

Vaisnava System is Liberal Towards Women

According to the Vedic injunctions, only a brāhmaëa may be offered sannyāsa. The Çaikara-sampradāya (ekadaëòà-sannyāsa-sampradāya) awards the sannyāsa order only to caste brāhmaëas, or born brāhmaëas, but in the Vaiñëava system even one not born in a brāhmaëa family may be made a brāhmaëa according to the direction of the Hari-bhakti-vilāsa (tathā dékñā-vidhānena dvijatvaà jāyate nāëām). 17.266

It is stated in the Hari-bhakti-vilāsa that one should not accept initiation from a person who is not in the brahminical order if there is a fit person in the brahminical order present. This instruction is meant for those who are overly dependent on the mundane social order and is suitable for those who want to remain in mundane life. Madhya 8.128

In regards to the household women who are all cooking at home, Prabhupada said it is better if you can arrange a nursery program so that those women can be engaged in our preaching mission. That is more important work than cooking at home. He was very emphatic about this point. Letter Dec 15, 1974

You Are Not a Woman

A woman devotee asked Prabhupāda a further question about the position of women, and he replied, "Of course you are not a woman. You are a devotee." Prabhupada Lilamrita

Mother Yamuna says:

"I was present on four occasions when Çréla Prabhupāda repeated the Cāëakya adage: 'Never trust a woman or a politician.' On each occasion Çréla Prabhupāda looked me in the eye to see my response. On the last occasion, in Bombay in 1973, he quoted the saying, heartily laughing in front of a small group of men. Then he said: 'What do you think, Yamunā?' Immediately I retorted: 'Of course it is true, Çréla Prabhupāda,' whereupon he became grave, looked at me with great feeling, and said, 'But you are not a woman, you are a Vaiñëava.'

Another series of exchanges centred on leading kértana. Çréla Prabhupāda often had me lead the first kértana before he spoke at a programme, whether in front of twenty people or ten thousand people. There were occasions when I felt uncomfortable with this. At the Jaipur pandal at Rādhā Govinda temple, I refused to lead kértana. Çréla Prabhupāda called me over and said, 'Lead kértana.' I said, 'I can't. My throat hurts.' He said, 'No. Lead kértana.' So, croaking like a frog, I led kértana.

In late 1974, not long after I had left my householder āçrama, Çréla Prabhupāda pronounced it 'good that you have left your husband', and encouraged me to become a 'sannyāséni'. Although I was not in the traditional role of being protected by my father, husband or son, in both his personal darçanas and written instructions, Çréla Prabhupāda offered me unfettered encouragement and astonished me with unexpected answers to my questions.

After settling in Oregon with my Godsister Dénatāriëe, Çréla Prabhupāda, while pronouncing us 'independent' to a concerned Godbrother, at the same time twice rebuked us when we approached him to leave. 'You westerners are so restless,' he admonished. 'Why can't you remain in the same place? Stay where you are.' We questioned, 'But Çréla Prabhupāda, they are saying that if we aren't in ISKCON, we lose your blessings and cannot make advancement.'

Prabhupāda replied, 'ISKCON is where you are chanting the holy name—that is ISKCON.' We rejoined: 'They are saying we don't have any association here and are therefore in m̄yā.' He replied: 'Association can be two or two hundred. If you are two and compatible, you can become perfect in Kāñēa consciousness. If you are 200 and are not, then no one will make advancement.'

To conclude, Çréla Prabhupāda trained me to be concerned about his movement, and at this time I am deeply concerned. Now more than ever, it is time to revive and imbibe Çréla Prabhupāda's mood with his disciples. If we neglect this, an aspect of his greatness will remain unknown to future generations."

[It is] Not that even though they become interested they keep behind. No ... with equal force with men, they also promoted. So Kunti, out of her humbleness, meekness, she is presenting herself that 'We are women, striya'. But she's not ordinary woman. She's devotee. Similarly, any devotee woman is as good as Kunti.*

Not knowing that boys and girls in countries like Europe and America mix very freely, these fools and rascals criticise the boys and girls in Kāñēa consciousness for intermingling. But these rascals should consider that one cannot suddenly change a community's social customs. However, since both boys and girls are being trained to become preachers, these girls are not ordinary girls, but are as good as their brothers who are preaching Kāñēa consciousness. Therefore, to engage both boys and girls in fully transcendental activities is a policy intended to spread the Kāñēa consciousness movement.

