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By Virtue of Yoga Powers:
The Image of Divinity in Swaminarayan Hinduism

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Abstract

A *siddha yogin* (perfected yogi) can perform inexplicable feats like walking on water and levitating. The *yogin* obtains these powers, often explained in terms of divinity, by performing penance. These superhuman *siddha yogins* have historically been known to use yoga powers to command control, building authority by appearing to be extraordinary or divine. However, Hindu traditions contest whether miraculous powers confer divinity. While tantric traditions believe religious leaders claim divinity through the display of miraculous powers, bhakti traditions perceive supernatural powers with skepticism (Burchett 2012). This paper examines the extent to which yoga powers are the primary determinant of divinity and authority in contemporary Hindu religious traditions through a case study of the Bocāsanavāsī Śrī-Akṣar-Puruṣottam Svāminārāyana Sansthā (BAPS), a devotional tradition in Gujarat. I analyze conceptions of two theological entities, *Parabrahman* (God) and *Akṣarabrahman* (Guru), to demonstrate how yoga powers construct and deconstruct divinity: BAPS simultaneously accepts and rejects yoga powers. For instance, devotees imagine God with yoga powers; however, they should not ground their belief in miracles. Swaminarayan canonical texts reconcile this difference by suggesting that yoga powers play a role in defining divinity but do not form a basis for devotional faith. Given the evidence that yoga powers alone do not grant authority to a divine figure, I argue that authority stems from multiple factors, with a virtuous life at the core.

Practitioners in Hindu devotional traditions like BAPS determine the authority of a religious figure by examining this person's life.

Keywords: Yoga Powers, Bhakti, Divinity, Religious Authority, BAPS, Guru

Introduction

The practice of various forms of yoga, such as hot yoga, power yoga, and aerial yoga, has grown exponentially in the United States during the last few decades, due in part to the physical and mental health benefits it provides. In South Asia, the region where this practice originated, yoga has historically been associated with the acquisition of supernatural powers. Flying through the air, seeing the future, reading minds, becoming disembodied, and recalling previous births are feats that a *siddha yogin*, a perfected yogi who has obtained powers by extraordinary penance and meditation, might display. Hindu traditions debate the extent to which the display of supernatural powers marks divinity (Jacobsen 5). For instance, in many tantric traditions (esoteric ritual-centric traditions), yoga powers have constructed authority and served as a spiritual goal. In contrast, in bhakti traditions (Hindu devotional traditions), yoga powers represent an undesired fruit of yoga and do not reveal God.¹

In this paper, I examine tantric and bhakti attitudes towards yoga powers to understand how the traditions conceive of divinity and authority. Specifically, I focus on a denomination of the Swaminarayan Sampradāya called Bocāsanavāsī Śrī Akṣar-Puruṣottam Svāminārāyana Sansthā (BAPS), to illustrate how yoga powers both construct and deconstruct divinity. Through

¹ Bhakti and tantra are not necessarily a binary; rather, they are contrasted in this paper to highlight various attitudes towards yoga powers. Tantra at large is highly influential in all aspects of Hinduism, even bhakti, in the development of rituals. In this paper, I juxtapose the left-wing tantra groups, characterized by magical rites, slaughter, and demonology by David Gordon White with bhakti sampradayas.

an analysis of this case study, I contend that while yoga powers can prove useful in defining divinity in a limited way, they do not signal divinity reliably. First, not all with yoga powers are divine and second, not all that are divine display yoga powers. To understand these perspectives on yoga powers, I examine Swaminarayan theology as described in sacred texts and biographies. Then, I consider the relationship between yoga powers and divinity and its impact on religious authority. Understanding the role of the *Akṣarabrahman* guru, an ontological entity specific to Swaminarayan theology, helps us examine the relationship between divinity and authority in an institutional bhakti *sampradāya*.² My research de-emphasizes supernatural powers as ways of legitimizing God, and instead, emphasizes lived virtues as at the heart of recognizing divinity. While many religious traditions have understood God through supernatural powers, the evidence presented by the case study of BAPS points to alternate forms of divinity.

