

How to Mess Up Varnāśrama

By Underestimating Women & Neglecting *Gurukula*



Kaunteya das

a member of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness
Founder-Ācārya: His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda



EYE of the STORM



The *varṇāśrama* institution is constructed to enable one to realize the Absolute Truth. It is not for artificial domination of one division over another. When the aim of life, i.e., realization of the Absolute Truth, is missed by too much attachment for *indriya-prīti*, or sense gratification . . . the institution of the *varṇāśrama* is utilized by selfish men to pose an artificial predominance over the weaker section."

- *Srimad-Bhagavatam*,
1.2.13, purport



To Krishnanandini Devi,
we miss your wisdom and
your generosity;
we miss your love.

You showed the world how
to be a Vaisnavi, a mother
and a preacher.

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Kaunteya das - a member of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness - Founder-*Acarya*: His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada

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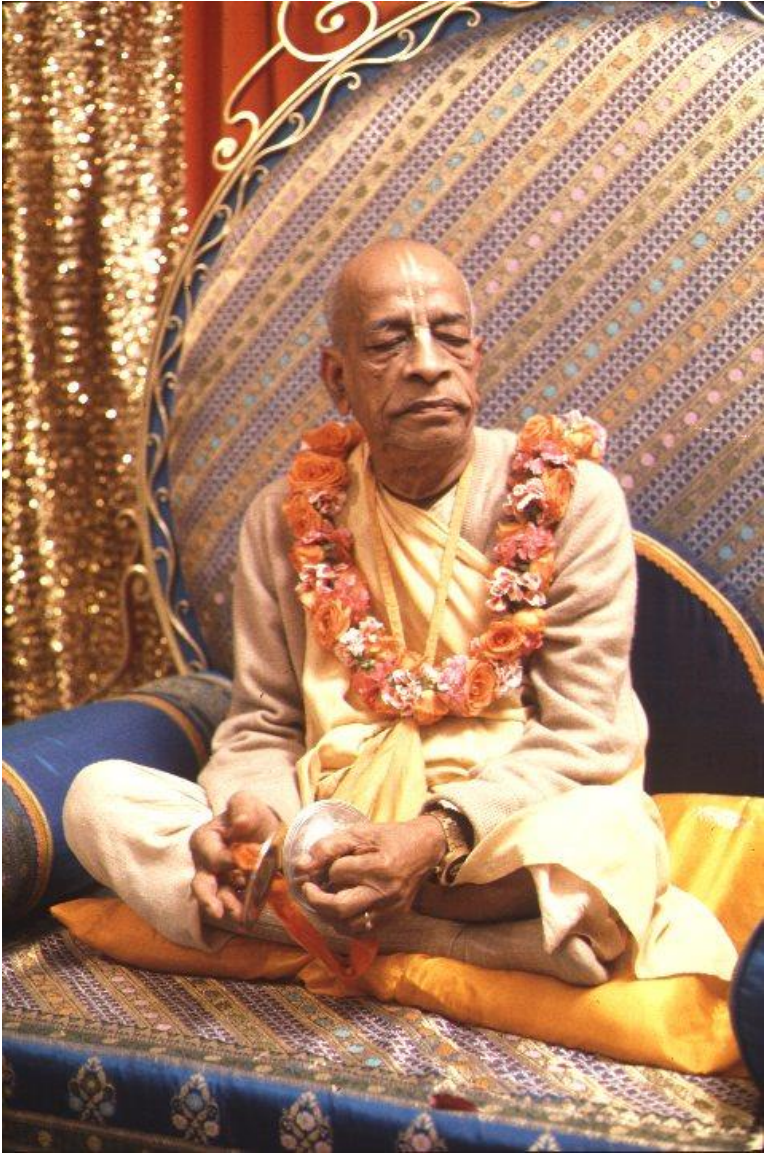
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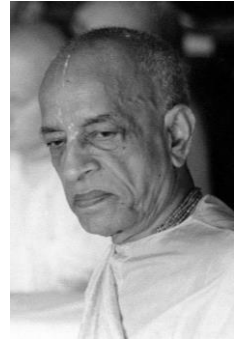
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Foreword

Varṇāśrama is Krishna's system of social organization - the blueprint the Lord offers humanity for living harmoniously in this world while advancing in self-realization. *Varṇāśrama* is a blessing for all human beings, and it's therefore essential to get it right. When misunderstood and mismanaged, *varṇāśrama* can provoke huge damage to individuals and communities, both spiritually and materially. When *rajas* and *tamas* reign, *varṇāśrama* agonizes - and people suffer. When androcentrism and gynophobia dominate the social discourse, *varṇāśrama* can turn pathological. When *smarta* influences infiltrate the system, true Gaudiya-vaisnavism is eclipsed and mutilated.

As indicated by its Founder-Acarya, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, promoting *varṇāśrama* - in beneficial forms - is one aspect of the mission of ISKCON, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. To protect the *varṇāśrama* project from misuse, in February 2020 I presented the seminar "How to Mess Up Your Life with Varṇāśrama" at the ISKCON Leadership Sangha (ILS) in Sridham Mayapur. Someone misunderstood the spirit of



the title and complained to His Holiness Jayapataka Maharaja, my spiritual master. Always the harmonizer, he wrote me: "How about using something like 'Deviation or misapplication, improper use of varnashrama' as the title? . . . you can adjust something with the title." I therefore changed it into the more explicit and didactic "How to Mess Up Your Life with (Misapplied) *Varṇāśrama*."

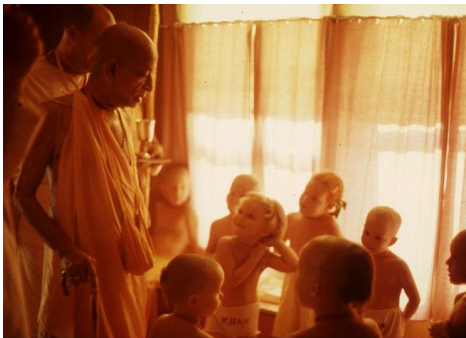
But changing the title didn't appease everyone. Five months later a friend, a high-ranking member of ISKCON India - who will remain unnamed - confidentially wrote me: "you changed the title but [*name withheld*] said that the issue was the content as it was very offensive to varnashrama. He never detailed what the offenses were . . . he wanted to have Bureau [ISKCON India's national council] banning you from any preaching in India and request GBC to remove you . . . He's not telling anyone what the offenses are." Dear reader, as you go through the book, which is an elaboration of the seminar's message, you can judge for yourself if what I write is "offensive to varnashrama."

I was blessed: other devotees also developed an active interest in the seminar. The ISKCON India Advisory Committee (IIAC), formed a subcommittee that disseminated the seminar among devotees and even created a website exclusively dedicated to it. I am grateful to them: they inspired me to expand the message by including considerations and references that could not fit in the original one-hour presentation. Their actions

represent an example of the "Streisand effect," by which the attempt at censoring or suppressing information only makes it more widely available; still, I am thankful to them without their involvement this book might have never been written.

This book is not an *Encyclopedia of Varṇāśrama*; and here you won't find important aspects such as cow protection. There are other forums for that. The book focuses on gender-interactions and *stri-dharma*, women's duties. Immature theoreticians might construe the role of women as a marginal *varṇāśrama* topic, a peripheral subject. But women constitute fifty percent of *varṇāśrama*, and if you don't get the position of women right, you instantaneously mess up half of *varṇāśrama* (and you'll presumably wreck also the other half).

The book also includes an edited, expanded transcript of another important seminar, "Varṇāśrama Without Gurukula? Just a Hobby," which I have been presenting in various venues, including the 2018 ILS in Mayapur. Every



society has its own educational system, which perpetuates its values and prepares its children to fit into the broader community. *Varṇāśrama* has *gurukula* and

Varṇāśrama College. *Gurukula* is as essential to *varṇāśrama* as roots are essential to a tree.

Readers who don't live in India (or readers who live in India but are in touch only with psychologically well-adjusted ISKCON leaders) may find puzzling that this book addresses, among other subjects, themes such as polygamy or child marriage, which may appear irrelevant, surreal or even dystopian to contemporary sensibilities and customs. Well, please consider their inclusion as an indication of the existence of certain currents in ISKCON coveting the indiscriminate resurrection of Vedic practices. Although it might not appear as an urgent concern, please consider that prevention is better than cure. These are examples of the tendency to revive customs that served valuable purposes in the past, but which are extremely difficult to implement now (and which often are banned by state law).

In the quotes I use abbreviations such as "SB," "Bg" or "Cc." If you don't know what they mean, I suggest this book may not be for you. I humbly recommend more introductory information, which you can find at www.krishna.com. (But, since you are here and I wish to honor your presence: SB stands for *Srimad-Bhagavatam*; Bg for *Bhagavad-gita*; and Cc for *Sri Caitanya-caritamrita*)

Good reading. And best wishes to your efforts at practicing and promoting true *daiva-varṇāśrama-dharma*!

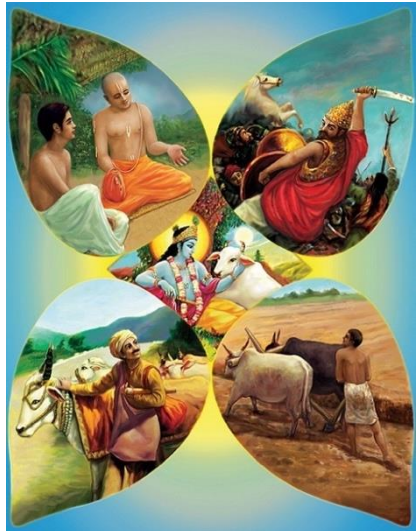


Preface

Varṇāśrama is essentially simple.

There are four broad phases of growth in life and there are four broad ways of being productive in the world. When these eight are centered on and aimed at the Blue Boy, the whole system is considered divine - *daiva-varṇāśrama*. Srila Prabhupada writes (emphasis mine, here and in the rest of the book): “The life of a human being is a chance to prepare oneself to go back to Godhead, or to get rid of the material existence, the repetition of birth and death. Thus in the system of *varṇāśrama-dharma* every man and woman is trained for this purpose.” (SB 1.19.4, purport)

Varṇāśrama is God's system for organizing human society, and because it's God's system, its archetypical eight divisions keep existing in every society - but in degenerated forms. You may wonder: "If *varṇāśrama* is God's system; how can it be messed up?" Just like water is originally pure



but it can become mixed with so many dirty things, *varṇāśrama* can and has been polluted in a variety of ways. As a system, it morphed into a hereditary arrangement of castes based on birth (and not on training and qualification). It also deteriorated in its individual aspects, such as monarchy, which collapsed when kings lost their original sense of identity as servants of God and as protectors of the citizens. Just like Krishna says in *Bhagavad-gīta* that the science of yoga was lost in course of time, also *varṇāśrama* - the social companion to yoga - has decayed through history.

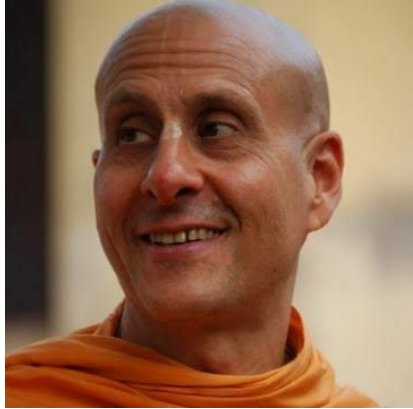
Varṇāśrama has eight divisions; four orders of spiritual life (*asramas*): *brahmacari*, *grihastha*, *vanaprastha* and *sannyasi* - broadly: student life, married life, retired life and renounced life - and four occupational classifications (*varnas*): the *brahmanas*, *ksatriyas*, *vaisyas* and *sudras* - broadly and briefly: priests and intellectuals; rulers and administrators; agriculturalists and tradesmen; workers and artisans. Srila Prabhupada writes about the essence of *varṇāśrama*: “There are four *varṇas* and four *āśramas*, which divide human society, but the central principle is to become a first-class pure devotee.” (SB 7.9.10, purport) The focus on devotional training is central to make *daiva-varṇāśrama* work.

If you are active in ISKCON, you are familiar with the four *asramas*, at least in a general way. You have seen *brahmacaris*, you have seen *grihasthas*, you have seen *sannyasis* and you have seen (or at least you have heard of)

vanaprasthas. The individual and collective practice of the *asramas* can certainly be improved, but, as a movement, we have at least a basic understanding of their ideal standard; and we also have some good, shining individual examples. When we come to the *varnas* things get more complex. Why? One reason is that in the last several thousands of years so much genetic and cultural mixing took place that is now hard to encounter specimens of the *varnas* in a pristine, unadulterated form. On the other hand, in any society someone will naturally excel at economics, at administration or at knowledge (the aspects of *vaisya*, *ksatriya* and *brahmana* leadership). Others (*sudras*) will assist such drivers, getting hired or engaged in varieties of ways. Practically everyone is born as *sudra* and among them those with some *dvijas* (twice-born) tendencies, the natural leaders of the common people, will stand out socially. Of course, due to false ego, people resent being classified as *sudras*, although that might just be who they are, socially, economically and psychologically. Despite whatever challenges and complexities we might consider, the *varna* concept of *daiva-varṇāśrama* is fundamentally simple. As His Holiness Radhanath Maharaja says:

"We can speak for days and weeks and months and years and lifetimes about *daiva-varṇāśrama-dharma* but, in essence, *daiva-varṇāśrama-dharma* is to educate people — according to their nature and propensity — to utilize their talents in the service of God, to develop pure love

of God. We are not these bodies. We are neither men nor women . . . We are eternal souls, eternal servants of Krishna . . . our goal of life is to awaken our natural love for Krishna, and *bhakti*, devotional service, is the only means to achieve that. Everyone is



conditioned by his previous karma and therefore in human society we find so many different tendencies. We have to serve the Lord with our material mind and senses but, due to our different natures, we cannot all serve in the same way. In every social system—capitalistic or communistic, atheistic or theistic—people have different propensities. Some are natural teachers, priests, leaders or administrators. Others are happy doing business, buying and selling . . . Others are happy doing hard manual work, farming or making bread . . . We need to develop a social organization, within our society, to take care of the devotees so that they can be happy in Krishna consciousness for the rest of their life. Srila Prabhupada expected us to work together to accomplish this. In our temple in Mumbai, India, Sri Sri Radha-Gopinatha Mandir, we have tried to implement the spirit of *varṇāśrama* in our social development . . . We were thinking that is necessary to establish training for the various *varnas* - *brahmanas*, *ksatriyas*, *vaisyas* and *sudras*.

Srila Prabhupada emphasized it but it is so complicated, because in the city environment it's difficult to identify the real *varna* of a person. On one level a grihastha may be living outside as part of the congregation, doing excellent *sadhana*, preaching, cultivating many people and doing *pujari* service. In this way he is like a *brahmana*, but as occupation he may be a businessman, that is *vaisya*; or he may work in a factory, that is *sudra*. So what is he? He is a Vaisnava."

The *Padma Purana* confirms and emphasizes:

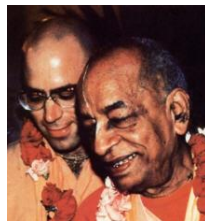
*na sudra bhagavad-bhaktas
te tu bhagavata matah
sarva-varnesu te sudra
ye na bhakta janardane*

"A devotee should never be considered a *sudra*. All the devotees of the Supreme Personality of Godhead should be recognized as *bhagavatas*. If one is not a devotee of Lord Krishna, however, even if born of a *brahmana*, *ksatriya* or *vaisya* family, he should be considered a *sudra*."

Varṇāśrama in Rural Settings

Radhanath Maharaja was mostly describing an urban Vaisnava community. In rural communities, depending on more traditional forms of sustenance, it would be smoother for devotees to place themselves in one of the four foundational occupations. I can think of an ISKCON

community in which most naturally the *varnas* were revealed and practiced: Kurginova, in the Caucasus region of southern Russia. There I observed how someone effortlessly assumed the role of religious ceremonies' expert; someone else spontaneously became the community organizer and representative toward the local government; and someone else stood out as the economic driving force. In agrarian settings it would be simpler for people to find their collocation, as someone naturally will deal with knowledge, or with administration, or with production of wealth, or with general assistance and artisanship. Tamal Krishna Maharaja wrote in a letter, while acting as Srila Prabhupada's secretary: "Srila Prabhupada was most enlivened to hear the report of New Govardhana Farm. His Divine Grace in the last month or so has been stressing the importance of these farm projects, and said, 'This is the next aspect of Krishna consciousness which I wish to push forward. If I am able to travel again, then I shall visit the farms and make them perfect. On



these farms we can demonstrate the full *varṇāśrama* system. If these farms become successful then the whole world will be enveloped by Krishna consciousness. From your letter I can understand how nice this farm is. I am very happy to see fresh vegetables, fresh fruits, grains, the devotees taking sumptuous *prasadam* and chanting Hare Krishna. This is the actual meaning of human life. It is a very good farm, from your letter I can understand. Whatever you build, get the building materials locally. If you can manufacture tiles locally, then your house problem is solved. Build up bamboo frame, and on it place tiles. In any event, get everything locally. I wish to make a farm tour and then I shall surely visit your farm.' I suggested to Srila Prabhupada that He was the Farm Acarya, but Srila Prabhupada said, 'Krishna is the Farm Acarya. Baladeva is holding a plow, and Krishna is holding the calf. Krishna advised Nanda Maharaja not to perform Indra puja but to worship the land, Govardhana because it was supplying all foodstuffs for the residents of Vrndavana and the cows as well.'" (Letter to Hari Sauri, 10 Aug 1977)



There is something to be said about living similarly to how Krishna and Balarama lived. And there are certainly advantages for devotees living in economically and culturally self-sufficient communities. Twelve days after



the above letter, Tamal Krishna Maharaja wrote to another leader: "Throughout the last month Srila Prabhupada has emphasized the important role the farm communities will play in the future of the Krishna consciousness Movement. Srila Prabhupada explains that it is at these farm communities that the *varṇāśrama* system, the basis of civilized society, can actually take place. He desires to organize such ideal *varṇāśrama* farm communities . . . Srila Prabhupada commented . . . 'It gives me great pleasure to know that the devotees can eat nicely fresh vegetables, and grains, and pure milk . . . If our farm projects are organized all over the world, then we shall conquer. As soon as I see the farms growing, fresh vegetables, fresh fruits, and the devotees eating sumptuously and chanting Hare Krishna, O, how

wonderful it is! What is this nonsense civilization of the karmis?" (Letter to Ramesvara, 22 Aug 1977)

Varṇāśrama Through Vaisnavism

Srila Prabhupada wanted to implement *varṇāśrama* parameters in ISKCON, but he also wanted to prevent a mixing-up of priorities: "To achieve transcendental knowledge, *varṇāśrama* or the institution of four castes and four orders of life, must not be rejected and neither must it be accepted as the ultimate goal." (Lecture, Calcutta, 13 March 1973) He was aware that a more solution exists, over and above calibrating the standard divisions: "So this Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement is trying to re-establish *daiva-varṇāśrama*, where *brahmana*, *ksatriya*, *vaisya*, *sudra*, everyone. Systematic. We are, therefore, proposing to start a college, *varṇāśrama* college. It is proposed... We are trying so many things, but this is also one of the programs, that the people of the world, they should be educated according to the quality and work . . . So a systematic society means *varṇāśrama-dharma*. But there is another way. That is another way. That is called transcendental society, or Vaisnava society. As it is stated in the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* [SB 6.1.15],

*kecit kevalaya bhaktya
vasudeva-parayanah
agham dhunvanti kartsnyena
niharam iva bhaskarah*

Simply by becoming devotees of Vasudeva, *vasudeva-parayana*, everything can be adjusted." (Lecture on Bg 7.1, Bhubaneswar, 22 Jan 1977)

In the purport to the verse he quotes above, SB 6.1.15, Srila Prabhupada stresses the purifying and elevating power of devotional service, which automatically qualifies one for *varṇāśrama*'s higher echelons: "[I]n *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (3.33.6) . . . Devahuti said:

*yan-namadheya-sravananukirtanad
yat-prahvanad yat-smaranad api kvacit
svado 'pi sadyah savanaya kalpate
kutah punas te bhagavan nu darsanat*

'My dear Lord, if even a person born in a family of dog-eaters hears and repeats the chanting of Your glories, offers respects to You and remembers You, he is immediately greater than a *brahmana* and is therefore eligible to perform sacrifices. Therefore, what is to be said of one who has seen You directly?'"

So, for Vaisnavas, *varṇāśrama* is simple: just try to improve yourself spiritually through a rigorous practice of *bhakti-yoga*, pick the most appropriate *asrama* for you, adopt an honest occupation, and learn to serve Lord Krishna with whatever talent and nature you may have acquired. Strive for pure love and don't hesitate to pick up a few new skills on the way. Chant Hare Krishna and be happy. Whatever is your psycho-physical set-up (are you an intellectual? An

administrator? A merchant? A manual worker?) on a personal level live a brahminical lifestyle: get up early in the morning, keep your body and mind clean, chant your rounds, follow the four regulative principles, eat only *prasadam*, behave kindly, etc. You can also consider moving to the countryside to grow your own food and to protect your children from the *ugra-karma* dynamics of contemporary urban life.

Vaisnava *varṇāśrama* is simple, but, as my father, Dr Paolo Oppecini, used to say: "The office for the complication of simple matters is always open." One way we may tend to muddle the sublime simplicity of *daiva-varṇāśrama* is by trying to incorporate customs and practices that were useful and recommended in previous ages but are



unworkable and even counterproductive today. We may also filter the pure understanding of the *acaryas* through all sorts of psychological maladjustments. When the mirror of our subconscious is not sufficiently clear, we distort *varṇāśrama* into a reflection our confused psyche.

Those Who Twiddle with *Varṇāśrama* Are the Most Likely to Mess It Up

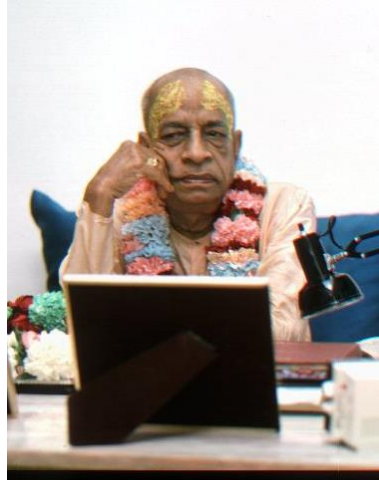
It may sound counterintuitive but think of it: you have to be in a particular field to mess it up. You need to be in cycling as a sport physician to mess up the sport by drugging your cyclists with banned substances, thus creating scandals and long-term repercussions. You won't mess up cycling if you are a carpenter, a cricket player or an astronaut. You have to work in large scale food production to mess up food products with illegal, carcinogenic food additives, thus poisoning people. You won't mess up food production if you are a jet pilot, a diamond cutter or a math teacher. Similarly, the devotee who spends all her time as a *pujari* - cooking, dressing and worshipping the Deities - won't be the one who messes up *varṇāśrama*. She is simply living *varṇāśrama*. The *brahmacari* who goes out all day distributing books - introducing people to *Bhagavad-gita* and *Srimad-Bhagavatam* - won't mess up *varṇāśrama*. He is just propagating *varṇāśrama*.

The Govinda chef who cooks all day - striving to make the preps healthy, tasty and visually attractive - she won't mess *varṇāśrama*. She is solely practicing

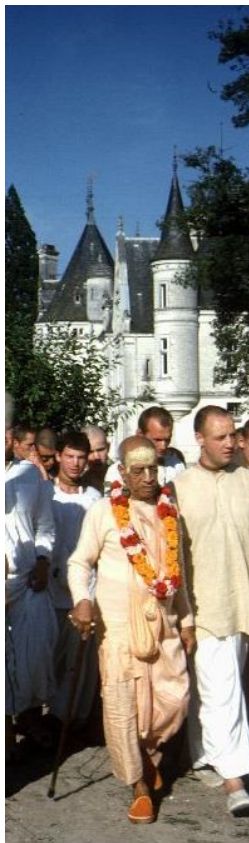


varṇāśrama. It's the *varṇāśrama* theorists and promoters - those who mix their *varṇāśrama* notions with their childhood traumas, their gynophobia, their chauvinism, their emotional deprivation, their *smarta* leanings and

their other psychological dysfunctionalities - they are the ones who mess up *varṇāśrama*. You have to be in the field to mess up the field. The self-appointed specialists who struggle internally with so many issues (but who present themselves as experts), they are the ones truly endangering ISKCON's *varṇāśrama*. On top that, many who blabber about *varṇāśrama* often do nothing substantial to further it; they don't open any *gurukula* or *Varṇāśrama* College.



The devotees who, with a pure heart and motivation, sincerely strive to follow their *dharma* as *brahmacaris*, *grihasthas*, *vanaprasthas* and *sannyasis* are the true poster boys and poster girls of *varṇāśrama*. But those who are drawn to *varṇāśrama* to satisfy their impure desires for self-aggrandizement, those who acclaim defunct, unrealistic norms to mitigate their personal sexual frustrations, those who dogmatically pontificate on obsolete stereotypes, they are the ones best positioned and equipped to mess up *varṇāśrama*. Those who say "Vedic" every three words are the ones most likely to mutilate and transmogrify the Vedic essence. And, of course, if the shoe fits you, wear it. Otherwise relax. If you feel agitated



devotees are interested only in seeing that the people in general are not misguided by political propaganda and that the valuable life of a human being is not spoiled in following a type of civilization which is ultimately doomed." (SB 2.4.28, purport). I wish to go on record saying that ISKCON should distance itself from the pathological attitudes influencing some of the self-appointed *varṇāśrama* promoters. *Varṇāśrama* conceptions built on psychological disorders are destined to produce "a type of civilization which is ultimately doomed." Unfortunately, when leaders are so affected, their followers and admirers - simple-minded devotees - also start parroting the flawed party line of that Maharaja or that Prabhu, thus amplifying and compounding confusion and

misinformation. And so I write, hoping that more thoughtful, reasonable people will also take a stand and write and speak up against tamasic and rajasic *varṇāśrama* schemes.

There is a drive to mess up *varṇāśrama* in ISKCON. I wouldn't call it a systematic effort, because it's mostly based on visceral feelings and misplaced subconscious

assumptions, but it has the energy to grow, like a cancer. We need to address and neutralize (or at least mitigate) the dark *varṇāśrama* opinions cropping up in ISKCON. If we fail at that, we will have to answer to Srila Prabhupada, to the future generations and to the world.

Developing ISKCON's *Varṇāśrama*

An analogy might be helpful to understand the process needed to develop *varṇāśrama* in ISKCON: when you wish to have a better residence there are basically three ways you can go about it:



1. Get new land and build afresh (or get land, demolish whatever building is there and then build afresh).
2. Buy a new, better house or apartment.
3. Improve the building that already exists, the place where you already live.

With *varṇāśrama* the first option - building anew - is not available: we already have *brahmacaris*, *grihasthas*, *vanaprasthas* and *sannyasis* in ISKCON. We can't just kill

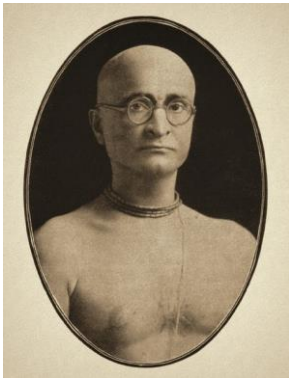
them all of and then try to start *varṇāśrama* with a new set of souls. The second option - buying something new - is also not available: we cannot just acquire *varṇāśrama* by buying it from somewhere. *Varṇāśrama* is an organic social system, a culture of human interactions that can't just be purchased as a car or a boat. (Who would be selling it, anyway?) The only real option is the third, improving the existing situation, by working on the understanding of devotees, by fine-tuning the *asramas*, and by giving attention to individual, local and global application of the system. To some extent, *varṇāśrama* is already established in ISKCON. We do have the four *asramas*, and we do have devotees with different occupational inclinations. The effort should be to calibrate the *asramas*, for instance by



*All elements of varṇāśrama already exist in ISKCON;
we need to fine-tune and improve each of them*

establishing standard training for all *brahmacaris*; by clarifying the definition and standards for *vanaprastha* life; by (finally) elucidating what it means for *grihasthas* to donate 50% of their income (my understanding: it means giving 50% of one's discretionary income); and by specifying the legitimate relation of *sannyasis* with money and properties. These and many other institutional interventions are needed to improve and develop ISKCON's *varṇāśrama* - but *varṇāśrama* is already there.

How to Mess Up Your Reading of this Book

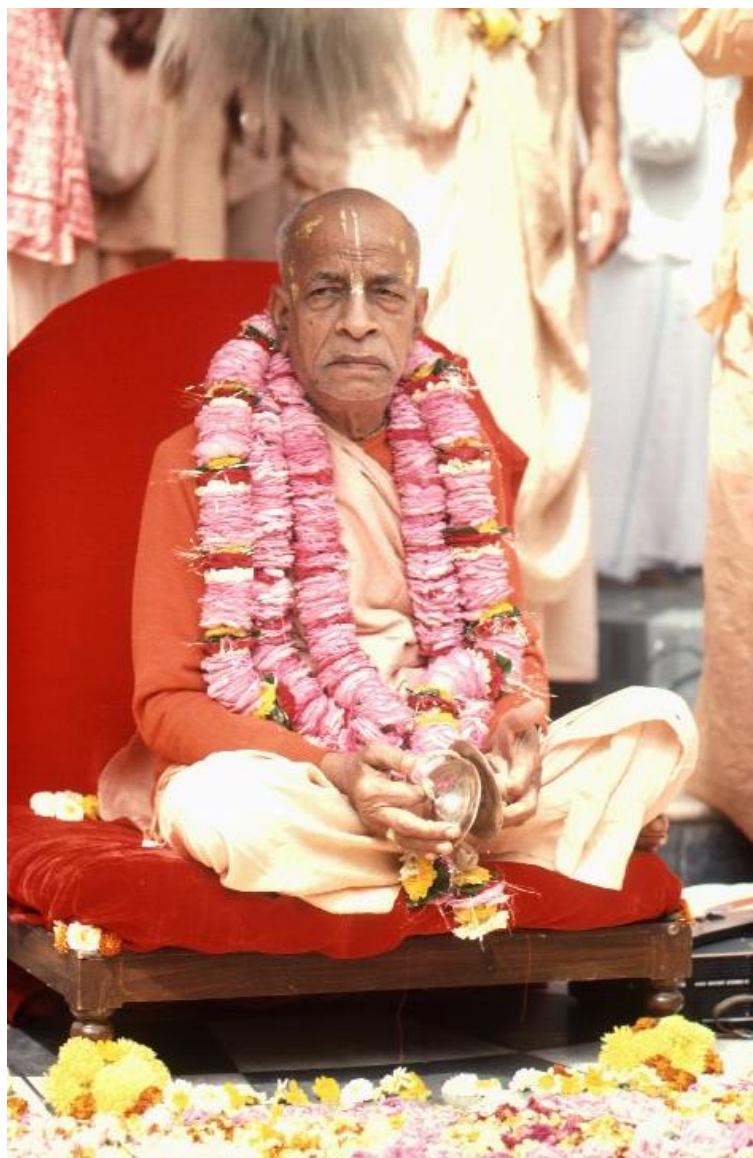


In his foreword to *Sri Caitanya-caritamrita*, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura describes the various possible attitudes in approaching the text: “The readers of *Sri Caritamrita* are divided into three types. One of them is a reader who becomes inclined to study this book being guided by curiosity. Another reader reads the

book with hostility in order to invite his own inauspiciousness. The third type of reader is one who attentively reads the book with the aim to achieve auspiciousness and due to his strive for the truth he attains the actual result of such reading. As they read the book, curious readers quickly establish themselves either in the second or in the third category.”

Similarly, dear reader, although this book cannot be compared with *Caitanya-caritamrita*, you can choose your own mood in approaching this book. At any rate, I offer my respectful obeisances to all the readers - whether friendly, neutral or hostile. If you are here simply to find faults, you will imagine that you found many. Your attitude will only cement your present state of consciousness. If you are here to learn, to refine your grasp of the subject, may Lord Caitanya bless and enrich you with profound understanding. At least try to gain from the many gemlike quotes embedded in the book; even if you discard all my words, the excerpts from the Founder-Acarya's words can provide extraordinary illumination and guidance. May you become an instrument to manifest the type of *varṇāśrama* Srila Prabhupada truly wanted.

Your servant, Kaunteya das
18 November 2020, Srila Prabhupada Disappearance Day
Sridham Mayapur



Ten Offenses to *Daiva-varṇāśrama*

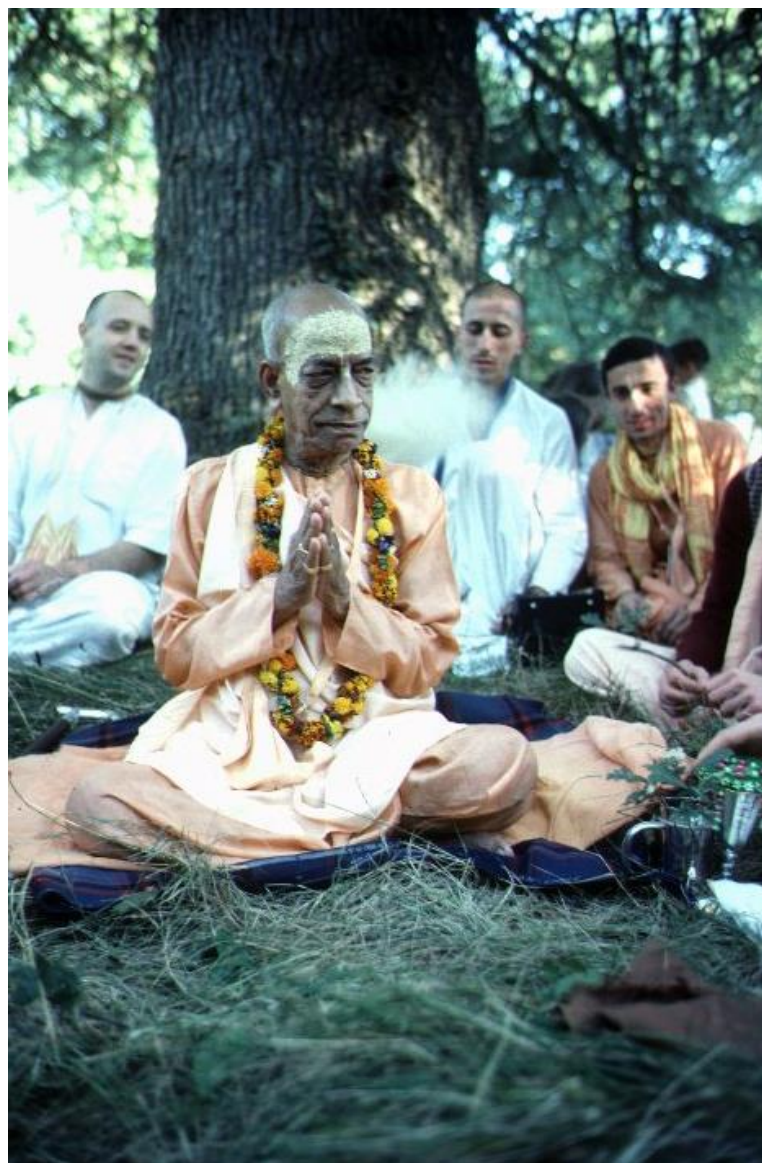
- 1) To blaspheme the devotees who have dedicated their lives to practicing and propagating *daiva-varṇāśrama*.
- 2) To consider other social systems equal to or independent of *varṇāśrama*.
- 3) To disobey the orders of the Founder-*Acarya* on *varṇāśrama*.
- 4) To blaspheme the presentation of *varṇāśrama* in the Vedic scriptures or scriptures in pursuance to the Vedic version.
- 5) To consider the glories of *varṇāśrama* to be an imagination.
- 6) To give some interpretations to *varṇāśrama* based on the influence of the lower *gunas* and on one's psychological issues.
- 7) To commit to socially and theologically erroneous opinions, such as antagonizing Vaisnavi *dikṣa*-gurus, on the strength of misrepresenting *varṇāśrama*.

8) To consider the practice of *daiva-varṇāśrama* (Vaisnavas performing one's *asrama*'s and occupational duties purely for advancing in Krishna consciousness) as one of the auspicious ritualistic activities which are offered in the Vedas as fruitive activities (*karma-kanda*).

9) To instruct faithful persons to implement outdated or inappropriate *varṇāśrama* practices and customs: 1. for which they don't have the qualifications; 2. for which the necessary conditions are not present; 3. which are illegal; 4. which jeopardize ISKCON's reputation.

10) To not have complete faith in *daiva-varṇāśrama* as presented by the Gaudiya-vaisnava *acaryas* and to maintain material attachments - such as visceral anti-women sentiments and *smarta* inclinations - even after understanding so many instructions on this matter. It is also an offense to be inattentive to one's personal psychological problems and *anarthas*, thus promoting a distorted version of *varṇāśrama*. It is also offensive to constantly blabber about *varṇāśrama* without promoting *varṇāśrama*'s recommended educational systems, *gurukula* and *Varṇāśrama* College.

Every devotee who claims to support *varṇāśrama* must guard against these ten offenses in order to quickly achieve the desired success, establishing a harmonious, realistic, *sastra*-based, relevant and attractive *daiva-varṇāśrama*.



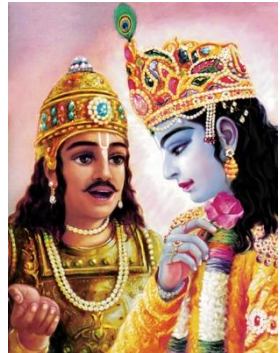
How to Mess Up Your Life with (Misapplied) *Varṇāśrama*

Where *Varṇāśrama* Comes From?