'Kāñēa does not make distinction—female dress or male dress ... Kāñēa gives intelligence' (Satsvarupa, 1983a:147).

When two female devotees asked Çréla Prabhupāda if they would make slower progress than the male devotees, he replied, 'Yes ... if you think of yourselves as women, how will you make any advancement? You must see yourself as spirit-soul, eternal servant of Kāñēa.' (Satsvarupa, 1983a:147)

Madhavananda Prabhu, my godbrother, told me that on a morning walk, Yasodananda Prabhu (then swami) was continually prodding Prabhupada to agree that women are the cause of material entanglement. Prabhupada didn't respond. Finally, because Yasodanadana wouldn't stop, Prabhupada said acknowledged the truth of this. When they returned to the temple, four women (who stayed back to clean) greeted Prabhupada at the door. When Prabhupada say them he said women are the cause of bondage but if you associate with these woman you will go back to godhead.

Some of the Things Manu Samhita Says About Women

(The traditionalists say Prabhupada wanted us to follow the injunctions of Manu Samhita. The injunctions below are clearly against Prabhupada's instructions to us.)

5/157. Men may be lacking virtue, be sexual perverts, immoral and devoid of any good qualities, and yet women must constantly worship and serve their husbands.

Alternate translation: Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife.

20. “Na ast strinam.....” – 5/158. Women have no divine right to perform any religious ritual, nor make vows or observe a fast. Her only duty is to obey and please her husband and she will for that reason alone be exalted in heaven.

(Perhaps this just might explain why Suniti couldn't be a guru.)

8/370. In case a women, proud of the greatness of her excellence or her relatives, violates her duty towards her husband, the King shall arrange to have her thrown before dogs at a public place.

9/6. It is the duty of all husbands to exert total control over their wives. Even physically weak husbands must strive to control their wives.

9/18. While performing namkarm and jatkarm, Vedic mantras are not to be recited by women, because women are lacking in strength and knowledge of Vedic texts. Women are impure and represent falsehood.

((Perhaps these social norms just might explain why Suniti couldn't be a guru.)

9/77. Any women who disobey orders of her lethargic, alcoholic and diseased husband shall be deserted for three months and be deprived of her ornaments.

9/80. A barren wife may be superseded in the 8th year; she whose children die may be superseded in the 10th year and she who bears only daughters may be superseded in the 11th year; but she who is quarrelsome may be superseded without delay.

Sagacious people never act upon a woman's advice for women are the cause of all domestic disputes. They are also solely responsible for instigating all felonious wars and sinful deeds. This is why saintly people refrain from even viewing the reflection of a woman. **Chanakya Neeti**

About Wife Beating

(Traditionalists say if it's in the sastra, we cannot disobey it, and we cannot override sastra with pratyaksa, direct experience. Still, my direct experience is that if any man in the Western world follows the injunctions below, he will destroy his marriage to one degree or another, most likely completely.)

[Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 6.4.7](#)

If she does not willingly yield her body to him, he should buy her with presents. **If she is still unyielding, he should strike her with a stick or with his hand and overcome her**, repeating the following mantra: “With power and glory I take away your glory.” Thus she becomes discredited.

[Garuda Purana 1.109.31](#)

Wicked persons, artisans, slaves, defiled ones, drums and **women are softened by being beaten**; they do not deserve gentle handling.”

Prabhupāda sometimes quoted the poet Tulasé dāsa about four things that can be beaten. One can beat a drum, or a dog, or a woman, or a çūdra. One time when Prabhupāda mentioned this, he laughed and turned to his disciple Nara-Nārāyaēa. "Nara-Nārāyaēa understands this principle very well," said Prabhupāda, and the other devotees also laughed. But then Prabhupāda turned seriously to Nara-Nārāyaēa and said, "But don't do it. These are not ordinary women. These are devotees."

(If I were to say that this definitely proves sastra supports wife beating and that this is what Prabhupada wants, I would be amiss. Last week one devotee told me that one traditionalist told him to beat his wife. This alarming thing also is that this devotee is a supporter and friend of the group we are debating with.)

