A woman in silhouette, wearing a sari, is shown from the side, holding a lit diya (oil lamp) in her right hand. The background is a warm, golden-brown bokeh, suggesting a large gathering of lights or a festival. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

What's a Woman to Do?

Part I:
Reflections on
Women's Services
in Srila Prabhupada's
Hare Krishna Movement.

Visakha Dasi

What's a Woman to Do?

By Visakha Dasi:

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Five Years, Eleven Months and a Lifetime of Unexpected Love, a memoir

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Visakha Dasi

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Dedicated to His Divine Grace
A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada
and his followers, generous souls
who forever try to evoke the divine within us.



His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada
Founder-Acharya of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness

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Introduction

In early 2018, members of Pandava Sena, a dynamic group of devotees in England, asked me to make a presentation on women in Srila Prabhupada's Hare Krishna movement. To be frank, this is not one of my favorite topics, but in a spirit of cooperation I agreed and began my research. Tension around this topic developed among devotees in the early 1970s. It has been discussed and written about as a subject of great concern since that time, and it remains so today.

Srila Prabhupada left us a powerful, encompassing legacy, and the Vaishnavis in his movement are an integral aspect of that legacy. One may ask, Why is it that although the

Hare Krishna movement has been around for more than fifty years, we're still sorting out this major aspect of our culture? Well, a number of factors contribute to the dissension perpetually swirling around this topic. Among them are:

- * Male/female psychological tendencies: men tend to feel superior to women; women tend to defer to men.
- * When we came to Srila Prabhupada's movement we brought with us different cultural, societal, familial, and personal expectations about what men and women can and cannot or should and should not do.
- * Our understanding of Srila Prabhupada's statements, example, and mood related to women vary widely.
- * We may mistake some past and present values and customs of traditional India as Vaishnava values taught by Srila Prabhupada.
- * The sexual attraction between men and women - we overlook or minimize it at our peril.

With these major complexities it's no wonder that we haven't worked this issue out over the past fifty years. Yet for the future of Srila Prabhupada's movement, it's vital that we develop a mature understanding of the issue - that we work it out and thereby insure that every person in Srila Prabhupada's movement thrives. Toward that end, we offer this booklet with the prayer that it's true to Prabhupada's mood and teachings.

I. What do our scriptures say about women and their service?

When irreligion is prominent in the family, O Krishna, the women of the family become polluted, and from the degradation of womanhood comes unwanted progeny. (Gita 1.40)

This verse emphasizes the importance of women's chastity. Women, Srila Prabhupada says, are the power of inspiration for men and, as such, are more powerful than men. For example, mighty Julius Caesar was controlled by Cleopatra. "Such powerful women are controlled by shyness," Srila Prabhupada writes. "Therefore, shyness is important for women." (SB. 1.9.27, purport) Once this "control valve" is loosened, havoc and unwanted children – children who disrupt their parents' lives and may later disrupt society – can result.

To render service to the husband, to be always favorably disposed toward the husband, to be equally well disposed toward the husband's relatives and friends, and to follow the vows of the husband – these are the four principles to be followed by women described as chaste. (SB. 7.11.25)

Srimad-Bhagavatam describes a patriarchy – a social system in which men hold power and their wives and daughters remain in a supporting role. What results from a woman's chastity and support of her husband?

Not only was mother Sita powerful, but any woman who follows in the footsteps of mother Sita can also become similarly powerful. There are many instances of this in the history of Vedic literature. Whenever we find a description of ideal chaste women, mother Sita is among them. Mandodari, the wife of Ravana, was also very chaste. Similarly, Draupadi was one of five exalted chaste women. As a man must follow great personalities like Brahma and Narada, a woman must follow the path of such ideal women as Sita, Mandodari, and Draupadi. By staying chaste and faithful to her husband, a woman enriches herself with supernatural power. (SB. 9.10.27, purport)

The result of a woman being chaste to and supportive of her husband is that they gain great power; the demon Ravana was defeated by Sita's curse. Similarly, Gandhari, Kunti, and Devahuti were illustrious, powerful women. Srila Prabhupada writes, "Gandhari, although a woman, is no less than Bhismadeva in character." Krishna Himself clearly says that women are eligible for the highest destination (Gita 9.32). Srila Prabhupada confirms, "Draupadi attained the same destination as her exalted husbands."

In Vaishnavism, qualification is not based on the body but on an individual's consciousness.

The wives of Kaliya were actually serious devotees of Lord Krishna, and according to the acharyas they had often tried to convince their husband to surrender to Him. Finally, finding himself in unbearable agony, Kaliya remembered his wives' advice and took shelter of the Lord. (SB. 10.16.30, purport by the followers of Srila Prabhupada)

In another statement, Srila Visvanath Chakravarti Thakur explains that Kaliya's wives, who were great devotees of Krishna, "had been disgusted with their husband because of his demoniac activities." They had been thinking, "Let this atheist be killed by the Supreme Personality of Godhead. We'll be widows and engage in His worship." But after Krishna had danced on Kaliya's hoods, his wives understood that Kaliya had taken shelter of the Lord within his mind and had become humble and remorseful. Then they thought, "Just see. Our husband is becoming a Vaishnava. We must try to protect him." Although Krishna killed other demons, He spared Kaliya. "Because Kaliya's wives were great devotees of the Lord and offered Him loving affection, Krishna withdrew both Kaliya's offense against the Lord's devotee Garuda and that against the residents of Vrindavan, who were very dear to Him." (SB. 10.16.64, cited in the purport by the followers of Srila Prabhupada) Such is the power of the Naga-patni Vaishnavis.