Varṇāśrama is God's social system for humanity. It includes four occupational divisions (*varnas*): *brahmanas*, *ksatriyas*, *vaisyas* and *sudras*; and four orders of spiritual life (*asramas*): *brahmacari*, *grihastha*, *vanaprastha* and *sannyasi*. God creates the world and also creates the blueprint for progressive human society; Lord Krishna says in *Bhagavad-gita* (4.13):

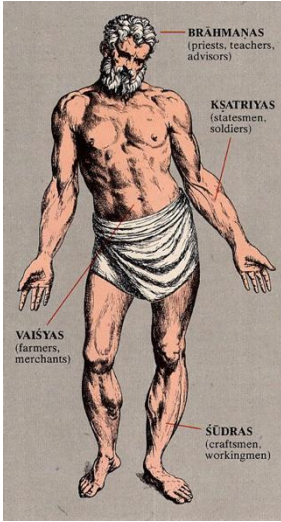
*catur-varnyam maya srstam
guna-karma-vibhagasah*

"According to the three modes of material nature and the work associated with them the four divisions of human society are created by Me." Conditioned souls are affected by the three *gunas*, the influences of material nature, and according to their psychophysical setup they will be naturally inclined



to certain mentalities and engagements. *Varnāśrama* is especially meant for the civilized, spiritually progressive human society, but because it's Krishna creation, the divisions exist in every human conglomerate - in various degrees of purity. Srila Prabhupada elaborates: “The Lord says that the institution of four *varnas* and four *asramas* ‘is created by Me.’ Anything created by the Lord cannot be closed or covered. The divisions of *varnas* and *asramas* will continue to exist, either in their original form or in degraded form, but because they are created by the Lord, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, they cannot be extinguished. They are like the sun, a creation of God, and therefore will remain. Either covered by clouds or in a clear sky, the sun will continue to exist. Similarly, when the *varnāśrama* system becomes degraded, it appears as the hereditary caste system, but in every society there is an intelligent class of men, a martial class, a mercantile class and a laborer class.” (SB 3.21.52-54, purport)





In every society you'll find intellectuals, priests, pastors or shamans; in every society there will be administrators, rulers, protectors and organizers; everywhere there will be traders, businessmen, businesswomen, food producers and merchants; and everywhere you will see artists, artisans, laborers and other hired hands. They might be engaged in divine or demonic pursuits, but the archetypes of the social body will remain: "Just like in your body

there must be the head, there must be the arms, there must be the belly and there must be the legs. By comparative study, head is more important than the leg. But leg is also required. You cannot do without leg. Similarly, *brāhmaṇa* is the head, *kṣatriya* is the arms, *vaiśya* is the belly and *śūdra* is the leg . . . And if the head is cracked, then everything is gone—madman." (Conversation, London, 2 Sept 173)

The Vedas explain that these classes manifest from the universal form:

*brāhmaṇo 'sya mukham āsīd
 bāhū rājanyaḥ kṛtaḥ
 ūrū tad asya yad vaiśyaḥ
 padbhyāṁ śūdro 'jāyata*

“The *brāhmaṇa* appeared as His face, the king as His arms, the *vaiśya* as His thighs, and the *sūdra* was born from His feet.” (*Rk-saṁhitā* 8.4.19, *Śukla-yajur Veda* 34.11, *Atharva Veda* 19.66)



You will also find that different stages of human life are dedicated to student life, to married life, to retired life and to renounced life. Because this imprint, this social DNA, comes from God you will find these eight divisions throughout the world, from the simplest to the most complex societies, throughout all phases of history. The *Bhagavatam*, in the words of Camasa Muni, one of the nine sages instructing

King Nimi, includes the *asramas* in its description of the emanation of the social system from the universal form:

śrī-camasa uvāca
mukha-bāhūru-pādebhyaḥ
puruṣasyāśramaiḥ saha
catvāro jajsire varṇā
guṇair viprādayaḥ pṛthak



"Śrī Camasa said: 'Each of the four social orders, headed by the *brāhmaṇas*, was born through different combinations of the modes of nature, from the face, arms, thighs and feet of the Supreme Lord in His universal form. Thus the four spiritual orders were also generated.'" (SB 11.5.2) The following verses explain that although the system

comes from God, it can be messed up by misuse of free will: "If any of the members of the four *varṇas* and four *āśramas* fail to worship or intentionally disrespect the Personality of Godhead, who is the source of their own creation, they will fall down from their position into a hellish state of life . . . *brāhmaṇas*, members of the royal order and *vaiśyas*, even after being allowed to approach the lotus feet of the Supreme Lord, Hari, by receiving the second birth of Vedic initiation, can become bewildered and adopt various materialistic philosophies." (SB 11.5.3, 5) Just like Krishna says about the yoga system (Bg 4.2): "This supreme science was thus received through the chain of disciplic succession . . . But in course of time the succession was broken," similarly, *varṇāśrama* did get vitiated, to the point of debasing into the corrupted hereditary system. "Because the *varṇāśrama* system is a

creation of the Personality of Godhead," Srila Prabhupada writes, "it is not possible to do away with it. However, the nefarious activities of the people of the age of Kali can jeopardize the *varṇāśrama* system. We have purposely used the word jeopardized because the whole system still exists but in a reflected form."



(*In Search of the Ultimate Goal of Life, Varna and Asrama Jeopardized*)

We Are Not This *Varna* and *Asrama*



We should take our duties within *varṇāśrama* very seriously, but without identifying too deeply with any of the divisions. The book *Amṛta Vāṇī* reports the words of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura: "Every living entity considers his body the self, thus they need to learn to think that: 'I am the Lord's eternal servant

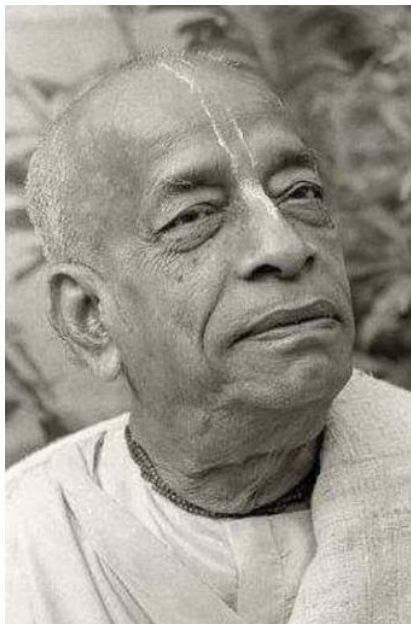
and it is my eternal constitutional duty to serve Him. I belong neither to the four *varṇas* nor the four *asramas*.' This is the truth, so how can *varṇāśrama dharma* be considered eternal *dharma*? By properly following the practices of *varṇāśrama dharma*, one receives an immense advantage both in this life and the next. One can follow the *varṇāśrama* system for as long as one has a material body. It is good to follow this system as long as one wanders throughout within the fourteen worlds. But it has no use in the spiritual world." Sarasvati Thakura then quotes Lord Caitanya:

*nāham vipro na ca nara-patir nāpi vaiśyō na śūdro
nāham varṇī na ca gr̥ha-patir no vanastho yatir vā
kintu prodyan-nikhila-paramānanda-pūrnāmṛtābdher
gopī-bhartuḥ pada-kamalayoṛ dāsa-dāsānudāsaḥ*

"I am not a *brāhmaṇa*, I am not a *kṣatriya*, I am not a *vaiśya* or a *śūdra*. Nor am I a *brahmacārī*, a householder, a *vānaprastha* or a *sannyāsī*. I identify Myself only as the servant of the servant of the servant of the lotus feet of Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the maintainer of the *gopīs*. He is like an ocean of nectar, and He is the cause of universal



transcendental bliss. He is always existing with brilliance.”
(Cc Madhya, 13.80)



Connecting with the above verse, Srila Prabhupada writes in the *Bhagavatam*: "The system of caste, or *varṇāśrama-dharma*, is no longer regular even amongst the so-called followers of the system. Nor is it now possible to reestablish the institutional function in the present context of social, political and economic revolution . . . Lord Caitanya accepted many devotees from communities other than

the *varṇāśramites*, and He Himself declared, to teach us, that He does not belong to any caste or social order of life, but that He is the eternal servant of the servant of the Lord who maintains the damsels of Vṛndāvana (Lord Kṛṣṇa). That is the way of self-realization." (SB 2.4.18, purport) Any effort at *varṇāśrama* should be imbued and illuminated with such understanding: all positions and identities are temporary in this world; the only permanent feature of the self is being the eternal servant of Krishna. The goal of life is to develop our innate love for the Lord.

We also need to avoid getting stuck in the outdated externalities of *varṇāśrama*. Should we try to restore moustaches on the faces of *ksatriyas*, or should we rather focus on promoting the qualities that allow noble *ksatriya* to govern and protect? (Or should we attempt to bring back both the virtues *and* the moustaches?) What's sure is that a noble ruler can perform his *dharma* towards God and country even without



facial hairs protruding from under his nose. Details have their use when properly applied, but they can never be substitutes for the essence, for the underlying principles.

In 1976, in the presence of Srila Prabhupada, the devotees commemorated the first ten years of ISKCON. At one point they brought in a big cake:

Rūpānuga: It is very heavy... very heavy cake . . .

Hari-śauri: Is that, cutting the cake, is that a Vedic... did they used to do that in Vedic times, or is that a Western invention? We were just wondering about it.

Prabhupāda: *Prasada* distribution. Either you cut or take with hand, same thing. It doesn't make any difference.

(Conversation, Washington DC, 6 July 1976)



In May 1974, in Switzerland Srila Prabhupada shook hands with the Governor of Geneva; was that gesture "Vedic"? I am not sure, but it was perfectly appropriate. The body language of greeting may take different forms, each suitable for particular circumstances, but its essence, its function as a cordial social exchange, remains.

“You Have to Establish *Varṇāśrama*”

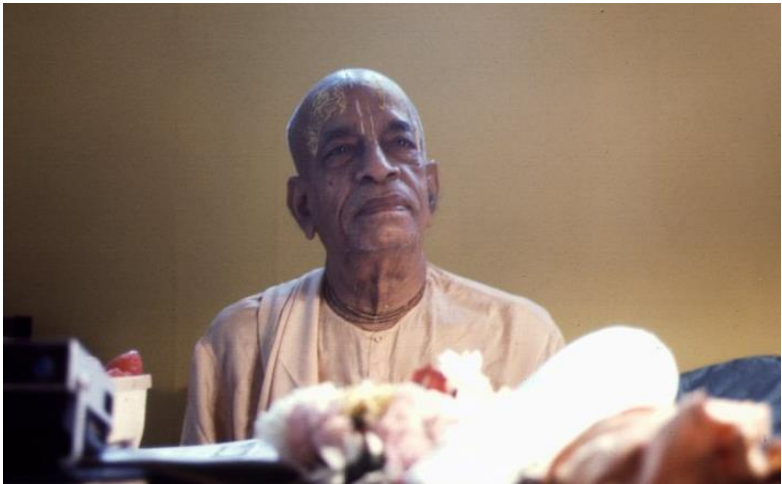
Despite expressing caution about the full applicability of the system in this age, the Founder-*Acarya* told his leaders, "You have to establish *varṇāśrama*." (Morning Walk, Mayapur, 5 Feb 1976). And he made similar statements. He said it and we have to do it. The first question, then, is: *what kind of varṇāśrama should we establish?* We should certainly listen to the Founder-*Acarya* and not try to make our *varṇāśrama* too "Vedic.": "[T]he *varṇāśrama-dharma* system . . . divides society into *brahmācārya*, *gṛhastha*, *vanaprastha*, *sannyāsa*, and *brahmana*, *ksatriya*, *vaiśya* and *sudra* . . . " Srila Prabhupada writes in *Sri Caitanya-caritamṛta* - for the whole world, for the next ten-thousand years: "However, this institution is very difficult to establish in this age; therefore Sri Caitanya Mahāprabhu advises that we not worry about the Vedic system of *varṇāśrama-dharma*." (Cc *Madhya*, 6.178, purport) It doesn't take a genius to get the message. The *yuga-avatāra* "advises that we not worry about the Vedic



system of *varṇāśrama-dharma*"; the Founder-*Acarya* repeats His advice and we should take those words very seriously.

ISKCON's *varṇāśrama* is not going to be the "Vedic system of *varṇāśrama-dharma*." It will be a simplified form focusing on the essence and not the externals; an approach centered on universal principles and not focused on circumstantial ethnic details and anachronistic customs.

Srila Prabhupada said: "Caitanya Mahaprabhu knew that in the Kali-yuga, **practically the *varṇāśrama-dharma* will never be observed, or it will be very difficult to observe.** So people by simply observing the *varṇāśrama-dharma* will not be able to make very much progress in devotional service. Stereotype." (Lecture on SB 1.2.8, Vrindavana, 19 Oct 1972) Srila Prabhupada had been saying this throughout the years: "Of course, from Vedic literature, perfection, the path of perfection, is to follow the institution of four *varnas* and four *asramas* . . . Caitanya



Mahaprabhu . . . knew that this system cannot be introduced strictly at the present moment in this age." (Lecture on Bg 13.6-7, Montreal, 25 Oct 1968) We don't need superfluous external trappings; we need foundational practices and purity of purpose: "You have to take this purificatory process, chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa. There is no other way. You cannot reform the society. That is not possible. **You cannot train them in the Vedic way.**" (Lecture on SB 6.1.56-62, Surat, 3 Jan 1971) Be very suspicious of those who say "Vedic" every three words. We can end up messing up *varṇāśrama* by trying to make it "*too Vedic*," neglecting the mood and teachings of Lord Caitanya - the *yuga-avatara* - and by minimizing the example of the Gaudiya-vaisnava *acaryas*.

If we don't remove our prejudices, instead of creating a harmonious, progressive Society, we will promote discrimination, favoritism and exploitation - all the while fancying that we are being "Vedic." Here we are exploring various ways in which you can mess up your life and the life of the movement with strange ideas of *varṇāśrama*. Everything has a *pravritti* and a *nivritti* aspect - desirable and undesirable elements. Here we are focusing on the undesirable. Just like in cultivating the creeper of devotion we need to uproot the weeds, or in chanting Hare Krishna we need to avoid the ten offenses, in establishing *varṇāśrama* in ISKCON we need to carefully uproot undesirable mental attitudes and ineffective practices. As



Srila Prabhupada says, in regard to the creeper of *bhakti*: "If sufficient care is not taken, then the watering process may only help to breed the weeds" (SB 2.2.30, purport) Similarly, if sufficient care is not taken, in trying for *varṇāśrama* we may create a monstrosity. If we mix *varṇāśrama* with our *anarthas* - spiritual and psychological blocks - and with imaginary, unrealistic ideas, the result can be a disaster; not *daiva-*

varṇāśrama but Frankenstein-*varṇāśrama*.

Varṇāśrama is good. It's the mercy of God that we can function in progressive stages of advancement (*asramas*) while working according to our nature (*varnas*). All norms of *varṇāśrama*, all customs described in the scriptures are beneficial, but we have to be attentive in identify *for whom* and for *what circumstances* those practices are favorable or applicable. The *sannyasa-asrama*, for instance, is a great institution, for both the individual and the community. The person has the chance to emancipate and renounce, and society gets a detached spiritual leader - a win-win situation. But if someone takes *sannyasa* too early or for the wrong reasons, or if being a *sannyasi* is not really his nature, moving to that *asrama* isn't fruitful, neither for him nor for the society. The individual may struggle for several

years and then fall down, to experience burning embarrassment and intense guilt; the society suffers loss of faith in the individual and in the spiritual leadership; if the person has disciples, they might feel betrayed and disoriented. We have seen it happen so many times; and it's painful for all involved. Everything in *varṇāśrama* is good, if applied in the right way, by the right person, at the right time and at the right place. Accepting a guru, for instance, is a central pillar of *varṇāśrama*; it's recommended everywhere, in the *Gita*, in the *Bhagavatam*,



in the *Upanisads*; but the guru has to be genuine, otherwise both guru and disciple may go to hell. In his description of the symbology of the demons in Vraja, Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura describes Putana Raksasi, the first *asura* killed by Krishna, as representing the

false guru. She had come dressed as a beautiful woman, but her intention was just to kill Krishna. *Varṇāśrama* externalities divested of purity of purpose can cause untold damage.

Eclipsing Devotion by Mixing Up Levels of Instruction

Different statements, although similar, may apply only to a specific plane of discourse, only to a particular level.

Srila Prabhupada spoke on different levels. For instance, he taught the whole world that we are not these bodies; but several times he said about himself: "I am an old man." Two different levels of discourse, one about the ontological self, the other about the historical self. Recognizing the platform of an instruction is essential to avoid bewilderment and unnecessary conflict. It's particularly challenging to distinguish between statements on different planes but made using the same words. Since *stri-dharma* is a main focus of this, let's consider the idea of "equal rights" and how it applies differently on different levels, and how Srila Prabhupada used the expression differently. Let's start with an example of Srila Prabhupada being against "equal rights": "I said that if you are equal rights, then make some arrangement: sometimes you become pregnant; sometimes he becomes pregnant." It's a fact that pregnancy and childcare limits a woman's free movement and puts her in the vulnerable condition of being dependent, at least temporarily, on the help from



others. Srila Prabhupada continues: " I don't say that I don't like women, but I cannot say that equal rights. How can I say? First of all show that you equal rights—your husband becomes sometimes pregnant and then you become pregnant, alternately . . . by nature the woman's body is different from man's." (Morning Walk, Vrindavana, 10 Dec 1975) Srila Prabhupada here describes the physical plane; the nature of the body. The wife can't suggest that the husband become pregnant and breastfeeds the child. No "equal rights" in that area. Talking on a different anthropological level, Srila Prabhupada acknowledges that in some countries men and women do have "equal rights":

Reporter: Do you have women followers also in this movement?

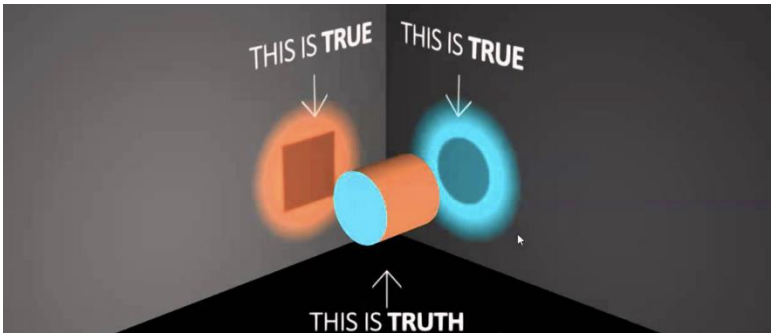
Prabhupada: Yes. America, men and women have got equal rights.



(Conversation with Reporters, Delhi, 25 March 1976)

Srila Prabhupada recognizes the equality there between men and women in terms of civil liberties, such as voting or running for political office. His statement is not a moral or philosophical judgment; it's an acknowledgment of a fact (a fact that, by the way, allows women to freely join

ISKCON). When speaking on a higher level, the spiritual plane, Srila Prabhupada again recognizes the "equal rights" of men and women: "For God there is no discrimination. Women, men have equal rights to become godly and back to home, back to Godhead." (Lecture on SB 5.5.2, Johannesburg, 22 Oct 1975) So, here we have three different statements on the same theme but addressing three different planes - the physical, the civic and the devotional. Srila Prabhupada rejects the idea of equal rights on the bodily platform; he acknowledges them on the socio-political plane; and consistently promotes equal rights on the spiritual platform. People failing to recognize what level he is addressing might become bewildered or may try to overlay one level upon another. We see this all the time, especially in relation with gender roles. One reason of so many controversies and conflicts surrounding *varṇāśrama* is that it intersects both material and spiritual planes - as a sort of theological *tatastha-sakti*;



Srila Prabhupada rejects the idea of equal rights on the bodily platform; he acknowledges them on the socio-political plane; and consistently promotes equal rights on the spiritual platform

and people often merge statements belonging to two different planes. Srila Prabhupada describes the nature of *varṇāśrama* as a bridge between the material and the spiritual dimensions: "*Varṇāśrama-dharma* is also material. That is not spiritual. *Varṇāśrama-dharma* is the beginning of spiritual life." (Lecture on SB 1.2.6, Calcutta, 27 Feb 1974) People tend to mix up pre-Mahaprabhu, outmoded social customs with pure Gaudiya standards. As a result, they hinder spirituality and eclipse Lord Caitanya's purpose: "The system of *varṇāśrama-dharma* refers to the three modes of material nature, but transcendental devotional service is on the absolute platform." (Cc *Madhya*, 8.60, purport)

A Key Word: Interdependence



You can't have the full puzzle without all pieces; similarly, before you can recommend certain practices, certain conditions must be present. This is interdependence

Anytime we talk about sociology and social organization we talk about roles and functions that are interdependent. Social life is a network of individual, mutually dependent connections. We cannot consider a position separately from everything else; we can't study the part independently from the whole. As the functioning of a part changes, other

parts change accordingly. and as one role changes, others have to change accordingly. Interdependence is a fundamental concept for *varṇāśrama*. A person's *dharma* is determined by a number of factors, also external to himself or herself.

What determines one's *dharma*? First and foremost, there are scriptural injunctions, outside of which everything becomes corrupted. In the words of Srila Rupa Goswami:



*śruti-smṛti-purāṇādi-
pancarātra-vidhiṁ vinā
aikāntikī harer bhaktir
utpātāyaiva kalpate*

"Devotional service of the Lord that ignores the authorized Vedic literatures like the *Upaniṣads*, *purāṇas* and *Nārada-pancarātra* is simply an unnecessary disturbance in society." (*Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* 1.2.101) Another important consideration in determining one's duty is listening to the guru and the saintly persons: "As stated by Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura, *sādhu-śāstra-guru*: one has to test all spiritual matters according to the instructions of saintly persons, scriptures and the spiritual master." (SB 4.16.1, purport) In this connection, Srila Prabhupada also writes: "One must therefore act with reference to these three important sources of understanding." (Cc *Adi*, 7.48, purport) Within

the broad parameters of *sādhu-śāstra-guru*, other factors determine the specifics of duty. For instance, in connection with the *dharma* of a son towards his father, Srila Prabhupada writes to a disciple: "I have already told you that your father and mother are very good souls . . . you must treat your father as respectful as myself; even if you are sometimes ill-treated, you should tolerate. You should follow the example of Prahlada Maharaja. His father continually tortured him in so many ways, but



he never protested against his father, but he never agreed with the opinion of his father. That should be your policy also, that you will never agree to your father's demoniac principles, but still you will try to serve him as faithfully as a nice obedient son." (Letter to Gargamuni, 22 Nov 1968) In an ideal

situation a son can and should "agree with the opinion of his father"; but because the fathers of Gargamuni and Prahlada weren't Krishna conscious, the sons weren't obliged to agree with their ideas. Other aspects of filial *dharma*, though, such as behaving respectfully, had to be maintained.

Another example: "A woman can choose her own husband after attaining maturity. If her parents are unable to choose a deserving groom, she can herself choose her husband." (*Manu-samhita* 9.90-91) A good example of the principle of interdependence: when conditions shift, roles and



duties also change. In traditional societies, not only in India, the parents would and should generally arrange the marriage of their children: "Daughter or son, everyone, if the father, mother, by their supervision, the boys and girls get married, that is very good. They see how they will be happy. And without father, mother, simply by lusty desires, that selection may be wrong." (Conversation, Washington DC, 6 July 1976) But if the parents fail to arrange the marriage, then, according to *Manu-samhita*, the girl can choose herself. Social affairs are therefore interdependent. They don't exist in a vacuum. They don't function in isolation. In short: social behaviors are determined by scriptural principles applied according to time, place and candidate, while following the guidance of guru and *sadhus*.

If Conditions Change, Prescriptions Change

Visualize a group of men forming a human tower. Each have a function and they are interdependent; those on top can't stand by themselves if the ones below don't do their part. If those on the ground show to be unreliable, if, say,



they are drunk and unsteady - the ones depending on them cannot be expected to climb on their shoulders; going up, up and up; and risk their life. It would be foolish and suicidal. Social directions, even authentic injunctions based on *sastra*, only apply in particular conditions. Should those conditions change, those directions may not apply anymore, or they may need to be adapted and



modified. To a man sitting in nature, you can tell to inhale deeply, to open his lungs and freely let the oxygen in. That's good

for him. But when the same man is under water, you can't tell him anymore to open his lung and breathe deeply. You would kill him. Similarly, in *varṇāśrama* certain traditional customs



need particular preconditions to remain beneficial. For instance, Srila Prabhupada writes: "The *sūdra* class is less intelligent and should have no independence. They are meant for rendering sincere service to the three higher sections of the society. The *sūdra* class can attain all comforts of life simply by rendering service to the higher classes. It is especially enjoined that a *sūdra* should never bank money." (SB 1.9.26) This direction only applies when the "three higher sections of the society" are caring, responsible and generous - in one word, dharmic. Then, and then only, can the *sudra* fully depend on them and "attain all comforts of life." If the master is greedy, selfish



and ruthless, the fully dependent *sudra* will be exploited or even enslaved. In that situation, instead of remaining at the mercy of the whims of abusive

bosses, it's better and more dharmic for the workers to get paid for their labor, to maintain economic independence, have personal bank accounts, and even organize labor unions to prevent exploitation. The primary duty of everyone - including *sudras* - is self-preservation and the maintenance of one's family. Faithfulness to a cruel master - a slave-owner or another unfair employer - is nobody's *dharma*. Therefore Srila Prabhupada adds, in the same purport: "The higher castes should always look after the maintenance of the *śūdras*, and they should provide them with old and used garments. A *śūdra* should not leave his master when the master is old and invalid, and the master should keep the servants satisfied in all respects." Here we see interdependence in action. The *sudra* should be loyal, but the master should be an honest caretaker. If the master doesn't do his duty, fulfilling his part of the social contract, then the *sudra* can and should look for a worthier employer.



These are all basic points, and you might even wonder: "This is obvious stuff; what's the use of talking about it? Is someone doubting that workers should be properly taken care, otherwise they can choose a different master?" Actually, unfortunately, yes, I have personal experience hearing from devotees who lock themselves into the idea that "a *sudra* should never bank money" as if it was a fundamental principle of *bhakti* or *varṇāśrama* - or as if Srila Prabhupada never paid salaries to workers. For these devotees it's apparently better that workers become slaves of abusive masters than to accept payment for their labor, have financial independence, or have control over their destiny. That's why we need to elucidate even fundamental social notions such as *interdependence*. One issue with dogmatic, literalistic religionists is that if they don't see the exact terminology or phraseology in Srila Prabhupada's books, they reject the whole concept, even if basic (an awfully inadequate way to do exegesis).

Kings Wanted (Or Perhaps Not)

In previous ages - or just in previous centuries - kingdoms was ruled by kings; kings with real executive power, not just ceremonial heads of state: "Formerly everywhere, all over the world, the monarchy was prevalent." Srila Prabhupada says, "Even up to date some of the countries, they are maintaining monarchy, but only in name actually; the monarch has no power. So monarchy is good so long

the king is as ideal as Bharata Mahārāja, Ṛṣabhadeva, Mahārāja Yudhiṣṭhira, Mahārāja Parīkṣit, Lord Rāmacandra." (Lecture on SB 5.5.28, Vrindavana, 15 Nov 1976) A key statement, demonstrating *interdependence*: "monarchy is good so long the king" is ideal as the great saintly rulers of the Indian past. A system - any system - is only as good as the people populating it. A political system - any political system - that gives unchecked power to the ruler is only as beneficial to the state as the degree of enlightenment and qualification of the ruler. If the ruler is despotic and irreligious, better to limit his power through a mechanism of checks and balances.



The *Puranas* are replete with examples of *rajarsis*, saintly monarchs. Srila Prabhupada says: "An ideal king thoroughly trained by culture and devotional service with the martial spirit makes a perfect king. Such a personal monarchy is far better than the so-called democracy of no training and responsibility." (SB 1.8.43, purport) Such statements tempt many devotees to conclude that - today, in the twenty-first century - monarchy is still the preferred political system, the system Srila Prabhupada would support and promote. But there are conditions in Srila



Prabhupada's statement. He is talking about an "ideal king thoroughly trained by culture and devotional service" - not about any dummy with a crown on the head. It's important to note that Srila Prabhupada also explained that monarchy degraded and practically vanished: "Because in this age kings have such demoniac propensities, monarchy is abolished by the laws of nature in every country" (SB 4.26.6, purport) In other words, monarchy



is not finished simply due to historical dynamics; it's directly "the laws of nature," that determined its demise. Srila Prabhupada was of course aware of the few monarchies surviving here and there on the planet, but obviously those are pale reflections of the Vedic monarchies; empty shells. Therefore Srila Prabhupada concludes: "Monarchy is out of date now."

(Conversation, New Vrindavana, 9 June 1969) How I wish that devotees would update themselves on this one! When the topic came up, Srila Prabhupada reiterated:

Rāmeśvara: Krishna conscious government must be monarchy. A real Krishna conscious government.

Prabhupāda: No. Why monarchy? You can continue democracy, but the legislators should be first-class men who has knowledge, not these rascals.

(Conversation, Allahabad, 15 Jan 1977)

"Continue democracy"? But didn't Srila Prabhupada say that democracy was *demon-crazy*? He did; and more than once; but he said many more things. For instance, here he writes to an ISKCON leader in America: "If somehow or other we can convince the majority of the United States population to take to Krsna Consciousness then the whole world will become Krsna Conscious. This is a fact. The United States is the leader of all other nations. You simply educate the people in this Krsna Conscious philosophy and then there will be no difficulty in capturing the government. In your country there is very good system of democracy. As we have seen just recently the people, as the common people have so much power, that they were able to get down this Nixon, who is obviously a rascal. So if

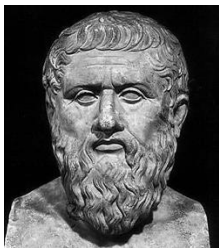


we can simply convince a good majority of persons then they will automatically want a Krsna Conscious leader." (Letter to Rupanuga, 18 Dec 1974) So, "very good system of democracy"; because, at least: 1. if people become devotees, they can choose spiritually qualified leaders; 2. people have the power to remove - through elections or other legal means - corrupt leaders, as they did in the case of President Nixon in 1974, the year of this letter. So, back to the central idea of *interdependence*, the necessity to test existing conditions before recommending a way forward in the matter of political systems or anything else. Monarchy is good *only* when the conditions are there for it to function properly, not as an absolute idea, independent from times, territories or candidates. Srila Prabhupada writes to another American ISKCON leader: "your countrymen are more or less independent spirited and lovers of democracy. So everything should be done very carefully so that their sentiments may not be hurt. According to Sanskrit moral principles, everything has



to be acted, taking consideration of the place, audience and time." (Letter to Tamal Krishna, 13 Oct 1969) The "Sanskrit moral principles" - or *niti-sastra* - do not recommend blind devotion to anachronistic conventions that are not serviceable anymore. But let's spend a few more words

on democracy, because most ISKCON devotees in the world live and operate in democratic systems; and fine-tuning our understanding of democracy is therefore relevant. Since at least the time of Plato, western thinkers



Plato

were aware of the shortcomings of democracy. Plato complained that democracy followed citizens' impulses and were typically run by fools. Besides its classical faults, democracy today can hardly compete against the virtual takeover of the corporations investing billions into influencing lawmakers.

Also, present democracy struggles to resist the demagoguery of populist manipulators. Srila Prabhupada, painfully aware of the shortcomings of democracy, says: "Any rascal can secure votes by some arrangement, and then he becomes the head of the government. The candidates are bribing. They are cheating. They are making propaganda to win votes. Somehow or other they get votes and capture the prime posts. This system is bad." (Conversation, New Vrindaban, 24 June 1976). Srila Prabhupada also says: "The common man is allowed to



Winston Churchill

vote. He has no knowledge, and he's voting. This is most condemned process." (Conversation, Mayapur, 14 Feb 1977) In a similar vein, World War II British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, said: "The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter." A short chat is sufficient

to reveal that the man and woman in the street hardly have any clue of the realities at the governmental, financial, military, ideological, industrial or geopolitical level - what to speak of being sufficiently aware of philosophical and ethical dimensions. How can common people, subject to the relentless propaganda of the few that somehow secure financial backing, wisely decide on who should run the country? How can they vote for the right persons when the vested interests promote, through expensive media campaigns, only candidates supportive of their gains? How can people make reasonable choices while caught in the thunderstorm of fake news and mock promises? And how can candidates be candid about what the country really needs while fearing the public's rejection of any uncomfortable truth and unwelcome austerity? Nonetheless, Churchill also said: "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."



So, both Plato and Srila Prabhupada would agree that the best form of government would be by qualified, detached, enlightened kings; but, if unavailable, democracy at the very least prevents brutal tyrants from establishing themselves as lifelong

dictators. So, with all its faults, democracy still seems the best available system; the system ISKCON should embrace and work within, where it exists, without unrealistically fantasizing on resurrecting Vedic monarchy. Srila Prabhupada says: "If you can make the people Krishna conscious, then everything will be automatically. Because the democracy is there. So if they vote for a Krishna conscious person to become president and prime minister, then everything will be saved. So that means you **have to create voter, Krishna conscious**. Then everything will be right. That should be one of your aims, the Krishna conscious movement. The government is still is under the control of the public. That's a fact. If the public becomes Krishna conscious, naturally the government will be Krishna conscious." (Conversation, Bombay, 6 Nov 1970) Mature, healthy *varṇāśrama* ideas can't remain anchored to sentimental, obsolete notions. Because a political system was working five-thousand years ago, it doesn't mean it would work now. Nostalgically clinging to romantic but impractical beliefs is a sure way of messing up *varṇāśrama*.



Description Is Not Necessarily Prescription

The next principle: something described in the *sastra*, or even in Srila Prabhupada books, is not necessarily meant for implementation. In some cases it's obvious, like in the following, extreme example, from a purport to a verse telling how Śunaḥṣepha was purchased to be used as the



sacrificial animal:

"It appears that in those days a man could be purchased for any purpose. Hariścandra was in need of a person to sacrifice as the animal in a *yajna* and thus fulfill his promise to Varuṇa, and a man was purchased from

another man for this purpose. Millions of years ago, animal sacrifice and slave trade both existed. Indeed, they have existed since time immemorial." (SB 9.7.20, purport)

Nobody in his or her right mind would conclude that by *describing* human sacrifice and slave trade Srila Prabhupada was *prescribing* such practices for ISKCON devotees. It's clear that he was mentioning such practices without recommending them. In other, less striking cases,

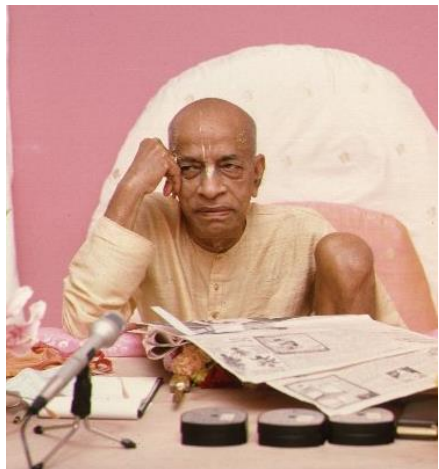
we understand that the description is not a prescription because Srila Prabhupada himself acted differently. For instance, Srila Prabhupada translates SB 7.12.4: "Carrying pure *kuśa* grass in his hand, the *brahmacārī* should dress regularly with a belt of straw and with deerskin garments. He should wear matted hair, carry a rod and waterpot and be decorated with a sacred thread, as recommended in the *śāstras*." We have no evidence of Srila Prabhupada ever promoting such attire for ISKCON *brahmacaris*. Photos of the period always show *brahmacaris* with shaved heads and saffron robes; we see no matted hairs or deerskins.

Was Srila Prabhupada disobeying the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*? No, he is applying the same principle in the most suitable way. Both shaved heads and matted hairs serve the same purpose: avoiding being absorbed in cultivating an aesthetically attractive hairstyle. What about



deerskins? Vedic ashrams situated in the forest presumably had plentiful access to deer and deerskins. Nowadays it would be challenging to provide urban *brahmacaris* with deerskins (and it would also probably appear exceedingly odd to the public); but saffron-colored cotton garments are easily available and, as a standard

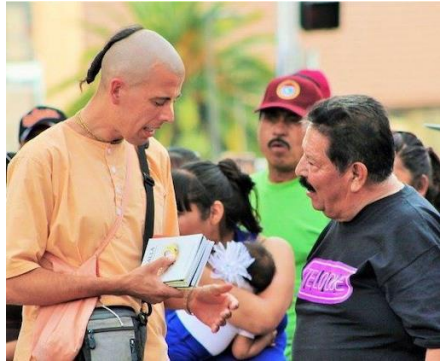
uniform, fulfill the need for a monastic, austere garb and protect *brahmacaris* from preoccupying themselves with fashion. I am quoting the following passage extensively because it's a crucial point: "What Kṛṣṇa said five thousand years ago, the same thing Caitanya Mahāprabhu said. Same thing. There was no change . . . *śāstra*, there is no change. Not that 'Modernize. The *śāstra* should be changed.' No. That is nonsense. That is not *śāstra*. *Śāstra* cannot be changed. 'Circumstantially, it will be changed, seasonal changes.' No. That is not *śāstra*. *Śāstra* means it is perpetual. What Kṛṣṇa said five thousand years ago or Kṛṣṇa said some forty millions of years ago to the sun god. . . *Imaṁ vivasvate yogaṁ proktavān aham avyayam* [Bg 4.1]. He says, 'I am talking to you that *purātanaṁ yogaṁ*.' Not that 'Because it has passed millions of years and now it is a different time, so I will have to change.' No. He said, 'I am talking to you that very old system.' Is it not? Just see. The *śāstra* cannot be changed. God's word cannot be changed. Then what is the difference between God and ourselves? He is always perfect. He is always perfect. What



*"You can put the same thing in a new way,
but you cannot change the principle."*

He said forty millions of years ago, what He said five thousand years ago, that is also correct up to date. That is *śāstra*. Not that 'So many years have passed and it has become old. Now let us reform it and put it into new way.' No. **You can put the same thing in a new way, but you cannot change the principle.** *Sādhu śāstra guru-vākya, tinete kariyā aikya.* *Śāstra* is never changed. And the *sādhu*... *Sādhu* means who follows the *śāstras*. He is *sādhu*. He also does not change. *Sādhu, śāstra*. And *guru*? *Guru* means who follows the *śāstra* and *sādhu*. So there are three, the same. A *guru* will not change, that 'It was spoken five thousand years ago. That is not applicable now. Now I am giving you something new, jugglery.' He is useless. *Sādhu śāstra guru-vākya tinete kariyā aikya. Yaḥ śāstra-vidhim utsṛjya vartate kāma kārataḥ, na siddhim avāpnoti* [Bg 16.23]. These things are there." (Lecture on SB 5.6.8, Vrindavana, 30 Nov 1976) Very important: " *śāstra* cannot be changed"; at the same time, "**You can put the same thing in a new way, but you cannot change the principle.**" That's why the role of the *acaryas* is so essential: they decipher perennial principles and translate them into contemporary applications. *Acaryas* first of all distinguish *principles* from *details*. Principles are unchangeable, details are not. The principle of *brahmacaris* being celibate is eternal; how they dress is a transient detail. The principle that the *brahmacari* serves his teacher, his *guru*, is eternal; how he serves will vary. The Vedic-age *brahmacari* may go in the jungle to collect wood for a fire-*yajna*. The modern-age *brahmacari* may go

in the busiest part of the city to sell books as part of the *sankirtan-yajna*. In this regard, the principle of *yajna*, sacrifice, is timeless; and the *acarya* would determine the specific form the *yajna* should take place.



Unfortunately, there are cases in which devotees misidentify a *description* of an ancient event for a *prescription* for today's ISKCON. They mistake a secondary historical detail for a changeless principle. A conspicuous example is when devotees artificially interpret the fact that Suniti did not initiate her son, Dhruva (SB Canto 4, Chapter 8), as a universal prohibition on Vaisnavi *diksa-gurus*.