About Syama devi, the Gujarati Female Guru that Prabhupada Liked

69-05 "When Mataji Syama devi came to see me in Los Angeles she was very respectful to me, every time she was touching my feet and offering obeisances. She was also very serious of having my cooperation in spreading the Krsna consciousness movement." (SPL to Mukunda, 22nd May, 1969)

She offered to help the London devotees and Prabhupada encouraged Syamasundara Prabhu to see if they could work together. She had disciples and had initially visited Prabhupada in Los Angeles. Prabhupada with her disciples. He did not mention she was not a bonafide guru, that we shouldn't work with her because she is not a liberated soul but has taken disciples, etc.

It was known to all she had disciples. Guru das relates: "Prasadam?" she asked. They brought simple rice, dahl, chapatis, and vegetables. The brahmachari, Gopal, *her disciple*, spoke a little English, and asked if I wanted to stay with them. "Yes, that would be nice."

Men and Women Equal in Preaching

Who can become guru? Anyone who knows the science of Kāñēa, he can become guru. That is the injunction. Yei... It doesn't matter. Kibā vipra kibā çūdra, nyāsē kene naya. He may be a brāhmaēa, he may be a çūdra, he may be a sannyāsē, he may be a gāhastha. It doesn't matter. He may be European, he may be American, he may be Indian. It doesn't matter. If he knows the science, yei kāñēa-tattva-vettā sei guru haya [Cc. Madhya 8.128].

So it is not limited under certain country, certain atmosphere or certain population. Kāñēa consciousness is open for everyone. So therefore our request is that these Europeans and Americans who have taken to Kāñēa consciousness just become perfect in the understanding of this science and become guru and deliver the whole world. SB December 17, 1973

"Don't hesitate. Why you are hesitating because you are a gāhastha or you are in politics or you are a..., born a çūdra family? Why you are...? I am learning from you." This is Caitanya Mahāprabhu's preaching. He did not think anyone negligible. Anyone who is qualified with Kāñēa consciousness, he can become guru. It doesn't matter where he is born, what is his family and identification. It doesn't matter. He must know the science. It is very practical. Just like when you go to consult an engineer or a medical man or some lawyer, you do not ask him whether he's a brāhmaēa or a çūdra. If he's qualified, if he can help you in the particular subject matter, you consult with him, you take his help. That is practical. So similarly, in the spiritual

matter it doesn't matter what he is. If he knows Kāñhëa, then he can become guru. It doesn't matter. November 7, 1974

Prabhupada continues, Or tãra' ei deça. "You become a guru on My order, and you deliver your country or other countries." "So I have no so qualification, I have no education. How I can become guru?" Now, Caitanya Mahãprabhu says, ãmãra ãjãya: "By My order." "Then what is Your order, Sir?" "Now, My order is yãre dekha tãre kaha kãñhëa-upadeça [Cc. Madhya 7.128]. This is My order. You simply explain what Kãñhëa has said or what has been said about Kãñhëa." That is kãñhëa-upadeça. Kãñhëa-upadeça means what Kãñhëa is instructing.

"How I can become guru?" So Caitanya Mahãprabhu says that "It is not very difficult." Yãre dekha tãre kaha kãñhëa-upadeça [Cc. Madhya 7.128]. Bãs. You become guru. You simply speak whatever Kãñhëa speaks. Then you become guru." November 13, 1974

(Why didn't Prabhupada tell us here that this only refers to his male disciples, if indeed this is what he intended?)

On a morning walk, when Prabhupada got in the car to go back to the temple, the devotees said "All glories to Srila Prabhupada." Prabhupada replied, "I will become glorious when all my disciples become gurus."

(He could have said when all my male disciples become gurus or when all my male disciples and female siddhas become gurus.)

So we should follow this instruction of Caitanya Mahãprabhu, yãre dekha, tãre kaha 'kãñhëa'-upadeça. So you, *every one of you*, can become guru. You may say that "I am not interested to become a guru," but Caitanya Mahãprabhu says that if you are not interested, that is not very good. You should be interested. You must be guru. That is success of your life. You can speak the instruction of Kãñhëa, even to your family. That also guru. You are actually guru. The father or the head of the family is guru to the children, to the wife. In India still, the wife addresses the husband as pati-guru. And father is guru. That is natural. So why don't you become real guru to your wife, to your children, and instruct Bhagavad-gétã as it is? This is our mission. You sit down in the evening, chant Hare Kãñhëa mantra and teach little instruction from the Bhagavad-gétã. See how the life changes. Is that very difficult task? Boliye? March 13, 1975
Tehran

(I know for sure there were at least two woman in the audience (Nandarani and Manjari), so everyone one of you includes women. He could have said, "everyone one of you, but women need further qualifications.)