Background: Divinity in Swaminarayan Hinduism

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gujarat abounded with diverse religious groups, such as Pustimārgi Vaiṣṇavas, Mahāpanthis and Nāthpanthis, Kabir movements, and more (Mallinson 51). In a sea of varied religious communities, one such figure named Sahajānand Svāmī (1781-1830) founded the Swaminarayan Sampradaya in 1801. Sahajānand Svāmī was also known as Swaminarayan on account of his *samādhi*³-inducing *Svāminārāyana* mantra. During his lifetime, Swaminarayan established a thriving religious community with several hundred thousand followers who worshipped him as *Parabrahman* (“supreme existential reality”). Further, he constructed six temples, initiated three-thousand sadhus, and inspired the creation of a wide range of texts on Swaminarayan theology and devotion (Paramtattvadas 1). A century later, in

² *Samprādya* here means religious sect or tradition. *Samprādya* and *Sansthā* are synonymous in this paper and hereafter will not be italicized when being used in the proper noun form.

³ *Samādhi* is the eighth and final stage of *astanga-yoga* as described by Patānjali in the *Yoga Sūtras*. For some yoga traditions, *samādhi*, as a state of enlightenment, is believed to be the highest attainment.

1907, a *sādhu* named Śāstrī Yajñapurūṣadās consecrated a Swaminarayan mandir in Bochasan, marking the beginning of the BAPS Sansthā, a denomination of the Swaminarayan Sampraday (Brahmbhatt 102). This Sansthā was established on the grounds of doctrinal differences, especially the conceptualization of *Akṣarabrahman*'s divinity (Brahmbhatt 102, Ghadia 157).

In South Asian religious traditions, divinity has been broadly described as a state of superhuman existence that entails possessing the highest possible capacities of knowledge and action (Davis 10). While this definition emphasizes supremacy as divinity, ontological worldviews specific to Swaminarayan Hinduism narrow this definition even further.

Swaminarayan recognizes five *tattvas*,⁴ or ontological beings, in Swaminarayan his theological system: *jīva*, *īśvara*, *māyā*, *Akṣarabrahman*, and *Parabrahman*, in ascending order.

Parabrahman is God, and *Akṣarabrahman* is God's abode, as well as the choicest devotee of *Parabrahman* (Mamtora). *Akṣarabrahman* has four forms, one of which is the guru that leads devotees past the barrier of *māyā* to understand *Parabrahman* (Kim 241). *Māyā* is dark ignorance, sometimes translated as "illusion," that shrouds infinite *jīvas*, preventing them from experiencing the highest eternal bliss; therefore, to transcend *māyā* is to attain liberation. A *jīva* is the blissful consciousness that animates the bodies of humans, animals, and other life forms. Only two *tattvas* remain eternally above *māyā*, namely, *Parabrahman* and *Akṣarabrahman* (Paramtattvadas 72). Devotees must become *brahmarupa*,⁵ meaning, attain a perfected state like *Akṣarabrahman*, through association with the living *Akṣarabrahman* guru to then worship *Parabrahman*: this state is the ultimate liberation, or *mokṣa* (Kim 241, Paramtattvadas 275).

⁴ For detailed explorations of each *tattva*, see Paramtattvadas: *Introduction to Swaminarayan Theology*.

⁵ Through association with *Akṣarabrahman*, a *jīva* learns how to become like *Akṣarabrahman* (*brahmarupa*). *Brahmarupa* refers to the form that a *jīva* takes upon being liberated from *māyā*. Note that the *jīva* cannot become *Akṣarabrahman*, but similar to *Akṣarabrahman*.

According to Swaminarayan theology, the divine is eternally beyond the grasp of *māyā*—therefore, only *Parabrahman* and *Akṣarabrahman* can be classified as divine. Both *Akṣarabrahman* and *Parabrahman* “are replete with divine virtues and devoid of *māyik* impurities” (Paramtattvadas 190). Despite manifesting in human forms, both *Akṣarabrahman* and *Parabrahman* are eternally divine because they are eternally above *māyā* (Paramtattvadas 190).⁶ Because a *jīva* can also transcend *māyā*, I emphasize the boundaries of this definition of divinity: in Swaminarayan theology, one cannot *become* divine but is eternally so (Paramtattvadas 80). Therefore, though association with *Akṣarabrahman* can lift a *jīva* beyond the grasp of *māyā*, the *jīva* is not eternally divine in the way that *Akṣarabrahman* or *Parabrahman* are. The concept of God’s eternal divinity is rooted in Swaminarayan theology, for no transformation can turn the *jīva* into *Akṣarabrahman* or *Parabrahman*, as Swaminarayan explains when he says, “no one can become like [God]” (*Vachanamrut* Gadhada III 39). According to the Swaminarayan tradition, the divine is eternally divine.