Suniti was living in the first *manvantara* of this day of Brahma, more than one and half billion years ago; *Satyayuga* initiations were different from the present-day ones. But, more importantly, Srila Prabhupada never ever linked the episode of Suniti not initiating Dhruva to ISKCON. Srila Prabhupada never said or wrote that because Suniti

didn't initiate her son, no ISKCON Vaisnavi should ever initiate. Just the opposite: Srila Prabhupada again and again stated that women - when qualified, of course - can and should become spiritual masters: "I want that all of my spiritual sons and daughters will inherit this title of Bhaktivedanta, so that the family transcendental diploma will continue through the generations. Those possessing the title of Bhaktivedanta will be allowed to initiate disciples." (Letter to Hamsadutta, 3 Jan 1969) "Actually male and female bodies, these are just outward designations. Lord Caitanya said that whether one is brahmana or whatever he may be if he knows the science of Krsna then he is to be accepted as guru." (Letter to Malati, 25 Dec 1974) "My dear sons and daughters . . . You'll have to become spiritual master. You, all my disciples, everyone should become spiritual master . . . I hope that all of you, men, women, boys and girls, become spiritual master." (Vyasa-puja Lecture, London, 22 Aug 1973) The Suniti narration is purely a *description*, completely devoid of any *prescription* for contemporary Vaisnavism.



Nonetheless some devotees - going against all Gaudiya-vaisnava teachings, history and tradition - misrepresent the event as a perennial recommendation. Such sectarian fabrications and falsifications destroy Gaudiya-vaisnava *varṇāśrama*.



In *The Nectar of Devotion* we find another description that could be mistaken for a prescription. There Srila Prabhupada includes "the worship of the demigod Gaṇapati" among the rules for Deity worship. But from his example and from a series of letters we know that he did not expect ISKCON devotees to perform such worship: we understand that it wasn't a recommendation for daily practice: "So far worshipping Ganesh is concerned, that is not necessary. Not that it should be done on a regular basis." (Letter to Sivananda, 25 Aug 1971) One may protest, "But it's there in *The Nectar of Devotion*!" Yes, it's there as a description, not as a prescription. The point is that whatever is enjoined in the Vedas is valuable and recommendable - for someone, somewhere, at some time. But, through the guidance of guru, *sadhu* and *sastra*, we have to identify what's appropriate for us today, individually and collectively.

The *sati* rite, for instance, the voluntary immolation of the widow on the pyre of the dead husband, has its place in specific settings and only for suitable individuals. It's a Vedic custom, respectable in the proper context and for the right candidates; but, does it mean ISKCON should promote it nowadays? Srila Prabhupada writes: "A chaste wife like Gāndhārī would feel the separation of her husband to be more burning than actual fire. Such a lady can observe the *satī* rite voluntarily, and there is no criminal force by anyone. When the rite became a formality only and force was applied upon a lady to follow the principle, actually it became criminal, and therefore the ceremony was to be stopped by state law." (SB 1.13.58, purport) In working on *varṇāśrama* we need to be careful in distinguishing descriptions from prescriptions, mere depictions from actual recommendations; otherwise we might end up (figuratively) burning witches at the stake or (literally) burning widows on funeral pyres.



Not Every Medicine Is Good for Everyone

There might be thousands of medicines in the pharmacy, all of them approved by the government, all of them useful for something; but we can't whimsically pick one or the other without the



prescription of the expert physician. Similarly, there are so many rituals, customs, practices and observances, all authentic parts of the Vedic tradition, but we need the guidance of the *acaryas* and of mature *brahmanas* to identify what is beneficial - for us as individuals and, collectively, for the *sankirtana* movement of the twenty-first century. A certain medicine might be beneficial for, say, a horse, but it might kill a human being. *Sannyasa*, for instance, may be a good *varṇāśrama* prescription for the mature and renounced man, but for the immature man, attracted by the prestige of the position, it may represent spiritual poison; the threshold to humiliation and public disdain. Each medicine is suitable only for particular patients, and only in the recommended dose. We also need to check the expiry date: a medicine that was effective, say, five-thousand years ago, might be lethal today. As Lord Caitanya quotes:

*aśvamedhaṁ gavāmbhaṁ
sannyāsaṁ pala-paitṛkam*

*devareṇa sutotpattiṃ
kalau pañca vivarjayet*

“In this Age of Kali, five acts are forbidden: the offering of a horse in sacrifice, the offering of a cow in sacrifice, the acceptance of the order of *sannyāsa*, the offering of oblations of flesh to the forefathers, and a man’s begetting children in his brother’s wife.” (*Brahma-vaivarta Purāṇa*, *Kṛṣṇa-janma-khaṇḍa* 185.180, quoted in *Cc Adi*, 17.164)

In another illustration of interdependence, of the principle that something is recommended only if the proper conditions exist, Srila Prabhupada explains: "In this age, no other *yajna* can be performed perfectly. It is not possible. First deficiency is there is no *yajnic brāhmin*. Formerly, the *brahmins* were so expert that by *mantra* they ignite fire, and they would test, putting one animal in the fire, they would take and make it again alive. That is the test of the *mantra* . . . People think that *gomedha yajna*, *aśvamedha yajna* are made for killing the animal. No. It was testing the *mantra* of the *Vedas*, whether actually being pronounced. That was the test . . . in the Vedic *yajna*, the animal was put in the fire and it was again taken alive. **Because such *yajnic brahmin* is not there in this Kali-yuga, therefore the all the *yajnas* are forbidden. *Aśvamedhaṃ gavālbham . . . sannyāsam pāla paitṛkam*. Even *sannyāsa* is also forbidden in this age. *Karma-sannyāsa*. That is called *karma-sannyāsa*. The Vedic principle of *sannyāsa* is to give up this *karma - karma* means *yajna* - and take *sannyāsa*. But *vaiṣṇava***

sannyāsa is *tridaṇḍī sannyāsa* . . . that means the living entity is offering his body, mind and words for the service of the Lord. So *tridaṇḍa sannyāsa* can be accepted in this age, not otherwise." (Lecture on SB 1.2.10, Bombay, 28 Dec 1972) Vedic practices stop being favorable when certain preconditions cease to exist. These are examples of medicines with an expiry date, of customs officially



prohibited in this age; but these are other Vedic traditions that are not advisable anymore - at least not for the vast majority of people.

Polygamy: Mostly Unworkable and Prohibited

There are many descriptions of polygamy in the *Bhagavatam*. Not only that, there are statements by Srila Prabhupada in which he openly supports it; for instance: "Every person must get married. Every woman especially must get married. If the women outnumber the men, some men can accept more than one wife." (Cc *Madhya*, 7.128,



purport) Considering that Srila Prabhupada books are for ten-thousand years, it's perfectly conceivable that this suggestion may become more relevant and viable in the future. After all, in 58 countries today polygyny is already legal. Srila Prabhupada's words in the above purport may

be already applicable for millions of people, but that's still a minority of humanity. (*Polygamy*: one person with two or more spouses simultaneously. It has two main forms: 1. *polygyny*: one man with two or more wives, and 2. *polyandry*: one woman with two or more husbands.) Srila Prabhupada grew up in a culture in which polygamy was normal. More than once he expressed his disappointment with the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, with which polygamy was banned in India, for Hindus. Srila Prabhupada reasons: "Actually the system of polygamy is natural because . . . there should remain a class of men who do not marry in the society. But that will create an unfavorable situation of excessive population of unmarried women . . . if there is any man who is better able to maintain wife and family, he is advised to marry as many women as he can maintain and thereby free other men in the society to remain *brahmacari*." (Letter to Karandhara, 9 Jan 1973). The logic is inescapable: if a substantial portion of the male population remains as lifelong celibates, a substantial percentage of women wouldn't find a husband; polygamy offers them a way of getting married (and an opportunity to legitimately have more than a wife for men so inclined).

Let's do a little math in connection with India: the letter was written forty-seven years ago. Maybe at that time the practice of killing baby girls - in the womb or after birth - wasn't so widespread or well-known. Recent statistics by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) indicate that 46 million girls are missing in India, due to both pre-

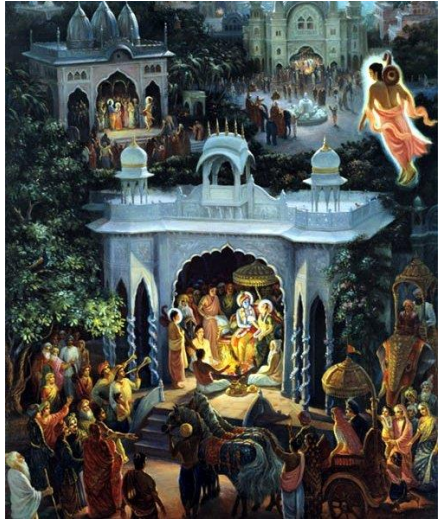


and post-natal sex selection (Others estimate higher numbers, but for now let's stick to this lower figure). So, in theory, you could still have 46 million Indian

lifelong *brahmacaris* without the need to resort to polygamy to provide husbands to all women. In fact, the opposite trend is visible: in some areas it's difficult to find enough girls to marry all the existing boys. But Srila Prabhupada books are for ten-thousand years and for the whole world, so it might very well happen that the scarcity of husbands, due to men choosing the path of *naistika-brahmacari*, might manifest some time, somewhere.

What about ISKCON and polygamy? A book could be written on all that Srila Prabhupada said about polygamy, in his writings or in private exchanges - but this is not that book. Therefore, let me go straight to the conclusion: in the proper conditions, polygamy can be beneficial to individuals and society, but in most cases it's not a practicable proposition today. Although he contemplated it as an option, and even appeared to promote it, Srila Prabhupada later banned it in ISKCON. Writing to one of his leaders, Srila Prabhupada accepts the possibility, but warns of the consequences of not doing it properly:

"According to our Vedic process, polygamy is allowed. For example, Krsna married 16,000 wives, Arjuna married 3 or 4 wives, Krsna's father Vasudeva, married 16 or 18 wives, like that. So according to the Vedic system polygamy is not prohibited. But it is not a farce also. Every wife must be provided



for sufficiently. Krsna married 16,000 wives, but each wife was provided a palace and He was personally present at each palace. It does not meant to marry many wives and maintain none of them. If anyone is able to keep more than one wife and give them all comforts of life, there is no objection for having more than one wife. But if he creates trouble by marrying, he should not marry even one wife, this is my judgment. Now you can do the needful, taking into consideration the circumstances of the laws of your country, the customs of your people, the reputation of our society, the example which will be set for future devotees to follow, like that . . . it will be the best idea if those who are well-qualified as husbands to keep more than one wife very much satisfied in every respect, if such men can marry more than once. That will free the others to remain brahmacari. But you must consider very

carefully the possibility of becoming scandalized in the public for breaking their laws in this way. And in future also the devotees who are neophyte may not understand our policy in this connection, and we gradually could wind up attracting only a class of men who are very eager for unlimited sex life only. These things must be avoided at all cost." (Letter to Karandhara, 9 Jan 1973)



This letter could double up as a mini-crash course for grasping interdependence. Polygamy as a concept is acceptable, but its applicability depends on various conditions: 1. the husband should be "well-qualified"; 2. he should be able to provide, to every wife, "all comforts of life";

3. the local culture ("the customs") should be supportive enough; which would include that the women should be willing to coexist with co-wives; 4. the public should not become "scandalized"; 5. the laws of the country should allow polygamy (or at least tolerate it); 6. the example offered to "future devotees" shouldn't mislead them into a bacchanalia of multiple marriages motivated by carnal desires.

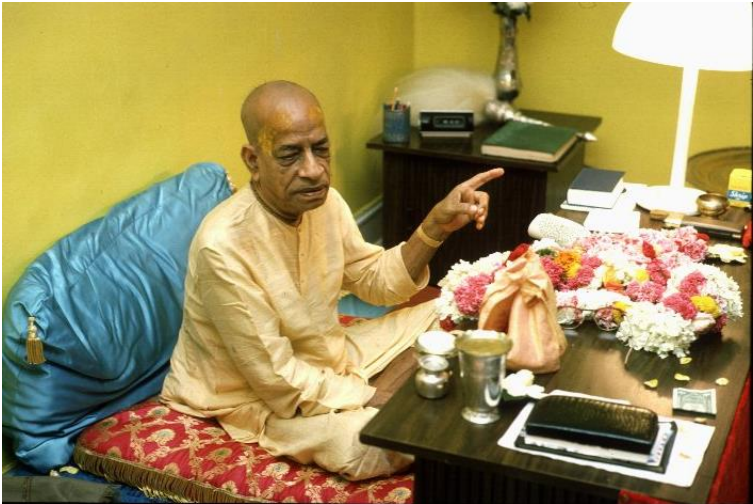
"If" is an all-important word in *varṇāśrama*. If the man is qualified; if he can fully provide, if



it doesn't affect ISKCON's reputation... and so on. In the present circumstances it would be extremely embarrassing and dangerous for ISKCON to promote or practice polygamy. It's illegal in most places and many people, rightly or wrongly, consider it a barbaric custom. If ISKCON adopts it, millions of people automatically wouldn't want to have anything to do with us. They would immediately put us in the same bucket with the Taliban and ISIS. Of course, in the course of time perceptions shift, norms transform and mores morph. In the United States of America, for instance, polygamy is illegal in all 50 states; however in Utah, a Mormon stronghold, in February 2020, the law was significantly changed to reduce polygamy to the status of a traffic ticket. Also, among American Muslims, a minority of 50,000 to 100,000 people are estimated to live in families with a husband maintaining an informal polygamous relationship. It is perfectly conceivable that in the future the broader society would approve marrying more than one wife (and that ISKCON devotees would qualify themselves for polygamous relationships). But, at least for the moment, I do not recommend we include polygamy in our *varṇāśrama* project.

At any rate, just the month after penning the above letter to Karandhara, Srila Prabhupada again wrote on the subject: "After conferring with my various GBC representatives **I have concluded that polygamy must be strictly prohibited in our society.** Although it is a Vedic institution still there are so many legal implications.

Neither are many of our men fixed up enough to tend for more than one wife." (Letter to Rupanuga, 13 Feb 1973) Three days before he had written to another leader: "First let us understand that polygamy cannot be permitted in our society. Legally it is impossible and neither are there many of our devotees who are prepared to assume the responsibility for many wives." (Letter to Satsvarupa, 10 Feb 1973) In implementing varṇāśrama we should give utmost attention to *all* of Srila Prabhupada's instructions on a subject. Sometimes devotees "marry" a particular sentence as the all in all, unaware (or deliberately disregarding) everything else Srila Prabhupada said on the topic. Such unhealthy habit of clenching tightly to a phrase, excerpt or episode while disregarding everything else, can be very effective in messing up varṇāśrama. Such tendency to lock one's consciousness exclusively into a



"class" of quotes - while blocking out all other evidence - produces a slanted, prejudiced picture, which in turn creates a biased, limited and limiting idea of varṇāśrama. Very dangerous. The more light on the subject we intentionally impede, the darker our notions become. The next theme, child marriage, is another area in which big mistakes can be made by failing to consider, 1. the totality of Srila Prabhupada's instructions on the subject; 2. the stringent conditions needed for beneficial application.

Early Marriage? Mostly for Earlier Times

There are many benefits to early marriage (when the proper conditions are in place): psychological, relational, economic, even physiological. Srila Prabhupada had personal experience with early marriage (or *child marriage*, an expression he also used). During a very instructive morning walk in Mayapur with his top leaders, he explains that his wife was eleven when he married her; but of course they started to live together only after she reached puberty. The talk touches on social customs and other considerations, and those interested in real varṇāśrama would do well to study the full exchange:

Prabhupāda: So she came to live at the age of thirteen years, and at fourteen years she gave birth to a child . . .

Hṛdayānanda: How old were you when you got married?

Prabhupāda: I was student, so we were living separately. When she was thirteen years old, after puberty . . . But

there are many mothers still — the difference between the child, first child, and mother, twelve years. There are many mothers. At twelve years they gave birth to a child, especially in Bengal . . . All my sisters were married within twelve years. My second sister, she became twelve years, and I heard my mother become so disturbed: "Oh, this girl is not being married. I shall commit suicide." (laughter)

Tamāla Kṛṣṇa: At twelve!

Prabhupāda: Twelve years . . . My sister was twelve years old and brother-in-law was twenty-one. In the *śāstra*... I do not know exactly what is that *śāstra*, but they say that if



the girl before marriage has menstruation, then the father has to eat that menstrual liquid. Means it is, mean, very strict. And if the father is not living, then the elder brother has to eat . . . The girl must be married. That is it. It is called *dāya*, *kanyā-dāya* . . . *Dāya* means legally inheritance. That is called *dāya*. Just like your father's money you get automatically. So similarly, *kanyā-dāya* means to get the girl married is a *dāya*. You cannot refuse it. It is incumbent; you must do it.

Tamāla Kṛṣṇa: So many of our... the girls in our Society, they have reached that age, but they are not getting married.

Prabhupāda: No, your society is different. Now it is here also.

Tamāla Kṛṣṇa: I mean in ISKCON, in our Society.

Prabhupāda: No, ISKCON is not going to be social reformer, but as far as possible, we can help. Our main business is how to make everyone Kṛṣṇa conscious. That is our business. We cannot take up, but if possible, we can take up all the system of *varṇāśrama*.

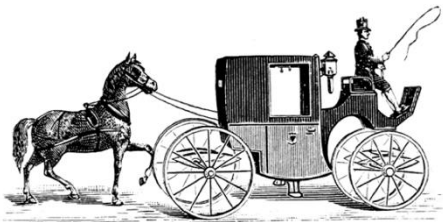
Tamāla Kṛṣṇa: If *varṇāśrama* is neglected, then how can there be proper functioning of society?

Prabhupāda: No. If the society chants Hare Kṛṣṇa seriously, then it is all right. Never mind whatever is done. It doesn't matter. *Pāpī tāpī jata chilo, hari-nāme uddhārilo*. This is the power of *hari-saṅkīrtana* . . . So the *varṇāśrama-dharma* is a good help undoubtedly, but it is not

important for Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Otherwise how could I start this movement in the Western country? There was no *varṇāśrama-dharma*. But that did not hamper my movement. Now people are surprised: "How these people have become such great devotees." So it was not based on *varṇāśrama-dharma*.

(Morning Walk, Mayapur, 9 Feb 1976)

"ISKCON is not going to be social reformer" How to understand this statement? One way is that ISKCON's primary strategy is not trying to modify social customs to bring people to spiritual life; but it is introducing spiritual practices, which would allow people to qualify for finer social standards. It's also a question of priorities. "Our main business" Srila Prabhupada says above, "is how to make everyone Kṛṣṇa conscious." We get to *varṇāśrama* - a simplified, contemporary form of *varṇāśrama* - through *bhakti*, through hearing and chanting; not vice versa. We



could use the analogy of not putting the cart before the horse. "Just like we are preaching in the Western countries."

Srila Prabhupada says in a lecture, "If we wanted to establish *varṇāśrama-dharma* in the beginning, that 'You become *brahmana*, you become *grihastha*, you become *sannyasi*...' No. Then everyone would have rejected . . . But the process . . . the sanction in the *sastras*: *sravanam kirtanam visnoh smaranam pada-*

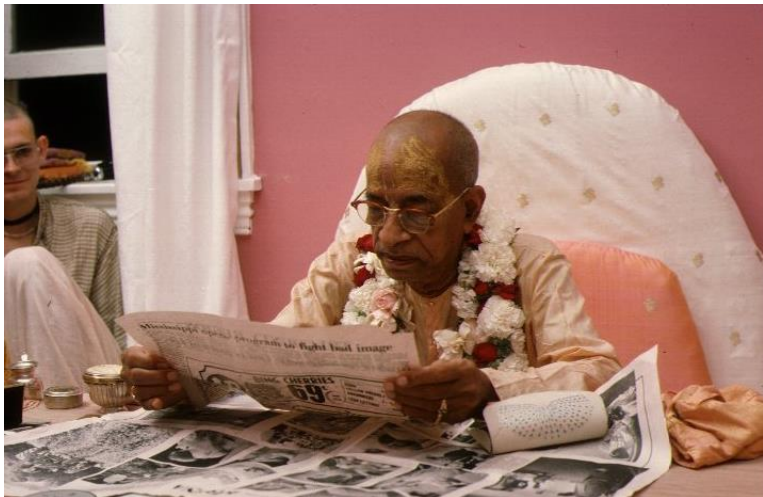
sevanam [SB 7.5.23]. This is standard method. Because we gave them the chance of hearing, gradually they're coming. Not that immediately you become *brahmana*. Now they are becoming more than *brahmanas*." (Lecture on *The Nectar of Devotion*, Bombay, 5 Jan 1973) This has been the message Srila Prabhupada reiterated through the years: "Now you cannot again introduce this system of *varṇāśrama*. It is not possible. But if one takes to Krishna consciousness, automatically he becomes immediately a *brahmana* and above the *brahmana*." (Lecture on Bg 3.18-30, Los Angeles, 30 Dec 1968)

Since we are talking about early marriage - especially for girls - let's refer to a conversation in Philadelphia, in 1975, in which Srila Prabhupada touches on both women protection and on how through chanting "everything will come automatically." First he asks a disciple to read two verses from the *Bhagavad-gita*:

Nitāi: "When irreligion is prominent in the family, O Kṛṣṇa, the women of the family become corrupt, and from the degradation of womanhood, O descendant of Vṛṣṇi, comes unwanted progeny." (Bg 1.40) . . . "When there is an increase of unwanted population, a hellish situation is created both for the family and for those who destroy the family tradition (Bg 1.41)" . . .

Prabhupāda: So this instruction is *strīṣu duṣṭāsu*: "When women become polluted, there is unwanted population." That is coming all over the world, the hippies. Therefore the first thing is how to train up women not to become

polluted . . . It is not meant for a particular class of men or particular country; it is meant for the whole human society. Therefore, this purification of the society at the present, fallen condition is very, very difficult to revive. Because people are so fallen, it is almost impossible. Therefore Caitanya Mahāprabhu has recommended that, "You all together chant Hare Kṛṣṇa, and everything will be done nicely." . . . In Kali-yuga it is very difficult to reform the whole human society to become perfect by this process, Vedic process. It is not possible. Therefore Caitanya Mahāprabhu's that, "You chant congregationally this Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra. Never mind. Whatever impurities have entered, it will be all cleansed." That you have seen yesterday in the procession. So everyone was chanting in ecstasy Hare Kṛṣṇa. You have seen? Yes. So this is the process which we are trying to



introduce—not anything caste system or this system, no. Then everything will come automatically. Easiest process.

(Conversation, Philadelphia, 13 July 1975)

Particularly in connection with child marriage as practiced in Indian villages some fifty years ago, Srila Prabhupada said that there was no plan - or possibility - to introduce it in the West. Let's also consider that present educated, urban Indians are now probably more "westernized" than the westerners were in the 1960s; when Srila Prabhupada spoke as follows: "Still, in India, the father... not the, I mean to say, modernized, educated Indians. In villages they are not very much educated. Oh, they must get their girl, I mean to say, daughter, married before fifteen years. Otherwise, it will be a social scandal. The father is



responsible for that. So of course, we cannot introduce that system in your country. **It is not possible.** (Lecture on SB 5.5.2. Boston, 28 April 1969)

What about introducing "that system" it ISKCON? As for everything else, we have to consider the conditions. First of all, in traditional cultures the young girl would join an extended family, in which all sorts of aunties and

grandmothers would engage and protect her through the day, while the husband is out, working in the fields or wherever. If husband and wife live far away from the rest of the family in a teeny city



flat and if the young girl is asked to remain alone all day, she might spend all her time on Facebook, Instagram, or worse. Another concern is the mood of the husband: is he choosing a very young girl with the proper attitude of protecting and loving her, or does he wish to marry a poorly educated teenager because she is easier to exploit and control? This danger is one of the reasons why child marriage is almost universally condemned.

Another crucial, essential consideration is the law of the land. In India, for instance, the 2006 *Prohibition of Child Marriage Act* established that the minimum legal age for boys to get married is twenty-one, and for girls is eighteen. Anything below that is illegal. Do we wish to break the law for the love of a custom that to work also requires so many other conditions? Would that be favorable for ISKCON's reputation, for its mission? I seriously doubt. Let's also consider that governments make certain laws not because they are demons, *raksasas*, *asuras*, *yavanas*, *candalas* or *mlecchas*. In some case they simply observe how certain practices are misused and abused, with the result that

people (in this case young girls) suffer; their motivation is often to help and protect. Child marriage is prohibited in India, but early betrothal could still take place - if the proper circumstances are guaranteed - so that the two youngsters can fix their mind on each other and be sustained through their tumultuous teen years by the thought of having gotten a life partner. We should always consider the culture; the value system of the people involved. It's interesting to study how Srila Prabhupada personally reacted to a suggestion for an early marriage in ISKCON:

Radha-vallabha: He is nineteen years old . . . he made arrangement with another devotee to marry her daughter at a later date. She's only twelve. So I've told him not to do anything until I spoke to you . . .

Prabhupada: There is no objection nineteen-years-old boy and twelve-years girl, it is very good combination, **but the**



culture is so bad that after few days they will separate . . . So what is the use of consulting me? They'll break. They'll promise and they'll break.

(Room Conversation, Mayapur, 27 Feb 1977)

Srila Prabhupada said that, "the culture is so bad . . . they'll break." It's sad but this

was the evaluation of the Founder-Acarya in 1977. Are we in a much better cultural shape forty-three years later? I can't speak in absolute terms, but in certain ways it seems we are worse off. In any case, let's not get infatuated with customs that nowadays are mostly impractical and unrealistic for various legal, sociological, psychological and educational reasons. Early marriage is in principle good and desirable, but so many conditions would have to be in place for making it actually implementable and beneficial - otherwise it's just another method to mess up *varṇāśrama*. In the following exchange Srila Prabhupada confirms that, when the conditions allow, early marriage would be best; but he was also aware of the obstacles - legal and cultural - to making early marriage work. He also reiterates that such social affairs aren't ISKCON's priority:

Prabhupāda: Actually the Indian system is that when the girl is utmost twelve years, not more than that, ten to twelve years, she must be married. And the father would see. Not necessarily in every case the boy is rich man or educated. If he's healthy and if he can work, he'll take charge. Then fortune, faith.

Rūpānuga: That is responsible.

Brṣṅākapi: How should we do this in our ISKCON Society with these young girls?

Prabhupāda: Of course, **we are not very much concerned with the social affair**, but still, if we can organize society, that will be very good. That will be peaceful.

Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa: Might be possible on the farms.

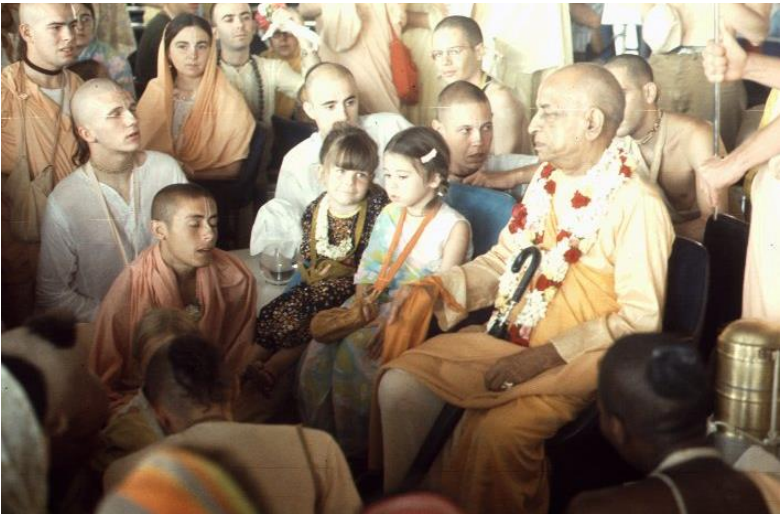
Prabhupāda: Yes.

Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa: Away from the bad social environment of the cities.

Prabhupāda: Anyway, system is the boys and girls should be married earlier, and they should work, and there should be no divorce. But whether your country law will allow, that is another difficulty. You may introduce something, but the state law may not approve of it . . . Another difficulty is the boy and the girl, they also do not stick. That is another difficulty.

Rūpānuga: Yes. That is the biggest one.

(Conversation, Washington DC, 6 July 1976)



Women Protection - Throughout All Their Lives

Five categories of citizens deserve protection: *brahmanas*, cows, the elderly, children, and women. Women - you heard it a million times - need to be protected by their father in their childhood, by their husband in their youth, and by their grownup sons in their old age. What happens in holy Bharata-bhumi, Dharma-bhumi (India), though, is different. Let's take it from the reverse, from the widows. First of all, there will be widows in India, because the life expectancy for women is 70.7 years and for men 68.24. That's an average difference of 2.46 years (statista.com). To that add the average difference of age at marriage: 26



for men; 22.2 for women; an age gap of 3.8 years (Wikipedia). So, 2.46 years difference in life-expectancy plus 3.8 years of age gap at marriage: the average Indian wife survives the husband for more than 6 years and lives those 6+ years, about 9% of her full life, as a widow. In fact, widows represent 9% of the female population of India. Some women, of course, live as widows for 10, 20, 30 or more years. What kind of life can a widow expect? A lot depends on the character and culture of the family. Are they dependable, noble protectors of women? Are they superstitious, greedy goons? Or are they somewhat in between?



Srila Prabhupada personally gave the example of how to protect widows. He gave shelter to his widowed elder sister, Rajesvari, and her young son, Tulasi. In the famous 1924 group photo, taken in Allahabad, she is sitting on the right, while her son stands in the center. Also, later, although a *sannyasi*, in his last will and testament Srila

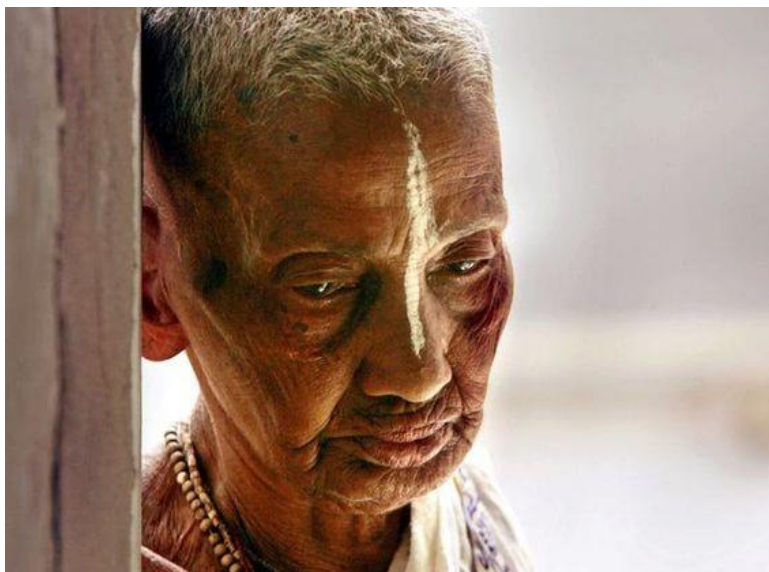
Prabhupada directed that after his departure his former wife, Radharani, would receive a monthly allowance of 1,000 rupees. This may appear as a pittance by today's standards, but back in 1977 about two-thirds of people in Calcutta earned less than 300 rupees per month (and more than 40% earned less than 200 rupees).

Nowadays widows are often deprived of their inheritance rights, unless someone stands for them. The 1969 Hindu Succession Act stipulated an equal eligibility to the inheritance, but to gain control of land and property, brothers-in-law or other family members may harass, beat, torture and even murder the widow. To exercise full inheritance rights a widow would have to be literate - and very bold. She would need to assert her claim through land registries and lawyers; which is almost unthinkable for rural widows, unequipped to deal with the bureaucratic complexities and the social pressure; and if she tries, she



may expose herself to more verbal abuse and violence. And sometimes relatives don't covet just the widow's property. Srila Prabhupada writes: "one whose son dies tries to enjoy the possessions of his son. Sometimes the father of a dead son even enjoys his son's widow. Materialistic persons behave in this way." (SB 5.18.3, purport) Some widows are just kicked out of the home by their children. Obviously this is all sinful: "A son who does not take care of her widow mother deserves condemnation." (*Manu-samhita* 9.4) "Those who abandon their mother, father, wife or children without any reasonable reason should face severe punishments." (*Manu-samhita* 8.389), but this is often the situation. These are the stories that the Vrindavana widows tell: Prema Dasi, 60-years old, "I was a child bride married to an old man, and he died soon after our marriage. I was left to deal with the world that only abused





and humiliated widows." Subhadra Ghosh, 65: "Growing up, I had never thought that I would have to beg for food, but I had to when I was **thrown out of the house after my husband died.**" Manu Ghosh, 85: "I had to sleep on the street as even my family abandoned me after my husband's death. I was **married off to him when I was 11 years old and he was 40.** My daughter died of malnutrition as I could not give her food since nobody wanted to help a widow." Manuka Dasi: "**My children threw me out of the house after my husband died,** I try to earn money by singing devotional songs in temple and manage to get one meal for the day. I am just waiting to die so that I can be out of this life of misery." Radha Dasi, 82: "It's a lifelong sentence of humiliation and struggle. I have been in this temple for more than 60 years, and now I don't remember anything

about my hometown. I wait for death every day so that I get some relief." Arti Mistri, 65: "I was 18 when my husband died. **I was thrown out of the house by my in-laws** because they feared that I would demand a share in the ancestral property." Many widows experience economic hardship. If they have young children, they often have to send them to work to earn a living instead than to school. To survive, some widows become prostitutes - and easily get infected with sexually transmitted diseases. If you wish to know more about the conditions of widows in India, a simple YouTube search will provide much eye-opening (and heart-rending) information and images.

Shouldn't the self-proclaimed *varṇāśrama* advocates talk more about the plight of such women? We might be tempted to enthusiastically promote child marriage and energetically campaign for keeping young girls uneducated, but we may not consider the results of such a policy, mapped into the girls' later life. Preventing women from becoming educated and self-reliant may sound "Vedic"; but in Kali-yuga such ideas have serious consequences. It's easy to pontificate about the benefits of child marriage and forget about its risks for later in life. India has about 46 million widows, the largest widow population in the world. But despite their huge number, they remain one of the most stigmatized, neglected and marginalized groups. Without the presence of robust cultural assurances and social indemnifications, to promote keeping the young girls illiterate and at the mercy



of their husbands (and husbands' families) may simply be imprudent and irresponsible, bordering on the criminal.

Women protection should begin before birth, but in India a lot of baby-girls are killed within the womb - and a lot are killed after being born. According to the official website of the US National Center for Biotechnology Information: "millions of girls have been described as 'missing' in the population. The high ratio of male births to female births in India is thought to reflect sex-selective abortion and undocumented female infanticide and other female infant death. These gender-based disparities extend to child mortality in India; an estimated 70 of 1000 boys born will die before age 5 years, while this estimate is 13% higher for girls at 79 of 1000 born. Notably, the pattern in



India is the reverse of that found globally (i.e., child survival is greater for girls in most other nations)." In other words, although protection of women is supposedly an aspect of traditional Indian

culture, "most other nations" are doing better in ensuring the survival of their girls. So, millions of Indian fathers kill their baby girls, and many Indian sons throw their widowed mothers on the street. So much for protection by the father and protection by the son.

Not surprisingly the Indian husbands - supposedly the protectors in the middle - aren't on average much better at taking care of women. Their "protection" often results in charred corpses and faces disfigured by acid (and I specifically avoided to include photos showing more



horrific, shocking acid disfigurements). To get an idea of the varieties of "protection" some Indian husbands bestow on their wives, just Google "bride burning" or

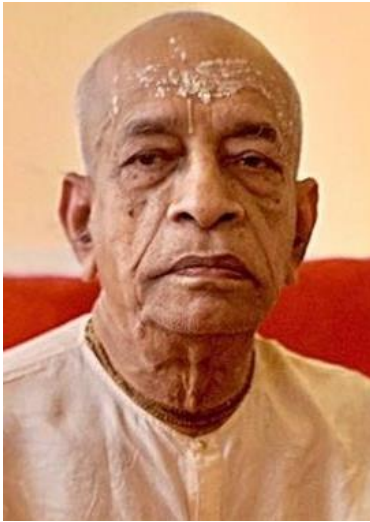
the more general "dowry death," the demise of married women murdered or driven to suicide by the continuous harassment and torture by their husbands and in-laws over dowry disputes. It's not by chance that the Thomson Reuters Foundation ranked India as the most dangerous country in the world for women. You can read about it [here](#).



Is this an attack on Indian culture? No. How could it be? What I am describing has nothing to do with Indian culture. It's the rotten, decomposing corpse of Vedic India. Women protection? According to recent official government data, in a rape is reported every 15 minutes. Reports of rape increased by 873% between 1971 and



2011; but it's estimated that 99% of all rape goes unreported, due to shame, fear of retribution, etc. After all, when we talk about protection of women, what does it mean? Protection from *what*? Protection from *who*?



Protection from men! "We give Kṛṣṇa consciousness both to the woman and man equally. We do not make any such distinction." Srila Prabhupada explains: "But to protect them from this exploitation by man, we teach something that, 'You do like this. You do like that. You be married. Be settled up. Don't wander independently.' We teach them like that."

(Conversation, Philadelphia, 13 July 1975) The problem is not women; the problem is men. That's why it's so important not to try to emulate Vedic customs regulating gender-interaction in the absence of the necessary prerequisites.

Marriage should not be conceived as a high-risk acrobatic exercise, in which the girl - with no education and no way to provide for herself - blindly "jumps" hoping that the husband (and the husband's family) will protect and take care of her. What if the husband dies? You read the testimonials of the Vrindavana widows, how often they



were married very young and upon death of their men they were thrown in the street. If the male partner is qualified (and his family is truly cultured), then the female acrobat - the bride - can jump confidently; she will be caught and be safe. But, ISKCON father, do you have full confidence in the bridegroom? Are you ready to tell your daughter: "Just jump, don't worry, he will catch you perfectly, and for the rest of your life"? ISKCON father, are you sure you can tell your daughter: "You don't need any other ability than cleaning, cooking, churning butter and having babies; your husband will take care of the rest"? What if the male "acrobat" - the husband - is not that good? What if his hand slips and your girl plummets to the ground? What if he dies young? Fathers, do you have any certainty that your daughter's sons and in-laws will be willing to take care of your daughter if or when she remains a widow,



which, statistically, is normal and expected? What socio-economic safety-net is in place, if any? It's not enough to harp on the need to marry the girls as early as possible. In ISKCON the husbands must be qualified to protect them, to do the best for them - which includes facilitating the wives to become the best they can become as human beings and as servants of the Lord. Śrīla Prabhupāda certainly wishes to see ISKCON girls growing into loyal wives: "I am instructing our GBC's that 'Let our little girls be educated to become faithful and chaste.'" (Lecture in San Francisco, 16 July 1975) Notwithstanding, Srila Prabhupada also wants to see his followers, both male and female, actively engaged in spreading Krishna consciousness: "[W]e want so many preachers, both men and women." (Letter to Jayagovinda, 8 Feb 1968) - and generally illiterate people don't make very effective

preachers.... Such injunctions - chaste wives and preaching wives - are not mutually exclusive; to present them as incongruent, or to accept one and reject the other, would be a disservice to the principles of *varṇāśrama* and a sure path to catastrophe.