Another example from Krishna's pastimes of how qualification is not based on the body but on the consciousness: "Because the wives of the brahmanas were great devotees of the Lord, the foolish brahmanas received spiritual benefit and finally came to their senses." (SB. 10.23.38, purport by the followers of Srila Prabhupada)

Taking note of their wives' pure, transcendental devotion for Lord Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and seeing their own lack of devotion, the brahmanas felt most sorrowful and began to condemn themselves. (SB. 10.23.39)

The brahmana husbands noted that their wives, having perfected their transcendental attachment for Krishna, did not have even a trace of attachment left for home, husband, children, and so forth. Therefore from that day on, the husbands accepted those women as their worshipable spiritual masters and no longer thought of them as their wives. Clearly, the scriptures, like Krishna, direct us past bodily designations to the essence of each individual – to his or her bhakti.

2. How did Prabhupada translate service opportunities for women?

Prabhupada transplanted an entire culture from one age and milieu to a different age and milieu. While he left the message of that culture intact, he also had to make the culture practical and appealing to young people who had no orientation to that culture, who had for the most part rejected the cultural values of their own society, and who had accustomed themselves to drugs and promiscuity.

Although shockingly contrary to the mood of the day, from the beginning Srila Prabhupada encouraged his students to get married and be responsible. Prabhupada's followers accepted his directives because they were convinced that by doing so they could progress spiritually.

A. *Touching on touchy topics.*

Let's not shy away from the uncomfortable and controversial statements about women that we sometimes find in scriptural verses and in Srila Prabhupada's writings. For example, Srila Prabhupada writes,

A man's psychology and woman's psychology are different. As constituted by bodily frame, a man always wants to be superior to his wife, and a woman, as bodily constituted, is naturally inferior to her husband. Thus the natural instinct is that the husband wants to post himself as superior to the wife, and this must be observed. (SB. 3.23.2, purport)

As I also mentioned in my introduction, men and women have different psychologies. Ignoring, defying, or trying to "correct" these natural psychological bents can make marital relationships ugly. Thus such statements are helpful – not just for husband-wife relationships but also for any relationship between men and women. For example, according to an article published in the New York Times on September 17, 2017, Angela Merkel, chancellor of Germany



Cornerstone laying ceremony, Juhu

since 2005, “has spent her political career playing down her gender: shunning a feminist label, offering modesty, caution and diligent preparation as an implicit contrast to male swagger.” Honoring the male-female psychology, Merkel’s leadership was often invisible because “she painstakingly built consensus behind the scenes and avoided claiming credit for ideas she often originated.” This is one way a woman can deal with the male psychological tendency to dominate women.

Thus it is possible for women to teach and lead men, as the Naga-patnis did with Kaliya and the brahmanas’ wives did with their husbands.

The actual system is that the husband is Spiritual Master to his wife, but if the wife can bring her husband into practicing this process, then it is all right that the husband accepts wife as Spiritual Master. Chaitanya Mahāprabhu has said that anyone who knows the science of Krishna, that person should be accepted as Spiritual Master, regardless of any material so-called qualifications, such as rich or poor, man or woman, or brahmana or sudra. (Letter to Silavati, June 14, 1969)

In this letter Srila Prabhupada affirms the precedent set by the Naga-patnis and the wives of the brahmanas. We’re meant to be personal, to appreciate one another’s qualities, and to avoid forejudging another based on gender stereotypes.

Another possibly touchy statement from Srila Prabhupada’s writings:

Every person must get married. Every woman especially must get married. (Cc. Madhya 7.128, purport)

This and other such statements are generalizations or guidelines meant to give us informed direction. Generalizations, by definition, are inferred from specific cases and not meant to be applied indiscriminately, whereas universal statements (such as that we’re spirit souls) are always true in every circumstance. For example, although Srila Prabhupada said everyone, and especially all women, should be married, he also said:



Prabhupada: If one can remain without marriage, that is the first class.

Rupanuga: Women also?

Prabhupada: Women also. What is the use of this material husband? Make Krishna husband. Krishna’s prepared to become everything – love Him as husband, love Him as son, love Him as friend. (Room conversation, July 6, 1976, Washington, DC)

Prabhupada is broad-minded and encompassing, not small-minded and narrow. His idea is that we become Krishna conscious, not that we become married, particularly, and throughout his writings and talks he leaves room for individuality in how we achieve that. Krishna consciousness is a variegated, dynamic process. Here is another of his statements:

If one becomes Krishna conscious, then he [she] doesn’t require husband. He [she] does not require. He ... She knows that ‘Krishna is my protector. Why shall I artificially seek after father or ...?’ And what protection for a few days either the father or the son or the husband may give? Real protection is Krishna. (Room conversation, January 7, 1977, Bombay)

We have a number of practical examples in our movement of women who are not protected by father, husband, or son – Malati, Mukhya, Kaisori, Prasanta, Visakha Priya, to name but a few. Each of these women not only feel protected but are also making important contributions to

Srila Prabhupada's movement. (We should note with caution, however, that neither men nor women are meant to remain single artificially – that is, to remain single for prestige, power, or out of frustration. This benefits no one and leaves the individuals involved unhappy and vulnerable.)

The above quotes are easy to understand. Let's look at some more challenging statements.

Generally all women desire material enjoyment. They are called less intelligent because they are mostly prone to material enjoyment. (SB. 3.23.54, purport)

Again, this is a generalization, not a universal statement – that is, inferred from specific cases and not to be applied indiscriminately.