When Divinity and Yoga Powers Align

For various religious traditions across South Asia, yoga powers, which only a select few hold, construe individuals as divine. Knut Jacobsen, who studies the relationship between yoga powers and divinity, states that “yoga powers became a successful way to explain the divine” (Jacobsen 6). In many ways, yoga powers demonstrate the extraordinary abilities of the divine. I begin this exploration by considering how God is known to possess yoga powers in the Swaminarayan tradition. My analysis of Swaminarayan Hindu scriptures suggests that sometimes yoga powers are appropriate in defining the divinity of *Parabrahman*.

⁶ BAPS devotees recognize the present form of *Akṣarabrahman* as Sadhu Keshavjivandas, also called Mahant Swami Maharaj.

The *Vachanamrut* (*Vacanāmṛt*),⁷ a collection of 273 didactic discourses delivered by Swaminarayan, lists yoga powers as an attribute of God. In his sermons, Swaminarayan identifies himself as omnipotent, omnipresent, and manifest by these yoga powers. For example, in *Vachanamrut* Loya 2, Swaminarayan articulates that God enacts the process of creation by using yoga powers: “God, who is the cause of all, appears like a human being; yet by his yoga powers, he is able to create countless *brahmānds*⁸ from his body and absorb them back into himself.” (*Vachanamrut* Loya 2). Swaminarayan indicates that even though *Parabrahman* presents himself as a human being, he uses yoga powers to create and dissolve universes. The prepositional phrase “by his yoga powers” emphasizes *Parabrahman*’s omnipotence. While yoga powers are an instrument in the creation of the universe, *Parabrahman* is the musician. Swaminarayan’s yoga powers, like Krishna’s in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, demonstrate transcendent, liberated existence and rulership over the cosmos (Malinar 51). If we assume that divinity entails creation of the universe, this excerpt demonstrates that divinity involves yoga powers because God uses these powers to enact creation.

Yoga powers do more than engender the universe—they also allow *Parabrahman* to exist in multiple places at once. Similar to how Krishna’s yoga powers characterize him as divine in the *Gītā*, Swaminarayan notes in the *Vachanamrut* that only a supreme God possesses certain powers (Malinar 54). Swaminarayan explains that *Parabrahman*, using yoga powers as a means, simultaneously presents himself in an all-pervading and manifest form:

The fact that he remains in one place and yet reveals himself in countless places is a demonstration of his yoga power...This use of God’s (*Parabrahman*) yoga powers to

⁷ In the *Vacanāmṛt*, a “primary revelatory text” of the tradition, Swaminarayan establishes his doctrine through oral articulation (Paramattvadas 15). From here on, *Vacanāmṛt* will be spelled *Vachanamrut*, a common spelling variant. A town (i.e., Loya, Gadhada, etc.) and discourse number in parentheses indicate a *Vachanamrut* citation.

⁸ *Brahmands* (plural) means universes.

remain in one place and at the same time to appear in countless places is itself his pervasive form... (*Vachanamrut* Gadhada II 64)

Parabrahman, being the inner soul of the universe, possesses an all-pervading nature. He dwells in everything through “*antaryāmi śakti*,” translated as “yoga powers” (Paramtattvadas 115). These yoga powers allow *Parabrahman* to be “immanently present within all while still being distinctly transcendental” (Paramtattvadas 115). According to the *Vachanamrut*, Swaminarayan is present in everything, sentient or insentient, and despite existing in even low life forms, he remains supreme on the ontological level. Using these yoga powers, God manifests on earth and acts in the world while remaining unaffected and unbound by worldly gains (Malinar 51). Thus, yoga powers are one of the many characteristics of God.

According to Swaminarayan theology, defining *Parabrahman* according to yoga powers alone is limiting. The Swaminarayan tradition conceptualizes *Parabrahman* as using yoga powers to manifest on earth, be omnipresent, and create countless universes. These yoga powers are limited to a single highest Parabrahman, imposing a distinction between Parabrahman and ordinary yogins or other gods (Malinar 54). While Jacobsen states that “yoga powers have been interpreted as signs of divinity,” (Jacobsen 5) I note that they are fallible signals on their own. Even though Parabrahman can be characterized as possessing yoga powers, in the following sections, I examine how God cannot be recognized through these powers because individuals possessing such powers need not be divine.

