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## Foreword

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# F OREWORD

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The editorial team of the BAPS Swaminarayan Research Journal is pleased to introduce this third issue of the journal. This compilation stands as a testament to our unwavering dedication to fostering a diverse and rigorous scholarly inquiry and exploration. In line with our mission to contribute substantively to the discourse surrounding Indian thought, this issue focuses on delving into topics pertaining to the philosophical, scriptural, societal, and architectural expressions of Bhagavān Swaminarayan's Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana.

The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana is a Vedic *darśana* whose foundational teachings were revealed by Bhagavān Swaminarayan in the latter 18th and early 19th century. In his discourses, compiled in a seminal sacred text renowned as the *Vacanāmṛta*, Bhagavān Swaminarayan expressed not just a comprehensive philosophical system but also one that was fundamentally unique to the *darśanic* landscape. With its own distinct epistemological (*pramāṇa-mīmāṃsā*), metaphysical (*tattva-mīmāṃsā*), and soteriological (*mukti-mīmāṃsā*) framework, his philosophical system presents the existence of five ontologically distinct categories of beings. Among them, the many (1) *jīvātmans* and the more capable (2) *īśvarātmans* comprise the individual selves, who are bound by ignorance since eternity, searching for enlightenment and liberation. The eternal (3) *māyā* is

the cause of ignorance and the power of the Divine. (4) Akṣarabrahman prevails as the eternally liberated servant of the Divine, his divine abode, the cause and pervader of the world, and the liberating guru through whom God continues to dwell on the earth. Finally, (5) Puruṣottama reigns as the supreme being who is in all ways beyond not just the *jīvas*, *īśvaras*, and *māyā* but also Akṣarabrahman.

In addition to uniquely describing the nature and being of these entities and their relationships, Bhagavān Swaminarayan also presented a distinctive understanding of liberation and the means for achieving it. Within his teachings, he provided a detailed account of what it means to attain *brahmabhāva*—the state of achieving qualitative (but never ontological) oneness with Akṣarabrahman—and offering supreme devotion (*parābhakti*) to Parabrahman Puruṣottama. His revelation of *brahmavidyā* as the means for realizing the nature and form of both **Akṣarabrahman** and **Puruṣottama** laid the foundation for not only the Darśana's apt title: the **Akṣara-Puruṣottama** Darśana, but also for the mantra 'Svāmīnārāyaṇa' ('Svāmī'+ 'Nārāyaṇa'), where 'Svāmī' refers to the manifest form of Akṣarabrahman on earth and 'Nārāyaṇa' refers to none other than Bhagavān Swaminarayan—the manifest form of Puruṣottama. Through these and other distinctive principles, Bhagavān Swaminarayan's Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana introduced an altogether novel *darśanic* school, forever broadening the landscape of Vedic thought in the process.

Beyond the elucidation of the core tenets of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, Bhagavān Swaminarayan's legacy extends to fostering a vibrant tradition of diverse literary expression. This literary heritage, intricately interwoven with the philosophical tapestry of the Darśana, has played a pivotal role in recording the unfolding historical trajectory of Darśana and articulating its intricate principles. Spanning a diverse range of genres, including scriptures, commentaries, philosophical treatises, histories, devotional hymns, and discourses, this corpus of literature has collectively contributed to preserving and disseminating the Darśana's insights. Through an extensive array of written works and compositions,

this literary tradition has served as an invaluable medium for capturing and directing the Darśana's growth, documenting the discourse surrounding its principles, and facilitating profound contemplation on their philosophical, theological, and pragmatic implications.