One who is not Kãñhëa's representative, he cannot become guru. Guru does not mean any nonsense can become guru. No. Only tat-puruña. Tat-puruña means a person who has accepted the Supreme Personality of Godhead as everything. Tat-puruña-niñevayã. That means Vaiñhëava, pure devotee. June 29, 1975

(Here we see the qualification is to be a pure devotee.)

A guru can become guru when he's ordered by his guru. That's all. Otherwise nobody can become guru. October 28, 1975.

“I want all my sons and daughters...” The order was clear. The order was given.)

“Generally, the siksa guru becomes the initiating spiritual master.” CC

(This is natural. To say a woman can be siksa but not diksa until she is seeing Krsna face to face is like saying she can get married but she can't have children.)

“*Everyone* can become guru if he simply repeats what Kåñëa has said, that's all.” August 10, 1976

Seeing Krsna at Bhava

When the devotion of the neophyte reaches the stage of bhäva-bhakti the pure eye of that devotee is tinged with the salve of love by the grace of Kåñëa, which enables him to see Kåñëa face to face.

(If this is the qualification, we have thus conveniently eliminated 99.9 percent of the women in Iskcon, now and forever, from becoming gurus. Well, maybe we eliminated 100 percent because we can trust women and they have to tell us they are seeing Krsna!)

Modern Times Versus Vedic Times

Although Srila Prabhupada said one thing about the Vedic times of Dhruva, he said something quite different in his time, something that supports the idea that there is no prohibition in Mahaprabhu's movement for women becoming diksa-gurus.

Tripurari Swami's Contributions to This Discussion (from his website)

Therein, Sri Jiva says that a lower-class person in consideration of birth who becomes spiritually qualified as a devotee is eligible to perform Vedic rites, but just as a brahmana boy is eligible but must wait to do so until receiving his sacred thread, similarly the devotee from a lower class family while eligible do to his engagement in bhakti must wait until his next birth to perform brahminical duties. This, of course, does not include arcana (Deity worship), which is a limb of bhakti. However, Visvanatha Cakravarti many years later wrote the opposite when commenting on the same section. He emphasized that the slightest touch with bhakti immediately qualifies one for the performance of Vedic rites or any other religious duty. In doing so, he demonstrated that Sri Jiva Goswami's commentary was written in consideration of the socioreligious norms of his time. The sampradaya was just beginning to be established in the religious society, which was predominated by Advaitin smarta brahmanas.

Can we not consider the socioreligious norms of our times when discussing and implementing our doctrine? The historical record says yes. We must extract the essence and apply it dynamically. This is the business of a guru.

The first half of the verse that Srila Prabhupada quotes twice in the excerpt above is kiba vipra kiba nyasi sudra kene naya, which means one's social or religious standing in society has no bearing on one's capacity to serve as guru. The only qualification is ei krishna tattva vetti, one must know the tattva of Krishna. Pujapada Sridhara Deva Goswami, predicting that the question of women accepting the role of acarya in our movement would someday arise, cited the examples of Jahnava-devi and Gangamata Goswamini and said that whoever was qualified should be accepted as acarya.

One should be careful not to interpret this verse from Caitanya-caritamṛta to say that it refers only to siksa-gurus in an effort to discourage women from serving as diksa-gurus. This is the argument that some caste Goswamis use to say that sannyasis can only be siksa-gurus, not diksa-gurus. Caste, asrama, gender, and other material considerations are transcended by knowing the science of Krishna. Thus Mahaprabhu, through the pen of Krishnadasa Kaviraja, tells us that anyone who knows that science in a substantial sense can become guru.

Furthermore in another conversation, Prabhupada stresses the same point:

“If a woman is perfect in Krishna consciousness ... Just like Jahnava devi, Lord Nityananda’s wife, she was acarya. She was acarya. She was controlling the whole Vaisnava community.... It is not that woman cannot be acarya.” (Conversation 6/29/72)

Here Prabhupada says that a Krishna-conscious woman can be an acarya and that Jahnava devi was an acarya who was in charge of the whole Vaisnava community. Although she was recognized substantially as leader of that community, she may have at times deferred to male devotees in ceremonial matters in consideration of social norms. However, the same social norms no longer exist. What applied in those times as well as today is *yei krishna tattva vetti*, one who knows the tattva of Krishna consciousness is guru. Anyone, man or woman, who knows and lives the tattva of Krishna consciousness can become acarya and give diksa and siksa.