When Powers Do Not Confer Divinity

Having explored how *Parabrahman* is imagined with yoga powers, I compare bhakti and tantra to investigate how individuals possessing yoga powers are understood in South Asia. Practitioners of tantra strive to become like God by attaining *siddhi*, or yoga powers (White).

Tantric traditions emphasize ritual practice and knowledge as means to reach this God-like state of salvation (White). In contrast, bhakti *sampradāyas*,⁹ which emphasize devotion and subservience to the divine, understand yoga powers as the result of God's grace. Therefore, *bhaktas* possessing yoga powers do not proclaim themselves as divine but defer glory to God. In "Encounters with Yogīs in Sufi and Bhakti Hagiographical Literature," Patton Burchett compares miracles in bhakti traditions and magic in tantric traditions to argue that not everyone with yoga powers can be ordained divine. Burchett explains that *bhaktas* perceive miracles as a display of an omnipotent God's grace and magic as an inferior display of power from the self, arising through individual ascetic or ritual action (Burchett 350).¹⁰ Due to differing conceptions of *Parabrahman*, *bhaktas* challenge tantric claims that supernatural powers are self-arising because they believe that powers result from God (Burchett 373).

According to the Swaminarayan Sampraday, a Hindu devotional tradition (bhakti *sampradāya*) yoga powers are an aspect of *Parabrahman*'s divinity. However, mere possession of yoga powers does not confer divinity upon ordinary individuals. In the *Vachanamrut*, Swaminarayan as *Parabrahman* establishes himself as the cause of creation. Through him, an omnipotent God, all actions are possible (*Vachanamrut* Loya 2). Swaminarayan further describes *Parabrahman* as the ultimate source of supernatural powers in the *Vachanamrut*:

Many people become realized yogis, many become omniscient, many become deities,

⁹ Bhakti, when referring to religious movements, is a term with a rich historiography (see Hawley, "Introduction: The Bhakti Movement—Says Who?"); it emphasizes devotion as an expression of religiosity. These movements had roots in South India as early as the 4th century and flourished in North India in between the 11th and 18th century, as poets like Mira, Surdas, and more are known as bhakti poets. Bhakti movements often operated in regional languages, like Gujarati. Though bhakti movements were primarily associated with Vaishava or Shaivite sects, they are not limited to Hinduism, for Sufism, Sant traditions, and more are often categorized as bhakti movements.

¹⁰ The comparisons that Burchett draws between tantra and bhakti seem to parallel the dichotomy between magic and religion posed by James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*.

and attain countless types of greatness, including the highest state of enlightenment.

These feats are accomplished through the strength of God's *upāsana*¹¹. Without *upāsana*, nothing can be accomplished. (*Vachanamrut* Gadhada I 56)

While Swaminarayan acknowledges that many attain supernatural powers, he contends that the source of these powers is *upāsana*, meaning, devotion to an omnipotent, supreme, and manifest form of God. This quote reinforces the understanding of God as all-doing and the cause of miracles because he holds and dispels such powers. Thus, any yogic feats that an individual displays are but a reflection of God's grace. For instance, sacred biographies in the Swaminarayan tradition elaborate on the supernatural powers of devotees who revived dead horses, changed the rotation of the planets and stars, and remained in *samādhi* for many months—miracles that stem from the mastery of yoga (Dave 306). Nevertheless, devotees in the Swaminarayan Sampraday attribute these powers to a higher being and understand these feats as displays of God's compassion. In the Swaminarayan tradition, devotees believe that the manifestation of powers is not synonymous with divinity because of their understanding of God's supreme and exclusive omnipotence.

More broadly, Hindu devotional literature often derides yogis who flamboyantly demonstrate yoga powers as fraudulent. Burchett narrates a tale of a Ramanandi devotee named Payohari, who effortlessly defeats the shape-shifting Nāthayogi Tarānāth. This account demonstrates that bhaktas' miracles are more powerful than those of a self-attained yogin because they stem from an omnipotent God (Burchett 351, 361). Bhaktas do not claim to be divine by displaying miracles, but rather, credit miracles to a supreme God; these bhaktas view

¹¹ In this context, *upāsana* refers to understanding *Parabrahman* as *sākār* (possessing a form), *sarvakartā* (all-doing), *sarvopari* (supreme), and *pragaṭ* (manifest), according to *Vachanamrut* Gadhada I 40, Panchala 6, and Gadhada III 36. In the *Vachanamrut*, *upāsana* is often synonymous with *bhakti* (devotion). Further, *upāsana* also refers to how a devotee must first become like *Akṣarabrahman* to worship *Parabrahman*.

yoga powers of tantrics as sorcery (Burchett 356, 368). Notable here is the difference in vocabulary: yogins only possess powers, while bhaktas experience miracles (Burchett 357). In this example, God's compassion and omnipotence are paramount and the devotee is subservient to God. Thus, yogins' display of powers does not make them divine-- in fact, according to many bhakti traditions, devotees believe the opposite since demonstrating yogic magic is associated with deceit.