The extensive literary creations of the Darśana not only encapsulate its intellectual depth but also bear witness to the profound spiritual contemplation that this philosophy has kindled within the hearts and minds of its followers. The substantial personal and societal transformations that have transpired serve as a testament to the wide-reaching impact of the practical applications of the Darśana's teachings. The legacy of Bhagavān Swaminarayan's philosophy extends into the realms of personal transformation and societal impact, where the principles elucidated within the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana have guided transformative initiatives, evident notably in the uplifting endeavors undertaken by its spiritual leadership. The tangible changes resulting from these initiatives further underscore the enduring relevance of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana in guiding practical living, ethical conduct, and social harmony. This confluence of theory and practice is emblematic of Bhagavān Swaminarayan's intent to offer a comprehensive and holistic philosophical system that addresses both the philosophical dimensions and the ethical and practical aspects of human existence.

Additionally, this philosophy's architectural and iconographic significance finds tangible expression in revered sacred places of worship, such as the Swaminarayan Akshardham, reflecting the Darśana's seamless integration of philosophy, aesthetics, and spiritual symbolism. These architectural marvels, painstakingly designed according to the principles and teachings of sacred texts, transcend mere visual appeal. They stand as living testaments to the authenticity and integrity of the traditions they represent, creating an environment where each sacred image (*mūrti*), each structure, and every artistic element holds a purpose rooted in sacred revelation. The commitment to authenticity in the architectural and iconographic aspects witnessed in these creations ensures that the

legacy of sacred texts is preserved, inspiring reverence for generations to come and perpetuating the timeless values and profound truths espoused by the Darśana.

The assemblage of articles within this issue is positioned to offer a diverse exploration of the multifaceted Darśanic dimensions inherent to these discussions. The articles within this issue span a broad spectrum, covering topics ranging from the Darśana's fundamental philosophical principles to the meticulous explorations of its textual treatises, its influence and social impact, and the authenticity of its architectural and iconographic expression. They encapsulate diverse insights, deepening our understanding of the broad philosophical landscape of the Swaminarayan tradition. They also contribute to a nuanced understanding of this philosophical framework by immersing its reader in its teachings' diverse aspects and implications. Through rigorous scholarly inquiry and insightful analysis, these articles shed light on the intricate philosophical, scriptural, and personal facets of the Darśana, illuminating its role in guiding spiritual contemplation, shaping ethical conduct, and influencing broader societal and cultural landscapes. The breadth and depth of the topics covered reflect a shared commitment to advancing our knowledge and understanding of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana and underscore its relevance within the broader framework of Indian thought and the diversity of its philosophical traditions. This collection of scholarly works not only celebrates the rich intellectual heritage of the Darśana but also serves as a testament to the continuous pursuit of knowledge and the quest for deeper insights into the teachings of Bhagavān Swaminarayan.

In closing, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to the esteemed authors whose outstanding original works have graced this issue. Their dedication to scholarly rigor, coupled with the depth and meticulousness of their research, has truly enriched the discourse surrounding the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana. The contributions presented within this issue illuminate multiple dimensions of the Darśana and serve as beacons of

scholarly inquiry that inspire further exploration. We sincerely appreciate the passion and commitment displayed through their works and the far-reaching implications of their outstanding research.

We also wish to acknowledge the invaluable experience and expertise of our editorial committee, whose guidance and dedication have played a pivotal role in shaping this issue. Their collective insights, discernment, and commitment to academic excellence have been instrumental in ensuring the quality and scholarly integrity of the articles presented here. Through their unwavering commitment to fostering rigorous intellectual inquiry, they have aided in navigating the intricate landscape of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana and facilitated the compilation of a rich and diverse array of works that encapsulate its essence and significance.

This issue is a testament to the collaborative efforts of our authors and the editorial committee and reflects the vibrant intellectual discourse that characterizes the BAPS Swaminarayan Research Journal. We look forward to the ongoing engagement with our readers and scholars who share in our mission to delve deeper into the profound teachings of Indian thought across all of its diversity. With your continued support and the dedication of our authors and editorial team, we are confident that our pursuit of scholarly excellence will meaningfully contribute to the continued exploration of Indian thought and foster a deeper appreciation of its spiritual and intellectual heritage.