Prabhupada: Both of them are very intelligent. And Nandarani is more intelligent than her husband. (laughs) I know that.

Atreya Rishi: I find that he is very intelligent, Srila Prabhupada.

Prabhupada: Ah, Dayananda.

Atreya Rishi: Yes.

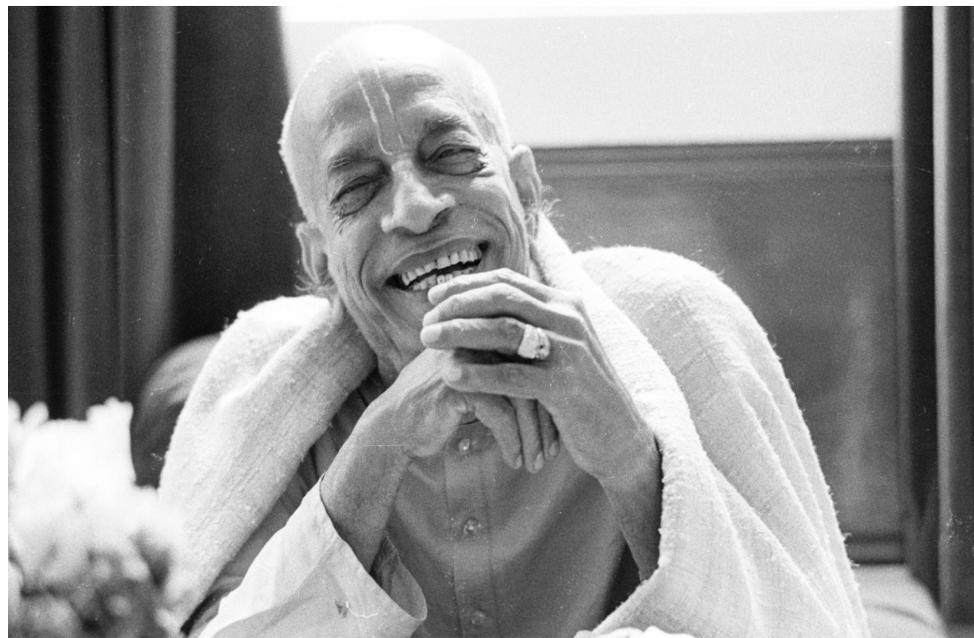
Prabhupada: He is intelligent, but Nandarani is still more intelligent. (laughs) I know that. Both of them are intelligent, but this girl appears to be more intelligent.” (Room conversation, July 16, 1976, New York)

To understand the “women are less intelligent” statement we need to consider what “intelligence” means in this or other contexts. In Sanskrit there are several words that are translated as “intelligence.” One is *buddhi*, which refers to the ability to analyze, judge, or discern. Another is *medha*. In the tenth chapter of the Bhagavad-gita, Krishna lists *medha* among seven feminine qualities. *Medha* means “mental vigor, wisdom, prudence.” From Prabhupada's purport to Bhagavad-gita 10.34: “The ability not only to read many books on different subject matters but to understand them and apply them when necessary is intelligence (*medha*), another opulence.” Thus these are broad classifications – *buddhi*: analytical intelligence; *medha*: nourishing, practical intelligence.

The Lord is so kind that He does not show special favor only to one who is a great philosopher. He knows the sincerity of purpose. For this reason only, women generally assemble in great numbers in any sort of religious function. In every country and in every sect of religion it appears that the women are more interested than the men. (SB. 1.8.20, purport)

However, both women and men have both the *buddhi* and *medha* types of intelligence; it's a matter of the degrees of each. We need to avoid jumping to conclusions about a person or a group of people based on what body they are wearing around their intelligence.

One of the beauties of Krishna consciousness is that it sees past all bodily and mental differences to a higher, spiritual truth. When we become devotees we transcend all designations. Thus Krishna consciousness can unite all people, whatever their religion, race, nationality, age, or gender. The Hare Krishna movement is meant to be at the



forefront of implementing such equal vision. Our world is in desperate need of it.

Let's move on to what many consider a very heavy statement:

Never place your faith in a woman or politician. (Chanakya Pandit, quoted by Srila Prabhupada)

Yamuna Devi Dasi comments: "I was present on four occasions when Srila Prabhupada repeated the Chanakya adage, 'Never trust a woman or a politician.' On each occasion Srila Prabhupada 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, Yamuna?' Immediately I retorted: 'Of course it is true, Srila Prabhupada,' whereupon he became grave, looked at me with great feeling, and said, 'But you are not a woman; you are a Vaishnava.'"

Srila Prabhupada's consistent goal is to help us transcend all material designations. He wants to see each of us advance spiritually.

Women, sudras, and vaisyas are ordinarily regarded as less intelligent, but if one takes to Krishna consciousness one is the most intelligent... Although Kunti had the body of a woman, she was a devotee. Therefore she was not like an ordinary unintelligent woman. Rather, she was the most intelligent, for she recognized Krishna to be the Supreme Godhead. (Teachings of Queen Kunti, chapter 3)

No material qualification can satisfy the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Krishna, yet He is satisfied and our endeavors become successful simply by our developing devotional service to Him. Thus, from Krishna's viewpoint, unless and until we're elevated to spiritual consciousness, we're conditioned and fallen. From that viewpoint, those of us who are spiritually inclined are more intelligent than those who aren't, and on the spiritual platform everyone is equal. Krishna does not discriminate.