The long history of strife between bhaktas and yogins in North India continued during Swaminarayan's lifetime (Burchett 364). Swaminarayan's contemporaries included *siddha* yogins with supernatural abilities, like Meghjita Sukhadiya of Mangrol, Pibek of Kamakshatirtha, and Magniram of Mangrol, all of whom practiced tantric rituals publicly (Dave 11.06. 21.09. 21.13). Swaminarayan viewed certain tantric practices unfavorably since they instilled irrational fear in the public (Mallinson 50). In the *sampradāya*'s sacred biographies, the tantric figures are described as angry, terrifying, and deluded by ego, for they are unaware of a supreme God's all-doing nature. And in many ways, descriptions of these yogins as arrogant and ignorant parallel Burchett's description of Nath yogis. In the Swaminarayan tradition, many of these yogins experienced a transformation and even became Swaminarayan's devotees and ascetics after encountering a force greater than theirs. Rather than being confident in self-powers, they become reliant on God's omnipotence.

Whereas tantric yogins may claim divinity by manifesting powers, bhaktas perceive yoga powers as miracles of God. Bhaktas maintain that faith based on supernatural powers is unstable—many can attain yoga powers. To the naïve, these powers might falsely appear to be markers of divinity, but even demons have magical powers; therefore, Gunatitānand Swami

(1784-1867),¹² the first manifestation of *Akṣarabrahman*, instructs devotees to not give importance to supernatural powers (Swamini Vato 4.113). Since many humans have the capacity to show powers, these yoga powers are not legitimate ways to recognize divinity. The *Vachanamrut* discusses how a true devotee does not construct his faith in God on a flagrant display of miracles (Vachanamrut Gadhada II 66). Such a faith is superficial, for it is susceptible to damage when God fails to show powers. Therefore, yoga powers are not preferred ways to understand the divine.

When the Manifestation of Powers Does Not Determine Divinity

Having established that not everyone who shows powers is divine, in this section, I will focus on demonstrating that not everyone who is divine shows powers. Historically, bhakti *sampradāyas* have valued the virtue of suppressing yoga powers far more than displaying them. For instance, in one devotional narrative a Mughal emperor requests Tulsidāsa to show miracles, the latter refrains from doing so by claiming only Rāma is capable of such powers (Burchett 372). According to this account, devotees neither display nor employ yoga powers for worldly gain. Since these spectacles do not stem from love or devotion to God they are considered to be in vain. Thus, bhakti traditions revere restraint and discretion and prefer suppressing yoga powers. In another example, Malinar presents a story about Śuka, the narrator of the *Bhagavata Purāṇa*, to illustrate that yogins should restrain their yoga powers, and only the most controlled yogin should use powers for the highest attainment (Malinar 40). Śuka behaved as a bhakta and had obtained such powers by worshipping God, who is the repertoire of yogic might (*Vachanamrut* Loya 4). This narrative suggests that a yogin, though

¹² Gunatitānand Swami, the *Akṣarabrahman tattva*, is understood as Swaminarayan's choicest devotee.

undoubtedly possessing powers, should not indulge in them. Higher yogins suppress yoga powers while lower yogins spoil in them.

The guru in Hindu traditions is an example of a higher yogin who possesses powers. Jacobsen reflects that some believe if gurus do not display yoga powers, then they must not possess them, thus, they are illegitimate leaders (Jacobsen 29). Leaders of contemporary movements, however, often abstain from showing yoga powers, which demonstrates a turn in how authority is understood (Jacobsen 29). For these traditions, yoga powers are considered less authoritative than other aspects of a guru's life. And yoga powers fail to deem authority because not all gurus are required to prove possessing them.