The guru is the most chaste person in society. He is chaste to Krishna. What better chastity is there? We need examples like this. Sri Guru transcends male and female qualities, and thus the principle of guru—guru tattva—can appear in one who possesses either male or female qualities. Because one is familiar with male gurus and has erroneously identified their male qualities with the principle of guru, one may think that women cannot be guru, but I do not agree.

Krishna may be the guru of the whole world, but his guru is Radha, *radhikara prema guru ami*

“Unfortunately, the *varnashrama dharma* system has been lost.... Although we may try to revive the perfect *varnashrama* system, it is not possible in this age.”⁹ And Sri Krishna’s statement, of course, applies to a *varnashrama* society that does not exist today. Thus for the most part we are left with hearing and chanting about Krishna, with moral support derived from *sadhu sanga*, increasing taste for *bhakti*, and the rejection of all that is unfavorable to the culture of *bhakti*.

But can one not perform *dharma*, *artha*, and *kama* as service to Krishna and in this way mix *varnashrama* and *bhakti*? Not quite. Sri Krishna tells Uddhava, a person with natural faith should constantly hear topics about me, should sing and remember me which purifies the world, and enact my exploits and birth. He should perform *dharma*, *kama*, and *artha* as service to me. Having taken shelter of me, he will attain permanent *bhakti* to me, whose form is permanent.” Sri Vishvanatha Chakravarti comments on these two important verse thus:

“For serving me, one should perform *dharma*—giving cloth and food to *brahmanas* and Vaishnavas on my birthday or on days for worshipping *guru*, who is also my *svarupa*. One should perform *kama*, acts for oneself, in the form of obtaining *prasadam*, garlands, sandalwood, betel nut, and cloth from the assembly of Vaishnavas. One should perform *artha*, collecting items for service to Vishnu and the devotees.” Such *dharma*, *artha*, and *kama* is nothing but *bhakti* herself, not *varnashrama dharma*.¹⁰ Choosing to refer to this approach as *daiva varnashrama* for the sake of preaching is not objectionable.

Vedic Versus Modern

“Actually, there is no... brahmacarini is not allowed in the sastra. Where is the question of brahmacarini? Because according to Vedic system, as soon as a girl is fourteen years old or sixteen years old, she is at once married. According to Vedic system, no girl should be allowed remaining unmarried. So there is no question of brahmacarini. Every girl is supposed to be married. That is the Vedic system.”

Yet in spite of quotes like this he established a brahmacarini asrama! He also said the following in this regard:

“So at the present moment we cannot strictly follow [the Vedic culture]; neither we are strictly following; neither it is possible to strictly follow. As far as possible, that’s all. Our conception of brahmacarini is in the Krishna society, because especially in India there is no brahmacarini. But here, in your country, the boys and girls mix very freely, but just to restrict such free mixing, we think that the unmarried girls should remain separately. That is the contemplation. Actually, in the Vedic system there is no brahmacarini system.”

In the above quote Srila Prabhupada speaks of establishing a brahmacarini asrama in his society in spite of the fact that it is not Vedic to do so. He said the following about this non-Vedic asrama:

“I am so pleased that you are guiding your God-sisters in N.Y. so nicely. But some of your God-sisters in San Francisco want you for 2 months. I have asked them to write you directly and if you can spare yourself for that time to organize a brahmacarini asrama in S.F., please think it over. I have seen the article put in Boston newspaper about your activities there, and I am so glad to see your picture, just a brahmacarini. The picture was very attractive for me, and I pray Krishna that you may make further progress in Krishna consciousness so your spiritual beauty may come out more and more.”

“If you can organize a brahmacarini asrama, it will be very nice idea.”

The example of Srila Prabhupada’s ISKCON is noteworthy: in today’s ISKCON the position of the GBC is arguably higher than sannyasa. Although women were not members of the GBC during the personal presence of Srila Prabhupada, the wise leaders of today’s ISKCON have appointed women members of the GBC. Who is protecting them? Perhaps the best protection for women in today’s society is education, by which they will be aided in seeing through the pretense of concern for their well-being on the part of male chauvinists who disguise their sexism in quasi-spiritual packaging. Such chauvinists hardly represent Srila Prabhupada and sorely lack his dynamic spiritual vision.