ISKCON wives (or any wives) shouldn't just be used as toys to gratify - grossly and subtly - immature male egos. Unless sufficient cultural and psychological safeguards are in place, early marriage risks to become just another entry-



Vedic-sounding norms in the hands of non-Vedic men can turn a woman's existence into a living hell.

trap into hellish life for women. In some cases, the best the father can do is giving his young daughter in marriage to a responsible, qualified man, hoping that their children would take care of her even when

the husband dies. At the same time, the father may also consider that an added and more effective form of protection could be to educate his daughter, preparing her to become a self-respecting and self-sufficient adult, equipped to be able to take care of herself in the world, if and when the need arises, thus avoiding becoming, as a widow, an illiterate, dejected and rejected beggar. Some may argue that studying in contemporary educational institutions would certainly degrade the girl, exposing her to all sorts of debasing influences. True, there are risks in closely interacting with the modern world and its



substandard culture, but we see young Vaisnavis attending schools and colleges without losing their chastity, faith and spiritual conduct. It's not a fact that learning practical skills in the material world must automatically mean losing one's Krishna consciousness. Otherwise, why Srila Prabhupada would write: "Some of our girls may be trained in colleges and take teacher exams"? (Letter to Satsvarupa, 25 Nov 1971) Young Vaisnavis with healthy values and solid character will move unscathed through education; will acquire valuable assets and gain precious talents to engage in Lord Caitanya's mission.

We hope and pray that ISKCON husbands would be better than the average Indian "protectors"; nonetheless, ISKCON fathers would do well to consider what's the best way to protect their daughters, especially in the long-term:

keep them uneducated and marry them off as soon as possible, or provide them with training and skills by which they can take care of themselves and be self-reliant? What's more in tune with a



mature *varṇāśrama* spirit? What protects women better? What's more likely to ensure their wellbeing, even at an advanced age? Please take (at least) a few minutes and search information on, say, the relation between education and domestic violence; or on how the lack of education negatively affects a woman throughout her life. Fathers, you decide - and be ready to face the consequences if you get it wrong.



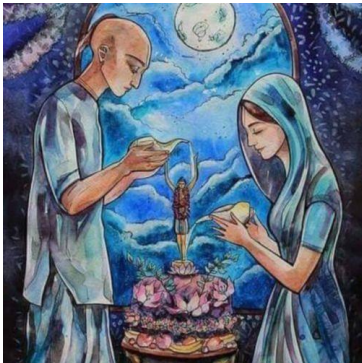
Fathers (and mothers and daughters): never think that because a boy is officially "in ISKCON" (whatever that means), he will be a responsible, dharmic husband. For instance, I have a western Godsister who married an ISKCON devotee, a resident of the *dhama* to boot. After marriage he made her pregnant. He then pushed her

old parents to sell their house, claiming that he needed the

funds for some legal emergency. They trusted him and sold their house. He pocketed the money, left the wife, disappeared and was never seen again. His wife now lives as a single mother, abandoned and depredated.

Should Only the Wife Be "Vedic"? What About the Husband?

I heard this story: in Mayapur, someone holding a voluminous manuscript came up to Jayapataka Maharaja and proudly said: "Maharaja, we have compiled all the duties of women from the scriptures, from quotes, from everywhere. Everything about *stri-dharma*, the *dharma* of women, is in here!" "Very good." Maharaja said, "Do you have also a compilation of duties for men? Do you have also that book?" The devotee said, "No Maharaja, we have only collected the duties of women." "Then," Maharaja said, "You can take this book and throw it in the Ganga. Unless you also bring a compilation of all the duties for men, you can throw this one away." It takes two to tango.



Husband and wife share the responsibility for the success of the marriage. It's not that the whole burden is on the woman and the only qualification the man needs is a little fleshy appendage between his legs. A model in which there are innumerable demands on the woman and

PENGUIN CLASSICS
THE LAWS OF MANU



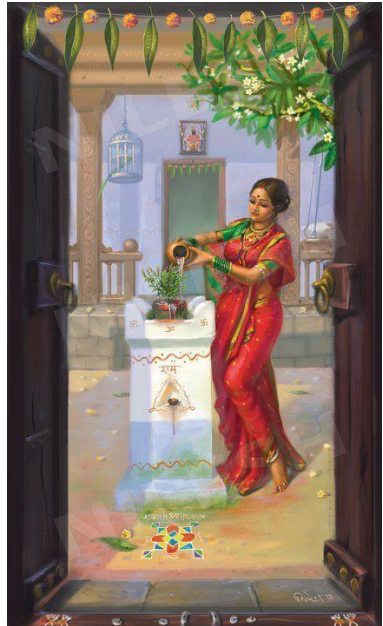
practically nothing on the man, is the death blow of *varṇāśrama*. Such conception is also against *sastra*. Let's take a look, for instance, at some passage from *Manu-samhita* (which nobody can call a feministic, westernized text), delineating the duties of men toward women: "A father, brother, husband or brother-in-law should keep their daughter, sister, wife or sister-in-law happy and pleased

through gentle words, respectful behavior, gifts etc. Those who desire prosperity should ensure that women in their family are always happy and do not face miseries." (*Manu-samhita* 3.55) So, the responsibility to generate well-being among the womenfolk extends beyond the wife. The next quote explains the consequences of failing or succeeding in making women happy: "A family where women remain unhappy due to misdeeds of their men is bound to be destroyed. And a family where women are always happy is bound to prosper forever." (*Manu-samhita* 3.57) Clear, no? The next passage specifies the required tangible actions: "One desiring glory should ensure that he keeps women in the family by giving them respect and pleasing them with good ornaments, dresses, food. Women should always be revered under all circumstances." (*Manu-samhita* 3.59) These scriptural references should not be

taken by women as an authorization or encouragement to divorce men who don't fully manifest all the good qualities of an ideal husband. We are not sharing these verses to make allowances for frivolous, unjustified separations. No, we offer these sastric passages to give a sense of balance: there are duties and responsibilities for both men and women. We can't just download on the lady an unlimited list of demands without asking anything from the man. Next quote: "A family where women feel insulted or discriminated against and curse their menfolk, is destroyed in the same manner as poison kills all those who eat it." (*Manu-samhita* 3.58) Let's consider this passage also in the broader context of ISKCON, the family of Srila Prabhupada's followers: "Now, we have by Krsna's Grace built up something significant in the shape of this ISKCON and we are all one family." (Letter to Babhru, 9 Dec 1973) Are women feeling "insulted and discriminated against" in our ISKCON family? This would



be diametrically opposed to true *varṇāśrama*, and the surest way to mess it up. Beware of those who deny, minimize or neglect the importance of honoring women! Legitimate dissatisfaction of womenfolk can generate ruin and devastation for the whole ISKCON family. The next quote shows that denying women any form of leadership is totally anti-Vedic: "Women should be provided autonomy and leadership in managing the finances, maintaining hygiene, spiritual and religious activities, nutrition and overall management of home." (*Manu-samhita* 9.11) The traditional spheres of action and authority for men and women in the Vedic age were different, but women had their jurisdictions for management, and the respective circles of influence were recognized and honored. In traditional, agrarian societies men were active outside the home. They would go and plough the fields or fight battles or travel and trade goods and so on. In ancient societies women were active at home, taking care of babies, cleaning, cooking, churning butter, etc. In such domestic settings, according to this verse, women should be granted "autonomy and leadership."



Strī-dharma in Lord Caitanya's Mission, in Srila Prabhupada's Movement

Intrinsic physical and psychological factors innate to the male and female human condition, as well as cultural customs and conventions, determined - and determine - particular socio-economic roles and functions for the genders. Individual inclinations are of course another major factor. Srila Prabhupada's instructions, expressing the mood and standards promoted by Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, as well as contemporary realities, expand the range of activities, services and residential arrangements suitable for women well beyond the confines of the household. Some examples:

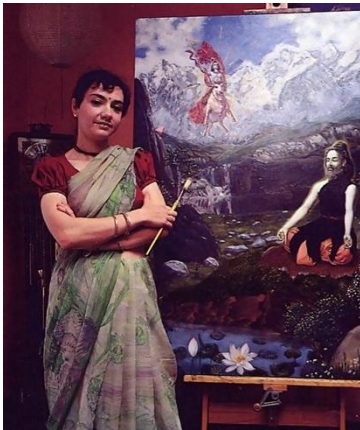
1. "Now you organize our KC school very nicely . . . Some of our girls may be trained in colleges and take teacher exams." (Letter to Satsvarupa, 25 Nov 1971)



2. "Our main business is to distribute books, and from the reports I am receiving from all over the world, the progress is



very encouraging. So far as the woman distributors who have left New York and Boston Temples and have gone to New Vrindaban, they should return immediately and resume their original service. In Caitanya Mahaprabhu's Movement, everyone is preacher, whether man or woman it doesn't matter. I do not know why Kirtanananda Maharaja is encouraging our woman devotees not to go out on Sankirtana for book distribution. Everyone should go out." (Letter to Karandhara, 6 Oct 1973)



3. "You are very talented girl, and you can paint very super excellent pictures, I have seen it . . . So I request you to simply sit down wherever you are, and paint nice pictures for being distributed to all centers. This will help you, and it will help others as well." (Letter to Madhavi Lata, 19 March 1969)

4. "Pālikā . . . is expert in typing. Amongst the women, she is expert typist. She is expert in so many things." (Conversation, Vrindavana, 4 Nov 1976)

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

Prabhupada: Yes, why not?

(Room Conversation, Chicago, 5 July 1975)

6. "I am especially pleased to learn that you are introducing my books as textbooks in the colleges. We especially have to try to attract the educated young men and women in your country so that in future there will be many strong leaders to keep our Kṛṣṇa Consciousness Movement strong." (Letter to Govinda, 7 April 1973)

7. "Brahmananda showed Prabhupada a globe with markers representing ISKCON centers. 'Now there is one in North Carolina,' Brahmananda said. 'Then it becomes fifteen?' Prabhupada asked. He was smiling and looking directly from one devotee to another. 'I want each of you to go and start a center. What is the difficulty?' . . . 'The girls also?' Rukminī asked. 'There is no harm,' Prabhupada said. 'Kṛṣṇa



does not make distinction - female dress or male dress. I mean to say, the female body is weaker, but spiritually the body does not matter." (New York, 9 April 1969, *Srila Prabhupada-lilamrita*, Ch. 21)

8. "I am very glad also to know that you are engaged as Pujari there. Try to learn this art of *Arcana* very nicely . . . I wish that all our girl devotees be expert in the matter of *Arcan* and cooking." (Letter to Kanchanbala, 20 April 1970)



9. "So you please continue your devotional service, cooking, etc, and you can also keep giving Bhagavatam class if you like. Women in our movement can also preach very nicely." (Letter to Malati, 25 Dec 1974)

10. "[W]e want so many preachers, both men and women." (Letter to Jayagovinda, 8 Feb 1968)

11. "Regarding your preaching work in the schools, colleges, and universities, try to attract the students, they are our great future hope." (Letter to Kanchanbala, 20 April 1970)

12. "I have seen in your article on Mr. Lennon that you have a very nice gift for writing, so better you should utilize this God-given talent for writing articles for our Back To Godhead." (Letter to Bibhavati, 15 July 1969)

13. Harikesa: In America they have women senators now.
Prabhupada: Huh?

Harikesa: Women senators, women are in charge of companies sometimes.

Indian man: No, in India there are two women. They are high commissioners of India to the foreign countries.

Prabhupada: No, that is possible. That it requires education.

(Morning Walk,
Vrindavana, 10 Dec
1975)



Tulsi Gabbard, first Vaisnavi elected to the Congress of the United States of America

14. "I am very glad that you both, husband and wife, are executing the mission of Lord Chaitanya so nicely and faithfully. Please continue to act like that and certainly Lord Chaitanya will bestow all His blessings and power upon you . . . I am especially proud how my householder disciples are preaching Lord Chaitanya's Mission. This is a new thing in the history of the Sankirtan 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." (Letter to Himavati, 20 Dec 1969)



*Himavati Devi preaching in India, in front of
Srila Prabhupada and Kirtanananda Swami*

Someone - by dint of whatever personal psychological or political impetus - might try to falsely minimize the previous quotes as individual or circumstantial instructions, possessing limited application. Let me therefore include a couple of Srila Prabhupada's statements in *Sri Caitanya-caritamrita*, a public, solemn and universally authoritative document for the next ten-thousand years:

15. "An *ācārya* who comes for the service of the Lord cannot be expected to conform to a stereotype, for he must find the ways and means by which Kṛṣṇa consciousness may be spread. Sometimes jealous persons criticize the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement because it engages equally both boys and girls in distributing love of Godhead. Not knowing that boys and girls in countries like Europe and

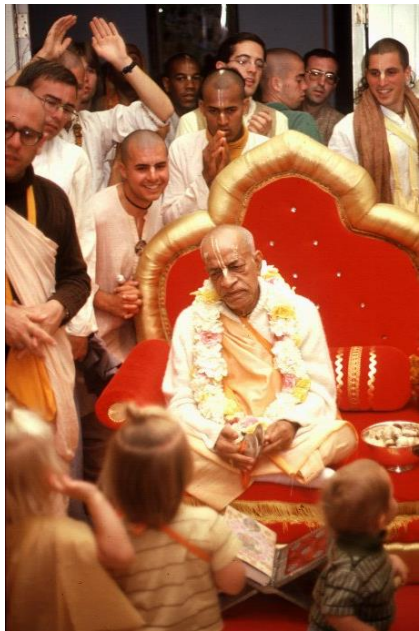


America mix very freely, these fools and rascals criticize the boys and girls in Kṛṣṇa consciousness for intermingling. But these rascals should consider that **one cannot suddenly change a community's social customs.** However, since both the boys and the girls are being trained to become preachers, those girls are not ordinary girls but are as good as their brothers who are preaching Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Therefore, **to engage both boys and girls in fully transcendental activities is a policy intended to spread the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement.** These jealous fools who criticize the intermingling of boys and girls will simply have to be satisfied with their own foolishness because they cannot think of how to spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness by adopting ways and means that are favorable for this purpose. Their stereotyped methods will never help spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Therefore, what we are doing is perfect by the grace of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu, for it is He who proposed to invent a way to capture those who strayed from Kṛṣṇa consciousness." (Cc *Adi*, 7.31-32, purport)

Srila Prabhupada was criticizing the attitude of some people outside ISKCON; but it's unfortunate that nowadays we hear the promotion of "stereotyped methods" even from within ISKCON's ranks. Some devotees - in the name of *varṇāśrama* - advocate that ISKCON's mission should "conform to a stereotype" and "suddenly change a community's social customs." But *varṇāśrama* is God's system for social organization; and the form of God descended to illuminate the age is Lord

Caitanya; therefore any idea of *varṇāśrama* that goes against the mood of the Golden Avatara represents a fake and severely anachronistic *varṇāśrama*, a *varṇāśrama* polluted by *smarta* and other debasing influences.

16. "It is the concern of the *ācārya* to show mercy to the fallen souls. In this connection, *deśa-kāla-pātra* (the place, the time and the object) should be taken into consideration. Since the European and American boys and girls in our Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement preach together, less intelligent men criticize that they are mingling without restriction. In Europe and America boys and girls mingle unrestrictedly and have equal rights; therefore it is not possible to completely separate the men from the women. However, we are thoroughly instructing both men and women how to preach, and actually they are preaching wonderfully. Of course, we very strictly prohibit illicit sex. Boys and girls who are not married are not allowed to sleep together or live together, and there are separate arrangements for boys



and girls in every temple. *Gṛhasthas* live outside the temple, for in the temple we do not allow even husband and wife to live together. The results of this are wonderful. Both men and women are preaching the gospel of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu and Lord Kṛṣṇa with redoubled strength. In this verse the words *sabā nistārite kare cāturī apāra* indicate that Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu wanted to deliver one and all. Therefore it is a principle that a preacher must strictly follow the rules and regulations laid down in the *sastras* yet at the same time devise a means by which the preaching work to reclaim the fallen may go on with full force." (Cc *Adi*, 7.38, purport)

Protection; But Not Stereotyped

Srila Prabhupada writes in the *Bhagavatam*: "A woman must always be protected, either by her father, by her husband, or by her elderly son." (SB 9.14.38, purport) This is the standard message; this is what society should strive for. At the same time, we shouldn't make the mistake to consider that this is the *only* message from the scriptures or from Srila Prabhupada. Neophyte theoreticians tend to idolize this notion, this formula for protection as absolute and universal, but the reality is different. For instance, *sastra* declares: "It is better to keep the daughter unmarried than force her to marry an undeserving person." (*Manu-samhita* 9.89) A good illustration of the principle of interdependence: for a woman it's certainly desirable to get a husband, but getting no husband is better

than getting a very bad husband. Better to skip a meal than to eat rotten food, right? The general injunction is that the father should arrange the marriage of his daughter: "A father who does not marry his daughter to a deserving groom deserves condemnation." (*Manu-samhita* 9.4) but such instruction, as we have just seen above, doesn't exist in a vacuum; other conditions must be taken into account. Srila Prabhupada certainly encouraged women to get married: "it is advised that all women get themselves married," (Letter to Karandhara, 9 Jan 1973) but that's also not an unconditional directive:

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

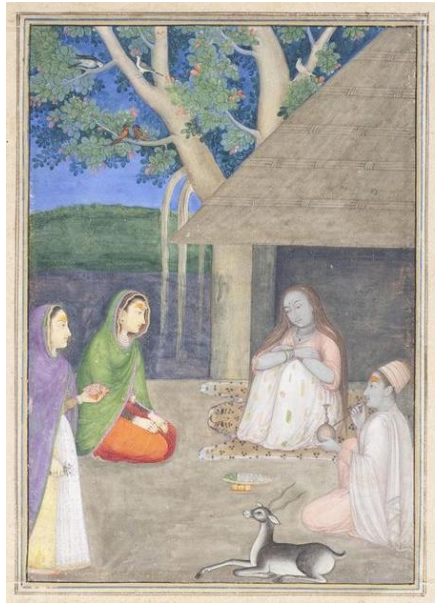


Rūpānuga: Women also?

Prabhupāda: Women also. What is the use of this material husband? Make Kṛṣṇa husband. Kṛṣṇa's prepared to become everything—love Him as husband, love Him as son, love Him [as] friend.

(Conversation, Washington DC, 6 July 1976)

As far as protecting elderly women; yes, if there are qualified sons to take care of them, that may be the best. But that's also not an absolute requirement: "Yes, after the husband retires from family life," Srila Prabhupada explains, "the wife can live alone in a sacred place of pilgrimage, like Vrindaban, provided she has got sufficient strength. There is no female sannyas. If the children are favorable, it is better to remain with children. Or, she can live alone after 50 years old, if she is able." (Letter to Malati, 20 July 1968) The problem is that - due an incomplete exposure to Srila Prabhupada's wide range of instructions - some devotees lock their brain into partial models. Those concepts might be bona fide, but they don't tell the whole story. Those references might be authentic, but they don't give the complete picture. After all, many ISKCON women may not get a husband in this life. Call it karma or whatever you like, not every lady will get married. Can't they reach perfection and go back home, back to Godhead? Can't they remain as chaste and exemplary Vaisnavis? Of course they can!



Princess visiting yogini; circa 1700

They might feel somewhat lonely or not fully protected, but devotional success ultimately doesn't depend on any material arrangement: "The real purpose of life is to become a devotee of the Lord. It does not matter where one is situated . . . he can execute devotional service under any circumstance, as stated, *ahaituky apratihātā*: 'Devotional service cannot be checked by any material condition.' (SB 1.2.6)" (SB 4.24.69, purport)

Another *Manu-samhita* passage emphasizes that feeling protected is a psychological state, which cannot be produced externally: "Women, confined in the house under trustworthy and obedient servants, are not (well)

guarded; but those who of their own accord keep guard over themselves, are well guarded." (*Manu-samhita* 9.12)

Another translation: "A woman who is kept constrained in a home by noble men (husband, father, son) it's still insecure. Security of women would come only through her own capabilities and mindset."



This important verse emphasizes that the sense of feeling protected, safe and sheltered can't be produced just by outward circumstances. Security doesn't come simply from padlocks at the door or from muscular males in the household. At the 2020 ILS in Mayapur, I attended the seminar "*Stri Dharma* in the 21st Century and Beyond" by Srimati Radha Dasi Prabhu, global Minister of the ISKCON Vaisnavi Ministry. I was inspired - and educated - by hearing her saying that while she was in Mayapur, she was being protected by her husband, who was then in California, on the other side of the world. You can watch the seminar [here](#). It's not just the physical presence; it's the inner connection, the quality of the relationship, the mutual trust and affection that generate the experience of shelter, of feeling secure and protected. That's what the *sastra* talk about; it's the sense of identity of being part of a healthy couple, being fixed in a sacred, socially irreversible union with one's husband. Of course, superficial social theoreticians might struggle with the concept, as they might expect to see everything express on fleshly, corporeal dimensions; but that's not what *varṇāśrama* is based on. (For more on the Vaisnavi Ministry, go [here](#).)



Sanskrit words and traditional concepts should be grasped with maturity, understanding the spirit permeating them, without projecting into the text our own insecurities and psychological imbalances. It's a pleasure, for instance, to hear Srila Prabhupada elaborating on a famous *Manu-samhita* passage, which is often distorted by less realized men: "A woman is meant for being protected . . . she is always in charge of somebody. So according to Vedic



system, there is no independent life of woman. *Na strī svātantryam arhati. Manu-sam̐hitā* [9.3], that '*Strī*'—*strī* means woman—"should not be allowed independence." They should be given all protection. That's a very nice system . . . Independence does not mean their position is very lower, no. Just like children. Children has no independence. No independence means they are well-protected. No independence does not mean that he has no independence to act. No. She has got. But under the protection. Just like there are some nation still now, protectorate. America is protecting. America is a big

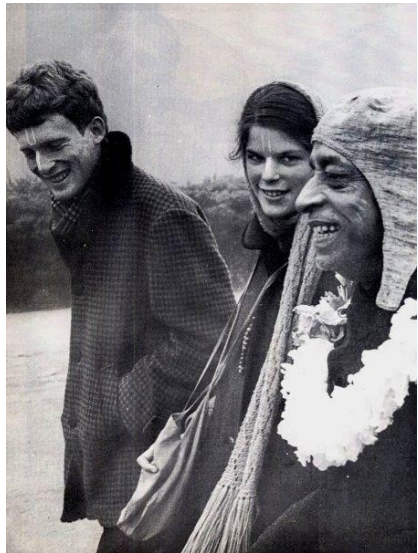
nation, and protecting another small nation. That does not mean they have no independence. They are also independent. They are acting like that. But because weaker, they should be given protection. Similarly, woman, children, *brāhmaṇa*, cow, old men, diseased men, they are to be protected. That is the social order." (Lecture on SB 2.1.2-5, Montreal, 23 Oct 1968)

There is a fine line between protection and oppression. The demarcation is subtle, internal, between feeling the obligation to safeguard and the urge to coerce into submission for one's egoic validation. The second is the controlling attitude, *isvara-bhava*, typical of conditioned souls, to subdue others for selfish purposes. That's the Ravana mentality. He was



thinking he had the right - due to physical power - to own, control and enjoy Sita. But he didn't. And his attempt destroyed him. Srila Prabhupada explains the positive, healthy approach by saying, "There are so many Western woman, girls, in our society. They are chanting, dancing, taking to Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Many. Of course, because superficially, bodily, there is some distinction, so we keep

women separately from men, that's all. **Otherwise, the rights are the same.**" (Interview with Professors O'Connell, Motilal and Shivaram, Toronto, 18 June 1976) We need gender separation because, of course, "bodily, there is some distinction," but "**the rights are the same.**" That's the mood. That's the representative of God speaking on the spiritual platform. Women, what to speak of Vaisnavi women, must be respected and honored. The husband's service to the wife might be different than the wife's service to the husband; but both are worthy of service and respect. Women are physically weaker and cruel men can easily abuse them; therefore women require shelter. Srila Prabhupada explains: "We give Kṛṣṇa consciousness both to the woman and man equally. We do not make any such distinction. But to protect them from **this exploitation by man,** we teach something that, 'You do like this. You do like that. You be married. Be settled up. Don't wander independently.' We teach them like that. But so far Kṛṣṇa consciousness is concerned, we equally distribute . . . We welcome women, men, poor, rich, everyone . . . We do not refuse anyone.



That is equality." (Conversation, Philadelphia, 13 July 1975) Vaisnavas and Vaisnavis, they are both going back home, back to Godhead. That's the consistent message of the Founder-Acarya: "*Striya* means woman. So there is no restriction for going back to home, back to Godhead, for anyone, and what to speak of man, woman—anyone . . . For God there is no discrimination. **Women, men have equal rights to become godly and back to home, back to Godhead.**" (Lecture on SB 5.5.2, Johannesburg, 22 Oct 1975) Therefore, the Founder-Acarya recommends that both be given full facilities to perfect their life: "Anyone who is trying to be Krishna conscious, he should be given



or she should be given all kinds of facilities." (Lecture, Initiation of Rukmini Dasī, Montreal, 15 August 1968) It's therefore essential to appraise the attitude with which we approach the topic of protection of women. Someone might embrace it filtered through the spiritually stunted notion that women are only *maya*, dangerous, treacherous creatures to contain and

disdain. Or we can subscribe to a more enlightened and sastric vision. The *Manu-samitha*, for instance, says: "Women give birth to next generation. They enlighten the home. They bring fortune and bliss. Hence women are synonymous to Prosperity." (*Manu-samhita* 9.26) And Srila Prabhupada says: "Actually, we are equal on the spiritual platform. We do not say that 'You are woman. You cannot become my disciple.'" (Arrival lecture, Philadelphia, 11 July 1975) And he writes: "To be either a woman or a man only involves one's bodily dress. The soul in nature is actually the marginal energy of the Supreme Lord . . . Both man and woman should be attached to the service of the Lord. Then there is the possibility of liberation from material entanglement for both of them." (SB 3.31.41, purport)



When spiritually puerile and psychologically undeveloped men talk about *varṇāśrama*, expressing their opinions on the place of women in ISKCON, their views are often impaired by the embryonic state of their consciousness. Some of them tend to quote scriptures only to justify their infantile machismo. Their social theories are flawed because their perspectives are undeveloped; and their erudition

is stunted by prejudice. Genuine learning goes beyond mere familiarity with selected doctrinal formulas or rote repetition of shallow clichés. Factual ISKCON scholarship should encompass the assimilation of the mood and disposition of the Gaudiya-vaisnava *acaryas*. Simply fiddling with peripheral Sanskrit references, doggedly pursuing confirmation of one's biases, doesn't represent true knowledge. Real awareness should include self-awareness, recognizing how one came to think the way one thinks, what traumas and frustrations (lack of affection in childhood, romantic disappointments, etc.) might have shaped one's beliefs. If damaged men see women as "the enemy" - as ruthless temptresses, devilish entities to be exorcised and neutralized - how can they develop the sincere desire to protect them? Men seeking protection *from* women cannot become protectors *of* women. How can such men engage women in appropriate devotional service? How can they enable women to excel in missionary activities in the service of Lord Caitanya? Such frail men would rather restrict and disempower women, because they are afraid of them. Being insecure, they feel threatened by women, by the likelihood that women can outshine and surpass them.



If you see women as devils, how can you feel to protect them?

They are unable to acknowledge that women can do whatever men do, and often even better. When these unripe men propose solutions to social issues - solutions dictated by fear and jealousy - their prescriptions simply produce confusion, perplexity and frustration. (Dear men readers: if the shoe fits you, wear it. Dear women readers: you are not women; you are spirit souls.)

Of course, healthy prudence in dealing with the opposite sex and caution in the presence of feminine charms are welcome and necessary in any civilized setting. "[E]veryone is advised" Srila Prabhupada writes, "that one should not freely mix even with one's daughter or with one's mother or with one's sister, because the senses are so strong that when one becomes infatuated, the senses do not consider the relationship of daughter, mother or



sister." (SB 3.31.36, purport) Distrust in one's own hormonal oscillations can prevent many disasters. A reasonable amount of fear to succumb to the attraction of the object of sexual desire is commendable. Therefore we need to distinguish if we are simply keeping a "respectful distance" from the opposite sex, acting as cultured gentlemen, or if we are foolishly trying to neutralize the magnetism through morbid, sickly tactics and artificial mental adjustments - such as demonizing women as a class, attempting to crush and nullify the whole female gender.



In Krishna consciousness we should maintain the appropriate separation of genders, but we should also eagerly desire and facilitate every man and every woman to reach their full potential as servants of the Lord and instruments in the preaching mission. Failing to do so

represents a great disservice to the individuals and to humanity at large. We should not superficially visualize protection simply as a physical, emotional or economic function; we must also include protection of the devotional enthusiasm of women; protection of their sincere yearning to do as much as possible in Lord Caitanya's movement. These aspects also need protection. We can discuss about the best forms that that protection should take, but we should remain focused on "protection of women" in the true, pristine sense - not on "protection of the stereotyped ideas that wounded men maintain about



Varṇāśrama in ISKCON should display the vibrant, living Gaudiya culture, not calcified pre-Mahaprabhu models

protecting women." We need to understand the principle of protection and its contemporary application; not just its ancient, archaic symbols. *Varṇāśrama* is a living, breathing culture of perennial values employed in changing circumstances, not a dusty museum display of anachronistic customs.

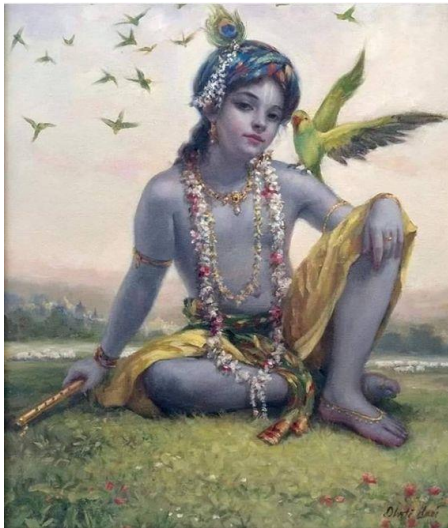
Śrīla Prabhupāda's ideas for protecting women weren't stereotyped, one-sided or fossilized. For instance, he contemplated protecting women through nunneries: "[T]he women must have a husband to give protection. Of course, if the women can remain unmarried, and if there

is suitable arrangement for the temple to protect them, just like in the Christian Church there is nunnery for systematic program of engaging the ladies and protecting them, that is also nice." (Letter to Madhukara, 4 Jan 1973) Srila Prabhupada was following in the footsteps on his spiritual master, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura, who, for instance, had said in a lecture: "All of you please perceive everything of this world as ingredients for serving Krishna; everything of this world is actually meant for Krishna's service. Please see the whole race of women as beloved consorts of Krishna, and help them to always engage themselves in the service of Krishna . . .



Our Mathas are being built at many places, and many *sannyasis*, *vanaprasthas*, *grihasthas*, and *brahmacaris* are living there all the time and receiving the opportunity to learn spiritual conduct. But we have been trying for a long time to also give the

women the opportunity for devotional service. Of course, those who have the facility and opportunity for devotional service in their own homes do not need a separate residence. But every so often we hear that many of them get impeded in their devotional service due to bad association. It would be very beneficial for them if we could build Sri Vishnupriya-palli ["palli" means "neighborhood"] in Sridham Mayapur near the residence of Sriman Mahaprabhu, and if they can live there separately from their families and render devotional service. (Lecture, 21 Sept 1925; *Sarasvati Jayasri*, p. 339) Whatever we do, the result should be authentic protection and safeguard for women, not pampering of the male-ego through hackneyed platitudes. Ontologically speaking, Srila Prabhupada explains that ultimately only Krishna can offer real protection: "The only solace is Krishna



consciousness - only solution. If one becomes Krishna conscious, then he [she] doesn't require husband. He [she] does not require . . . 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, Bombay, 7 Jan 1977) As much as possible the external provisions should be there, but no material arrangement can offer the deep sense of shelter and protection that only true God consciousness can provide.

"The Only Real Husband of All Women"

Ultimately, bodily relationships and the protection they can afford are all relative and temporary. Intelligent ladies understand that: "the only real husband of all women is Kṛṣṇa, the supreme husband." Srila Prabhupada's wrote these words while commenting on a *Bhagavatam* verse spoken by the goddess of fortune: "My dear Lord, You are certainly the fully independent master of all the senses. Therefore all women who worship You by strictly observing vows because they wish to acquire a husband to satisfy their senses are surely under illusion. They do not know that such a husband cannot actually give protection to them or their children. Nor can



he protect their wealth or duration of life, for he himself is dependent on time, fruitive results and the modes of nature, which are all subordinate to You." (SB 5.18.19) From Srila Prabhupada's purport: "In this verse, Lakṣmīdevī (Rāmā) shows compassion toward women who worship the Lord for the benediction of possessing a good husband. Although such women desire to be happy with children, wealth, a long duration of life and everything dear to them, they cannot possibly do so. In the material world, a so-called husband is dependent on the control of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. There are many examples of a woman whose husband, being



dependent on the result of his own fruitive actions, cannot maintain his wife, her children, her wealth or her duration of life. Therefore, factually the only real husband of all women is Kṛṣṇa, the supreme husband . . . Everyone should perfectly understand that Kṛṣṇa is the real husband of all living entities . . . Therefore any woman who

seeks a material husband for her protection, or any man who desires to become the husband of a woman, is under illusion. To become a husband means to maintain a wife



and children nicely by supplying wealth and security. However, a material husband cannot possibly do this, for he is dependent on his *karma*. *Karmaṇā-daiva-netreṇa*: his circumstances are determined by his past fruitive activities. Therefore if one proudly thinks he can protect his wife, he is under illusion. Kṛṣṇa is the only husband, and therefore the relationship between a husband and wife in this material world cannot be absolute. Because we have the desire to marry, Kṛṣṇa mercifully allows the so-called husband to possess a wife, and the wife to possess a so-called husband, for mutual satisfaction. In the *Īśopaniṣad* it is said, *tena tyaktena bhunjīthā*: the Lord provides everyone with his quota. Actually, however, every living entity is *prakṛti*, or female, and **Kṛṣṇa is the only husband.**" (SB 5.18.19, purport)

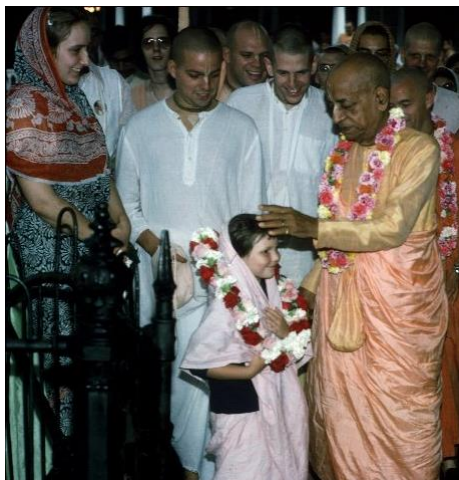
Within *daiva-varṇāśrama*, the divine understanding of Krishna as the real protector should always remain crystal clear in our consciousness. Lakṣmīdevī continues in the next verse: "He alone who is never afraid but who, on the contrary, gives complete shelter to all fearful persons can actually become a husband and protector. Therefore, my Lord, You are the only husband, and no one else can claim this position. If You were not the only husband, You would be afraid of others. Therefore persons learned in all Vedic literature accept only Your Lordship as everyone's master, and they think no one else a better husband and protector than You." (SB 5.18.20) In the purport, Srila Prabhupada writes: "People want to become a husband, a guardian, a governor or a political leader without knowing

the actual meaning of such a superior position . . . those who are actually learned and advanced in spiritual life do not accept any leader, husband or maintainer other than the Supreme Personality of Godhead . . . Since so-called leaders or dictators are completely under the control of material nature, they can never give complete protection to others, although they claim this ability due to false prestige. *Na te viduḥ svārtha-gatiṁ hi viṣṇum*: people do not know that real advancement in life consists of accepting the Supreme Personality of Godhead as one's master. Instead of deceiving themselves and others by pretending to be all-powerful, all political leaders, husbands and guardians should spread the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement so that everyone can learn how to surrender to Kṛṣṇa, the supreme husband." (SB 5.18.20, purport)



Playing the Marriage Game by the Rules

In the few years we inhabit this body we must dutifully fulfil our temporary roles as husbands, wives, fathers, sons and so on. Obviously a woman should perform preaching and other divine services without neglecting her other important duties. To a mother apparently giving undue priority to Deity worship, Srila Prabhupada wrote: "For you, child-worship is more important than deity-worship. If you cannot spend time with him, then stop the duties of pujari . . . These are not ordinary children, they are Vaikuntha children, and we are very fortunate we can give them chance to advance further in Krishna Consciousness. That is very great responsibility, do not neglect it or be confused. Your duty is very clear." (Letter to Arundhati, 30 July 1972) At the same time, Srila Prabhupada also



encouraged nursery programs to free up mothers so that they could do other things: "The nursery school program is very good. That is good that the mothers are being freed to increase their devotional service. It is not that women should only produce

children, but they are meant for advancing in devotion." (Letter to Jayatirtha, 20 Nov 1975) Once married, the woman is advised to wisely manage the marital relation and tolerate the shortcomings and idiosyncrasies of the man, if she wants to keep the marriage together. In connection with Devahuti, wife of Kardama Muni and mother of Kapiladeva, Srila Prabhupada writes: "Devahūti served her husband in two ways, *viśrambheṇa* and *gauraveṇa*. These are two important processes in serving the husband or the Supreme Personality of Godhead. *Viśrambheṇa* means 'with intimacy,' and *gauraveṇa* means 'with great reverence.' . . . 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. Even if there is some wrong on the part of the husband, the wife must tolerate it, and thus there will be no misunderstanding between husband and wife . . . *Damena ca*: a wife has to learn to control herself even if there is a misunderstanding. *Sauhr̥dena vācā madhurayā* means always desiring good for the husband and speaking to him with sweet



words. A person becomes agitated by so many material contacts in the outside world; therefore, in his home life he must be treated by his wife with sweet words." (SB 3.23.2, purport) Using pleasing language doesn't mean that the wife will automatically agree with each and every proposal of the husband. When Lord Rama was going from Ayodhya in exile, He wanted His wife Sita to stay behind, concerned that forest life would be too hard for Her. But She insisted: She wanted to go with Him. Lord Rama relented and let Her accompany Him. In fact, Sita Devi, impelled by Her divine attachment, spoke heavy words to persuade Sri Rama, practically insulting Him: "Distressed and highly agitated, Sita reproached broad-chested Rama, from affection and longing, in the following words: 'What



my father, the king of Mithila belonging to the country of Videha, think of himself having got as so-in-law you, a woman having the form of a man? . . . I shall accompany you to the forest.'"

(*Ramayana, Ayodhya Kanda,*

30.2, 3 & 7) So, listening to the husband doesn't mean blindly agreeing on everything. No; there is dialogue, there is an exchange of views - and the husband can agree, change his mind, and follow the wife's conclusion. Another relevant *Bhagavatam* narration regards the marital relation of Cyavana Muni and princess Sukanya.