The notion that a true guru hides yoga powers is prevalent in the BAPS Swaminarayan Sansthā as well. *Akṣarabrahman*, in the form of the guru through whom *Parabrahman* manifests, does not always demonstrate the marvelous yogic feats that *Parabrahman* has been described to possess. Nevertheless, *Akṣarabrahman* is considered divine, alongside the highest supreme *Parabrahman tattva*.¹³ *Akṣarabrahman* refrains from displaying yoga powers because he identifies as a subservient devotee of *Parabrahman*. Moreover, *Akṣarabrahman* conceals his own power and refrains from displaying miracles to become and remain accessible to the *jīva* devotees. Since the *Akṣarabrahman* guru is believed to hide his yoga powers, his yoga powers are evidently not the primary determinant of divine authority. In the *Vachanamrut*, Swaminarayan explains that *Akṣarabrahman* and *Parabrahman* conceal powers for the benefit of devotees when he says that he suppresses his powers and takes on a human form out of

¹³ *Akṣarabrahman* has 4 forms: 1. *Akṣaradhām*, the divine and luminous adobe of *Parabrahman*, 2. A *sevaka* (servant) of *Parabrahman* in *Akṣaradhām*, 3. *Chidakasha*, the all-pervading sentient space, and 4. The *brahmasvarupguru*, a living guru through whom *Parabrahman* is eternally manifest (Paramtattvadas 158). For more details on the characteristics and function of *Akṣarabrahman*, as well as distinctions between the two types of Brahman, see Sadhu Paramtattvadas' chapter on "Akṣarabrahman" in *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Theology*."

compassion for the *jīvas* (Vachanamrut Panchala 4). Swaminarayan adds that if he were to show his true form, *jīvas* would be unable to develop affection with God; therefore, he chooses to appear as a human and mask his divinity (Vachanamrut Panchala 4). Similarly, *Akṣarabrahman*, despite being divine, also manifests in what appears to be an ordinary human form and does not consistently display supernatural powers (Paramtattvadas 158).

Swaminarayan establishes that *Parabrahman* and *Akṣarabrahman* possess these powers but do not use them in ostentatious ways in the *Vachanamrut*. He details the capabilities of *Akṣarabrahman* as sustainer of the world, holder of infinite universes, and liberator of countless souls in *Vachanamrut* Gadhada I 27:

By the grace of God, that devotee attains countless types of powers and liberates countless beings...The powers of such a person are such that since it is God who sees through his eyes, he empowers the eyes of all of the beings in the *brahmānd*; and since it is God who walks through his legs, he is also capable of endowing the strength to walk to the legs of all of the beings in the *brahmānd*. Thus, since it is God who resides in all of the *indriyas*¹⁴ of such a Sant,¹⁵ that Sant is able to empower the *indriyas* of all beings in the *brahmānd*. Therefore, such a Sant is the sustainer of the world. His greatness lies in the fact that he tolerates the insults delivered even by insignificant people...

On the other hand, those who threaten and frighten those meeker than themselves and believe, ‘I have become great,’ are not truly great. In fact, those people in this world who frighten others by showing yoga powers should not be considered to be devotees of God; rather, they are beings lost in *māyā* and suitable only for Yampuri. Their greatness is limited to the worldly realm.

(*Vachanamrut* Gadhada I 27)

¹⁴ *Indriyas* translates to senses

¹⁵ Here, “Sant” is a synonym for *Akṣarabrahman*.

According to Swaminarayan, *Akṣarabrahman* possesses powers because God resides in *Akṣarabrahman* and *māyā* swallows one who displays yoga powers to terrify others. The former is considered divine, while the latter is not. *Akṣarabrahman* is described in a way similar to *Parabrahman* in that he is the life support of the universe-- this ability is due to *Parabrahman* being manifest in *Akṣarabrahman*. Hanna Kim explores the role of the *Akṣarabrahman* guru by studying Pramukh Swami Maharaj (1921-2016) in her chapter “Svāminārāyaṇa: Bhaktiyoga and the Akṣarabrahman Guru.” In her description of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, she does not highlight nature-changing, water-bending, levitating yogic abilities of the guru, just as this scriptural reference explains. Instead, devotees look primarily to the *Akṣarabrahman* guru’s virtues, such as simplicity and tolerance, to understand his greatness (Kim 252). Thus, the yoga powers of the *Akṣarabrahman* guru remain hidden because, according to the *Vachanamrut*, *Akṣarabrahman* suppresses his powers like *Parabrahman* for the sake of liberating spiritual aspirants. This analysis of Swaminarayan theology demonstrates that yoga powers alone neither construct divinity nor affirm authority.