Yamuna Devi Dasi, London

B. Classifications

Srila Prabhupada was not a warm, fuzzy guru who offered alluring clichés about the Light, the Force, or Energy. Neither is Krishna such a God. Rather, Krishna and His devotees use strong words to classify materialists: "Men who are like dogs, hogs, camels, and asses praise those men who never listen to the transcendental pastimes of Lord Krishna, the deliverer from evils." (SB. 2.3.19)

Classifying groups of people serves as a way we and others can: (1) understand our conditioned predicament; (2) start to transcend our conditioning through purification; and (3) get an indication of where we are on Krishna's all-encompassing material "map" and how we can move forward to achieve our desired destination.

Everyone in the material world is somewhere on Krishna's "map," and every place on that map has, for the conditioned soul, assets and deficits. For example, the scriptures tell us that before we can transcend the modes of material nature we must first come to the mode of

goodness. To be in the mode of goodness is advantageous – essential, in fact. But those in that mode may be stuck in their materially comfortable, peaceful state, and thus uninterested in spiritual life and unable to free themselves from repeated birth and death – a grim downside to the mode of goodness.

According to Sri Krishna’s and Srila Prabhupada’s teachings, everyone, regardless of his or her material designation, has the potential to attain the highest spiritual position, namely to become a pure devotee. Pure Vaishnavas are beyond all designations and classifications, and in their purest state, they see everyone else as beyond all designations and classifications too. The association of such persons is uplifting. As Srila Prabhupada said about his female disciples, “These women are not ordinary women. They are preachers. They are Vaishnavas. By their association one becomes a Vaishnava.” (Morning walk, March 27, 1974, Bombay)



Scholars and members of the
Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies

Our mission is to see sarve sukhino bhavantu: everyone become happy. We don’t want to see that we exploit somebody else and I become happy. No. We want to see everyone happy. But they do not know how to become happy. Therefore we are trying to spread this Krishna consciousness movement [so] that everyone will be happy. (Wedding lecture, December 4, 1973, Los Angeles)

Krishna consciousness means facilitating all devotees so that they remain enthusiastic and determined to grow to their full potential. Srila Prabhupada offered us such facility, and we, his followers, are meant to offer the same facility to others.

Please go to YouTube and view the ten-minute video, *Srila Prabhupada’s Shower of Mercy*. It’s available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43laBxnTMNQ>

C. Daiva varnasrama

Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur wanted to reestablish daiva-varnasrama. In daiva-varnasrama there cannot be acknowledgment of social status according to birthright because in the Bhagavad-gita it is said that the determining considerations are guna and karma, qualities and work. It is this daiva varnasrama that should be established all over the world to continue a perfect society for Krishna consciousness. This may be astonishing to foolish critics, but it is one of the functions of a Krishna conscious society. (SB. 5.1.24, purport)

We accept service in society not according to our birth but according to our qualities and the nature of our activities. If this straightforward, simple principle is enacted, it could help solve the current international crises of racism and sexism. It could also encourage people to do what they’re best suited for regardless of the body they inhabit and encourage them to see past the body and understand that they are spiritual beings. Srila Prabhupada’s Hare Krishna movement should be an exemplar of this principle, clearly given by Krishna Himself in the *Bhagavad-gita* (4.13).

For women, however, there are nuances to this principle of serving according to one's qualities and activities:

Mrs. Wax: Could a woman be a temple president?

Prabhupada: Yes, why not?

Mrs. Wax: Glad to hear it.

Prabhupada: But because women are less intelligent, they should remain dependent on first-class father, first-class husband, and first-class son. Then she is first class. That is the injunction. Woman should remain dependent in childhood upon first-class father, in youthhood upon first-class husband, and in old age upon first-class son. Woman is never independent. If she becomes independent, her life is not very good. She must agree to remain dependent on first-class father, first-class husband, and first-class son – three stages. (Room conversation, July 5, 1975, Chicago)

A “first-class” man is a man of integrity, kindness, courage, spiritual commitment, and maturity. That women can be temple presidents but must also remain dependent on such a man may appear to be a contradiction, but Srila Prabhupada doesn't see it that way. From what he says here, women should remain protected and do a service they're capable of. That women should be protected does not mean that women are forbidden from speaking, singing, managing, or leading. Let's take a closer look at protection.

D. What is protection?

Protection, like everything in Krishna consciousness, is ultimately meant to help one advance spiritually.

Protection means what? Your protection idea is very limited. You want to be protected for a few years. But the protection of Krishna is perpetually you are being protected. Tyaktva deham punar janma naiti. You don't get any more material body. That is real protection. (Morning walk, September 19, 1972, Los Angeles)

Here, in speaking about the traditional culture of India, Prabhupada explains what ultimate protection is: *rakhe*

krishna mare ke mare krishna rakhe ke – “That person whom Krishna wants to protect, no one can kill; and that person whom Krishna wants to kill, no one can protect.” As Prabhupada said in the room conversation quoted above (January 7, 1977), what can the father, husband, or son do? Ultimately, Krishna is our protector.

Women must be protected, and it is the duty of the leaders of our Society to see that this is carried out. (Letter to Satsvarupa, February 10, 1973)

We can't minimize women needing protection – the #MeToo movement is evidence that sometimes some men are out of control and so unqualified that they force themselves on women. Women need to be protected from such men, and the most effective way to do this is for women to serve in the association of Krishna's sincere devotees. When, in such an environment, women fully use their talents and proclivities in Krishna's devotional service, their absorption is another form of protection.