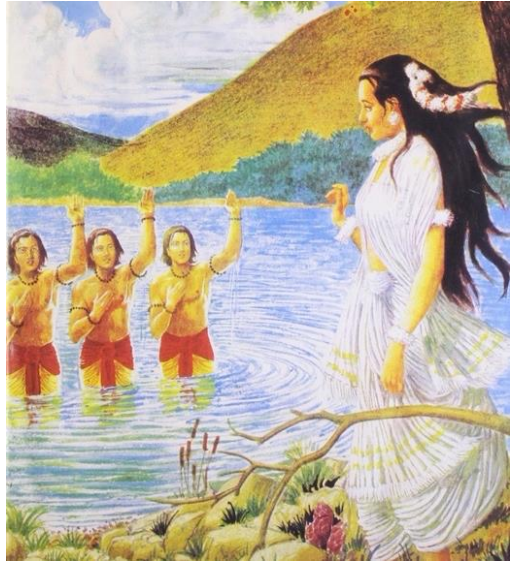


Translation: "Cyavana Muni was very irritable, but since Sukanyā had gotten him as her husband, she dealt with him carefully, according to his mood. Knowing his mind, she performed service

to him without being bewildered." From the purport: "This is an indication of the relationship between husband and wife. A great personality like Cyavana Muni has the temperament of always wanting to be in a superior position. Such a person cannot submit to anyone. Therefore, Cyavana Muni had an irritable temperament. His wife, Sukanyā, could understand his attitude, and under the circumstances she treated him accordingly. **If any wife wants to be happy with her husband, she must try to understand her husband's temperament and please him.** This is victory for a woman. Even in the dealings of Lord Kṛṣṇa with His different queens, it has been seen that although the queens were the daughters of great kings, they placed themselves before Lord Kṛṣṇa as His maidservants . . . Westerners contend that this is a slave mentality for the wife, but factually it is not; it is the tactic by which a woman can conquer the heart of her husband, however irritable or cruel he may be." (SB 9.3.10) The

Bhagavatam narrates: "When the heavenly physicians the Aśvinī-kumāra brothers once visited Cyavana Muni, the *muni* requested them to give him back his youth. These two physicians took Cyavana Muni to a particular lake, in which they bathed and regained full youth. After this, Sukanyā could not distinguish her husband. She then surrendered unto the Aśvinī-kumāras, who were very satisfied with her chastity and who therefore introduced her again to her husband." (SB

Canto 9, Chapter 3, Summary) And so the tolerant Sukanyā now had a handsome sage as husband (and perhaps receiving a fine-looking, youthful body also improved his mood, making him less irritable...).



Joining a man and a woman in holy marriage means also joining two egos. Srila Prabhupada in the above two purports especially focuses on the male ego. He doesn't say that it's good to be irritable or to be afflicted with superiority complex, but he is suggesting that the wife



needs to take those conditionings into account and act accordingly. After all, dear young lady readers, presumably you are not going to marry a super-self-realized soul, a *paramahansa* of the highest *prema* caliber; but someone who, as probably yourselves, is still working through material attachments and *anarthas*. As in playing a game one accepts the rules of the game, in accepting to live with a man, it's beneficial to handle the male ego with forbearance. That's doesn't mean to condone *anything* and *everything* without expressing any dissent; but it does

mean that women need to equip themselves with a robust dose of patience and tolerance to keep the marriage together and to avoid turning the household into a battlefield. Let's remember that, for either gender, marital dynamics are not the totality of life. The wife putting up with a petulant husband can take comfort in the fact that she can (and should) have so many other meaningful, rewarding spiritual connections. Let's face it: nowadays men are mostly damaged goods (and women are not necessarily in a much better shape). *Caveat emptor*, "let the buyer beware." Contemporary humans often reach marriage after indulging in so many debasing habits and undergoing so much corrupting influence. Let's not cultivate unrealistic expectations and sentimental fantasies. On the whole, notwithstanding the shortcomings of men, ladies would generally still do well to get married, make a solid, sustained effort to appease the male ego, and stick to the irrevocable vow to stay married - even if their husbands are not exactly *Manu-samhita* material. At the very least they should do it for their children, so that they can grow up in a united family. Always remember that the *grihastha-*

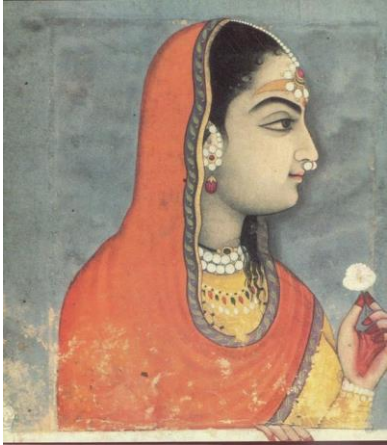


asrama - as everything else in *varṇāśrama* - is only a temporary platform to facilitate reaching something higher; ultimately love of God. None of the phases and conditions in life can give happiness in themselves without Krishna. And so, dear lady readers, if you wish to have a peaceful, rewarding, stable marriage, please seriously consider the instructions of the *Bhagavatam*, in which Narada Muni says: "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) Srila Prabhupada explains in the purport: "It is very important for peaceful householder life that a woman follow the vow of her husband. Any disagreement with the husband's vow will disrupt family life. In this regard, Cāṇakya Paṇḍita gives a very valuable instruction: *dampatyoh kalaho nāsti tatra śrīḥ svayam āgatāḥ*. When there are no fights

between husband and wife, the goddess of fortune automatically comes to the home." Yes, sometimes it's hard "to be always favorably disposed toward the husband," especially when he shows so many flaws in character; but please consider that life is meant for *tapasya*, austerity, and for the woman one of the ways of advancing in spiritual life in the *grihastha-asrama* (besides chanting her rounds, etc.) is to maintain an amiable atmosphere in the family by avoiding unnecessary tensions and conflicts, and by being tolerant of the shortcomings of the husband. That will attract the presence and blessings of the goddess



of fortune. Narada Muni continues: "A chaste woman must dress nicely and decorate herself with golden ornaments for the pleasure of her husband. Always wearing clean and attractive garments, she should sweep and clean the household with water and other liquids so that the entire house is always pure

and clean. She should collect the household paraphernalia and keep the house always aromatic with incense and flowers and must be ready to execute the desires of her husband. Being modest and truthful, controlling her senses, and speaking in sweet words, a chaste woman should engage in the service of her husband with love, according to time and circumstances." (SB 7.11.26-27) No

purport here; I guess Srila Prabhupada considered the above quite self-explanatory.

"Not Meant to Serve a Fallen Husband"

"A chaste woman should not be greedy, but satisfied in all circumstances." Narada Muni continues his instructions to married ladies, adding, at the end of the verse, an important caveat: "She must be very expert in handling household affairs and should be fully conversant with religious principles. She should speak pleasingly and truthfully and should be very careful and always clean and pure. **Thus a chaste woman should engage with affection in the service of a husband who is not fallen.**" (SB 7.11.28) In the purport, Srila Prabhupada confirms and elaborates: "Anyone who is a devotee is sinless. One who is not a devotee, however, is the most fallen and condemned. It is recommended, therefore, that a chaste wife not associate with a fallen husband. A fallen husband is one who is addicted to the four principles of sinful activity — namely illicit sex, meat-eating, gambling and intoxication. Specifically, if one is not a soul surrendered



to the Supreme Personality of Godhead, he is understood to be contaminated. Thus a chaste woman is advised not to agree to serve such a husband. It is not that a chaste woman should be like a slave while her husband is *narādhama*, the lowest of men. Although the duties of a woman are different from those of a man, a chaste woman is not meant to serve a fallen husband. If her husband is fallen, it is recommended that she give up his association. Giving up the association of her husband does not mean, however, that a woman should marry again and thus indulge in prostitution. If a chaste woman unfortunately marries a husband who is fallen, she should live separately from him. Similarly, a husband can separate himself from a woman who is not chaste according to the description of the *śāstra*." Srila Prabhupada was an outspoken opponent of divorce; he said, for instance: "What is this nonsense, divorce? There is no such thing in the Vedic civilization, divorce. **You must accept whatever God has given you as husband or wife. You must.**" (Conversation, Washington DC, 6 July 1976) Nonetheless in the above purport Srila Prabhupada shows that there is a limit to what a spouse



should tolerate before separating from an unqualified partner. It's noteworthy that Srila Prabhupada in the purport speaks only about *spiritual* disqualification; he is not mentioning domestic violence and other forms of abuse - which obviously must also be part of the equation.



For *varṇāśrama*, the importance of solid families cannot be overemphasized. The family is the building block of society. The stable family is the setting in which children can grow into well-adjusted individuals, eventually fulfilling their roles as healthy *brahmacaris*, responsible

grihasthas, detached *vanaprasthas* and reliable *sannyasis*. Children from dysfunctional or broken families find it much more challenging to become balanced, mature members of *daiva-varṇāśrama* (as unfortunately we can observe in the case of some ISKCON devotees with troubled childhoods). Srila Prabhupada declares: "Vedic marriage is not a farce; it is a spiritual obligation." (Lecture, London, 13 Aug 1971) It's therefore essential that married couples endeavor to remain together and keep the family in one piece. Having said that, as the above purport explains, there are limits to what a spouse should take from a fallen partner. This purport is simultaneously

very significant and very "dangerous." Significant because it emphasizes the principle of interdependence: Narada Muni's instructions to wives don't exist in a vacuum; his directives to be pleasant and service-oriented do not mean, as Srila Prabhupada puts it, "that a chaste woman should be like a slave while her husband is *narādhama*, the lowest of men." At the same time, the purport is *dangerous* because it could be easily misused and irresponsibly taken as a pretext to break up marriages even when the issues are not so serious. As usual with social interactions, there are a number of factors that need mature deliberation. Srila Prabhupada says: "A fallen husband is one who is addicted to the four principles of sinful activity — namely illicit sex, meat-eating, gambling and intoxication." What degree of habituality would determine an addiction? Should the husband be addicted to every one of "the four principles of sinful activity" to classify as "fallen"? (In other words, should a wife tolerate, say, a meat-eater, drug-addict and philandering husband who is not involved in gambling?) How much time should be given to a "fallen" spouse to reform? What difference



does it make if when the couple got married both of them were "fallen"? (In other words, if when they tied the knot neither of them was a practicing Vaisnava.) Where to exactly draw the line that cannot be crossed? These are delicate and crucial questions, that shouldn't be answered impulsively or, even worse, influenced by cravings for a younger, richer or sexier partner. We recommend caution and diligence, and consultation with mature, brahminical advisors. Every situation will have its particulars and we can't make a sweeping, blanket statement that will cover all cases: "Leave him!" "No, stay with the guy!"

The *Sri Caitanya-caritamrita*, *Madhya-lila*, Chapter 15, narrates a relevant episode: In Puri, Sārvabhauma Bhaṭṭācārya "had a son-in-law named Amogha, who was the husband of his daughter named Śāṭhī. Although born in an aristocratic *brāhmaṇa* family, this Amogha was a great faultfinder and blasphemer." (245) Apparently, he wasn't engaged in gross sinful activities, but he was excessively offensive and judgmental. Once he criticized Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu for allegedly eating too much; Sārvabhauma Bhaṭṭācārya "ran after him to strike



him with a stick, but Amogha fled so fast that Bhaṭṭācārya could not catch him. Bhaṭṭācārya then began to curse and call his son-in-law ill names." (250-251) "When Śāṭhī's mother, Bhaṭṭācārya's wife, heard of this incident, she immediately began to strike her head and chest, saying again, 'Let Śāṭhī become a widow!'" (252) Although Lord Caitanya tried to pacify him, Sārvabhauma Bhaṭṭācārya was unwavering in his condemnation of his son-in-law. He said: "I shall never see the face of that blasphemer. I reject him and give up his relationship. I shall never even speak his name. Inform my daughter Śāṭhī to abandon her relationship with her husband because he has fallen down. When the husband falls down, it is the wife's duty to relinquish the relationship." (263-264) The Bhaṭṭācārya then quoted from *smṛiti-sastra*: *patim ca patitaṁ tyajet*, "When a husband is fallen, his relationship must be given up." (265) The next morning Amogha fell ill with cholera. He was about to die but Lord Caitanya personally went to see him, saved him, and even bestowed upon him ecstatic love for Krishna (as a side benefit, Lord Caitanya also rescued his marriage...) So, after all, the daughter of Sārvabhauma Bhaṭṭācārya didn't have to repudiate her husband. In one of



the purports in this section, Srila Prabhupada writes: "A wife should dedicate her life and everything to Kṛṣṇa for further advancement in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. If her husband abandons Kṛṣṇa consciousness and she gives up her connection with him, she follows in the footsteps of the *dvija-patnīs*, the wives of the *brāhmaṇas* who were engaged in performing sacrifices. The wife is not to be condemned for cutting off such a relationship." (Cc *Madhya*, 15.264, purport) Such a drastic step, of course, should not be taken whimsically, on the spur of the moment, in a minute of fleeting frustration, or motivated by lack of chastity (the desire for another man). I hesitated to include the story, because irresponsible women may misuse it; but it's in *Sri Caitanya-caritamrita*, such a sacred, canonical text; and the words above are the commentary of the Founder-Acarya, our primary guide in *varṇāśrama* matters. But I warn all ladies readers: *do not take it lightly, as a pretext to dump slightly defective husbands*. Let's also consider that the uncompromising reaction of Sārvabhauma Bhaṭṭācārya and his wife appears as a manifestation of their unalloyed love for Lord Caitanya, which shouldn't be artificially imitated by lesser devotees. Sometimes staying with a "fallen husband" might be the best option available - as a later section will explain (a section that might even *appear* to contradict some of the ideas presented here). In a sense, but on a completely different plane, I feel similar to when Śrīla Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī says that he shouldn't talk about certain subjects, but that if he doesn't talk about them nobody would know those facts: "All these

conclusions are unfit to disclose in public. But if they are not disclosed, no one will understand them." (Cc *Adi*, 4.231) Of course, he was talking about very elevated topics of Radha-Krishna love, not about separation between earthly husbands and wives, but the similarity remains: the theme is risky because it can be easily misused and taken as an excuse to recklessly break marriages and wreck families. At the same time, the teaching that there are limits to what a woman should tolerate in a relation come from the holiest of scriptures and shouldn't be ignored or occulted. It's irresponsible to use these instructions as a pretext to ditch slightly imperfect husbands; but it's also irresponsible to teach that the wife should *always* stick with a fallen husband, no matter what. Decisions in this area should be taken only after consulting wise, trusted and balanced advisors. All efforts should be made to prevent it, but there are cases - hopefully rare - in which separating from one's spouse represents a painful but necessary step in life. In this connection we often hear the story of Srila Prabhupada's sister, Srimati Bhavatarini Devi Dasi (affectionately known as *Pishima*), who remained married and served his non-devotee, fish-eating husband. We hear praises of her conduct as appropriate for a Vedic wife. I don't have all the details, but



almost certainly the way she acted was the best in her social, economic, emotional and spiritual circumstances. We should honor her choice, but we should remain conscious that, according to *sastra* and the Founder-Acarya, her behavior is not necessarily *the* example that should be followed by all women, in all places, at all times and in all situations. We fall at her feet and worship her as the venerable sister and God-sister of the Founder-Acarya and as an elevated Vaisnavi; but let's recognize that endorsing her behavior as the *only* valid option constitutes an incomplete and potentially injurious doctrine. Such a great soul as Bhavatarini Devi was able to endure living for decades with a fallen husband and still thrive spiritually; but it doesn't mean that all women of lesser spiritual stature should imitate her. Lord Siva drank an ocean of poison with little or no side-effects; should we copy him? One-sided, *this-way-or-the-highway* directions fail to illuminate complex issues and risk to exacerbate problems.

Unilateral, blinkered directives may do more harm than good. There is no "one-size-fits-all" in social matters. Attempting to force everyone into the same pattern debases *varṇāśrama* to a system marred by bigotry, intolerance and prejudice. In any case,

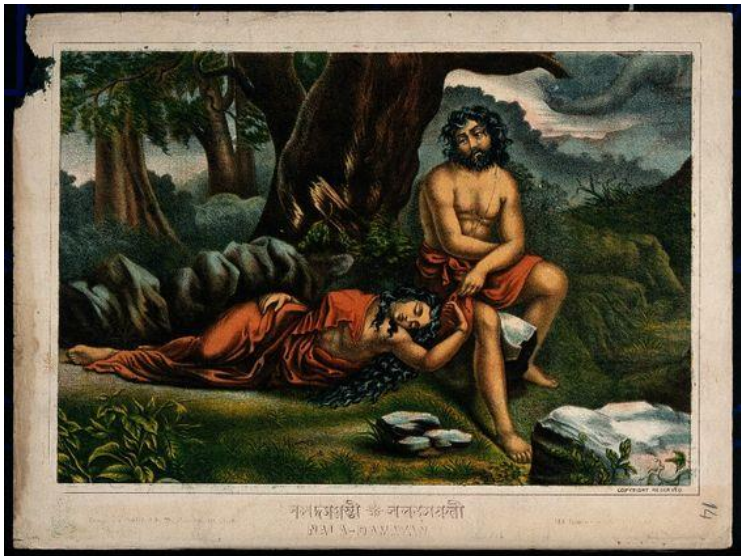


there shouldn't be cookie-cutter recommendations. We cannot just say: "The Vaisnavi must remain with the non-devotee husband." Or, "The Vaisnavi must leave the non-devotee husband." Every situation is slightly different, with many factors to consider. Something may work in one case and not in another. In all cases when facing life-changing decisions we need to consult experienced, mature counselors. That's the *varṇāśrama* way: when facing difficult dilemmas, one should ask direction to the *brahmanas* (but to *qualified brahmanas*, not to any fanatic wearing a brahmin thread). Prevention, when possible, is better than cure. Before marriage, both male and female should do everything they can to make sure they get a partner who is compatible with them in Krishna



consciousness and in everything else in life. Krishnanandini Devi, a founding member of the Grihasta Vision Team (GVT), a group of certified marriage and family therapists dedicated to the health of Vaisnava marriages, advises: "Examine what both of your motives are, what your goals are, and look realistically at your expectations of each other. What roles do you see yourselves playing? For

instance, the traditional role of a wife may be to cook, clean and do the laundry, but what if she works full-time just like the man?" Sometimes that preliminary dialogue, is not possible, because the lady is already married when she accepts Krishna consciousness. The grave decision of abandoning one's husband can only be prompted by an impending danger to the spiritual (or physical) life of the wife. It should never be indulged in because of mundane, selfish considerations. Srila Prabhupada says: "*Satī* means chastity. There are many stories of *Satī*, chaste woman. *Nala-damayantī*. His (her) husband became so poverty-stricken. He was king, but he became later on so poverty-stricken that he had no sufficient cloth. The husband and wife was putting on the same cloth, half



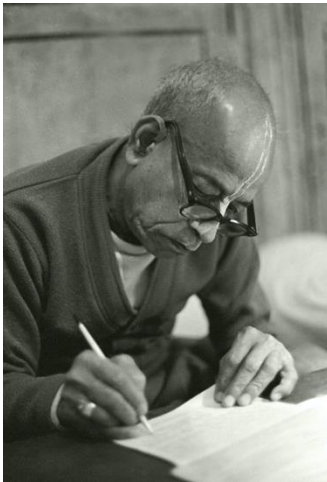
Nala Damayanti (c.1880) Calcutta Art Studio

and half. So still, still there was no divorce. You see? Still the woman did not consider . . . 'why shall I live with him?' These are some of the extreme examples of chastity. Not to speak of olden days. I have seen in Bombay, in 1935 or '34, on the roadside, there was a beggar . . . the face was defaced. Might be some accident. His eyes and everything became defaced. He could not see; everything became useless. So he, he was sitting on the roadside, and his wife also, also sitting. But I saw that beggar was neat and clean. The wife was also neat and clean. The wife's business was that to keep the husband always neat and clean and fresh; and bring him there and again take him at home. Young woman. So I could understand that the wife is so chaste. She has not left such ugly husband." (Lecture on Bg 1.40, London, 28 July 1973) The husband becoming poverty-stricken or disfigured (or being sick, or old, or simply boring and unexciting) do not constitute sufficient grounds to abandon him.

"It Does Not Matter If Husband Is Qualified Or Not" (Not a Sastric Quote)

On an ISKCON website I came across the article "When the Husband is Not a Devotee," which expressed views that I found intensely dogmatic, severely mistaken and poorly argued. For instance, the author, which will remain unnamed, states: "All women have just one duty or *dharma* in this world - to serve her husband." Wow! What about the *sanatana-dharma*, the real eternal *dharma*? What about

serving the guru? Shouldn't women also do that? And what about women who never get married, are they automatically precluded from a life of *dharma*? The article continues: "When we say all women, then it means all women. It is called *stri-dharma* (SB 7.11.25-29)." Interestingly, the *Bhagavatam* verses quoted, ostensibly to support the idea that the only *dharma* of women is to serve their husband, don't say anything like that. In fact, one of those verses directly debunks the message of the article: "a chaste woman should engage with affection in the service of a husband who is not fallen." (SB 7.11.28). The author continues: "For the wife, *vivaha* is her second birth (*dvi-ja*) her initiation into Vedic culture." Although such statement has some support in ancient texts, Srila Prabhupada on many occasions declared his lady disciples as *dvija*, twice born *brahmanas*, upon receiving second, brahminical initiation. A couple of examples: "I accept the



following as duly initiated twice born Brahmans. Yajñabhuk Dasa. Lalitasakhi Devi Dasi. Rasalila Devi Dasi." (Letter to Kirtanananda, 21 Nov 1974) "I accept the following as twice-born *brahmanas*: Janaladha das, Manipuspaka dasi, Manisa dasi, Damodara Pandit das, Kalanidhi das, Uttamauja das, Ajitananda das and Mudhakari devi dasi." (Letter to

Kirtanananda 10 Nov 1975) The article, through a rickety logic and going directly against *sastra*, also maintains that: "it does not matter if husband is qualified or not according to our standard or expectations. He is still the representative of Krishna. Who sent us this husband? Krishna sent him." In one sense everything represents Krishna, everything being a manifestation of His energy, but there are gradations of representations. To represent Krishna in the true sense, a husband should speak what Krishna spoke and act according to what Krishna instructed. Was the husband sent by Krishna as a merciful gift of a God conscious companion? Was marrying him simply the consequence of grievous sins, of bad karma? Was it the result of an ephemeral infatuation? Or was a marriage incompetently arranged by parents? *Sastra* says that "It is better to keep the daughter unmarried than force her to marry an undeserving person." (*Manu-samhita* 9.89) Where does it say that a worthless, sinful husband should be seen as "the representative of Krishna"? The article goes as far as comparing husbands, including bad husbands, with the Deity form of Krishna: "Like we have a *murti* of Krishna in some material form—He may be



carved and made with very delicate and attractive features, or He may be painted or carved not really perfect, but still Krishna is present in those

statue forms/*murtis* and we offer our service to Him. Even imperfectly carved *murti* is still Krishna's manifestation in this world. So is the husband for wife; perfect, imperfect, good, bad, devotee, or non-devotee." Some husbands - especially the crooked ones - will certainly love this analogy likening them to Deities, but actually the comparison is a weird mental contraption, a forced similarity to support a mistaken theory. A Deity is Krishna Himself - even if carved with differing degrees of expertise - if properly installed through the bona fide process. How can *any* conditioned husband be considered as representing Krishna without any prerequisite, without undergoing any purification, without any process of becoming qualified - just because of getting married? What's the special, magical ingredient of the wedding that



turns a corrupt schmuck into a consecrated being? The analogy doesn't work - and the underlying concept is off beam. The article also declares: "If husband wants her to serve him meat, alcohol, sex, etc, she should serve him." Hmm... completely opposed to Srila Prabhupada's teaching: "A fallen husband is one who is addicted to the four principles of sinful activity — namely illicit sex, meat-

eating, gambling and intoxication . . . a chaste woman is advised not to agree to serve such a husband. It is not that a chaste woman should be like a slave while her husband is *narādhama*, the lowest of men." The article persists in dispensing bizarre analogies (please pay attention, because the following one is truly... something): "If we are dealing on platform of justice and morality and think 'if my husband is not good then I will not serve him,' then we are not going to like Krishna. How will we tolerate that Krishna said He is going to be with me but is with another *gopi* instead? Is that justice? No it is not." Let's try to decipher. So, it seems that, according to the author, supporting and facilitating the husband's sinful habits is very favorable for *bhakti*. On the other hand, refusing to indulge every craving of the degraded husband is an obstacle in developing love of God (?!). The message sounds as the opposite of reality. The part about the *gopis* is also puzzling... It seems that what the author is trying to say is that, because Krishna at times behaves in a tricky way, appearing to breach mundane norms of morality and truthfulness, it's good for the wife to serve a sinful man, because it will acclimatize her to the trickery of the eternal Vrindavana. Living, in this world, enmeshed with the



husband's turpitude will prepare the wife for the transcendental chicanery of the spiritual world. Every whisky she pours, she makes spiritual advancement; every beef she roasts, she purifies her heart; every carnal act she allows, her path to liberation opens wider. This seems to be the wacky, irrational message of the article. You might wonder: why am I describing such strange ideas? This book is on how to mess up *varṇāśrama*, and I want to show tangible examples of the kind of arguments self-appointed *varṇāśrama* advocates use to substantiate their social theories. It seems that for some of them women's *only* purpose is to act as subordinates to men - regardless of the man's spiritual or moral stature. Women should live in serfdom and subjugation, indiscriminately enduring exploitation. That's their "one duty and *dharma*." They are not much better than chattel and should behave accordingly. "The point," the article educates us, "is that everyone should follow their *dharma* . . . For women it is simple. Just follow what your husband says." Yes, why complicate one's life trying to discriminate between right and wrong, religious and irreligious? Women!



Blindly follow your man and you'll be just fine! Live in captivity under your husband's domination; assist and abet his degenerate behavior; just satisfy your debauched husband! That's the way for you to qualify for the spiritual world, where you will serve the Supreme Debauchee, Lord Krishna. And don't forget that, according to this article, to your husband you should be "Speaking sweetly and be respectful." And this was all published on an official ISKCON site. Not surprisingly, at one point the article brings up the example of Bhavatarini Devi: "We have the example of Pisima Mataji, HDG Srila Prabhupada's sister. She was not only Srila Prabhupada's sister, but his God-sister as well. Just try to imagine her situation; she was married to a non-devotee, who turned out to be a rogue, meat eater, he drank alcohol, he was a woman-hunter, spending money on gambling, etc. . . . Not only was he a non-devotee, but he had many bad habits . . . she didn't criticize her husband, she didn't argue with him, but she did her prescribed duties." I am not sure if the above depiction of the husband is accurate; also I had never heard it before, but the author asserts that her husband, "ended up worshiping her." Promoting the sad situation Bhavatarini Devi endured as the standard for every Vaisnavi married to a non-devotee represents a total disservice to the devotional community. Pushing the idea that her conduct is the *only legitimate behavior* is false and misleading - and directly against the teachings of her glorious brother, Srila Prabhupada, and of the scriptures. As we have seen before, the *Sri Caitanya-caritamrita*, for instance, reports a quote from the *smṛti-śāstra*: "*patim ca*

patitaṁ tyajet" "When a husband is fallen, one's relationship with him must be given up." (Cc *Madhya*, 15.265) Therefore, although honoring the spiritual stature of Bhavatarini Devi, we cannot indiscriminately recommend to every woman to follow her example. For



some ladies it may work, but for many it would be spiritually suicidal. Anyway, despite all its creepy, disorienting and spine-chilling propositions, the article also contains some sound counsel: "a woman should never argue with a drunken man, because he can kill her." Good advice, no?

Marrying or Staying Married with a Non-devotee?

During presentations on *varṇāśrama*, more than once I was asked: "What if there are not enough men devotees available? Can a Vaisnavi marry a non-devotee?" This is not a theoretical question. There are places where ISKCON attracts more women than men. In China, for instance, we have about three women devotees for every male devotee. Some 60% of these ladies are already married to a non-devotee, and the general ISKCON policy there is to promote stable marriages, stable families, even if the spouse is not practicing *bhakti-yoga*. Obviously every

case is different and we can't make blanket, universal statements, but, certainly, the possibility of marrying a non-devotee should not be rejected a priori. In some case it's the best available option. Non-devotees come in all shapes and flavors, in all combination of *gunas*. On one end you find terribly tamasic men, addicted to all sorts of degradations - eating horrible things, thinking hideous thoughts, listening to awful music and so on. On the other end you have men with healthy habits; they might be vegetarian, they might exercise regularly, they might meditate daily, and they might possess strong ethics and hold compatible, monotheistic religious views. We sometimes use the moniker "non-devotee" in a colloquial, non-technical sense, but many might be devotees of God,



practicing within different traditions. Sattvic men can practically fulfil all anthropological needs of a wife, even a Hare Krishna wife. They could

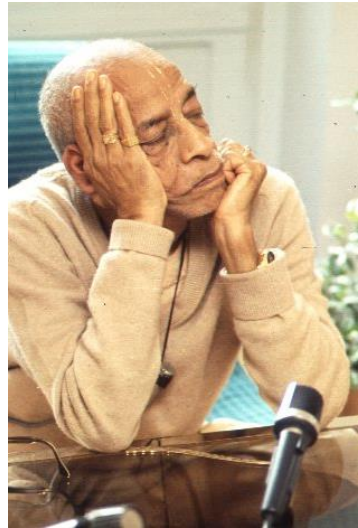
also become Krishna devotees at one point; but even if they don't, they can still affectionately support their wife in her devotional path. Let's also remember that not everyone who is connected with ISKCON is automatically a perfect or even passable husband. Not everyone with a bead-bag is necessarily a noble knight in shining armor,

riding on an immaculately white horse and valiantly protecting *dharma*. Not every initiated man possesses the impeccable character and the exceptional morals that a Vaisnavi girl may dream about. Some are egregious delinquents; aberrant individuals to avoid at all costs. I can give multiple examples, such as the Vrindavana pujari ("Vrindavana pujari" as in "serving on the altar



at the ISKCON Krishna-Balarama Mandir") who married a Vaisnavi from the Western Hemisphere. To make a sordid story short: they got married; he moved to her country and into her house; he then started taking more and more money from her. She was running a business; he took it over and made it collapse. Devotees caught him with several women. He took a loan - on the wife's name - and squandered that money too. More of his infidelity surfaced. Finally he went back to India, married another wealthy lady and asked the previous wife to sign the divorce papers, promising that he would pay the outstanding loan. She signed. He didn't pay. Obviously this is not the customary conduct of Vrindavana pujaris, of pujaris as a class, or of ISKCON devotees in general. These categories boast many saintly and responsible individuals; but the point is that we shouldn't assume all official ISKCON devotees to be angelic, trustworthy gentlemen and take all non-*bhakti*-yogis as evil devils

sporting monstrous protruding fangs and sharp horns, while concealing malicious intentions. Some of them would never, ever, even *imagine* committing the atrocities that certain "ISKCON devotees" perpetrated on their wives. Some men may not be practicing Vaisnavas, but they might be much more responsible and caring husbands than some formally practicing devotees. Srila Prabhupada writes: "*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (SB 5.5.18) states, *na patiś ca sa syān na mocayed yaḥ samupeta-mṛtyum*: 'One cannot be a husband if he cannot liberate his dependents from inevitable death.' If a person is not in Kṛṣṇa consciousness and is bereft of spiritual power, he cannot protect his wife from the path of repeated birth and death." True, but a non-devotee husband may at least be able to fulfil his wife's financial and emotional needs; he can sincerely protect her and give her children. He might not be like a guru to her, but he might be respectful and supportive, and not create particular obstacles to her practice of *bhakti-yoga*. I know a dedicated devotee lady in Italy whose husband stubbornly refuses to accept Krishna consciousness; nonetheless, they come together to the temple, he is friendly with the devotees and even helps with chores -



such as washing pots - although he adamantly declares: "I am not doing it for Krishna; I am doing it as a service to the community!" For some Vaisnavis - call it karma or call it whatever you like - that's the best they may get. So, things are not just black and white. The human eye can distinguish among more than five-hundred shades of grey.



Similarly, the devotional intelligence can identify hundreds of gradations of marital fitness, from the ideal circumstances to the nastiest situations. Let's remember that rejecting the defective doesn't guarantee achieving the superlative.

Same utmost caution and restraint are, of course, also necessary when a devotee husband wishes to separate from his non-devotee wife. I remember once, in China, a middle-aged devotee approached me and asked: "Should I leave any money to my wife, once I leave her?" I said, "Wait a minute; let me first understand: why should you leave her at all?" "She is not a devotee." he answered. "But," I asked, "you married her when you were also not a devotee, right?" "Yes." he confirmed. "So," I pressed, "regarding the expectations you had when you married her, she is not doing anything wrong, right?" "Right." He conceded. "Then why do you need to leave her?" I asked. He appeared disappointed with my line of questioning -

his original inquiry was simply if he had to leave her some money or not, but I was digging much deeper. He said, "She is into gambling." "OK," I said, "but is she gambling your money or her money?" "Her personal money." He had to admit. I then asked: "Besides this habit - gambling her own money, the money she herself earns - is she otherwise fulfilling all other duties as a wife?" "Yes." he had to begrudgingly acknowledge. "Then," I concluded, "I don't see why you should leave her. The question of leaving her some money or not doesn't even arise." He wasn't too happy with my advice but offered no further arguments. I suspect he was simply seeking some legitimization from me to divorce his middle-aged wife and marry a younger woman. I didn't perceive any religious basis for his plan to ditch his present partner. I didn't see any pure motivation in his desire to separate.



In many cases - although not in *all* cases - staying with one's lawfully married spouse may be the best policy. And failing to do so, due to restlessness, due to immature understanding of the philosophy, or due to mundane aspirations, may cause disastrous degradation. For instance, I know an initiated lady devotee, in Europe, who was married and had three children. The husband was apparently a good man by secular standards; a caring

father and responsible husband (and was also wealthy). But he was not a Hare Krishna. Sharing her dilemma if to leave him or not, she consulted an astrologer, who strongly discouraged her to break the marriage, and instead advised her to stay with the man. Nonetheless, in her confusion of priorities, she left him - and her children - on the pretext that "he wanted to have sex." To make a long story short, she ended up having extramarital sexual relations with married men, this time devotees (I know of two of such dalliances but there might have been more). Last time I saw her she looked much older and was still unsettled in life. She threw away what appeared to be a largely favorable family situation; she left three children to



grow without their mother; she abandoned an honest husband (whose horrific sin was that he "wanted to have sex" with his duly married wife) and ended up sleeping around in adulterous affairs,

exploited by unscrupulous ISKCON men. Her leaving the "fallen" husband may have made her ten times more fallen.

"Krishna Is the Only Male"



Sanskrit *sutras* often have threefold meanings, on the physical, psychological and spiritual level. In two *sutras*, the ancient astrological text *Brihat Parasara Hora Sastra* defines the Sun and the Moon - the archetypes of the male and female aspects and psyche:

“Honey-yellow eyed is the Sun, square and radiantly pure, o’ twice-born, of *pitta* nature, intelligent, masculine, with but little hair, o’ twice-born.” (*Brihat Parasara Hora Sastra*, 3.23) “Abounding in *vata* and *kapha* and filled with knowing is the Moon of round body, o’ twice-born, auspiciously eyed, of sweet speech, fluctuating and love-sick.” (*Brihat Parasara Hora Sastra*, 3.24) Psychologically, the square nature of the Sun makes it steadfast and consistent in thought - and therefore in action. It also indicates security in one's spiritual core, a self-esteem coming from being firmly, intimately and intuitively anchored in spirit. The honey-yellow - or golden - color indicates nobility free from arrogance, enjoying other's individuality, never harming the vulnerable and always helping the needy. The fiery temperament - *pitta* - makes



the Sun courageous, dynamic and magnetic; and enjoying fair competition. The Sun thinks logically of what it must do and how to fulfil his responsibilities. Hair is out of our immediate control; it's blown by the wind and cannot move by itself. Having "little hair," the Sun is

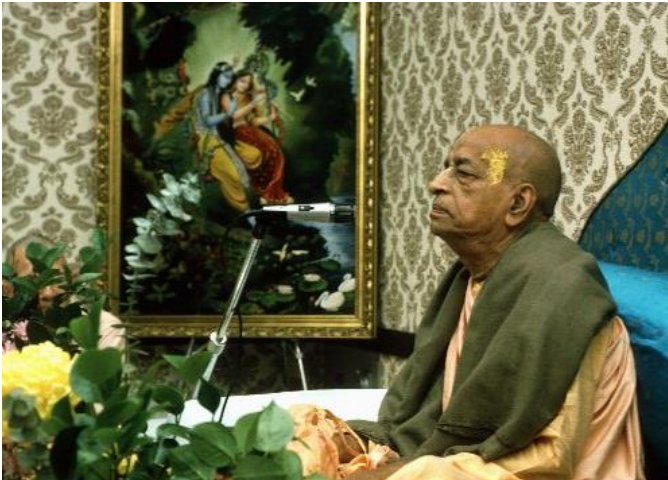
not very interested in that which he has little control over.

The Moon is said to be round; physically the womanly form is curvier and more smooth-edged; mentally, the round nature makes the Moon capable of quickly changing direction, as the circumstances in life require. The Moon has an agreeable and pleasant appearance that brings peace and comfort to the viewer. *Vata* makes the Moon physically less powerful but more excitable. Physically, *Kapha* makes the Moon softer, while psychologically it makes her emotional, peace loving, forgiving and appreciative of comforts. The Moon fluctuates from day to day as it goes through the cycle of waxing and waning, which is reflected in the dynamics of the woman's body. Psychologically, her fluctuations are seen in the emotional changes due to

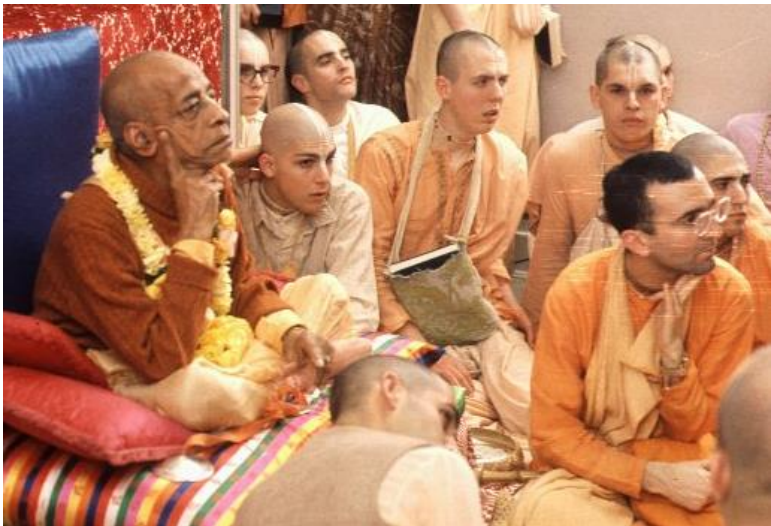


stimuli from the environment. Whereas the Sun uses his intelligence to follow a rational process to arrive at the truth of things, the Moon is filled with knowing and must only look within herself to discover the truth of any matter. The Moon not only has a sweet-sounding voice but also desires to say sweet words; she views words first as tools to help people feel good, and second to provide facts. The Moon is said to be love-sick. This characteristic makes the Moon much more relationship-centered than the Sun, causing her to desire emotional intimacy. Spiritually, it causes her to desire spiritual union.

