelatory literature in general, pays further testimony to
this emphasis on ‘tradition’. The fact that the transmission of knowledge from
guru to śiṣya is framed as an aural tradition, rather than an oral tradition, is
telling. One would assume that the guru as speaker, being of much higher
authority and learning than his audience of disciples, would be the protagonist in
the guru-śiṣya dialogue, and thus the revealed texts should be more aptly termed
‘Vakti’ (‘speaking’). The fact that they are not, and instead called ‘Śruti’, affirms,
as above, that even the teacher has heard whatever knowledge he is imparting
from his own previous teachers, extending the lineage indefinitely to,
presumably, the initial divine revelation by God himself.

Within the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, this idea of drawing upon ‘tradition’ and
the transmission of divine knowledge takes on a more specific meaning revolving
around the human personhood of Svāminārāyaṇa and, in particular, the Guru
Paramparā, the unbroken succession of Brahmāsvarūpa Gurus in and by whom
Parabrahman chooses to be revealed and remain liberatively active. As perfect
devotees, their lives serve as the ideal example of how theological principles
should and must be practiced, of living out faith in all aspects of everyday life.

Svāminārāyaṇa thus urges his devotees to “reminisce” the “divine incidents and
actions (līlā)” of God who lived among us, sometimes alluding to himself (Vac.
Gaḍh. II.35; see also Vac. Gaḍh. I.3 and Vac. Gaḍh. I.38) and also the
Brahmasvarūpa Gurus (Vac. Gaḍh. II.66). In Vac. Gaḍh. II.58, he explicitly
instructs Muktānanda Svāmī, one of his most senior sādhu-disciples, to
“continuously preach and write” about “your īṣṭadeva for the rest of your life”,

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because it is in the texts which narrate the life of one’s own īṣṭadeva that “dharma [righteous, or ‘right’, living] as well as the glory of that īṣṭadeva are naturally revealed”. In other words: If the Vacanāmrut is the ‘textbook’, the biographies of Svāminārāyaṇa and the Gurus are the ‘workbooks’ wherein we find real-life examples of theological ideas being put into practice, calling us also to emulate them. This is important because practices can be a useful tool when understanding or interpreting beliefs, since how one prays and worships reflects what one believes (and, correspondingly, what one believes, affects how one prays and worships).

The Guru-centric nature of ‘tradition’, and its continuous flow over time, ensures that ‘tradition’ itself is not a fossilised view of ‘how things were done’, but becomes an active process of reflection and interpretation, by which theological and spiritual insights are valued, tested, and transmitted. The very definition of ‘sampradāya’, even if translated as ‘tradition’, points both ways – not just to the past but, ironically, also to the future. The Halāyudhakośa lexicon states:

Sampradāyaḥ syāt pāramparyam gurukramaḥ |
A sampradāya is a lineage of successive gurus (2.402).

When elaborating upon the second half of the Bhagavad-Gītā verse cited above –

Upadekṣyanti te jñānam jñāninas tattvadarśinaḥ ||
Enlightened seers shall teach you that knowledge (BG 4.34)
– the Bhāṣyakāra is also keen to point out the use of the future tense in the verb ‘upadekṣyanti’ (‘will preach’) and the plurality in the nouns ‘jñānīnāḥ’
('knowers') and 'tattvadarśinaḥ' ('seers'). He interprets this as a clear affirmation of the succession of Brahmavāraṇa Gurus who will continue to transmit this knowledge to generations of seekers indefinitely.

Properly understood, then, tradition along with praxis and reason do not relegate revelation to an equal or lesser authority, but secure its position as the primary theological source even while establishing themselves as useful tools in the task of theology. This shall prove particularly useful when we (re)turn to these factors in the final Part to discuss a Hindu formulation of (Hindu) theology.