Women should be always protected. That is ... Protection does not mean negligence. No. Protection means to give him [her] all facilities. That is protection. (Lecture, SB. 3.28.18, October 27, 1975, Nairobi)

Protection ultimately means that as far as possible, we remove the physical, mental, and emotional obstacles to another's spiritual progress; that we facilitate and encourage that person's devotional service in whatever form that service takes.

Srila Prabhupada protected women by:

- * educating them about their true identities as spirit souls;
- * engaging them in devotional service, a process by which they could attain liberation from death and rebirth, the ultimate protection;
- * and, when limited facilities were available for the devotees' use, giving them a due share of those physical resources. In India, for example, Prabhupada would ensure

that his female disciples had proper transportation, *prasada*, and sleeping facilities.

An immature man may feel threatened by a woman who has a voice, intelligence, ideas, or any other form of power. Such a man, in the name of protection, may actually commit violence if he discourages, denigrates, or prevents that woman's chosen devotional service. Protection is not about denying someone service based on the body in which he or she has appeared. That would be repression or oppression and would cause only distress. Rather, protection means providing a safe place from which one's protégé can perform her service.

Often, capable women who want to offer service in the Hare Krishna movement are not encouraged to do so. The movement is a poorer place for having lost out on a wealth of abilities.



Visakha Dasi photographing, Mayapur

Women are one of five groups that, in a traditional Vedic society, require protection. Such protection means acknowledging value: we protect what we know is valuable.

In the glorious days, or before the advent of the Age of Kali, the brahmanas, the cows, the women, the children, and the old men were properly given protection. (SB. 1.8.5, purport)

1. The protection of the brahmanas maintains *varnasrama*, the most scientific culture for attainment of spiritual life.
2. The protection of cows maintains the most miraculous form of food, milk, for maintaining the brain.
3. The protection of women maintains their chastity, by which we get a good generation of children for peace and progress of life.
4. The protection of children gives the human form of life a chance to prepare for liberty from material bondage.
5. The protection of old men gives them a chance to prepare themselves for life after death.

The child must be taken care of. That is good. Similarly, woman also. Just like old man like us, I am always taken care of... That is civilization. That is human society. (Lecture, SB. 1.8.51, May 13, 1973, Los Angeles)

Here, Srila Prabhupada gives himself as an example of a protected person. Clearly, that one is protected does not mean that one is unable to fully utilize his or her propensities in Krishna's service. It is not that because women need protection they cannot speak or sing or manage or lead or do any other service that they're inclined to do, just as protecting old men did not limit the activities Srila Prabhupada was able to perform.

Prabhupada: If a woman is perfect in Krishna consciousness... Just like Jahnava-devi, Lord Nityananda's wife, she was acharya. She was acharya. She was controlling the whole Vaishnava community.

Atreya Rshi: Lord Nityananda?

Prabhupada: Wife. Jahnava-devi. She was controlling the whole Gaudiya Vaishnava community.

Atreya Rshi: Do you have references about that in any of your books, Srila Prabhupada?

Prabhupada: I don't think. But there are many acharyas. Maybe somewhere I might have mentioned. It is not that woman cannot be acharya. Generally, they do not become. In very special case. But Jahnava-devi was accepted as, but she did not declare. (Room conversation, June 29, 1972, San Diego)



Vaishnavas want others to excel regardless of the body those persons inhabit and are therefore eager to recognize, encourage, and facilitate excellence in other devotees. Thus in *daiva varnasrama*, we do the service we are qualified to do, regardless of our body. And we are encouraged to do that service. Rather than become threatened by women who are serving, Vaishnavas are proud of them and what they can accomplish.

Everyone can have the courage – and it may take courage – to see Vaishnavis as full persons and support them in doing all they can for Krishna. This is a vital part of Srila Prabhupada's teachings and example.

Professor O'Connell: Is it possible, Swamiji, for a woman to be a guru in the line of disciplic succession?

Prabhupada: Yes. Jahnava-devi was – Nityananda's wife. She became. If she is able to go to the highest perfection of life, why it is not possible to become guru? But, not so many. Actually one who has attained the perfection, she can become guru. But man or woman, unless one has attained the perfection ... *Yei krishna-tattva-vetti sei guru haya*. The qualification of guru is that he must be fully cognizant of the science of Krishna. Then he or she can become guru. *Yei krishna-tattva-vetti, sei guru haya*. In our material world, is it any prohibition that woman cannot become professor? If she is qualified, she can become professor. What is the wrong there? She must be qualified. That is the position. So similarly, if the woman understands Krishna consciousness perfectly, she can become guru. (Interview, June 18, 1976, Toronto)

Prabhupada gave his female followers responsible service as heads of the *pujari* department and *pujaris*, preachers and book distributors, art department heads and artists, headmistresses and teachers, proofreaders and other BBT staff, kitchen heads and cooks, and in a number of other areas. He based his appointments on their qualifications, not their sex. In his book *A Living Theology of Krishna Bhakti*, Tamal Krishna Goswami writes, "In addition to noting the many ways women contributed, Prabhupada credited his movement's success to their magnetic presence amidst the men, nearly all of whom, he reasoned, would not have otherwise stayed."

If we don't follow *daiva varnasrama*, we have only a caste system, an artificial system that forces people into molds according to their birth – a mold for which they may even be unsuited.