We all need to reconnect with our deepest, feminine identity as personal beings enjoyed by the Lord. All souls, are, in fact, *prakriti*, feminine entities yearning for the union with the original *purusa*; with the one, absolute and eternal male, Sri Krishna. "[E]veryone of us has to realize that Krishna is the only single *purusa*. *Purusa*



synonymously means male, but actually, in the spiritual dictionary, male means 'enjoyer' and female means 'enjoyed.' So in this sense, Krishna is the only male and all others being energies of Krishna, they are *prakṛti*, or female." (Letter to Janaki, 28 Feb 1969) Once in a lecture, while explaining that "according to Vedic civilization, the woman is accepted as hindrance to spiritual advancement," Srila Prabhupada immediately clarified that's it's the false conception of being the enjoyer that's condemned; the false idea that we are meant to enjoy other people's bodies: "You do not think that only woman is woman. **The man is also woman.** Don't think that the woman is condemned, man is not. Woman means enjoyed, and man means enjoyer. So this feeling, this feeling is condemned. If I see one woman for enjoyment, so I am man. And



if woman also sees another man for enjoyment, she is also man. Woman means enjoyed and man means enjoyer. So anyone who has got feeling of enjoyment, he is considered to be man. So here both sexes . . . everyone is planning, 'How I shall enjoy?' Therefore he is *puruṣa*, artificially. Otherwise, originally, we are all *prakṛti*, *jīva*, either woman or man. This is outward dress." (Lecture on SB 6.1.44-45, Vrindavana, 1 Sept 1975)

God is the only male. How does He deal with His devotees? As they want to be dealt with. Srila Prabhupada explains in the *Bhagavatam*: "Here the words *bhaktānām anurūpātma-darśanam* mean that the Personality of Godhead manifests His multiforms according to the desires of the devotees. For example, Hanumānjī (Vajrāṅgajī) wanted to see the form of the Lord as the Personality of Godhead Rāmacandra, whereas other Vaiṣṇavas want to see the form of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, and still



other devotees want to see the Lord in the form of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa . . . the Lord is always pleased to favor the devotee in the particular form in which the devotee wants to worship

and render service unto Him." (SB 3.20.25, purport) This is male - not ordering around for whatever one wants with the expectation that it should be done without any consideration. Real men are gentle, sensitive, and accommodative. Many of these androcentric, misogynistic men are simply women with male genitalia. It's hard for women to get along with them because it's like two women vying for control.

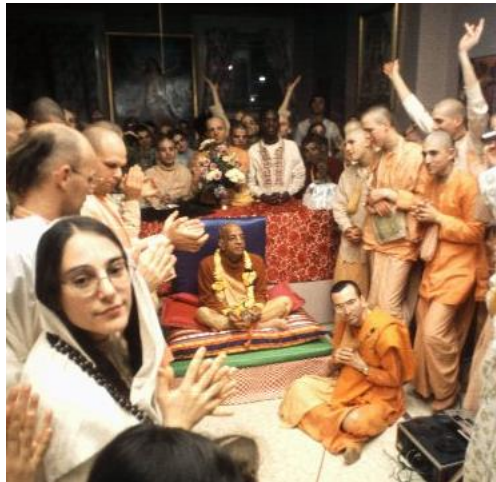


Our psyche possesses both a male and a female side; it embodies both prototypical characteristics of the masculine and the feminine: the male acts, the female responds; the masculine is rational, the feminine emotional; the male initiates, the female receives; the feminine

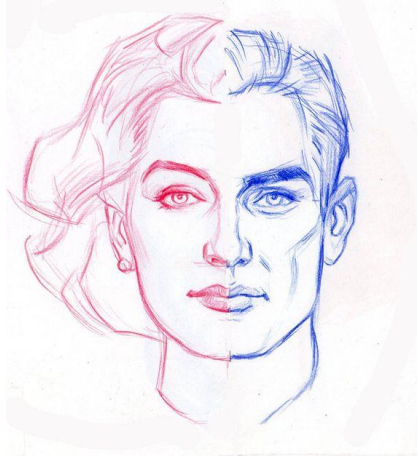
nourishes and nurtures; the masculine controls and disciplines; the male works to achieve what he loves; the female wishes to experience love. It is said that the wife should follow the husband; but *following* implies that the person being *followed* is moving forward. The husband can only expect the wife to follow him if he is actively going somewhere. Many marriages fail because the man is ignorant of the nature of the relation. He just likes to think that he is the boss, but he doesn't understand that he is trying to be the boss in a female-like way. The truly male

man wishes his wife to be the best she can, to develop as much as possible as a servant of guru and Krishna. He is encouraging; not discouraging due to his lack of confidence. Real Vaisnava men, for instance, shouldn't feel uncomfortable and disoriented in, say, seeing ladies excel in learning and teaching the philosophy. The secure husband rather rejoices in seeing his wife assimilating the scriptures and presenting them effectively. Feeling personally minimized is a symptom of insecurity and unmanliness. In a letter, Srila Prabhupada expresses his desire to see both "boys and girls" become experts in studying and spreading Krishna consciousness: "[S]iddhantic conclusions are being mentioned in all my books, and the boys and girls in our Krsna Society should now give more attention for studying the books very attentively . . . I hope in Washington center you will ask all the boys and girls to follow this method, because henceforward we will have to face many scholars and philosophers to stabilize our Krsna Consciousness movement."

(Letter to Krsna Devi, 17 Feb 1970)
Grihastha men acting as women is a huge issue in our society, a huge



destabilizing force in *varṇāśrama*. Many men are male only in the strictly physiological sense - but psychologically they are women. Because such men act as women, the women have to act as men. The life of the couple works according to a *dynamic equilibrium*: With a full male you will have a full female. With a partial male you will have a partial female. If the man is, say, thirty-percent female, the woman will have to be thirty-percent male. The missing maleness in the man has to be equalized by the woman, and vice versa.



Ultimately the nature of the self is feminine, but the soul in the male body is expected to manifest some degree of healthy masculine qualities. Often the petulant complaints and ululating lamentations of the "males" are actually manifestation of femininity and psychological dependence. "Oh my God! These women are so aggressive and self-directed!" Cry some of the male *varṇāśrama*-fan, "They demand space to grow, to be the best they can be; but what about me? I feel challenged, my masculinity being threatened... Oh my God! How unnerving and distressing! How painful and unpleasant! Alas, feminism is overwhelming and crushing me; help, HELP!" The



emphasis on the wish that women change to make the "males" more comfortable and secure, is a sign of the feminine mind, a symptom of an effeminate disposition. Discomfort with the strength of the "other" (gender, race, caste) is not a virile quality. It is weakness mixed with illusory entitlement. It's not Sun; it's Moon. Demanding all sorts of outstanding Vedic qualities from women - but asking none from men - is unrealistic and unfair; and not manly at all.

First Class Men Wanted

We come to my favourite quote on the topic of the interaction between the genders. A little context: this exchange happens in private, after a press conference in

which the role of women, among other things, was discussed:

Prabhupāda: There is cases of rape cases. The victims are women. Why the victim is not man? Why? In every rape case the sufferer, or the victim, is woman. And why not the man? . . .

Brahmānanda: Actually, they are just feeling frustrated, because it is a fact that woman has been exploited by the men. So now they want to counteract this.

Prabhupāda: No, we don't say that woman should be exploited by men. **We say the man should be responsible and give protection to woman.**

Brahmānanda: But they feel so angry from the exploitation that they cannot accept that actually a man could protect them.

Prabhupāda: That is bad experience. But the ideal is different. **Ideal is that man must be first class and he must be responsible to take care of the woman**, and she should be given all protection, all necessities. That is the duty of man. Just like father takes the charge of his daughter, similarly, husband should take charge of the woman. And similarly, elderly sons also took charge of the woman. The father never exploits the daughter. She [he] gives all protection. That is the duty of the husband also. When she is grown up, she cannot remain under the protection of father. She is given, therefore, to a suitable boy to take charge. But the charge is the same - to give

protection, all comforts. And because there is no first-class man to take charge of the woman, they are declaring independence. All the men are doing that. They keep girlfriend, make her pregnant and go away, goes away . . . That we also said, that there is no first-class men. So if there is first-class men, then whole question is solved.

Jagadīśa: The men are behaving just like dogs.

Prabhupāda: Yes.

(Room Conversation after Press Conference, Chicago, 9 July 1975)

Obviously the next question is: how to create "first-class men"? God, the *Bhagavatam* and Srila Prabhupada already answered that question: *gurukula*. The next section of this book, "Varṇāśrama Without *Gurukula*? Just a Hobby," elaborates on it; but, for a sneak preview, here is what Srila Prabhupada says about creating functional husbands: "A husband should be trained at the very beginning of his life. *Kaumāra ācaret prājño dharmān bhāgavatān iha* (SB



7.6.1). During the time of *brahmacarya*, or student life, a *brahmacārī* should be taught to be expert in *bhāgavata-dharma*, devotional service." (SB 6.18.40, purport). Dear male readers, please raise your hand if you were trained from "the very beginning" of your life in devotional service. Hmm... not too many hands went up... Therefore, men, to protect your own dignity and fairness, do not demand too much from your wife or would-be wife. How can you expect her to be a perfectly "Vedic wife" (whatever that means), if you are not a perfectly "Vedic husband" (whatever that means)? As the saying goes: people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. We shouldn't criticize others - such as women - for being less than ideal if we ourselves are flawed in so many ways. Before expecting unquestioning devotion from our wives, we should ask ourselves: "Am I behaving in ways that inspire trust, loyalty and commitment? Am I *commanding* respect, or simply *demanding* it?" As ISKCON guru Radhanath Maharaja puts it: "In India every husband likes his wife to be like Sita, but very few husbands want to be like Rama. But it has to be both ways." We need fairness: "There tends to be so much expectation of the woman," says Krishnanandini Devi. "But what is the expectation of the

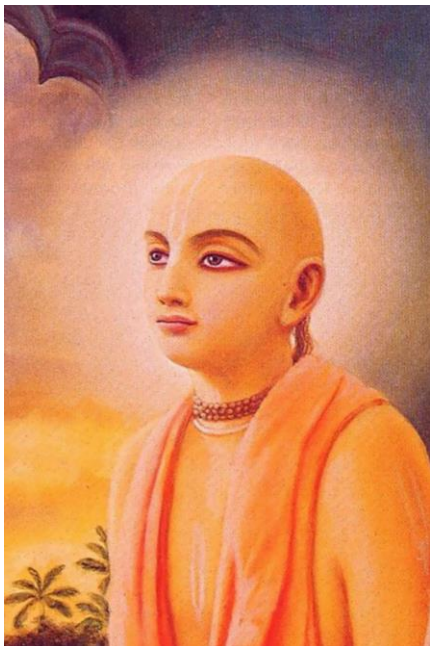


man? If you want a healthy Krishna conscious marriage, you need both a good wife, and the kind of husband that the wife can respect and appreciate."

Consider that many ISKCON temples daily recite the *Siksastaka* prayers. Within them, the third verse offers crucial guidelines for human interaction and social exchanges:

*trṇād api su-nīcena
taror iva sahiṣṇunā
amāninā māna-dena
kīrtanīyaḥ sadā hariḥ*

"One who thinks himself lower than the grass, who is more tolerant than a tree, and who does not expect personal honor but is always prepared to give all respect to others can very easily always chant the holy name of the Lord." (Cc *Antya*, 20.21) Should the male devotees *consistently* strive for humility in all interactions, or can they throw this verse out of the window



when dealing with their wives, and act as arrogant, domineering despots? Would it be OK if husbands, when talking with their wives, discard the tolerance recommended here, replacing it with brutal irritability? Would it be acceptable if husbands renounce the injunction of giving "all respect to others" when communicating with their wives or when speaking of women in general? The problem with sclerotic ideas of gender pecking order is that they clash with the mood that Lord Caitanya instructed all His followers to cultivate. Obsession with gender-hierarchies creates the odd psychological dichotomy in which the male devotee knows that he is expected to nurture inner meekness and unpretentiousness, but, influenced by the mundane male superiority complex (boosted by insecurity), he strives to establish the supremacy of his gender at every opportunity. His split psychic situation dangerously resembles the condition called *dissociative identity disorder* (previously known as *multiple personality disorder*) the mental disorder characterized by simultaneously maintaining at least two distinct personality states. In the case of our ISKCON men: on one side the domineering macho-man, the phallocratic Mr. Massive Erection; on the other the humbler-than-a-blade-of-grass dude, the servant-of-the-servant-of-the-servant identity. Which personality prevails, and to what degree, determines the flavor and sanity of our *varṇāśrama*. The two possible basic polarities: on one end the authentically soul-centered, empowering, transcendently egalitarian and genuinely Lord Caitanya-inspired *daiva-varṇāśrama*;

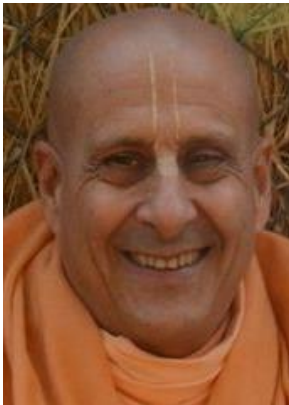
on the other extreme the gender-obsessed, body-conscious, chauvinistic, Taliban-looking, intolerant and *smarta*-mixed *varṇāśrama*, in which women exist only as peripheral add-ons to the male ego (and for reproduction). I am sad to report that the second type, the neurotically male-driven, is getting traction, goaded by the shrill propaganda of its advocates. This book is my attempt to support the discriminating men and women who feel uneasy at the prospect of ISKCON turning into the "Vedic ISIS" - or ISISKCON. (We already have the first two letters in common!). Can't we just be "normal"?

At any rate, in the words of Srila Prabhupada - "If there is first-class men, then whole question is solved" - all the pieces of the social puzzle will fall into place; all the questions and the tensions will be solved. Otherwise we can go on blabbering on *varṇāśrama* till we are blue in the

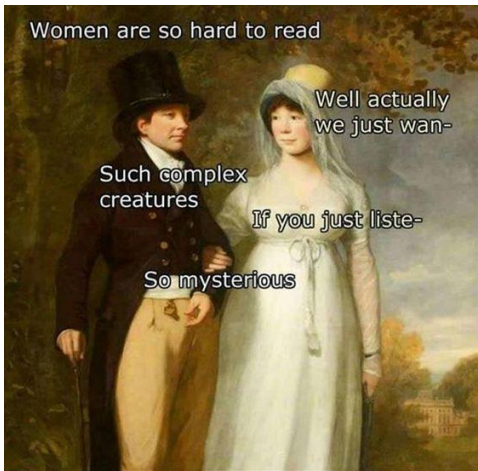


face, but nothing will really work, and women will continue to feel unprotected, constantly threatened by violence, oppression, insensitivity and neglect. And I am talking first and foremost about ISKCON women. Let's not delude ourselves into thinking that just by joining ISKCON a maladjusted, unqualified boy automatically becomes psychologically balanced and a perfect gentleman. Of course, with training it is possible; as Srila Prabhupada says, "If he takes to Kṛṣṇa consciousness, then he can be trained . . . if we take shelter of Kṛṣṇa's lotus feet, then we can become first-class men." (Lecture on SB 5.5.17, Vrindavana, 5 Nov 1976) But, can one fully learn to treat women like ladies, with a respectful and protective attitude, through a three-month new-*bhakta* course? Would a mere *Bhakti-sastri* degree be enough to deeply imbibe the sincere desire to see women become the best they can and see all of them as mothers?

Men who simply wish to be the boss of the situation, craving respect from their wives but unwilling to admire and cherish them, make malfunctioning husbands (and make their wives sad and frustrated). Teaching to householders how to deal with each other, His Holiness Radhanath Maharaja explains: "Feelings of affection may come and go, but as foundational, there



should be respect for each other and care for each other. Physically we care for each other by providing with necessities: housing, clothing, health and other physical needs. But emotional care is also very essential: we have a responsibility to each other to make each other happy. Everyone needs appreciation and everyone needs encouragement . . . Communication is so important. Sometimes in marriage we communicate with everybody except the person we are living with. That communication – honest communication, where we really do express our



appreciation for each other, express our affection for each other, express it in such a way that we encourage each other – it is very critical for a proper relationship." After describing how Sita Devi and Lord Ramacandra dealt with each other,

Maharaja says: "It is the principle that the two of them embody that we should strive to imbibe: **devotion to each other and devotion to *dharma***." Instead, we often witness insecure, untrained husbands incapable of expressing feelings in a mature way. We observe men - in any *asrama* - opposed to see women develop and evolve. It's natural to wonder: where this animosity against women comes from?

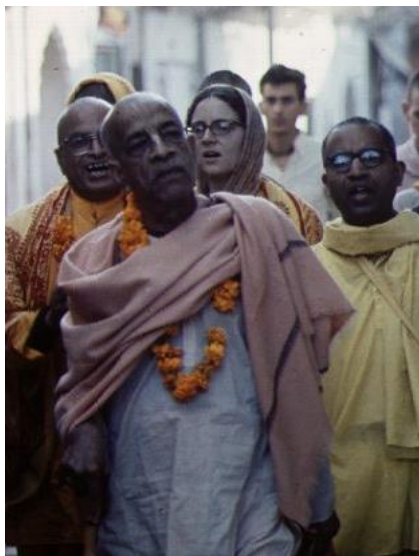
What's the origin of this fixation with suppressing the ladies' potential? Part of the explanation is simple: is an awkward, juvenile attempt at self defense. It's attraction exhibited as repulsion. True spiritual equality represents one of the trademarks of Lord Caitanya's mission, but it is difficult to imbibe it and display it for those among us still desperately trying to exorcise their attraction to women.



Aversion, the Other Face of Attraction

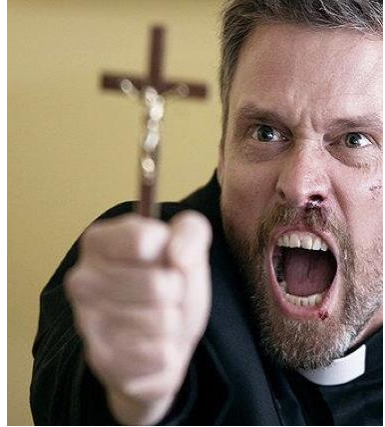
We all know: “The sex drive is so strong in the living entities that the whole material world is running on sex attraction only.” (SB 4.24.11, purport) The magnetic pull between the genders is the engine that keeps the world running. Developing love of God involves emancipating oneself from the gravitational field of sex desire. Men who wish to be *brahmacaris*, *vanaprasthas*, *sannyasis* - or even serious *grihasthas* - must overcome temptation and productively cope with their fascination with women. But because the lure is there, they might develop hatred and

antipathy for the object of their desire. Srila Prabhupada explains: "sometimes in the neophyte stage of devotional service, in order to withstand the attack of Maya and remain strong under all conditions of temptation, young or inexperienced devotees will adopt an attitude against those things or persons possibly harmful, threatening to their tender devotional creeper. **They may even over-indulge in such feelings just to protect themselves.**" (Letter to Lynne Ludwig, 30 April 1973) The "inexperienced" might include 80-year-old men serving in ISKCON for 50 years. Physical and institutional seniority doesn't guarantee expertise in negotiating one's connection with womanhood, the female body, one's sexual drive and the innate desire to enjoy and control matter. Adult males, of any age, might still tend to "over-



indulge" in feelings of antagonism "just to protect themselves." What to do? For one, listen to the Founder-Acarya: "Sometimes our Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement is criticized for mingling men and women, but Kṛṣṇa consciousness is meant for anyone. Whether one is a man or woman does not matter . . . We therefore request all the

members of the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement - both men and women - not to be attracted by bodily features but only to be attracted by Kṛṣṇa. Then everything will be all right." (SB 6.18.41, purport) Men "attracted by bodily features" may try to exorcise the pull of feminine charms by building libraries of quotes on the threats presented by women. They assemble vast collections of references on the weaknesses of women in the hope of neutralizing their fascination. They optimistically imagine that these compilations can defuse their deep-seated attraction. Such frightened men worship assertions such as: "Women should be always protected." (Lecture on SB 2.28.18, Nairobi, 27 Oct 1975) but expediently overlook instructions such as this: "Yes, after the husband retires from family life, the wife can live alone in a sacred place of pilgrimage, like Vrindaban . . . she can live alone after 50 years old, if she is able." (Letter to Malati, 20 July 1968) Their selective memory tricks them to forget that women are not the problem:



Devotee: Prabhupāda, sometimes I've seen devotees say that they did not like to chant in the temple room with the opposite sex . . . he does not want to chant with women in the temple room. I have seen this before. He says, "I do not

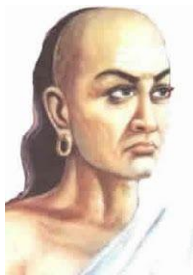
want to chant in a room with women. I would rather be away from the women."

Prabhupāda: That means he has got distinction between men and women. He is not yet *paṇḍit*. *Paṇḍitaḥ samadarśinaḥ* [Bg 5.18]. He is a fool, that's all. He is a fool. So what is the value of his words? He is a fool. He should always consider, "There is woman, that's all. She is my mother." That's all. *Matṛvāt para-dareṣu*. Then what is the... ? Suppose you sit down with your mother and chant. What is the wrong? But he is not so strong, then he should go to the forest. Why he should live in the Nairobi city? On the street there are so many women. He will walk on the street closing the eyes? (laughter) This is all rascaldom. They are rascals. They are not devotees; simply rascals. (Morning Walk, Nairobi, 2 Nov 1975)



Vaisnavis, Trustworthy Women

"First of all, one must prove that he's trustworthy; then we can accept him as trustworthy." (Lecture, 24 Nov 1976) Trustworthiness is an individual trait, not an exclusively gender-based characteristic. Some men are completely untrustworthy; some women are completely trustworthy - and vice versa. Our trusting someone should depend on the person's qualities - such as honesty, loyalty and good character - and not simply on their plumbing. For



instance, when Srila Prabhupada quotes: "Cāṇakya Paṇḍita has advised, *viśvāso naiva kartavyaḥ strīṣu rāja-kuleṣu ca*: 'Never place your faith in a woman or a politician.'" he immediately adds, "Of course, when woman comes to Kṛṣṇa consciousness, that position is different.

We are speaking of ordinary woman . . . women, *sūdra* and *vaiśya*, they also can become fully Kṛṣṇa conscious by training. And they can also go back to home, back to Godhead, without any check. So when we study things from material point of view, these things are to be taken care. **But when a man or woman becomes Kṛṣṇa conscious, he or she takes care of herself or himself.**" (Lecture on Bg 1.40, London, 28 July 1973) Srila Prabhupada also offers a deeper insight of Cāṇakya's mood: "Cāṇakya Paṇḍita says, *viśvāso naiva kartavyaḥ strīṣu rāja-kuleṣu ca*: 'Never trust woman and politician.' He was a politician, and his wife was kidnapped. He had

very bad experience of these two things, Cāṇakya Paṇḍita. Therefore he gave this injunction, *viśvāso naiva kartavyaḥ strīṣu rāja-kuleṣu ca*: "Never trust woman and politician." (Lecture on SB 5.6.2, Vrindavana, 24 Nov 1976) Isn't it paradoxical that he, a politician, says that we shouldn't trust politicians? Should we fully trust him or not? Also, Srila Prabhupada explains that his attitude of distrust in politicians and women were affected by "very bad experience." Srila Prabhupada demonstrated his trust in Krishna conscious women, his belief that she can take "care of herself," by giving initiation to unmarried women and to women married to non-devotees.

African man: Śrīla Prabhupāda, since there is no distinction between man and woman—these are both designations—is it possible for a woman to become a *brāhmaṇa*?

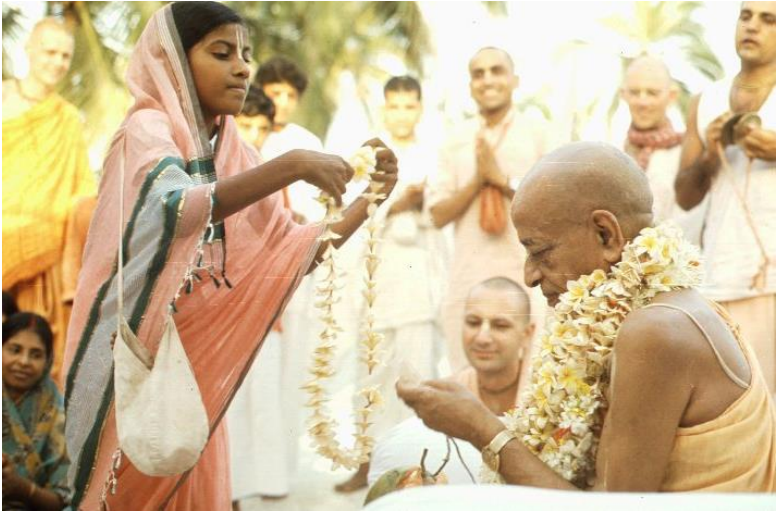
Brahmānanda: Is it possible for a woman to become a *brāhmaṇa*?

Prabhupāda: He is... Woman is a *brāhmaṇa*'s wife. Then she is automatically a *brāhmaṇa*.

African man: Suppose she doesn't want to get married for the rest of her life, just wants to serve the Lord?

Prabhupāda: So in his spiritual position everyone is a *brāhmaṇa*.

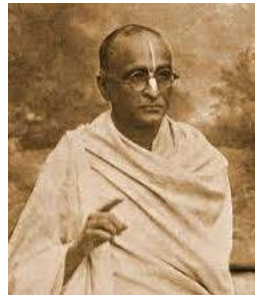
Brahmānanda: But you give brahminical initiation to unmarried women.



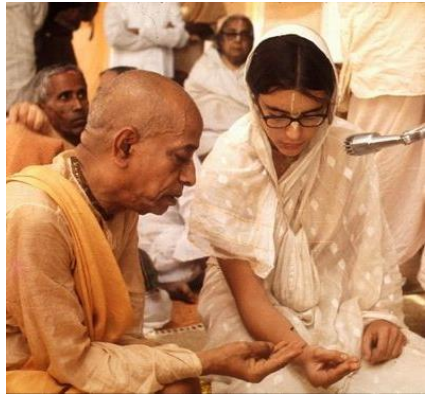
Prabhupāda: Yes. But on spiritual point she is *brāhmaṇa*. On the spiritual platform there is no such distinction.

(Morning Walk, Nairobi, 2 Nov 1975)

Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura applied the same principle; he initiated unmarried girls, expecting them to remain fixed in their spiritual practices even if later they would marry a non-devotee. His Holiness Bhakti Vikasa Maharaja writes: "Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati accepted some unwed girls as *sisyas* [disciples] . . . in those cases it was understood that the maiden was taking *harinama* at her own risk, for if her parents were later to



betrothe her to a man unfavorable to her practice of bhakti, she would nonetheless be obliged to attempt to persevere." (*Sri Bhaktisiddhanta Vaibhava*, Volume One, page 440) Maharaja also writes: "In some cases women were initiated even if their husbands were not." (*Sri Bhaktisiddhanta Vaibhava*, Volume Two, page 246) Bhavatarini Devi, Srila Prabhupada's sister, was one example of a lady who took initiation from Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura despite being married to a drunkard and fish-eater. That means the *acaryas* trusted their lady disciples to be self-reliant and spiritually autonomous, even in adverse conditions. Srila Prabhupada explains: "Unless elevated to spiritual consciousness, everyone is conditioned and fallen . . . On the spiritual platform, however, when one is elevated to the platform of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, whether one is a man, woman, *śūdra* or whatever, everyone is equal." (SB 9.14.36, purport) **To initiate prospective disciples, the guru needs to trust them.** He must be confident that they can loyally follow their vows. Our Vaisnava *acaryas* have shown their belief in the capacity of Vaisnavis to remain steadfast on the devotional path even without the support of a practicing husband. But, what to speak of trusting



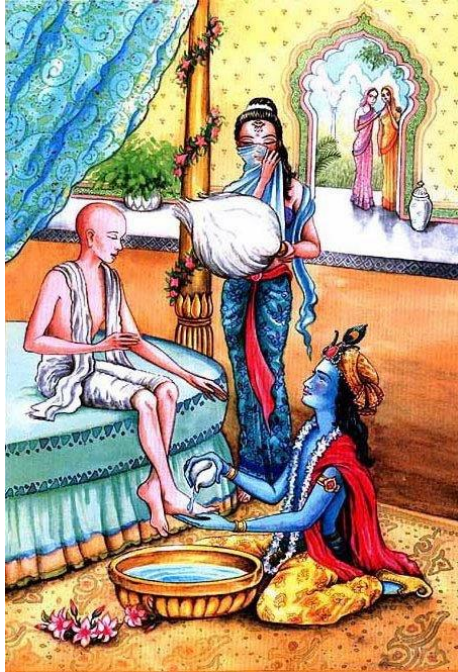
Srila Prabhupada gives second initiation to Visakha Devi; in the back Srila Prabhupada's sister, Bhavatarini Devi

that women could *take* initiation, Srila Prabhupada said that they could also *give* initiation: "One who will pass this examination will be awarded with the title of Bhaktivedanta. **I want that all of my spiritual sons and daughters will inherit this title of Bhaktivedanta**, so that the family transcendental diploma will continue through the generations. Those possessing the title of Bhaktivedanta will be allowed to initiate disciples. Maybe by 1975, **all of my disciples** will be allowed to initiate and increase the numbers of the generations. That is my program." (Letter to Hamsaduta, 3 Jan 1969)

Interchangeable Roles and Previous Ages' Standards

The next quote stresses the fluid nature of social interactions and how roles can be interchangeable, depending on the status and performance of the players. "The actual system is that the husband is Spiritual Master to his wife," Srila Prabhupada writes, "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." (Letter to Silavati, 14 June 1969) Probably many of us have seen ladies bringing their husband to Krishna consciousness, or at least ladies being Krishna conscious while the husband is not. In those cases the wife functions as the spiritual guide of the husband, and the intelligent husband would appreciate and honor that; he will be grateful for the spiritual leadership the wife provides. And

accepting guidance and suggestions from the wife doesn't only apply to cases in which the wife is a devotee and the husband is not. Look at Sudama Vipra; he was a friend of Krishna from their *gurukula* days, and he listened to his wife when she encouraged him to go and visit Krishna in Dvaraka (SB 10.80.9-11). You don't see him arguing, "How dare you, lowly wife, to tell me what to do?!" No; he accepted the counsel of his spouse and thus got the opportunity for a very sweet face-to-face meeting with the Supreme Lord (and, as a side benefit, he also obtained astonishing prosperity; see SB 10.81.21-31). We should always listen to good, Krishna conscious advice, from our wife, our daughter or any other woman in our life. (And from men too, of course.) Unquestioning compliance, mechanical capitulation of the woman's intelligence (also known as the "shut-up-and-get-pregnant" philosophy) is inhuman and anti-Vedic.



In Vedic times it was much more natural for the wife to see the husband as spiritual master, *pati-guru*, because the man would normally be substantially older and, in the case of the upper *varnas*, he would have spent years in *gurukula*, serving and learning at the feet of the guru. The girl would have been at home, sheltered in the family, learning domestic skills such as cooking. He is twenty-five; she is fifteen. The relation of guide and guided is organic and spontaneous in that context. The gap in knowledge,



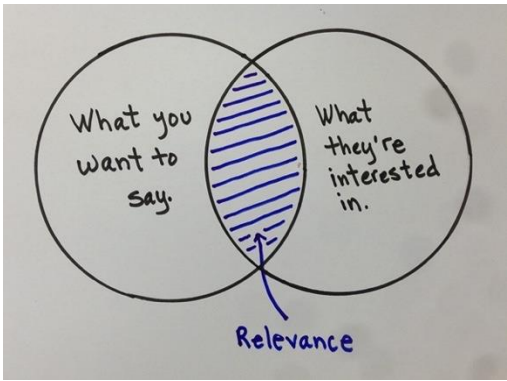
maturity and experience would be evident and would shape the relation. Nowadays the age gap between husbands and wives is shrinking. In India, for instance, we see many girls who refuse to marry anyone even slightly older than them. Right or wrong, they want to marry someone of their same age. Also, contemporary girls are often as educated as the boys (if not more). Time and again they earn as much as the boys (if not more). Often ISKCON girls are as qualified in terms of philosophical understanding and spiritual practices as the boys (if not more). When girls are as qualified or more qualified than the boys, it is artificial to impose on them the idea that the husband is their venerable guru. Recognizing and dealing

with the male ego is one thing, but... *guru*? If the husband has a history of living in the ashram, performing devotional austerities, controlling his senses, building his spiritual erudition and character for many years, then it may be easier for a girl to take him as her natural spiritual leader; but a boy who in the last ten years spent most of his free time watching porn and masturbating might not inspire the same instinctive reverence.



This raises a fundamental question in ISKCON's quest for *varṇāśrama*: do we want to wax all nostalgic, "Those were the days, when women stayed in their place!" and then try to force draconian (and artificial) rules upon the twenty-first century population? Do we wish to promote traditional customs, such as child marriage and polygamy, which can be easily counterproductive and are generally illegal? Or do we want to clearly understand the *principles* of *varṇāśrama* and apply them in a mature way to the present circumstances? If we simply condemn everything un-Vedic in the modern world, without engaging in dialogue, we will become more and more irrelevant. This will affect ISKCON's effectiveness. Those who strive for anachronistic externals may achieve the *opposite* of their stated purpose, which is to establish *varṇāśrama* in society.

How can they establish *varṇāśrama* in society if society doesn't want to have anything to do with them and their fossilized ideas? They burn all bridges and then look back in disdain: "These fallen people... followers of *yavana*, *mleccha* and *candala* standards... there is no hope for them!" Of course, some marginalized people would join anything (some join ISIS, so someone would also join ISISKON...) But if we can tactfully, intelligently present the message, even normal people would be open to spiritual science and transcendental sociology. *Daiva-varṇāśrama* can be attractive to anyone, if introduced expertly. So many aspects can be appreciated by so many: cow protection; a non-violent and karma-free diet; living in harmony with the laws of God and nature; a non-exploitative social approach based on the equality of all beings; human life as a path of spiritual progress; preparing children to responsible living by teaching character and sense control; equal spiritual rights for everyone, and so on. Intelligent, educated people are not interested in religious psychopathology or outdated social



dogma. If they smell "caste system," they will quickly turn away in disgust. Blaming the "fallen" public for our own incapacity to be relatable is the

perfect recipe for irrelevance and insignificance. Some of these so-called *varṇāśrama* promoters often represent the worst publicity for *varṇāśrama*, so stuck in their prejudiced, anachronistic and outlandish suggestions. Their unreasonable flights of fancy give *varṇāśrama* a bad name. The real *varṇāśrama* agents and advocates are those ISKCON devotees who connect with people where people are at, and gently inspire them to take the next step in spiritual life - which would automatically correspond to an improvement in their *varṇāśrama* status.

Varṇāśrama in the Tree *Gunas*

Varṇāśrama is good and beneficial for humanity. It's God's system; and God is everyone's friend and benefactor; but *varṇāśrama* has to be applied properly, otherwise it can hurt individuals and communities. A knife in the hand of a surgeon can save lives; the same knife in the hand of an aggressor can end lives. The *Bhagavad-gita* explains that everything in this world is subject to the three *gunas*, the three influences of material nature. On the human level, people's ideas of *varṇāśrama* are affected by the *gunas* and other contaminations. *Varṇāśrama* can and did degrade;



just like at one point people started thinking that birth in a certain family was enough to determine one's social status, one's *varna*. The *gunas*

affect everyone's actions, faith and knowledge; as well as notions of sociology and social organization. The three modes of nature tinge our perceptions and shape our views.

There is a conception of *varṇāśrama* that is more sattvic, more in goodness, more spiritually oriented, more inclusive, more aware of changing circumstances and of the needs of people in those circumstances, more focused on principles than details. When in *sattva-guṇa*, goodness, we envision a *varṇāśrama* that's realistic and inclusive. The underlying spirit is *unity in diversity*; as Krishna says in *Bhagavad-gītā* (18.20): “That knowledge by which one undivided spiritual nature is seen in all living entities, though they are divided into innumerable forms, you



should understand to be in the mode of goodness.” The focus of this enlightened *varṇāśrama* is nurturing the soul’s potential from any level of consciousness or external circumstances; as Narada Muni did with Mrigari the hunter. Infused by the true brahminical spirit and the liberality of *sattva-guṇa* we encourage individuals – men and women alike – to grow and reach their full potential; to completely engage their talents in devotional service and become the best they can be. The qualified *brahmana*, the epitome of *sattva-guṇa*, works to elevate people, not to compete with them.



When more under *rajas*, passion, we tend to be more attached to hierarchical aspects. We strongly identify with our bodies, our positions, our temporary roles. Passion pushes us to focus on exploiting the opportunities for privilege and prestige offered by social stratification. In *rajo-guṇa* we take the bodily divisions as central and essential; as Kṛṣṇa says in *Bhagavad-gītā* (18.21) “That knowledge by which one sees that in every different body there is a different type of living entity you should

understand to be in the mode of passion.” In passion the external, temporary distinctions appear to us more real, more vivid and important than people’s inner identities. Since passion stimulates egoic priorities, we assume an inflated sense of self-importance and become absorbed in selfish interests.



We concentrate on protecting the privileges of our rank, our gender, our position in the system (manager, *brāhmaṇa*, male, etc.), and, marred by jealousy, work to prevent others (subordinates, women, etc.) from reaching their full potential. Intrigue, maneuvering and politics become prominent.



Alternatively, we may get stuck in an idea of *varṇāśrama* dominated by *tamas*, ignorance. Such conception is unrealistic and nostalgic of an

imaginary past. It's frozen in time and therefore stiff and unyielding. Rigidity is mistaken for rigorousness. Details are confounded with principles. In such *varṇāśrama* the

norms are applied blindly without consideration of time, place and candidate. Remote, circumstantial details become elevated to central tenets. The tamasic approach is dogmatic and appears largely irrelevant to discriminating people. It involves cruelty and mistreatment, because under *tamas* empathy dramatically decreases. Krishna says in the *Bhagavad-gītā* (18.22): "And that knowledge by which one is attached to one kind of work as the all in all, without knowledge of the truth, and which is very meager, is said to be in the mode of darkness." Under this mode we try to impose roles and rules according to inflexible or even imaginary notions. Fanaticism reigns. Regardless of its applicability and relevance, we promote unsuitable practices that backfire, damaging individuals and communities. In this indiscriminating mode we try to fit everyone into our limited and limiting schemes; as a result, we do violence to them, stifling their growth.



"Śrī Kṛṣṇa Himself has enumerated the basic principles of a caste system that is real and universal." Śrīla Prabhupāda writes, "The four social orders (intellectual, administrative, mercantile, and laborer) are set by Him according to the qualities these persons have acquired through their actions under the modes of nature .