Women’s Position Under Prabhupada (T. Swami)

I have often heard criticisms of him from members of other Gaudiya missions for his liberal policy with regard to women. For example, he engaged women in ways that others, even his own guru, had not permitted. Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakura did not allow women to live in the monastery, to chant and dance together in the same room with men, to cook for the temple deity, or to engage directly in the seva puja of the temple deity.

Prabhupada allowed women to do all of these things and in many instances gave women the position of head priest in charge of the deity’s daily service. He also allowed women to travel with him as his personal cook at times. Prabhupada’s disciples take these things for granted, as

if they were the norm, but others from outside of Prabhupada's mission often consider these policies to be deviations.

Though Srila Prabhupada more readily identified with social standards of times gone by, some of which fit better with the words of Manusmriti, in practice he embraced whatever in his judgment was helpful for performing and disseminating Krishna bhakti, some of which did not conform to the injunctions of the dharma-sastras. That some of Manusmriti's centuries-old injunctions do not resonate with people living in our times is to be expected. For that matter, no Hindus today adhere to the text more than in some small part, and most scholars believe that the laws of Manu were never universally enforced anywhere in India.

Prabhupāda: No. They are not... So our point is, we are not going to bring back the old type of Hindu society. It is not that. Our...

Prof. Kotovsky: It is impossible.

Prabhupāda: It is impossible. Our idea is that best ideas from the original idea. Just like in the Bhāgavata there is a description of communistic idea, and it is being described to Mahārāja Yudhisthira. So if there is something good, good experience, why it should not be adopted? That is our point of view. Jan 22, 1971

Women in Iskcon From Professor Kim Knott

The issue of women in this well-known Western Vaisnava movement has been troublesome for many years, both within its own boundaries and in the depictions of those outside it. For large numbers of devotees, predominately women but some men, it has been a deeply painful matter, and has been perhaps second only to the issue of the status and role of the guru in threatening the future of the movement.

Needless to say, these complex levels of interpretation have led to many misunderstandings among both commentators and devotees. Devotees continue to strive for clarification of Prabhupāda's own view on the relationship between varnasrama-dharma and bhagavat-dharma. My view is that the ambiguities of this relationship are not possible to resolve in a movement which accepts both scripture and guru as fundamentally authoritative. Ancient texts speak of philosophical ideals and social principles which were worked out for distant places and times; living teachers have to interpret these in the light of contemporary circumstances while not losing the impetus for real spiritual revolution. The need to balance a commitment to ideals and the wisdom of a spiritual tradition situated in real time and place inevitably elicits mixed messages: those spoken out of an appreciation of ideals and those framed in the experience of the hard realities. It is commendable that in the face of this tension the founder of the Hare Kāñhā movement made a philosophy and practice available to women that had once been largely closed to them, allowing them effective material equality with men and the opportunity to serve in the same ways despite his own cultural background and the ideal prescriptions of his tradition. He acted in accordance with the spirit of bhagavat-dharma, in the manner of Caitanya and in the specific context of Kali-yuga as it manifested itself in the West. What happened in ISKCON subsequent to the initial positive opportunities for women is a matter to which I will return later.

A Transcendental Diary by Hari Sauri Prabhu November 1975 to April 1976

Prabhupāda surprised me when I entered his room at about 11 a.m. this morning to prepare for

his massage. For almost half an hour he preached to me, explaining that he wants all his disciples to become gurus. Each of us is to make thousands of disciples just as he has and in this way spread Kâñëa consciousness all over the world.

He didn't seem to be speaking in general terms either, but directly to me. He seemed very enlivened at the prospect of spreading Kâñëa consciousness in this way.

In the evening, when the GBC men filed into his room to make their report about their day's meeting, he brought up the same topic, before discussing their resolutions. He asked me to explain to everyone what he had said earlier. But when I hesitated, he did it himself, repeating in brief this principle of becoming guru.

He told them that just as he had made thousands of disciples, he wants each one of them to make ten thousand each. He encouraged them to become increasingly more qualified and rise to the position of being spiritual masters. He stressed that this can be done only if they maintain spiritual strength by strictly following the four regulative principles and chanting the prescribed number of rounds.