Think of a topiary. A topiary is a shrub clipped to create a particular shape. When we look at a topiary, we don't see the plant's natural shape but the shape that's been imposed on it. Topiaries may be visually entertaining, but when that "clipping" is applied to people and they are forced to function in ways that may be artificial for them, it leads to misery. To prevent someone from serving Krishna according to his or her personal proclivities is a kind of violence. No one wins – not the persons involved, not the Hare Krishna society, and not the promotion of Krishna consciousness. It's a lose-lose-lose scenario.



Empowerment is the opposite of this forced "topiary" methodology. To empower means to recognize, encourage, and facilitate one's abilities and then create a framework in which one can work in a stronger and more confident way. To empower, then, means to recognize others' qualities, trust them, and offer them fresh challenges. In Srila Prabhupada's words,

Our leaders shall be careful not to kill the spirit of enthusiastic service, which is individual and spontaneous and voluntary. They should try always to generate some atmosphere of fresh challenge to the devotees, so that they will agree enthusiastically to rise and meet it. That is the art of management: to draw out spontaneous loving spirit of sacrificing some energy for Krishna. (Letter to Karandhara, December 22, 1972)

Disempowerment means to concentrate first and too much on the framework within which others work, without the requisite acknowledgment of their potential. Disempowerment is also known by names like sexism, racism, bureaucracy. Within the Hare Krishna movement there is no limit to what can be done if we as a Society empower our members.

When book distribution was in full swing in the 1970s, several accomplished book distributors wanted to train other devotees to distribute effectively. They explained their proposal to Srila Prabhupada – how they would tell the devotees what to say to stop people, what to say about the book, what to say about donating for it. Prabhupada responded, "Simply teach the devotees how to be sincere. Then Krishna in their heart will inspire them to say the right thing. Each person is his own genius."

Srila Prabhupada expected greatness from all of us. And greatness is evoked when we're championed.

Great people usually have somebody around them who expects them to be better than they have any intention of being. (Saint Gregory the Great)



Expectations are powerful. It's been shown that teachers' expectations of students strongly influence those students' behavior and accomplishments. Srila Prabhupada gave us, his followers, responsibilities. He trusted us and expected us to accomplish great things on his behalf. As he writes in his purport to *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 3.9.30, "The mercy the Lord bestows upon a particular person engaged in

executing the responsible work entrusted unto him is beyond imagination. But His mercy is received due to our penance and perseverance in executing devotional service."

Having high expectations of ourselves and those around us can propel us to achieve what we otherwise wouldn't. We all need to expect a lot from one another - and then help one another to live up to those expectations. Srila Prabhupada wrote to Himavati on December 20, 1969,

I am especially proud how my householder disciples are preaching Lord Chaitanya's Mission. This is a new thing in the history of the Sankirtana Movement. In India all the acharyas and their descendants later on acted only from the man's side. Their wives were at home because that is the system from old times that women are not required to go out. But in Bhagavad-gita we find that women are also equally competent like the men in the matter of Krishna Consciousness Movement. Please therefore carry on these missionary activities, and prove it by practical example that there is no bar for anyone in the matter of preaching work for Krishna Consciousness.

Here and in other places is Srila Prabhupada making temporary concessions for his fallen Western women disciples? Did he do and say things to pacify such women and expect us, in the future, to institute more traditional Indian roles for women? Rather than speculate in this way based on our own ideas, culture, or adopted culture, we want to simply follow what Srila Prabhupada directly wrote, taught, and practiced. We believe that ISKCON should do the same: follow what Srila Prabhupada directly taught, and not reinterpret or guess that he actually meant something else.

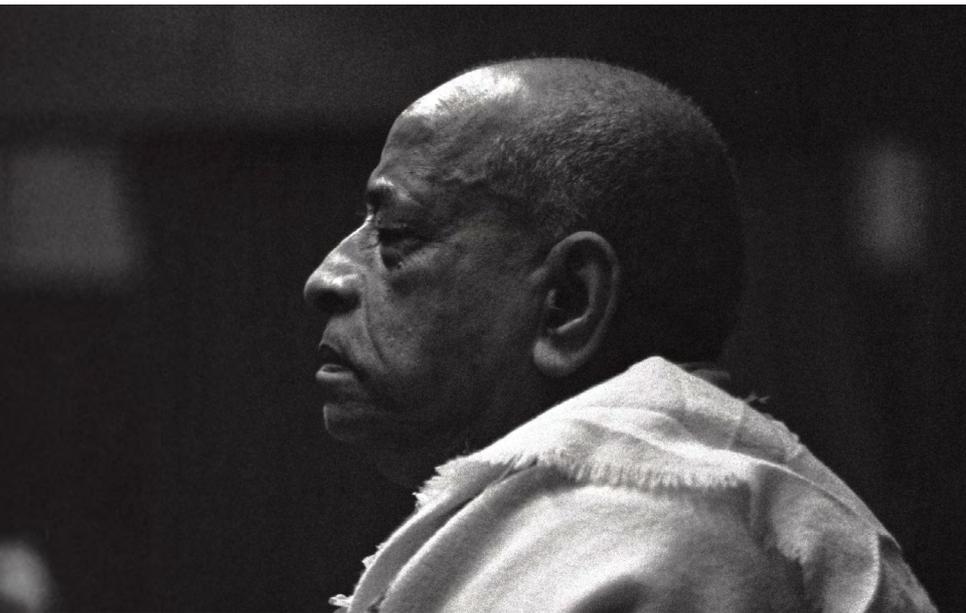
For us to make this required, refreshing, and much-needed change in the opportunities for Vaishnavis in Srila Prabhupada's movement, we can approach this issue as he did, that is, from the spiritual perspective. Then Srila Prabhupada's movement and the women in it can flourish as they are meant to.