. . He is not the maker of a tyrannical and unnatural caste system in which the faithless dictate one's position according to one's birth. Rather, He is the maker of a caste system that is applicable universally, is voluntary and natural, and is based on one's qualities and abilities." (Message of Godhead, Chapter 2, "Karma-yoga") *Guna* considerations are crucial to our study of *varṇāśrama*, its implementation and its protection. Obviously, theories shaped by the lower *gunas* render *varṇāśrama* painful and dysfunctional. Passionate attempts may bring immediate rewards but later result in suffering for everyone involved. Such efforts might generate a sense of success that eventually turns into pain. For instance, we might force people, by social pressure and indoctrination, to act contrary to their nature, but later their true inclinations spring back, undoing the endeavors and causing frustration. We may, for instance, charge the ceremony of the donning of saffron cloth by *brahmacaris* with a finality more congruent with the taking of *sannyasa*. This artificial, illusory sense of irrevocability later creates





feelings of failure and guilt when such *brahmacaris* move to the *grihastha-asrama*. Getting married is a perfectly progressive step for most human

beings and it should be a joyous rite of passage; but it can be tainted with a sense of defeat and disappointment for those *brahmacaris* that were led to believe their vow of celibacy would be ultimate and immutable. *Rajo-guna* instigates impatience, the desire to obtain valuable results by cutting corners. It's the burning ambition to reach goals in shorter time than required. Compelling young men to think that their orange dress signifies automatic lifelong renunciation appears as a symptom of *rajo-guna* - even if the motivation may be benign.

Tamasic approaches don't raise beyond the realm of dream and fantasy; they are also characterized by violence - such as the vitriolic Internet attacks we witness, against Vaisnavas with different opinions. Material nature is pretty... *unforgiving*. When *varṇāśrama* is filtered through the *tamo-guna*, it transmogrifies into the monstrous and unserviceable, the dark and painful. And people in *tamas* may not even realize the harm and distortions they are causing. Tyrants of the past - the Venas, the Hitlers, the Stalins, the Pol Pots and so on - may have been thinking that they were defending higher moral orders and purer ideals while murdering, torturing and introducing weird

social experiments. They must have sincerely considered their opponents as evil and malevolent, as enemies of progress. Crazy dictators don't recognize their own psychopathologies, which cause their atrocities. Similarly, devotees who embrace dismally medieval and misleading notions of *varṇāśrama* don't realize that their delusions are dictated by *tamo-guna*, which obfuscates their reason, by childhood traumas and gynophobia. They like to paint themselves as the saviors of Vedic culture, but their actions are often in direct opposition with the mood of the Gaudiya-vaisnava *acaryas*, the true standard-bearers of *varṇāśrama*. I truly believe that they truly believe that they are the true believers. I *know* that they think they are right, when they shout, propagandizing some irrelevant practice, "IT IS IN THE SASTRA!!!" Yes, granted; it is in the *sastra*. Correct. But for whom? For which age? For which social, economic and cultural contexts? Devotees in *tamo-guna* miss the boat of Lord Caitanya's mission; often by a *yuga* or two. I am not comparing the fanatical devotees to crazy dictators (thank God they don't have that much power!); but the *tamo-guna* influence is the same, although, in the case of the devotees, tempered by their spiritual practices and overall devotional culture.



The Path of the *Acarya*

There are tons of Vedic references, *dharmasastras*, *puranas* and *samhitas* delineating *varṇāśrama* canons and rules; but, ultimately, what really counts is what the *acaryas* pick as appropriate and applicable for contemporary Vaisnavas. As we have seen in the case of the attire appropriate for the *brahmacari* (deerskin recommended in the *Bhagavatam*; cotton dress sanctioned by Srila Prabhupada or Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura), it's the *acaryas'* role to indicate the true and realistic *dharma*. They do that by harmonizing and reconciling perennial principles with current circumstances: "An *ācārya* who comes for the service of the Lord cannot be expected to conform to a stereotype, for he must find the ways and means by which Kṛṣṇa consciousness may be spread." (Cc *Adi*, 7.31-32, purport) As a result: "The Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement is not stereotyped or stagnant." (Cc *Adi*, 7.28, purport) Srila Prabhupada is very strong on this point. In the *Bhagavatam* he writes: "The method of worship—chanting the *mantra* and preparing the forms of the Lord—is not stereotyped, nor is it exactly the same everywhere . . . one should take consideration of the time, place and available conveniences . . . Those who are not actually in the line of *ācāryas*, or who personally have no knowledge of how to act in the role of *ācārya*, unnecessarily criticize the activities of the ISKCON movement in countries outside of India." (SB 4.8.54, purport). Without carefully



considering the circumstances and a variety of sastric references, we might mindlessly repeat a number of “Śrīla Prabhupada said” that he spoke in completely different situations; to completely different audiences; and with completely different depths of realization, compassion and wisdom. We might commit terrible mistakes, similar to that made by an inexperienced veterinary. As the story goes, the neophyte veterinary went with an expert colleague to see a suffering horse. The poor animal had a huge bulge in his neck and was writhing in pain. After carefully studying the situation, the expert doctor took a hammer, forcefully hit the bulge, and the horse was cured in seconds. After a few days the neophyte doctor, this time alone, saw another horse with a similar big lump on the neck; without thinking twice, he powerfully hit the lump with the hammer. The horse collapsed on the floor and died. The foolish fellow didn’t realize that the first horse had swallowed an entire watermelon, which was stuck in the throat; by breaking the watermelon the expert veterinary had removed the blockage. The second horse had a tumor

in its neck; by hitting it with the hammer the young veterinary



caused a lethal shock and killed the horse. The “hammer” of ancient social customs should be used only in very specific circumstances, when all necessary conditions



align, and only by expert practitioners. Otherwise, we go around foolishly hammering away with Vedic-sounding formulas and massacring horses left and right.



One issue - let's face it - is the oceanic character of the Founder-Acarya's instructions, which illuminate different aspects of the human comprehension - theological, cosmogonical, mystical, ritualistic, historical, educational, economic, ecological, psychological, political, social, etc. - in multi-faceted expressions applying to a variety of levels. It's easy to mistake a statement applicable on a level (say to the physical level) and projects its parameters and limitations on another (say

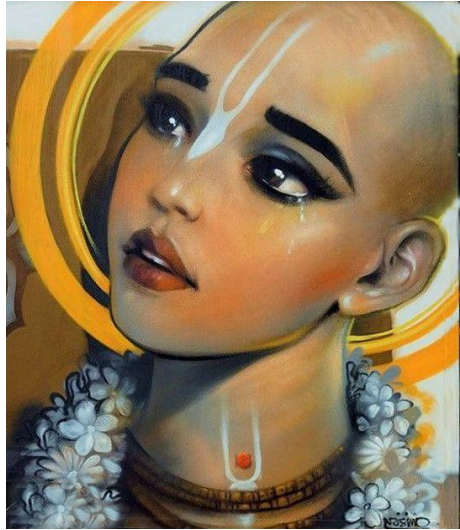
the spiritual level). Among his followers, therefore, Srila Prabhupada's words often act as Rorschach tests onto which virtually *any* opinion can be mapped. Anyone with a little rhetorical dexterity can find support for any personal inclination or political agenda; anyone with a modicum of skill in argument can find backing for practically any belief or prejudice. Conservatives will rejoice in finding validation from *Manu-samhita* edicts or Canakya Pandit's quatrains. Progressives will bask in Sri Caitanya's egalitarianism and exult in the rich Gaudiya tradition of women's empowerment as heralded by ISKCON's Founder-Acarya. I smile as I recall an attempt to idolize (and misuse) a book Srila Prabhupada never even quotes from, the *Bhāradvāja-saṁhitā* (Srila Prabhupada only mentions its title - once - in a list of texts in the purport to SB 4.31.10). Armed with good doses of bigotry and creativity, a group of ISKCON devotees devised a subterfuge, and in their hands and in their eyes a passage of that obscure text became the crucial and conclusive reference on the topic of Vaisnavi *diksa-gurus*, magically eclipsing all that Srila Prabhupada and the Gaudiya-vaisnava-*acaryas* ever said and done on the topic. Unfortunately for them, their sandcastle was thoroughly demolished when a real Vaisnava scholar dismantled their fictions in a 211-page paper, showing that their views "draw upon unfounded assumptions, missing or misstated contexts, and/or misinterpreted *sāstric* sources." His work proves that their "interpretational approach to *Bhāradvāja-saṁhitā* as well

as to statements of Śrīla Prabhupāda and ācāryas is . . . resorting to all sorts of assumptions, inferences, or whimsical interpretations." (You can find the paper by Madana-mohana Prabhu, "Guru: The Principle, Not the Body," [here](#)) I am giving this example to illustrate the point: sometimes devotees would grasp at any straw, even the flimsiest and feeblest, to maintain their convictions.

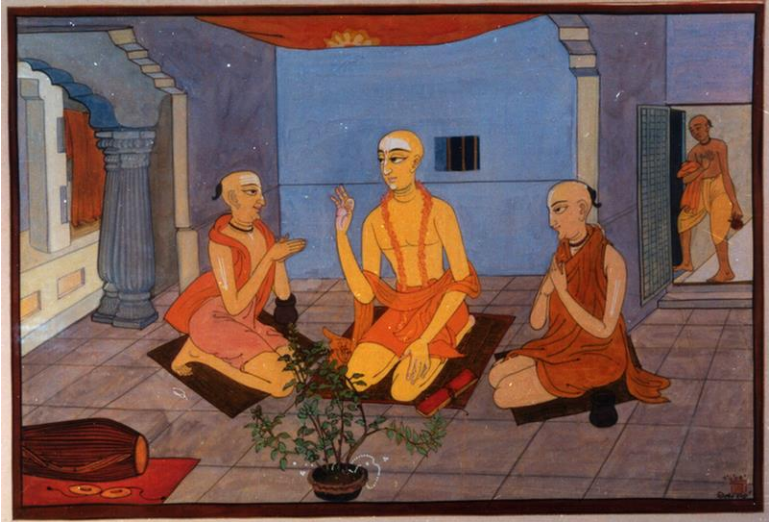


Ongoing tension between (self-styled) traditionalists and (self-styled) innovators appears inevitable, although, actually, the Gaudiya-vaisnava tradition is one of innovation. True Gaudiya traditionalists innovate because the truly traditional Gaudiya approach focuses on identifying permanent principles, within appropriate hierarchies of priorities, and boldly implementing them to recover fallen souls and to facilitate the smooth exercise of *sanatana-dharma* within fluctuating contexts. That's the Gaudiya-vaisnava mood; not worshipping at the altar of the anachronistic, the traditional in form but not in essence. Gaudiyas are firm on core teachings and pliable on details. But there have always people who are stuck behind, critics of the dynamism of Lord Caitanya's followers - critics even of Lord Caitanya's Himself. "The *brāhmaṇas*, the priests, have been against this Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement since it began with Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu." Srila

Prabhupada reports, "When Caitanya Mahāprabhu started this movement, the priestly class lodged complaints to the Kazi, the magistrate of the Muhammadan government. Caitanya Mahāprabhu had to lead a civil disobedience movement against the propaganda of the so-



called followers of Vedic principles." (SB 4.29.57, purport) History repeats itself, and some of the same disparaging attitudes against the *sāṅkīrtana* movement present then are also present now - this time also from inside of ISKCON. Lord Caitanya's predication introduces an intellectually intriguing enigma, almost a paradox; His simultaneous acceptance and non-acceptance of *varṇāśrama*. At the same time Lord Caitanya's message and behavior both endorses and transcends *varṇāśrama*: "The system of *varṇāśrama-dharma* refers to the three modes of material nature, but transcendental devotional service is on the absolute platform. Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu belongs to the spiritual world, and His methods for propagating the *sāṅkīrtana* movement are also imported from the spiritual world." (Cc *Madhya*, 8.60, purport) The

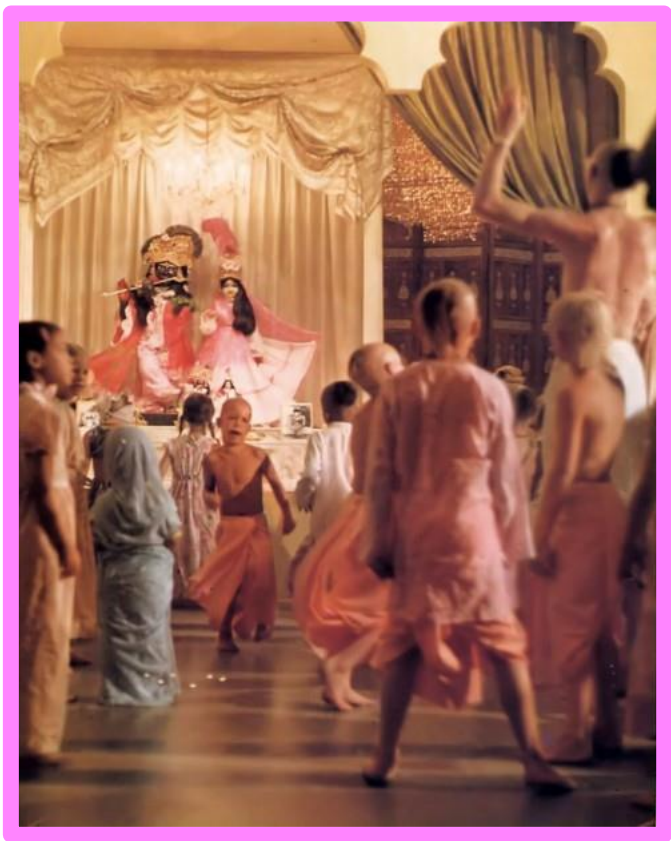


clash between the materialistic understanding of *varṇāśrama* and pure sociological Gaudiya-siddhanta is therefore practically inevitable - as we can see nowadays. In fact, if I won't receive some ferocious criticism, I will consider this book an utter failure, because it would mean that I didn't challenge the new *smartas* and their social theories pointedly enough. I apologize to whoever felt offended or disturbed by my straightforward style, but this is a cultural war, raging since at least the time of Lord Caitanya, when His devotional egalitarianism stirred hostility among those practicing stereotypical Hindu religiosity. I avoided pointing fingers at particular individuals presently promoting pseudo-Vedic social theories. I am not interested in personal attacks, and, furthermore, people who are here today won't be around tomorrow. I am therefore concerned with ideas and not

with personalities. Dear reader, I hope that you are gaining relevant insights about *varṇāśrama* from this book - despite my shortcomings. At least I expect you to find value from the gemlike words of the Founder-Acarya conveyed here. May the path of the Gaudiya-vaisnava *acaryas* prevail over the cacophony of tainted opinions. And may this message help in preventing messing up *varṇāśrama*. If you like, dear reader, you can discard all the words I wrote; but, please, preserve, cherish and implement all of Srila Prabhupada's precious instructions on how to manifest a healthy, mature and beneficial *varṇāśrama*.

Om Tat Sat





Varṇāśrama Without Gurukula? Just a Hobby

For establishing *varṇāśrama* and for spreading Krishna consciousness, *gurukula* is the secret weapon. Actually, there shouldn't be anything secret about the extraordinary power of *gurukula*; not after all that Srila Prabhupada and the *sastras* say about it. But it seems that in most of ISKCON this information remains hidden in plain sight. In fact, suspicion abounds, due to the challenges of the past. But it's time to stop throwing the baby out with the bathwater (quite literally in this case). I have been presenting versions of this seminar at various venues, from the 2016 “Exploring Varnashrama” convention in Gita

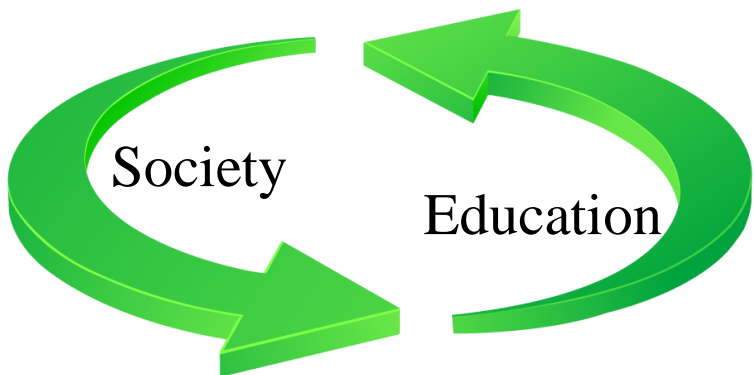


Nagari, USA; to the 2018 ILS (ISKCON Leadership Sanga), in Mayapur; to the Zonal Supervisor Course of the GBC College for Leadership Development, in Brazil (2019) and India (2020). The official 2018 ILS brochure introduced the seminar thus: "Although Srila Prabhupada consistently stressed the importance of *gurukula* and personally endeavored to establish it, today the *gurukula* system is neglected and even feared. Learn about the reasons for this 'rejection.' Hear about Srila Prabhupada's original recipe for making the *gurukula* a success. This seminar is essential for those wishing the long-term success of ISKCON, for those concerned about the future of our children and for those eager to see *varṇāśrama* becoming a reality." Good reading.

Society and Education

ISKCON devotees often hold conflicting views about *varṇāśrama*. What can we all agree with? I am confident we can all agree that it is desirable to have functional, healthy *asramas* - good *brahmacaris*, wholesome *grihasthas*, sound *vanaprasthas* and reliable *sannyasis*. We might debate on the details, but I don't think anyone is arguing having *asramas*, or that the *asramas* shouldn't be solid. As far as the *varnas*, I believe we can all agree that ISKCON devotees should sincerely engage their psychophysical nature and talents in the service of Krishna. Notwithstanding these fundamental parameters, Srila Prabhupada envisioned a larger role for the

varṇāśrama mission, a spiritually ambitious, comprehensive plan: “Now you be trained up and **revise the whole edition of the western civilization**, especially in America. Then a new chapter will come in. This is the program. Therefore *varṇāśrama* school required.” (Morning Walk, Vrindavana, 14 March 1974) Srila Prabhupada was keenly aware of the central role of education in forming and reforming individuals and society. Every society tries to instill in its children its values and worldview - and the skills to become productive members of the larger community. Education molds the young in the principles and beliefs of a society; it also trains them to function in that society according to the dominant economic paradigms. It's a cycle: society expresses a certain type of education, which prepares the type of citizens that will fit in that society, both culturally and occupationally. In an industrial society, for instance, the education will focus on creating workers that will support industrialization, both conceptually - by believing in the glories of technological advancement - and



practically - by managing factories, by developing technological innovations, by marketing industrial products or by operating machinery. In morally decadent societies, schooling contributes to debase and degrade the pupils, either by design or by maladministration. Srila Prabhupada warns: "Take care of the child immediately. When boys are spoiled? Simply by bad association, that's all. The world is so much polluted, any innocent child can be polluted. That is going on everywhere all over the world. The whole world is polluted even the best child is polluted. When? As soon as he goes to school and meets his friends, finished. The schools, colleges are slaughterhouses." (Conversation, Los Angeles, 24 Sept 1972) Real *varṇāśrama* culture deserves and requires its corresponding methods of education - an education in harmony with its principles; an education that generates



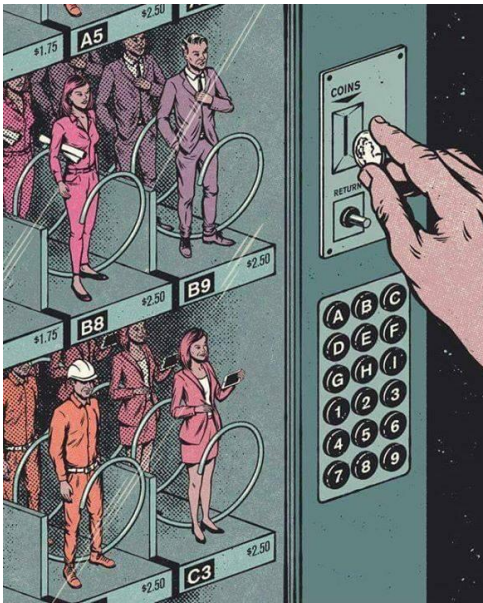
citizens with compatible ethics, habits and ideas; an education that instills spiritual knowledge and transcendental objectives in the heart of the students. That education is primarily and essentially *gurukula*. Without *gurukula*, what is going to save our children from the slaughterhouses of modern schooling?

"In the system of *varṇāśrama-dharma*, which is the beginning of actual human life," Srila Prabhupada explains, "small boys after five years of age are sent to become *brahmacari* at the guru's *asrama*." (SB 1.5.24,



purport) Srila Prabhupada emphasizes that such training is for "every boy, be he a king's son or the son of an ordinary citizen. The training was compulsory not only to create good citizens of the state but also to prepare the boys' future life for spiritual realization." In *varṇāśrama* civilization *gurukula* plays a vital role. In the same purport, Srila Prabhupada explains why: "Without being self-controlled, without being disciplined and without being fully obedient, no

one can become successful in following the instructions of the spiritual master, and without doing so, no one is able to go back to Godhead." Nowadays, most "education" focuses simply on providing students with marketable skills. Srila Prabhupada detests such an approach: "There is no education actually. The modern education means simply a craftsmanship." (Lecture, Melbourne, 19 April 1976) The students are mostly prepared to get jobs; they

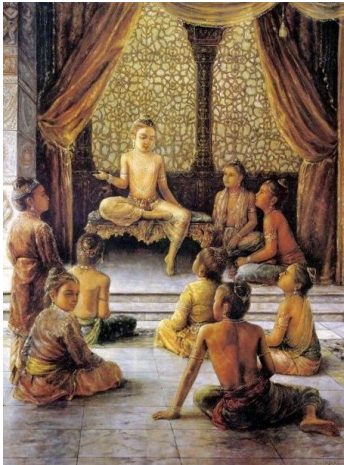


are certainly not tutored to achieve liberation from birth and death. The education imparted in *gurukula*, instead, besides preparing for adulthood, also plants the seed of renunciation, which will fructify later in life: "Formerly . . . the members of the higher castes - the

brāhmaṇas, *kṣatriyas* and *vaiśyas* (everyone but the *sūdras*) - were trained in the *gurukula* to adhere to a life of renunciation and sense control by practicing *brahmacharya* and mystic *yoga*. Then they were allowed to enter household life. There have consequently been many instances in which great kings and emperors

have given up household life. Although they were extremely opulent and were the masters of kingdoms, they could give up all their possessions because they were trained early as *brahmacaris*." (SB 7.6.10, purport). Their experience at the *asrama* of the guru, their living for years in an atmosphere of detachment and of cultivation of philosophical perspectives, would reverberate throughout their life, finally blossoming into full renunciation of the material world. In short: the quality of every *asrama* - *brahmacari*, *grihastha*, *vanaprastha* and *sannyasa* - and the effectiveness of the upper *varnas* - *vaisya*, *ksatriya* and *brahmana* - directly depends on the training received in *gurukula*.

Gurukula: the Irreplaceable Root of Varṇāśrama



The *Bhagavatam*, the primary text for this age, stresses early Krishna conscious education. A number of times Srila Prabhupada quotes these lines:

śrī-prahrāda uvāca
kaumāra ācaret prājño
dharmān bhāgavatān iha

"Prahlaḍa Mahārāja said: One who is sufficiently intelligent

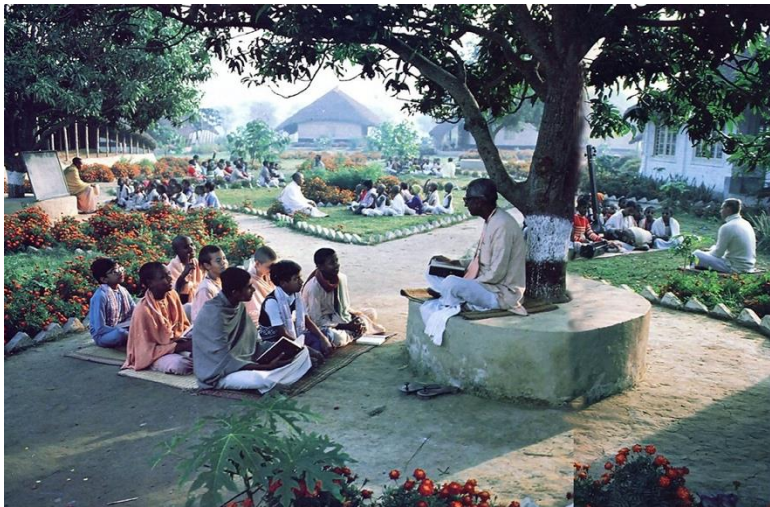
should use the human form of body from the very beginning of life—in other words, from the tender age of childhood—to practice the activities of devotional service, giving up all other engagements." (SB 7.6.1) Srila Prabhupada writes in the purport: "According to the Vedic system . . . from the very beginning of life the *brahmacarya* system is introduced so that from one's very childhood—from the age of five years—one can practice modifying one's human activities so as to engage perfectly in devotional service . . . Modern civilization, not referring to the verdicts of Vedic literature, is so cruel to the members of human society that instead of teaching children to become *brahmacārīs*, it teaches mothers to kill their children even in the womb, on the plea of curbing the increase of population. And if by chance a child is saved, he is educated only for sense gratification." In another verse that Srila Prabhupada quotes multiple times, Prahlada Maharaja's guru, Narada Muni, says:

*śrī-nārada uvāca
brahmacārī gurukule
vasan dānto guror hitam
ācāran dāsavan nīco
gurau sudṛḍha-sauhṛdaḥ*

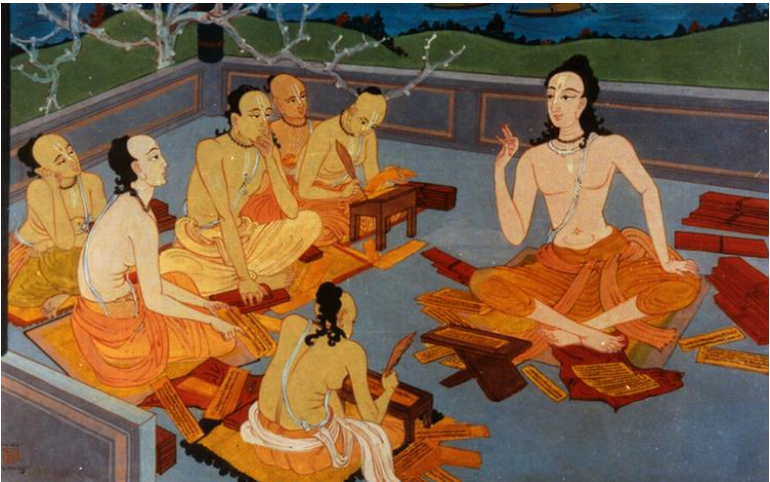
"Nārada Muni said: A student should practice



completely controlling his senses. He should be submissive and should have an attitude of firm friendship for the spiritual master. With a great vow, the *brahmacārī* should live at the *gurukula*, only for the benefit of the guru." (SB 7.12.1) Srila Prabhupada elaborates in a lecture: "Vedic civilization is that first of all send the children for *mahat-sevā*, *brahmacārī*. *Mahat-sevā*, that is the essential part of human life. *Tad-vijnānārthaṁ sa gurum evābhigacchet samit-pāṇiḥ śrotriyam brahmaniṣṭham* [*Mundaka Upanisad* 1.2.12]. To make this human life successful, to understand the value of life, to understand what I am, one must approach... go to *gurukula*. *Tad-vijnānārthaṁ sa gurum evābhigacchet*. This *abhigacchet*, this form of verb is used when it is called *vidhi-liṅ*, must! There is no option. I may go or I may not go. No. One must. That is human life. That is the



instruction of Vedic śāstra . . . *Bhāgavata-dharma* means children should be taught from the very beginning of life. That is Vedic civilization. The children should go... Even Kṛṣṇa, although He's God, He was also sent to *gurukula*, and He was collecting dry wood from the forest for *guru*, learning how to serve *guru* . . . *Mahat-seva*. Go to *mahat*, *mahanta*, the *guru*. Serve him. *Tad viddhi pranipatena pariprasnena sevaya* [Bg 4.34]. You cannot challenge like a nonsense. You have to engage yourself to the service. That is the beginning. *Brahmacari* is indicated, 'Go to *gurukula*.' And you may be a king's son or a very learned *brahmana*'s son, it doesn't matter. You serve your *guru* just like a menial servant. This is the instruction. This is the first education. Go to *gurukula* and serve the *mahat guru*, the broad-minded *guru*, just like a menial servant. What is that? You go collect everything for *guru*, alms, and do not claim proprietorship. It is *guru*'s property. Whatever you

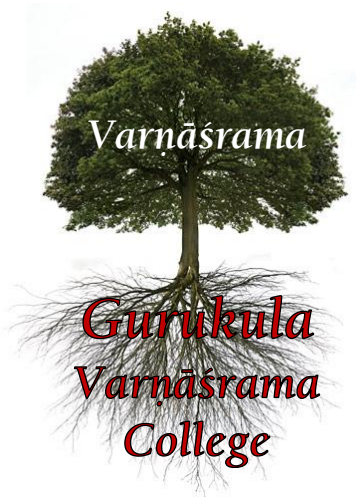


collect, that is not your property . . . Strenuous training was there to live in *gurukula* and sacrifice the whole life for *guru*'s instruction. This is the Vedic culture, *brahmacari*, and live at the place of *guru* just like a menial servant. (Lecture on SB 5.5.2, Hyderabad, 12 April 1975) This is the system to mold healthy, noble and spiritually resilient individuals, people of substance and character; people capable to perform at the higher echelons of *varṇāśrama*. Here I am not going to deal with details: Can the children go back home at night or they should stay at the ashram? How long should each lesson last? What exactly should we include in the curriculum? How students should dress? And so on. Here I just want to stress the essential ideas, the principles. The sense of identity as servant of *guru* and Krishna needs to be assimilated at a tender age. The idea of life as preparation for death, through austerity and sacrifice, needs to be cultivated from the beginning. Years of serving as a menial servant, of studying, of being humble, respectful, clean and strictly celibate are the true foundation of civilized human life. First-class *brahmacaris* will make first-class *grihasthas*. Women don't like to live with and serve men who are restless, insecure, impatient, disrespectful or lazy. *Gurukula* principles and training are the real roots of *varṇāśrama*, without which *varṇāśrama* is like a frail, shaky tree doomed to wobble and crash. Without the root of *gurukula*, *varṇāśrama* remains a theoretical construct devoid of fiber and consistency. Promoting *varṇāśrama* must include vigorous promotion of *gurukula*; otherwise one's blabbering about *varṇāśrama* is simply a hobby, an

armchair diversion. Nothing wrong with having a hobby; some hobbies can be very healthy, very relaxing, very sattvic - like swimming, or painting, or walking in the woods... - but talking about *varṇāśrama* without simultaneously promoting *gurukula* may offer some pious recreation but remains a sterile, fruitless engagement. *Varṇāśrama* without *gurukula* is just a hobby, not a serious plan to establish *varṇāśrama*.



"Gurukula Is Our Most Important Project"



Srila Prabhupada's general plan for ISKCON's children is: "From five to ten years, *gurukula*. And after ten years, they should go to the *varṇāśrama* college." (Morning Walk, Vrindavana, 14 March 1974) *Gurukula* and *Varṇāśrama* College represent the roots of the tree of *varṇāśrama*. A tree

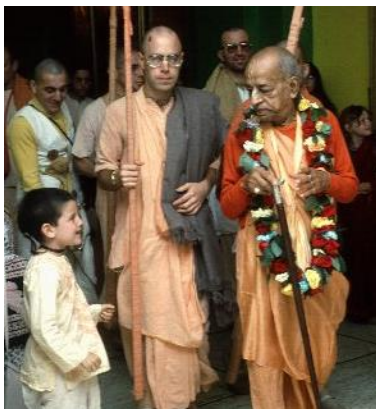
with weak or no roots is destined to collapse at the first storm. A *varṇāśrama* without *gurukula* has no chance of success or stability in the long term. Our Founder-Acarya personally invested so much time and energy in seeing *gurukula* implemented in ISKCON. He kept emphasizing its importance; and kept instructing leaders to take it very seriously:

"I consider this *gurukula* school to be one of our most important aspects of this movement and it should be given all serious consideration by the members." (Letter to Stokakrsna, 20 June 1972)

"I am very, very glad to hear of your desire to return to *gurukula* school and apply yourself to developing that place . . . It is the most important preaching work, to train our children in Krishna Consciousness education of life. And I think that you are just the right man to do it. Krishna has given you the right idea, just see!" (Letter to Mohanananda, 11 Dec 1972)

"*Gurukula* is our most important project." (Letter to Dayananda, Nandarani, 27 Jan 1973)

And Srila Prabhupada's instructions on *gurukula* are not only found in letters (which someone might try to minimize as individual directives, possessing no



universal application). No, also in his books Srila Prabhupada stressed the *gurukula's* great importance: "In our Krsna consciousness movement, the *guru-kula* plays an extremely important part in our activities because right from childhood the boys at the *guru-kula* are instructed about Krsna consciousness. Thus they become steady within the cores of their hearts, and there is very little possibility that they will be conquered by the modes of material nature when they are older." (SB 7.5.56-57, purport) Ultimately Krishna consciousness is the essence and objective of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. *Gurukula* offers innocent children the



opportunity to develop a deep, irrevocable affection for Krishna before being exposed to the vagaries of life. Five categories of citizens deserve protection: *brahmanas*, cows, the elderly, children, and women. "The protection of children gives the human form of life its

best chance to prepare the way of liberty from material bondage." (SB 1.8.5, purport) Without systematic training aimed at liberation, what are the chances for success? "Just like these children are there." Srila Prabhupada says, "If the father, mother and the teacher, they do not give these children protection, then what is their future hope?"

(Lecture on SB 1.15.45, Los Angeles, 23 Dec 1973) Such early training is precious for the children and for the whole mission. Imagine an army of devotees, "steady within the cores of their hearts," going into the world to propagate devotional service - what a powerful effect! What formidable spiritual invading force! Srila Prabhupada says: "Our students should be fit for teaching Kṛṣṇa consciousness. By their character, by their behavior, by their knowledge, that is wanted." (Conversation, Nouvelle Mayapur, France, 31 July 1976) According to Srila Prabhupada, through such *gurukula* graduates, "The face of the world will then change automatically": "What was possible for Dhruva Mahārāja is possible for anyone. Any five-year-old child can be trained, and within a very short time his life will become successful by realization of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Unfortunately, this training is lacking all over the world. It is necessary for the leaders of the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement to start educational institutions in different parts of the world to train children, starting at the age of five years. Thus such



children will not become hippies or spoiled children of society; rather, they can all become devotees of the Lord. **The face of the world will then change automatically.**" (SB 4.12.23, purport) Directly from the pages of his *Bhagavatam*, Srila Prabhupada instructs ISKCON leaders of all continents and all generations: "It is necessary" for them to start *gurukulas* "in different parts of the world." Unfortunately, even a cursory look at ISKCON today shows that this is *not being done*, how can we then expect "the face of the world" to change?

What Went Wrong? The Two-point Recipe Was Ignored

One may wonder: "What happened to the efforts at establishing *gurukula* that Srila Prabhupada personally spearheaded? Why weren't they successful?" It is a sad and painful fact: as a Society, our early attempts at *gurukula* resulted mostly in failure. The fiasco culminated with different kinds of abuse suffered by the children. Most early schools closed down. Of course, in many cases we did reach the objective of facilitating attachment for Krishna in the heart of the students, but this relative success shouldn't be used to play down the overall wreckage. Why such a flop? Let me start with an analogy: when you cook, if you wish to get a preparation right, you need to follow the recipe. You need to put in the necessary ingredients and in the proper proportion. For *gurukula*,



Srila Prabhupada indicated two crucial ingredients. Let's hear directly from the Founder-Acarya: "That school is very, very important business, and the best man must be found out for taking charge there and

developing it nicely." (Letter to Satsvarupa, 5 Nov 1972) In some cases, we did just the opposite: the worst men were assigned to take care of the children. Of course, there have also been dedicated, trustworthy and competent teachers, but, in some instances, devotees who were not capable of doing other services such as, say, distributing books, were sent to serve in *gurukula*. Srila Prabhupada had envisioned the inverse. He thought of the *sannyasis* - senior, detached and knowledgeable members - for training the future generations: "Teaching should be done by the *sannyasis*. Just like in missionary school, the fathers teach." (Morning Walk, Vrindavana, 14 March 1974) Of course, for a *sannyasi* it might not be the most attractive prospect to dedicate himself, year



after year, to civilize children and teenagers; to nurture them through their challenges; to steadily instruct them; or to discipline them with affection and firmness. Serving in *gurukula* doesn't offer the glamour, the glitz, the excitement or the immediate rewards of the jet-age-*parivrajakacarya* lifestyle. Children don't hand their teachers envelops of money. They don't cook delicious delicacies served with reverence and even adulation. Serving in a *gurukula* - as Srila Prabhupada envisioned (some) *sannyasis* doing - would remain a simple life with little or no bells and whistles, but rich in scriptural absorption, abundant in opportunities for pastoral care, for coaching and for teaching. But, besides *sannyasis* teachers or not, the fundamental issue is to have very qualified personnel to deal with young minds, for their benefit and for the benefit of the world: "If you become Head Master of the *gurukula* that is more important than going to South America. This is the most important post in pushing on this movement, practically, because you shall create our preachers of the future, many, many of them." (Letter to Mohanananda, 11 Dec 1972) You may wonder: "How many good teachers would it take to run a school?" According to Srila Prabhupada, one teacher, if truly good,



would be enough: "That is the way of Indian teaching, that there is one teacher, and how he's managing hundreds? That means there are groups. One who is elderly student, he's taking some beginners: 'Write *a* or *ā* like this.' That he can teach. What he has learned, he can teach. Similarly, next group, next group. So in this way, **one teacher can manage hundreds of students of different categories.** This is organization . . . In this way, stage after stage, everyone should be expert. Everyone should be teacher and student." (Conversation, Nouvelle Mayapur, France, 31 July 1976) Delegating teaching tasks to older students it's not just a technique for optimizing manpower: by repeating what they have studied, students themselves will learn the subject much better.



The widespread reluctance - or rather refusal - to invest the best talent in *gurukula* (or education in general) represents a manifestation, in *varṇāśrama* terms, of the (unenlightened) *vaiśya* mentality that afflicts our movement. Money-making initiatives are encouraged and staffed, promoted and equipped, while the brahminical function of teaching - the very core of

ISKCON - is neglected, understaffed and underfunded.