It is all dependant on enthusiasm, he told us. At seventy years he had left Vândavana with no money or men, nor any facility. He had done everything simply on this principle of enthusiasm.

Transcendental Diary Continued - Regarding Becoming Guru

After they had gone, I questioned Çréla Prabhupāda again on the criticism that Siddha Svarūpa's men are more attached to him than to Prabhupāda.

Prabhupāda shrugged it off, saying it is all right, it is not harmful. He said that each of us has to become a guru and accept many disciples. But as a matter of etiquette, one should wait until his own spiritual master has departed before doing so.

After lunch, I questioned him further. He told me that having a following is not such a serious offense. But if someone thinks that he is qualified and accepts disciples in the presence of his own spiritual master, that in itself would be his disqualification.

Replying to my question whether one has to be a pure devotee to make disciples, he said that one has to be strictly following the principles. That is the requirement. Then he can be considered to be on a pure platform.

From Radha Dasi

First, Çréla Prabhupāda indicates that the test of whether a woman's participation role is appropriate is not whether it is Vedic* but whether it helps to spread Kâñëa consciousness. If we truly thought in terms of what is effective for spreading Kâñëa consciousness, many of the controversies between men and women would disappear.

The second point is one I previously discussed in section two of this paper, that Çréla Prabhupāda has created an analytical exception to the statements that women are less intelligent or untrustworthy.* Women engaged in transcendental activities, that is women who

are devotees, are, according to Çréla Prabhupāda, just as intelligent as men engaged in devotional activities.

We can now examine the presumptions that are prevalent in ISKCON against the standard Çréla Prabhupāda has articulated. My perception, and others may disagree, is that we have a presumption against women's participation in ISKCON. That presumption does not mean that women do not participate in our movement. However, we begin by presuming that women should not participate, and then place the burden on women or their supporters to show why women should be included. This presumption needs to be reversed if we are to give women equal encouragement to develop in their spiritual lives and serve Çréla Prabhupāda's mission to the best of their abilities. We should have a presumption of equal participation for both genders. The burden then should be on those who argue that the role of women should be circumscribed, for reasons of etiquette or social custom, to articulate why and how such restriction relates to our goal of spreading Kāñëa consciousness.

When we examine our treatment of women in a logically rigorous manner, many of our practices appear unreasonable. For instance, we often speak of 'protecting' women whenever we are accused of gender discrimination. Disparate practices are held to be necessary and even beneficial to women on the grounds that women need special forms of protection.* However, this justification for discriminatory practices is incomplete. Those who would use it must define what it is that women are being protected from. Current ISKCON practice supports best the argument that women are being protected from participating. Moreover, we must also decide what the form of that protection should be. For instance, American law requires that restrictions that limit rights must relate to an important governmental purpose and be as narrowly defined as possible. ISKCON could use similar principles in its treatment of women, requiring that restrictions on their participation be related to the goal of spreading Kāñëa consciousness and that these limits be as narrow as possible.

We must first ask what Çréla Prabhupāda intended ISKCON to protect women from. For this, we can consult his writings on the subject. The most obvious context in which Çréla Prabhupāda discussed protection occurs in the first chapter of the Bhagavad-gita. Arjuna tells Kāñëa that when irreligion is prominent, women are prone to degradation. Arjuna informs Kāñëa that such women may bear unwanted children to the detriment of society. In his purport to this verse, Çréla Prabhupāda says that women are prone to being misled by irresponsible men and that the cause of their fall down is mixing too freely with men.* If that is the kind of protection we are discussing, then I do not understand how the dearth of women on the Governing Body Commission (GBC)* or discouraging women from accepting management positions in our movement protects us from sexual exploitation. Such an argument requires a belief that the men we would be working with under such circumstances are irresponsible men. The rules ISKCON uses in this context do not appear rationally related to the purposes Çréla Prabhupāda has described for us.

The next question is what form should this protection take? In ISKCON, we have an unspoken assumption that protection means restriction. We protect women by telling them 'you can't' and taken to its extreme form this instruction becomes, 'you can't leave the house.'* Even in slightly less restrictive contexts that permit women to attend worship at ISKCON temples, making flower garlands for the deities is sometimes seen as the most suitable service for a woman. There is

some similarity between the protection model currently applied to women in ISKCON and the techniques I use in raising my children. I give my children crayons and colouring books and protect them by instructing them to sit quietly and colour. Women in ISKCON get colourful bundles of carnation blossoms along with tapestry needles and string. We are instructed to sit quietly and make flower garlands. In ISKCON, the current perception seems to be that women are comparable not only to children, but to very young children.