E. The butter-fire principle

Material creation is centered on male-female attraction. This complicates the dynamic between the sexes and is something both must be aware of and cautious about. Otherwise havoc reigns for the individuals concerned as well as for society in general. Both men and women should not try to allure one another through their dress, behavior, or words. Every devotee should be careful of this.

*pumsah striya mithuni-bhavam etam
tayor mitho hridaya-granthim ahuh*

The whole material world is going on because of the attraction between male and female. (SB. 5.5.8)



Unfortunately, in this present civilization both men and women are allowed to be attracted to one another from the very beginning of life, and because of this they are completely unable to come to the platform of self-realization. They do not know that without self-realization they suffer the greatest loss in the human form of

life... The span of youth expires very quickly. One who wastes his life simply by committing sinful activities in youth immediately becomes disappointed and disillusioned when the brief period of youth is over. (SB. 4.27.4–5, purport)

Prabhupada and the scriptures give many warnings in this regard. The Krishna conscious culture seeks to minimize the attraction between the sexes. Previously (in part one), I mentioned the importance of women's shyness. This shyness does not mean that women are barred from services or from voicing their opinions, but that they conduct themselves sensibly in dealing with men.

The strong desire for sex will continue as long as we are in material existence, because sex is the center of all material pleasure. (Sri Prabhupada discussing Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy)

Sex attraction is a serious issue that we ignore or take lightly at our peril. "Female psychology dictates that when a woman offers her heart to a man for the first time, it is very difficult for her to take it back." (SB. 3.22.15, purport) Thus young women who are lax in their relationships with men will get hurt. With the exception of our spouse, we are all advised not to associate intimately with members of the opposite sex.

Sometimes our Krishna consciousness movement is criticized for mingling men and women, but Krishna consciousness is meant for everyone. Whether one is a man or woman does not matter. Lord Krishna personally says, striyo vaisyas tatha sudras te 'pi yanti param gatim: whether one is a woman, sudra, or vaisya,



not to speak of being a brahmana or ksatriya, everyone is fit to return home, back to Godhead, if he strictly follows the instructions of the spiritual master and sastra. We therefore request all the members of the Krishna consciousness movement – both men and women – not to be attracted by bodily features but only to be attracted by Krishna. Then everything will be all right. Otherwise there will be danger. (SB. 6.18.41, purport)

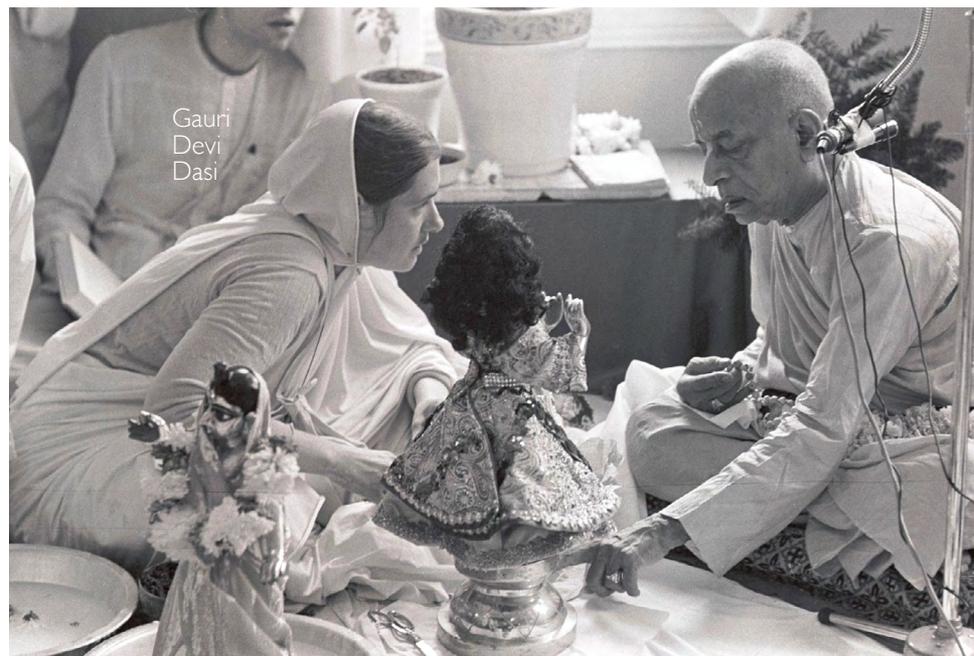
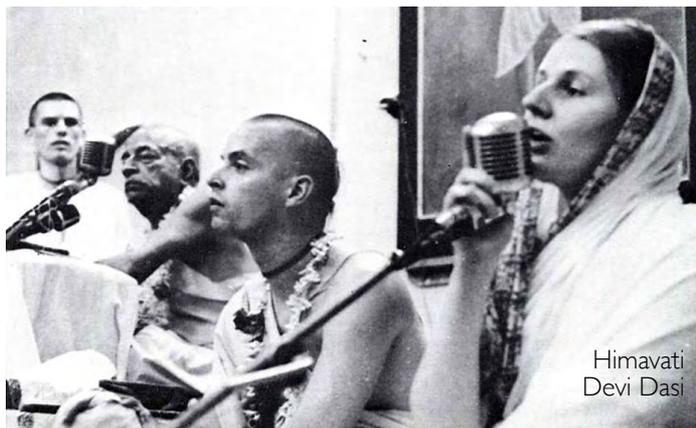
Prabhupada asks us to be serious about Krishna consciousness, to keep Krishna and our spiritual master always in the center. When we're focused on pleasing them, we experience harmony and self-control; then our lives become beautiful. Otherwise, mayhem.