Yoga Powers, Divinity, and Authority

Although the *Akṣarabrahman* guru conceals yoga powers, he holds profound authority in the devotional community. The *Akṣarabrahman* guru shapes how devotees conduct even mundane tasks, for devotees incorporate “*rājipā no vicār*,” or intent of pleasing the guru, in each action (Kim 253). To illustrate, a devotee might introspect whether their actions align with the guru’s inclinations. Devotees turn to the *Akṣarabrahman* guru when they face issues, and they aspire to live as the guru does by imbibing his qualities (Kim 248). The guru’s impact on the devotees’ lives illustrates his profound authority; his mere presence helps devotees make meaning of daily tasks. If religious authority is an endowed force that

shapes belief and action, the guru is definitively a religious authority (Leckie 2). These guru authorities can successfully command submission to their will, which is ultimately God's will (Sarbecker 213). Further, this attraction need not be built through charisma, as Kim describes the *Akṣarabrahman* guru as “not overtly charismatic” (Kim 248). The guru becomes the “driving force” in the life of the disciple guiding and inspiring devotees to act with the intent of *rājipo*, or pleasing the guru (Sarbecker 213, Kim 253). Therefore, in the Swaminarayan tradition, authority is neither created nor maintained, by yoga powers alone--the *Akṣarabrahman* guru does not conspicuously display such powers yet holds profound authority.

Since yoga powers do not cause authority as a divine figure, authority stems from multiple factors, the core of which is a virtuous life. The *Śrīmad Bhagvāt* lists thirty-nine virtues of a *sādhu*¹⁶ who should be worshipped on par with God (Trivedi 12). Swaminarayan devotees hold that *Akṣarabrahman* guru exemplifies each quality in his life (Trivedi 12). These thirty-nine virtues distinguish the *Akṣarabrahman* and *Parabrahman* ontological entities from ordinary human beings (Trivedi 17). The *Akṣarabrahman* guru's pure life is one of the key factors that paints the guru as trustworthy and endows him with authority. Authority is relational to a community; when the Swaminarayan community determines what to hold authoritative, they rely on reasoning while examining the life of the guru.¹⁷ In the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, individuals perceive a figure as authoritative after a thorough personal process of logic, wherein an individual should logically distinguish between false and true gurus (*Vachanamrut* Loya 6). Only after determining a true guru should devotees then

¹⁶ Here, *sadhu* is a synonym for *Akṣarabrahman*.

¹⁷ Note: The Swaminarayan community does not actively group-up and meet to determine who is authoritative. This process often happens mentally at the individual level, perhaps as individuals decide whether or not to commit to a guru.

follow that guru with unwavering faith (*Vachanamrut* Gadhada I 53). Yoga powers are not legitimate ways to determine divinity in the guru, for even demons or *siddha* yogins, who have no divinity, can demonstrate such powers. Instead, practitioners should build their faith on alternate proofs of divinity—one being examining the guru's life. Therefore, as Swaminarayan devotees perceive a figure's authority, they consider the divine virtues of a being rather than supernatural powers.

Yoga powers are not a preferred means of establishing authority in this bhakti *sampradāya*. These powers may prove effective in less institutionalized organizations that are trying to build authority (Sarbacker 212). However, in a transnational organization like the BAPS Sansthā, yoga powers are not a necessary means of institutionalizing authority. Furthermore, Burchett's work suggests that yoga powers are more attractive as sources of authority in tantric than in bhakti traditions, due to differences in how both traditions conceptualize God. For similar reasons, Swaminarayan Hinduism rejects the display of yoga powers as an infallible sign of divinity.

Conclusion

Though the divine possesses yoga powers, yoga powers are not limited to divine beings, nor does the divine always display them. The *Akṣarabrahman guru* of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya exemplifies divinity without obvious supernatural powers. Though *Parabrahman* is characterized with yoga powers, so are his devotees, and so are demons and ordinary yogins—the divine are with those who, despite possessing powers, hide them. Therefore, yoga powers are a faulty means of knowing, recognizing, and understanding God since ordinary beings may also acquire yoga powers. For this reason, bhaktas tend to connect the ostentatious display of yoga powers to fraudulent gurus. In the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, devotees rely on the teachings of

Swaminarayan and rationality to understand true saintliness and thus the authority of the living leader. This relationship between yoga powers and divinity help demonstrate how bhakti *samprādyas* construct and deconstruct authority based on their conceptualization of and relationship with God.

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