I do not believe that this 'woman as small child' model is the one Çréla Prabhupāda intended. In fact, examination of the histories told by many of his early female disciples reveals that Çréla Prabhupāda himself did not treat women in this way. Their stories reveal that Çréla Prabhupāda protected them in three ways. First, he educated his female disciples about their true identities as spirit souls. Second, Çréla Prabhupāda engaged women in devotional service, a process by which they could attain liberation from death and rebirth, the ultimate protection from worldly suffering and evil. Finally, as Kausalya Devi Dasi detailed in her presentation at the 'Vaisnavis in ISKCON' conference, when limited facilities were available for the devotees' use, Çréla Prabhupāda protected his female disciples by giving them the lion's share of those physical resources.*

In examining Çréla Prabhupāda's actual behaviour toward his female disciples, it seems fair to conclude that far from comparing women to children who need protection, Çréla Prabhupāda desired a model in which women would be nurtured and supported and above all encouraged to contribute as much as they could to the Kāññea Conscious Movement, rather than being reviled and restricted. Perhaps we should redirect our efforts towards a model designed to ensure that women are educated, engaged and provided with sufficient physical resources in order to perform their various services effectively within our organisation.

This question of protection through the provision of resources raises the second category of Human Rights, that is, substantive rights. If protection really were our goal, then as an external academic observer of the institution I would expect to see policies directed towards that goal. The Women's Ministry and other members of ISKCON have engaged in significant discussion concerning policies that would be necessary to protect women members of ISKCON. That list is legion, but if we examine protection from sexual exploitation specifically, I would expect to see, among many other things, education about the proper roles of men and women, ashram⁸²⁵ facilities for women and a policy prohibiting sexual harassment. In fact, we have some of these things. We have training manuals for our new members, but they do not often include material on how to respect and protect women. We have ashram facilities. However, we spend more resources on men's training and men's ashrams than we do on comparable programmes for women. The Women's Ministry is drafting a policy on sexual harassment, but without effective support from ISKCON's management, that policy is unlikely to result in meaningful social change. Thus, in spite of our rhetoric about protecting women, an outside observer will find that we give more substantive rights to men than to women.

In ISKCON we find ourselves in the position of telling our women members that they do not need participation rights because we will protect them. But we then fail to provide the resources by which that protection might come about. Human rights analysts will tell you that when you decrease somebody's participation rights without a corresponding increase in their substantive rights, that person will be worse off than they were at the beginning.* This type of situation is the

very definition of oppression and dictatorship, which is surely not what Çréla Prabhupāda intended.

There is another aspect of the protection issue that raises a slightly different philosophical basis for a duty on ISKCON's part. That issue is domestic violence. In his presentation at the 'Vaisnavis in ISKCON' conference, His Holiness Bir Kāñëa Swami mentioned a letter he had seen in which a male member of ISKCON expressed his understanding that our Vaisnava etiquette permitted him to beat his wife as long as he used only a leather belt on her back or a sapling on her legs. Some male members in Southern California have expressed the belief that Çréla Prabhupāda stated that both a wife and a mrdanga required beating. I have personally not seen any proof that Çréla Prabhupāda endorsed wife beating. Moreover, ISKCON's Governing Body Commission has specifically rejected the claim that our philosophy justifies spousal abuse in any way.

Given this institutional force that misguided members are using to promote domestic violence, ISKCON has a duty to create policies that will counter domestic violence. While the ISKCON Women's Ministry has undertaken to create policies and substantive programmes to meet this need, we often hear excuses for institutional inaction on this issue. The excuses we hear, lack of resources and an inability to interfere between husband and wife, are clearly insufficient. Given our somewhat chequered history that includes (at the very least) the public perception that we have a poor record on domestic violence, we have a duty to find the resources to counter this destructive influence. Moreover, having given numerous, repeated public instructions on the duty of the wife to tolerate any of her husband's abuses and having given men some (false, but well promoted) basis on which to justify their abuses, it seems a little late to make the claim that we cannot become involved in the marital relationship. If we make the claim that we protect women, then we must become responsible and actually protect them.