My Lord, I know that young girls have natural affection for young boys, and that young boys have natural affection for young girls. I am praying at Your lotus feet that my mind may become attracted unto You in the same spontaneous way. (Padma Purana)

3. Conclusion and continuing on...

Despite the complexity of this topic, here is a solid, simple, takeaway:

Be personal. Honor each individual for who he or she is.



This principle was repeatedly exemplified by Srila Prabhupada throughout his time with us. As he saw how everyone is spiritually equal and should have an equal opportunity to participate in his movement according to his or her qualifications and propensities, so can we. As he encouraged everyone, so can we.

In the world today, there's a dire need for this cutting-edge, spiritual vision, a vision that's resonant with Krishna's teachings, that's attractive, and that's natural. Implementing it would be an enormous contribution to the world, a contribution that could set the example of how to see past externals and evoke each person's genius.

Srila Prabhupada was an expert encourager. He sometimes insisted that Yamuna lead kirtan, Himavati speak, Kausalya recite the *Isopanisad*. As he wrote to Satsvarupa Dasa in a letter, "Encourage them more and more." One who's encouraged can move mountains.

Everyone should be allowed to render service to the Lord to the best of his ability, and everyone should appreciate the service of others. Such are the activities of Vaikuntha. Since everyone is a servant, everyone is on the same platform and is allowed to serve the Lord according to his ability. (SB. 7.5.12, purport)

Let's be true to Srila Prabhupada's legacy. Let's support and find strength in one another. We are not promoting feminism, we are promoting Krishna consciousness. We don't want women to become men; we want their talents and good qualities to be expressed and valued.

It's Krishna's arrangement that all of us have different strengths. When we work together, we find unity in diversity. When we fully engage all people in Krishna's service, without discriminating based on bodily designations, all people benefit, our outreach is enhanced, and the Hare Krishna movement becomes known as the Society where each and every individual can fully blossom.

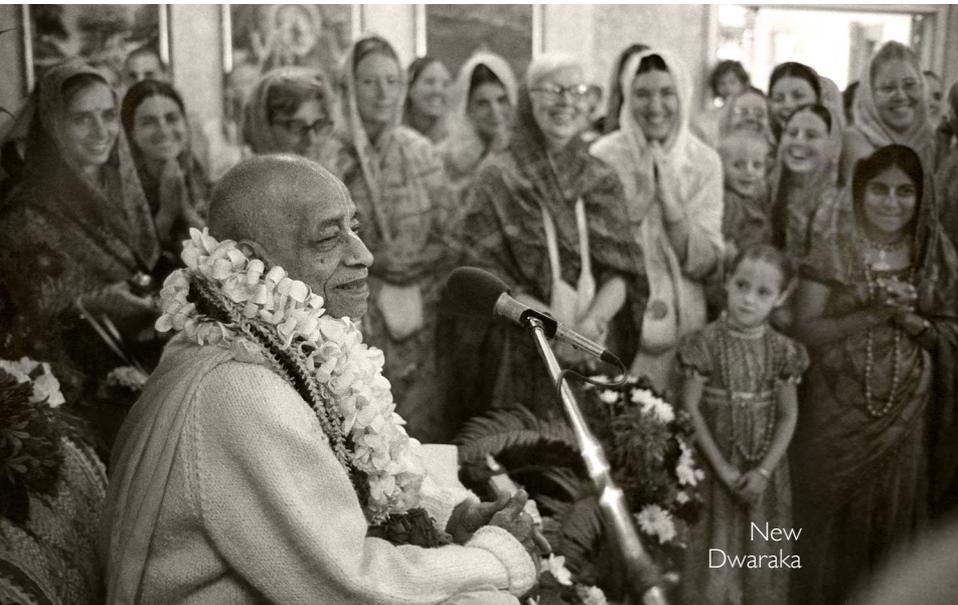
When, however, there's no sense of equal opportunity, we end up with devotees feeling alienated and distrustful, with no faith in the leadership. Our movement is weakened and experiences a sort of universal ennui. Life in Krishna consciousness is meant to be an exhilarating adventure, but terrible damage is done when any person



or group of people feel they are less, when they are discriminated against because of the body they inhabit. For the Hare Krishna movement to be vibrant and attractive, women need to be fully welcomed into it with everything they have to offer.

Sri Chaitanya, the combined form of Radha and Krishna and the avatar for this age of quarrel and hypocrisy, embodies both the analytical and emotional principles. He speaks philosophy with Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya and at other times, overwhelmed by Radha's love for Krishna, He feels intense separation from Krishna, so much so that He swoons at the sound of Krishna's name or dances with abandon.

In our personal lives and in our movement, we also need both the intellectual and the loving. In this vital area – the balanced contribution of each and every devotee – the full strength of Srila Prabhupada's movement is still waiting to be born.



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Visakha Dasi has been a disciple of Srila Prabhupada since 1971. As one of Srila Prabhupada's official photographers, she traveled with him in the US, Canada, Europe, and India. She has written many *Back to Godhead* articles as well as five books. Visakha also assists her husband, Yadubara Das, in making films – most recently the ninety-minute, award-winning documentary, *Hare Krishna! the Mantra, the Movement, and the Swami who started it all*, which has been translated into twenty-four languages and screened in theaters throughout the world.

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