Education, especially of children, is often relegated to an afterthought. This is symptomatic of the prominence of *tamas* and *rajas*, the two *gunas* characterizing the *vaisya-varna*. I have nothing against *vaisyas*; if trained and initiated they are also counted among the *dvijas*; but they need guidance on how to spend the money for the long-term progress of the mission. There is nothing wrong, per se, with making money (if later properly utilized). Economic development is one of the crucial elements of a flourishing society. Which brings us to the second essential ingredient for successfully implementing *gurukula* - funding: "You have suggested that some men are best engaged in doing business. I agree. All *grihastas* who are interested in doing business should do so in full swing . . . So let all the *grihastas* who wish to, execute business full-fledgedly in the USA and in this way support *gurukula*. Business must be done by the *grihastas*, not by the *sannyasis* or *brahmacharies*. Neither the *sannyasis* or *brahmacharies* can be expected to support *gurukula*. The parents must take responsibility for their children, otherwise they should not have children. It is the duty of the individual parents . . . The profits from the businesses should first go to support *gurukula* and balance may be given for the local Temple's maintenance." (Letter to Jayatirtha, 22 Jan 1976)



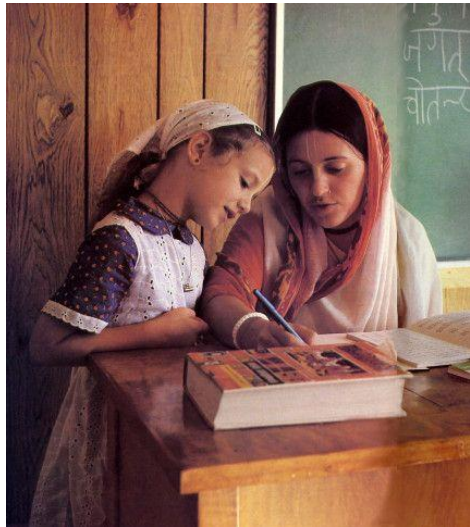
Very clear instruction, given to a GBC, a top leader, not just to any devotee: "The profits from the businesses should first go to support *gurukula*." Unfortunately, I have heard directly from Srila Prabhupada disciples about the financial deprivation they suffered while trying to run a school. I have also heard about the reluctance and sluggishness of parents to pay for their children's schooling. Fittingly, on the same day of the above letter, Srila Prabhupada wrote to another leader: "Actually it is the responsibility of the parents to maintain *gurukula*. By taxing the Temples or taking loan from the BBT the parents are being allowed to avoid their responsibility. Before having a child the parents should see whether they shall be able to pay for their child's education. **The GBC should make an injunction that if they beget children, then whatever the expenses are for supporting *gurukula***



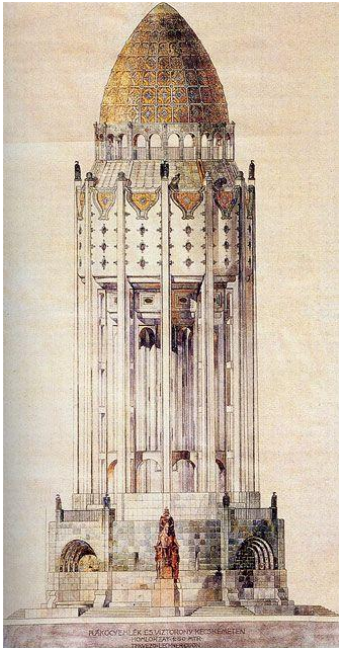
they must pay for it. In another letter to Jayatirtha I have suggested how the parents can earn money for their children's support. So you can discuss everything together and do the needful." (Letter to Jagadisa, 22 Jan 1976) Srila Prabhupada wanted to ensure the wellbeing of the children: "Regarding *gurukula* I am very happy to hear that the financial crisis has passed. That is very good.

This is real management . . . As far as the children are concerned, people are accusing us sometimes that our children are undernourished, underfed and not cared for properly. So it is good that you are seeing that they are happy and healthy. They should be given milk at least 8 ounces a day if possible 16 ounces a day. Dahl, chappati, rice, vegetable this will keep them fit. If possible a little bit of fruit also." (Letter to Jagadisa, 28 Dec 1974)

And "children's support" includes teachers' support and maintenance. *Brahmana* teachers are protected and treasured when the leaders are *brahmanas*, civilized *ksatriyas*, or cultured *vaisyas*. It's a question of cultivating the right values and identifying the right priorities. Srila Prabhupada writes: "As for fixing up the Deity house in Dallas with marble altars, this is not necessary for now. We shall see later on. For the time being organize the health, education and care of the children and continue the Deity worship as it is going nicely now. Deities are satisfied with *bhakti* not marble. Therefore try to increase the *bhakti*." (Letter to Jagadisa, 28 Dec 1974) When



unrefined *vaisyas* capture leadership positions, *brahmanas* starve. Crude, commercially minded businessmen focus on profit (even if for Krishna) and on externally opulent trappings and showy appurtenances, such as plush buildings and decorations. Srila Prabhupada was different; although he had plenty of business experience in life, and plenty of ideas to create revenues, he saw profitable enterprises as means to support education: "If it is possible to keep sufficient number of cows in the asram, there can be very nice milk business and that may make sufficient income for maintaining one institution for educating children in Krishna Consciousness." (Letter to Hansadutta, 1 Nov 1968)



In a *vaiśya*-dominated setting, instead, the collector is held on a golden pedestal, even if afflicted with moral shortcomings; while the *brahmana* is neglected, even if of noble character. Such leaders will energetically seek and cajole donors to build projects and, if successful, will produce marble erections and making-money schemes: Govinda restaurants, snack-counters, guesthouses, gift-shops, etc. (Again, nothing wrong, per se, with any of these.) *Vaisyas* with a notch

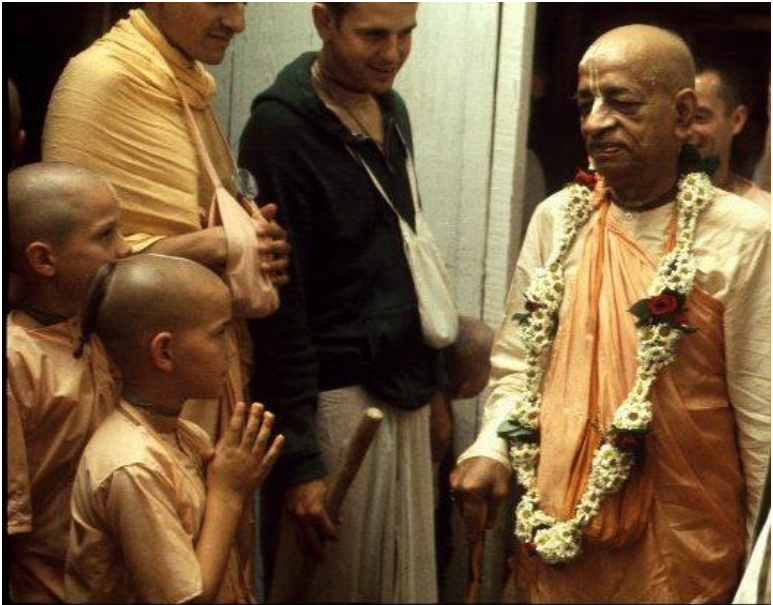
more culture will also support a goshala; but they might not find in their heart to invest in education, especially not-for-profit education. *Gurukula* is not a money-making enterprise, and these *vaisyas* won't emotionally connect with it. Unless they are very Krishna conscious and strongly aligned with Srila Prabhupada's instructions, it's unlikely they would invest for *gurukula*, for curriculum development or other such



brahminical pursuits. In such scenario, some *brahmanas* will presumably turn into mere employees, paid to twirl incenses, circle lamps and wave *camaras* - in Deity worship or in *car-pujas*. The children of the temple community, of course, can serenely attend the slaughterhouses of modern schooling, aiming at becoming hired hands in technology as coders, engineers and other *sudra* careers. The unenlightened *vaisya* leader hopes that, once grown up, those children will get "good jobs" and will also become temple donors. The *ugra-karma-misra-bhakti* cycle would thus be completed.

In summary, what went wrong with earlier attempts at *gurukula*? We didn't follow Srila Prabhupada's simple recipe: 1. best people as teachers and staff; 2. sufficient funding. The recipe remains valid. Next time you cook

sweet rice, don't forget rice and milk. Anyway, whatever happened, happened; whatever didn't happen, didn't happen; but what about the present and the future? At the ILS (ISKCON Leadership Sanga) in February 2020 I asked the Indian leaders present in the audience how many temples they had. They enthusiastically replied: "Two-hundred-fifty!" (I thought they exaggerated; but I didn't argue.) Then I asked how many *gurukulas* they had. Silence. They were taken aback. They didn't know. After a few moments they tentatively came up with a ballpark figure: "Ten," they said. (I think that's also too high; but let's accept that, for argument's sake.) So, one *gurukula* every twenty-five temples or centers. Hmm... What about the other twenty-four cities or communities? Don't they



make babies there? Don't they need Krishna conscious education for their children? What about Srila Prabhupada's instruction - from 46 years ago - that: "Everywhere, wherever we have got our center, a *Varṇāśrama* College should be established"? (Morning Walk, Vrindavana, 12 March



1974) There is obviously an unbalance, an asymmetry in our development. As a movement, at least in India, we are proficient in opening temples and installing Deities, attracting the pious Hindus. As far as opening *gurukulas* and *Varṇāśrama* Colleges our performance, with a few notable exceptions, has been abysmal. I am not pointing fingers at this or that particular leader; at this or that council, committee or consortium. The flop is across the board. Frankly, I don't have much hope that leaders in their sixties and seventies would suddenly turn around from years of apathy and distrust, magically morphing overnight into enthusiastic *gurukula* supporters. I am 57. I lived and served in *gurukula* for six and half years, mostly in Sridham Mayapur, but also in Italy, in Villa Vrindavana, Florence. I am willing to keep writing and talking about the significance of the *gurukula* by repeating and emphasizing Srila Prabhupada's instructions, even in the face of indifference and diffidence. Srila Prabhupadas writes: "I consider this *gurukula* school to be one of our most important aspects of this movement and it should

be given all serious consideration by the members." (Letter to Stokakrsna, 20 June 1972) I request you, if you consider yourself an ISKCON member, to ask yourself - and then take a few moments to answer: "What I am going to do for *gurukula*?" The next question is: if the instructions of Srila Prabhupada on *gurukula* are so numerous and direct; if the *Bhagavatam* is so clear and emphatic; if the recipe is so basic and straightforward; if the educational alternatives are so terrible; why don't we see more efforts to promote *gurukula* in ISKCON?

Why ISKCON Neglects *Gurukula*? Five Reasons

1. Our Past Still Haunts Us

We are still traumatized by the mistakes of early decades. Senior leaders are aware of the suffering of the children due to ham-fisted discipline, misunderstood frugality and slapdash screening of sexual predators. To some ISKCON leaders even the very sound of the word "*gurukula*" is distressing, as it



summons radioactive memories. The pain of mistreatment, abuse and negligence are still vivid in the memory of the victims. Those who had to deal with the consequences (such as having to raise millions of dollars to settle lawsuits) may have developed knee-jerk negative reactions and don't want to have anything to do with *gurukula*. Some of our leaders experienced *gurukula* as a big moral, financial and reputational black hole; an excruciating experience they don't wish to repeat. Such feelings are understandable, and our empathy and our sympathy go out to all of them, but such setbacks cannot determine the future of the movement. I am curious: how long will it take, as a movement, to overcome the shock and distress of the past and restart focusing on one of the key areas of the mission? What would it take for everyone to overcome the trauma? Collective, worldwide therapy sessions? *Come on people!* When will we get our act together and restart focusing on key instructions of the Founder-Acarya, such as this: "These children are



the future hope of our Society, so it is a very important matter how we are training them in Krishna consciousness from the very childhood." (Letter to Satsvarupa, 4 Nov 1973) It is said that the golden age will last for ten-thousand years, or, roughly, 400 generations. The first fifty years of ISKCON only represent the two-hundredth part of the ten thousand - 0.5% of the total. Should the blunders of our early years inhibit and block us for the 9,950 years? 9,950 years is roughly 398 generations. How many more we wish to burn before we learn to do real Krishna conscious schooling the way Srila Prabhupada wanted?



Let's consider that during the first decades of its existence ISKCON has faced lots of tribulations also in other areas, such as marriage. We have seen (and are seeing) so many

divorces; but devotees still enthusiastically get married. We had trouble maintaining possession of several temples, but devotees still enthusiastically open temples. We experienced so many *sannyasis* leaving the renounced order, but



devotees still enthusiastically take *sannyasa*. We have witnessed so many gurus falling down, but devotee still enthusiastically take initiation. In all these areas we continue to operate enthusiastically despite the failings of the past; but with *gurukula*, no; we basically stopped trying, as least as a worldwide strategy. Of course, devotees can choose to do whatever service they want, but if they neglect promoting *gurukula* they shouldn't say they care for *varṇāśrama*.

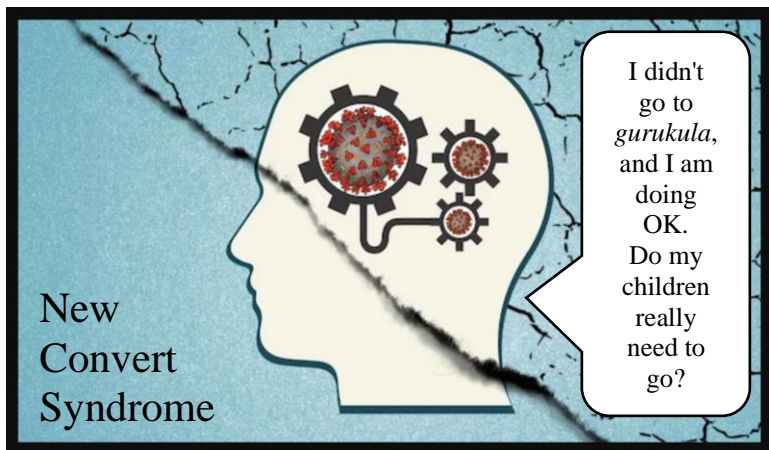
2. New Convert Syndrome

In sociological terms, most present ISKCON members are new converts. Most of us weren't born in the movement and didn't grow up in it; we joined at some point of our adult life. Those who joined as grownups and seriously practice *bhakti-yoga* today - chanting their rounds, following their vows, etc. - may tend to underestimate the



value of *gurukula*. They didn't have the experience of years of full-immersion Krishna conscious schooling; but they are still surviving spiritually; some might even be thriving. And so they might be tempted to think: "I didn't go to

gurukula and I am doing OK; do my children really need it? Is it really so essential for them? Perhaps it's just fine if, instead, they go to mundane schools, as I did. What's the harm?" This thinking - unexpressed but implicitly held - is diametrically opposed to Srila Prabhupada's vision for ISKCON's education. It's also quite contrary to any Krishna conscious understanding of child psychology: how can anyone imagine that years of association with materialistic classmates, materialistic teachers and materialistic teachings wouldn't damage our children or impair their chances to achieve love of God in this life? Spending one's childhood absorbed in Krishna; focused on reawakening one's dormant spiritual affection; learning to control the mind and senses in a pure devotional atmosphere; these experiences have an incalculable value. Precluding our children from that opportunity is one of the greatest brutalities we can subject them to. The indifference of new converts to *gurukula* is tacitly condoned and enabled by the almost complete



absence of emphasis on *gurukula* by spiritual leaders. (How many times did you hear an ISKCON leader speaking about *gurukula* this year?) As a result, apathy, diffidence and ignorance about *gurukula* reign almost unchallenged in contemporary ISKCON. Srila Prabhupada writes: "The irresponsible life of sense enjoyment was unknown to the children of the followers of the *varṇāśrama* system." (SB 1.5.24, purport) Unfortunately such a life is well known "to the children of the followers of" contemporary ISKCON.

3. There Is No Money in *Gurukula*

Education by brahminical teachers is not a money-making enterprise. It's not a business: "Those who give education in exchange of money, they are not *brāhmins* . . .



A *brāhmaṇa* will never ask. *Brāhmaṇa* is eager to give lesson only. That's all. *Brāhmaṇa* is eager to see that people are educated." (Conversation, Paris, 11 June 1974) Those for whom financial gain is a priority may find *gurukula* unthinkable. "Why engaging healthy, able, intelligent men and women in something that doesn't produce profit?" The philistine may see *gurukula* as a waste of time and money. Devotees, by their hard work and by the mercy of Krishna, generally achieve the goals they fix for themselves. Therefore Srila Prabhupada directed the devotees to meditate on how to make the *gurukula* a success: "If you can develop such an institution for future children of the society, or outside the society, it will be great service for the humanity. I am sure Krishna

will give you more and more intelligence in this matter, if you **seriously think on the subject** by gradual evolution. (Letter to Hansadutta, 1 Nov 1968) In other words, it takes concentrated focus and deep reflection. As Vaisesika Prabhu says, "Where attention goes, energy flows." If devotees seriously contemplate how to realize Srila Prabhupada's educational vision, they will start seeing possibilities and opportunities will open up. Where there is a will there is a way. When devotees put their minds into building temples, they often construct magnificent projects; for which they collect and spend millions of dollars. You might have heard that ISKCON is an educational movement; but judging by what gets attention and funding, it appears that in certain sections of ISKCON the focus is more on pompous worship and grandiose ritual. Establishing *gurukula* doesn't require

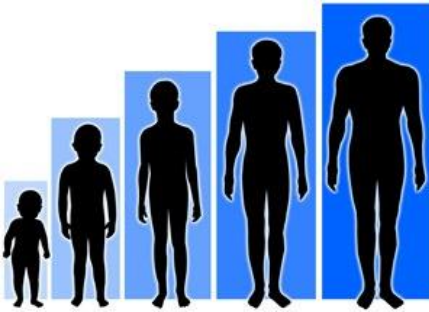


spectacular marble palaces, stunning domes, breathtaking pinnacles, or marvelous ornamentations - in fact simplicity would rather be the preferred flavor. Construction-wise it wouldn't be a major undertaking. Modest but clean living quarters and unpretentious but ventilated classrooms is what's needed. Some of the leaders who had been willing and able to construct awe-inspiring, monumental temples, can't find the inspiration, the energy or the interest to secure frugal facilities for traditional educational purposes. Laziness is not their challenge. They are willing to strive for herculean undertakings, but the idea of building a *gurukula* seems to never cross their mind, although it would cost only a tiny fraction of their pharaonic ventures. It's fundamentally a question of values. People endeavor and spend for what they consider important. *Gurukula* is very low - or conspicuous by its absence - in their list of priorities. The suspicion remains: if *gurukula* were bringing money, would it attract attention? But it doesn't, and therefore it's consistently neglected. The mantra seems to be: there is no money in *gurukula*, therefore there is no money *for gurukula*.

4. Lack of Goodness

Dealing with growing children and shaping them into responsible human beings take lots of time, tons of patience, and loads of love for teaching. It cannot be done in





passion and ignorance. (Or, rather, it can be done in passion and ignorance, but the results would be disastrous.) Teaching is for *brahmanas*, people who are satisfied with little

material possessions; people self-controlled and contented with wisdom; happy with cultivating and sharing knowledge. There is not much room in their lifestyle for the acquisitiveness of the *vaisya* or the political maneuvering of the *ksatriya*. And as far as *sudras*, it's not their thing to teach as a full-time engagement. You can't build a human being like a carpenter builds a cabinet, or like a businessman builds a company, or like a king builds an empire. It's a different ball game. Every student is a long-term project that likely won't provide fame or wealth to the teacher. When successful, ten, fifteen or twenty years of work will "only" provide the joy of seeing young adults able to walk on their feet in the world, in control of their mind and senses, firm in their faith and in their attachment to Krishna. How many ISKCON devotees are willing to invest that much for so (materially) little? Many occupations in this world can engage *rajas* and *tamas* but teaching in *gurukula* requires *sattva*. How many mothers dream and pray that their child would become a *gurukula* teacher? Engineers and doctors, yes; businessmen and clerks, perhaps; *gurukula* teachers? Nah.



But Srila Prabhupada was different; this is what he writes to *gurukula* teachers: "I am very glad to hear that all of you have been such a great help to Stoka Krsna there in our Dallas *gurukula* . . . I very much appreciate your activities for conducting our school to the highest standard of Krishna Consciousness behavior, and **I consider your work the most important in the society** because you are shaping the future generation of our Krishna Consciousness preachers, and this is not any small thing." (Letter to Rupa Vilasa, Candrika, Bhavatarini and Bhanutanya, 20 June 1972) The lack of focus on *gurukula* shows a pervasive lack of goodness in our Society, in the fiber, character and culture of our communities. We suffer from a disconnect from Srila Prabhupada's spirit and values. Therefore there is a lack of appreciation and attraction for purely brahminical occupations. Srila Prabhupada sees *gurukula* as the way to create people who would transform lives: "These children are therefore

fortunate . . . If they can be trained up, they can become very good preacher, each one of them. And they can make hundreds of devotees. In this way we can expand." (Conversation, Nouvelle Mayapur, France, 2 Aug 1976) But to create a "good preacher" takes years of hard, sattvic work. Any volunteer? Imagine: you are 25-years old; it takes some 12-15 years of nurturing before a *gurukula* student can go out and make his mark in the world. If you are active till, say, 75, you can only develop 4-5 full batches of students in your lifetime. The prize is great, the price too. Most people feel inspired only by shorter-term objectives.



An 8-year-old studies Sanskrit

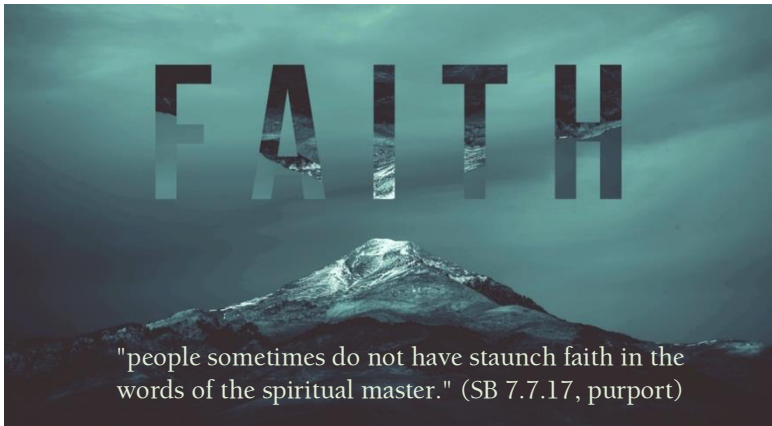
5. Lack of Faith

Faith: a very intimate and delicate matter. Suggesting that devotees don't have enough faith can be potentially offensive. I need to tread lightly here. Implying that

leaders and parents don't have much faith in Srila Prabhupada's instructions on children education won't make me many friends. But what am I supposed to do? Srila Prabhupada said certain things, including in official, public and solemn documents such as his books; for instance: "In our Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement, the *guru-kula* plays an **extremely important** part in our activities." (SB 7.5.56-57, purport) But I don't see that *gurukula* "plays an extremely important part" in contemporary ISKCON. It's virtually ignored and forgotten. It's mostly conspicuous by its absence, even in places where, due to the abundance of resources and manpower, they could easily do it - if they wanted to. How often do you hear *gurukula* mentioned in lectures and Sunday talks? How many serious efforts at establishing one do you know about? A value is only a value if it's implemented practically, otherwise it's just an antique trinket, a folk relic. Would it be offensive to say that leaders who talk about *varṇāśrama* but don't promote



gurukula, either don't understand *varṇāśrama* or they are hypocrites (or both)?



I am lucky I don't depend financially on any particular temple or administrative overlord, and so I can repeat Srila Prabhupada's words without fear of losing patronage. It reminds me of what Srila Prabhupada writes in the *Bhagavatam*: "*brahmanas* were not paid servants of the king, and therefore they had the strength to dictate to the king on the principles of scriptures." (SB 2.7.9, purport) I don't consider myself a *brahmana*, but the idea still applies: if you are not hired, you cannot be fired. We will see what the "kings" of ISKCON - those with money and manpower - will do. So far, what I see it's not very encouraging. For instance, Srila Prabhupada wrote - for the whole world to see and for all ISKCON leaders to follow: "It is necessary for the leaders of the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement to start educational institutions in different parts of the world

to train children, starting at the age of five years." (SB 4.12.23, purport) But I don't see many leaders starting "educational institutions in different parts of the world." *Entire continents do not have a single gurukula.* I am not blaming anyone in particular. ISKCON leaders do what they can and many of them work under immense stress just to keep temples and projects afloat, weathering one systemic crisis after another. They are heroes. In no way, shape or form I wish to insinuate that they are lesser devotees for not promoting *gurukula*. They are glorious in many ways. But I am deeply frustrated seeing an essential part of Srila Prabhupada's mission being ignored.



The status of the *gurukula* embodies and exemplifies the overall weakness of our movement. We are supposed to be primarily an educational movement, *but we fail miserably to even educate our own children* - what to speak of educating anyone else's children. "To systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large" Srila Prabhupada declares in the first of the Seven Purposes of ISKCON, "and to

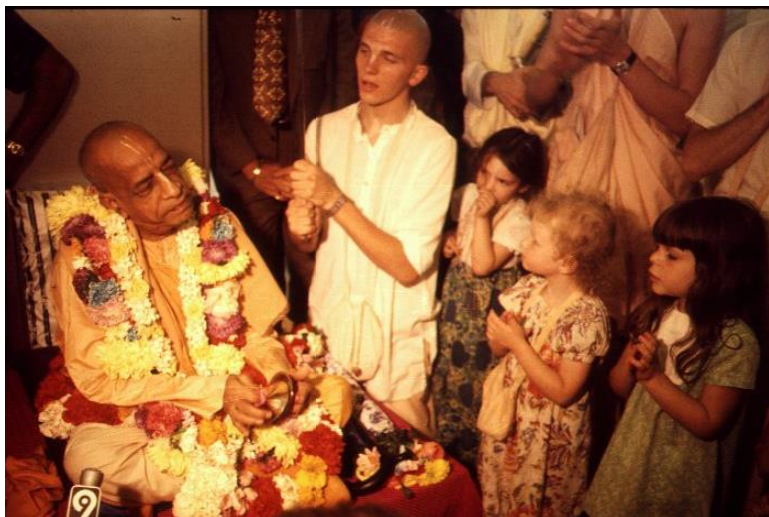
educate all peoples in the techniques of spiritual life in

order to check the imbalance of values in life and to achieve real unity and peace in the world." "Educate all peoples"?! We are not able to systematically educate even our own children! We are mostly dependent on the *ugra-karmic* society to tutor our children. The best way to prevent *varṇāśrama* from becoming a reality is to neglect *gurukula*; that's the perfect way to block, deactivate or preclude the establishment of *varṇāśrama*.

In summary: a fundamental reason why our movement neglects *gurukula* is a pervasive lack of faith, under several subheadings and manifested in various ways by different individuals (especially leaders and parents) and communities:

1. Lack of faith in the Founder-Acarya's words on the importance of *gurukula*.
2. Lack of faith in the *Bhagavatam*, which stresses *gurukula*.
3. Lack of faith in love for Krishna as the true goal of life and most urgent necessity - the objective that should be the central focus of children's schooling.
4. Lack of faith that building character is among the most important goals of education.





5. Lack of faith in *gurukula's* preaching potential: "The face of the world will then change automatically." (SB 4.12.23, purport) Srila Prabhupada writes: "I was also at Dallas school last summer and I was very much impressed with these children, how nicely they are becoming preachers and kirtan men and girls. **If we can develop properly, one day they will turn the world by their preaching.**" (Letter to Mohanananda, 11 Dec 1972) But if we cannot "develop properly"... you can complete the sentence.

6. Lack of faith in *varṇāśrama* as a social system that deserves and requires its own suitable, culturally self-sufficient system of education.

7. Lack of faith that our children will be happy and prosper as adults in *brahminical* or (at least) *dvija* occupations.

8. Lack of faith in ISKCON, in our capacity to create a functional *gurukula* that works and creates first class graduates.

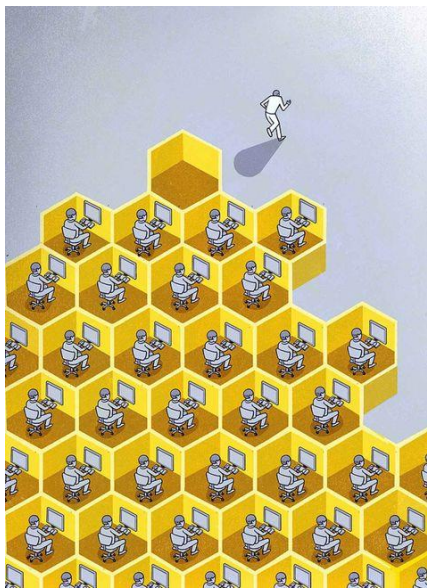
9. Lack of faith in our children. The intrinsic, unspoken but pervasive belief is that they can only work as *sudras*, getting a job and working for someone else. Srila Prabhupada says: "One who is depending on job, he's a *sudra*. That is not education . . . Unless he gets a job his education is useless. Therefore he's a *sudra*. And *brahmana*, *ksatriya*, *vaisya* – they will create their own



means of livelihood." (Morning Walk, Mayapur, 7 April 1975) We lack faith that our children can function as *brahmanas*, *ksatriyas* or *vaisyas* and "create their own means of livelihood." Therefore, we plan that our children get a degree - often in technologically oriented skills - so they can go around, begging employers: "Please, hire me; I will serve you." Srila Prabhupada writes in the *Bhagavatam*: "Technology, therefore, is meant for the *sudras*, whereas the Vedas are meant for the *dvijas*." (SB 7.12.13-14, purport) Turning their children into well-

remunerated *sudras* seems to be the implicit definition of success for many ISKCON parents.

10. Lack of faith in God, who provides for everyone's needs. Srila Prabhupada is unambiguous: "Kṛṣṇa is feeding even cats and dogs, and why He shall not feed us, we are engaged in His service? Why? It is simply a question of understanding. One should know that Kṛṣṇa is feeding the elephant, Kṛṣṇa is feeding the ant. So there are 8,400,000 species of living entities. So if one who has completely forgotten Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa is feeding them, then why not we?" (Conversation, Detroit, 18 July 1971) Srila Prabhupada also says: "From the *śāstras* we can understand that our necessities of life are already there. They are. *Tasyaiva hetoḥ prayateta kovido* [SB 1.5.18].



The *śāstra* says that, 'Don't bother yourself about the necessities of life. This is already there, settled. You will get it. Depend on the supplier of the necessities of life.' The supplier of necessities, life, is God. That is the description in the Vedic literature . . . there are 8,400,000 different forms of life, and God is the creator of them, and

He is supplying all the necessities of them. We human being, we have got different enterprises, but what the enterprises have got the elephant in Africa? There are millions of elephants. Who is feeding them? And the ant also. There are trillions and millions of ants in your room. Who is



feeding them? So we do not believe in God. That is our defect. Otherwise, if God is providing food for the lower animals, why not for us if we become God conscious?" (Lecture on SB 5.5.1, Johannesburg, 20 Oct 1975) We don't have faith in God, and therefore we shun *gurukula*.

Summarizing this section: ISKCON neglects *gurukula* because: 1. we let the past problems define our future; 2. most of us grew up as non-devotees, so we think that full-immersion Krishna conscious schooling is not so essential; 3. *gurukula* is not a money-making enterprise; 4. we suffer from a lack of *sattva-guna*, the goodness needed for long-term dedication to *brahminical* life; 5. we lack faith in the words of the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* and of the Founder-Acarya.



The Alternative? The Slaughterhouse

Since ISKCON implicitly and explicitly (largely) rejects *gurukula*; we need to consider the alternative. For this we first go to the Founder-Acarya. Srila Prabhupada didn't mince words when criticizing modern education, even from the pages of the *Bhagavatam*: "The whole system of education is geared to sense gratification, and if a learned man thinks it over, he sees that the children of this age are being intentionally sent to the slaughterhouses of so-called education." (SB 1.1.22, purport) His tone certainly didn't change in private: "I have seen intelligent boys, they go to school and he is spoiled. *Bas*, spoiled. He learns how to smoke, how to use sex, how to talk nonsense, how to use knife, how to fight, these things. At least at the present moment. Yes. Simply slaughterhouse. This so-called school is called, colleges yes, slaughterhouse. Yes, slaughterhouse . . . this *gurukula*



become such a frequent problem that the news coverage of these events has fundamentally changed, with the Columbine massacre [15 deaths and 21 injuries] getting months of press and current events hardly

drawing notice." And obviously these shooting don't affect only the direct victims and their families, but also the rest of the students and their families. Besides the shootings, according to *capenet.org*, 19% of US students in public schools reported the presence of gangs at school; 30% saw hate-related graffiti at school; 4% were victims of a crime while at school; 28% were bullied (and, according to Wikipedia, "75% of school shooters had been bullied"). As far as teachers in US public schools: 10% were threatened with injury by a student; 6% were physically attacked by a student; 41% reported that student misbehavior interfered with teaching. But the above data pales in comparison with the levels of students' depression, desperation, and self-inflicted violence. In India, for instance, according to Wikipedia: "Every hour one student commits suicide in India, with about 28 such suicides



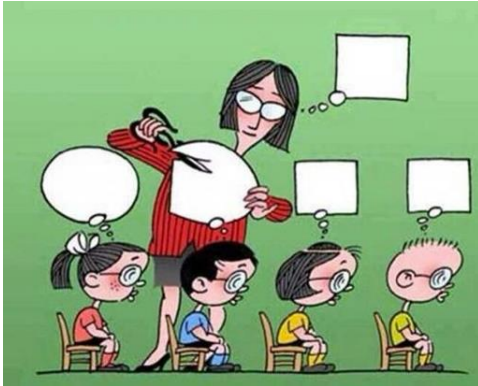
reported every day, according to data compiled by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). **The NCRB data shows that 10,159 students died by suicide in 2018**, an increase from 9,905 in 2017, and 9,478 in 2016." Besides those who actually die, how many more students consider killing themselves? Is this the environment, atmosphere and pressure we wish our children to grow in? And for what? For the hope of getting a *sudra* job, serving some *asuric* corporation?



Sir Ken Robinson

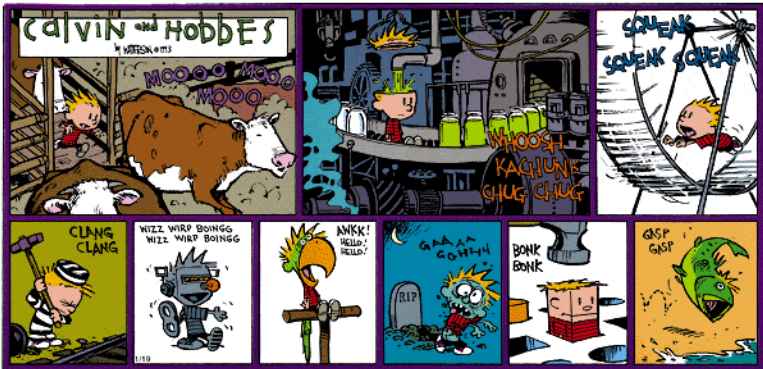
We are not criticizing modern education just out of a religious feeling, due to the pervasive lack of God consciousness. Secular intellectuals also recognize the huge problems with contemporary schooling, from a number of angles. Take for instance the late Sir Ken Robinson. The titles of his talks on YouTube clearly shows

that he is not too happy with the present situation: "How to escape education's death valley" ([here](#)); "Revolutionizing Education from the Ground Up" ([here](#)); "Do schools kill creativity?" ([here](#)) I recommend you watch at least his 11-minute talk: "Changing Education Paradigms - ADHD, Creativity and the Education System." It explains, among other things, how contemporary



education is modelled on the interests of industrialization (ugra-karma) and in the image of it (ever noticed how so many schools looks and functions like factories?). You can watch it [here](#).

Besides their relevance, their talks are outstandingly witty. His criticism of the contemporary school system is by no way unique. Among thinking people we find a profound dissatisfaction about present-day education. I find it



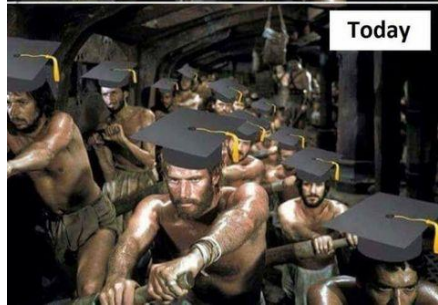
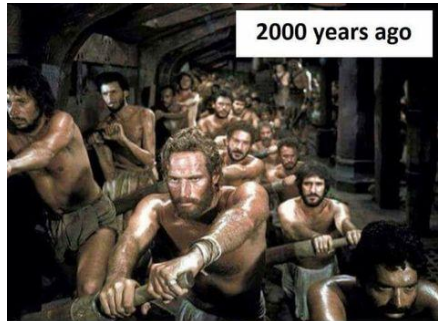
BOY, AM I GLAD TO SEE YOU, HOBBS!



ANOTHER TYPICAL SCHOOL DAY?

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astonishing how often the Hare Krishna parents appear oblivious or indifferent to the faults of modern schooling and tacitly, supinely, lethargically (and recklessly) entrust their children to the slaughterhouse.



Often the parents' basic hopes of education are plain wrong; they cultivate myopic and misplaced objectives, diametrically opposed

to Srila Prabhupada's vision for ISKCON's children. Many parents wish that their children will acquire some marketable skills, certified by a degree, so that they can get hired (likely by demoniac companies). Srila Prabhupada speaks strongly against this mood: "The modern education means to create dogs. The dog goes door to door and moves the tail, 'Please give me if you have anything' . . . In Vedic culture no *brahmana* will accept any job. No *ksatriya* will accept any job. No *vaisya* will accept any... Only *sudras*." (Morning Walk, Bombay, 17 Nov 1975)

Outside Education; If Needed in Later Years, Why Not?

Let me open a due parenthesis here: I am not saying that *gurukula* and *Varṇāśrama* College should be the only forms of education our children could ever receive. No. I am simply stressing that the first years of schooling are essential for building character and a solid attachment to Krishna. One essential function of education is to prevent children from becoming slaves to their senses: "When I was in America first, I saw some little boy, not more than ten to twelve years, smoking cigarette. I was astonished, that 'What kind of education is there?' . . . So this is not training. Training is he must be very controlled. And if you teach from the beginning, then he will be trained up. There



is a Bengali proverb . . . 'When the bamboo is green, you can bend it, but when it is yellow, dried, it will crack.' So education begins from the very, I mean, childhood. That is education. Therefore *gurukula* is required. It doesn't require how much he has learned A-B-C-D and grammar. No. First of all character. That is *gurukula* living . . . How to become sense controller, that is first education." (Lecture on SB 7.12.2, Bombay, 13 April 1976) This was Srila Prabhupada vision and priority; because it's the *sastra's* vision and priority:

Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa: Concerning the *gurukula* system, after a child attains a certain age . . . When he becomes, say, twenty years old, though, when he becomes older...

Prabhupāda: First of all begin. Then we shall think of old. But... at least when he is older, he will not become a nonsense . . . We want to save him from becoming a nonsense. That is our duty
Brahmacārī gurukule vasan dāntaḥ [SB 7.12.1].
When the *brahmacārī* is residing in *gurukula*, he must be trained up how to control senses. That is the first education. People are



spoiled because they are not trained up to become controller. That is the defect of the modern age. And when one is unable to control senses, he will do all nonsense."

(Morning Walk, Bombay, 14 April 1976)

If later Krishna and circumstances indicate that their individual path would require further training as, say, lawyers or architects, what's the problem? We don't expect all of our children to become lifelong, full-time missionaries. If universities can provide needed learnings and titles, our children can get them; but by then - if they first go to *gurukula* - they will be equipped to withstand degradation. They will already be strong devotees, able to deal within the material world in a Krishna conscious way; just as Srila Prabhupada describes: "Now you organize our



KC school very nicely on the basis of a kindergarten school and primary school for children up to 15 years old . . . If they are not spoiled by an artificial standard of sense gratification at an early age, children will turn out very nicely as sober citizens, because they have learned the real meaning of life. If they are trained to accept that austerity is very enjoyable then they will not be spoiled. So you organize everything in such a way that we can deliver these souls back



to Krishna—this is our real work. Some of our girls may be trained in colleges and take teacher exams, and their husbands also." (Letter to Satsvarupa, 25 Nov 1971) I am not therefore suggesting that our youths reject all of the training the world offers. If need be, let them go to colleges and universities or take whatever courses they want. No harm in them being properly situated in honest, respectable professions; but first, to use Srila Prabhupada's

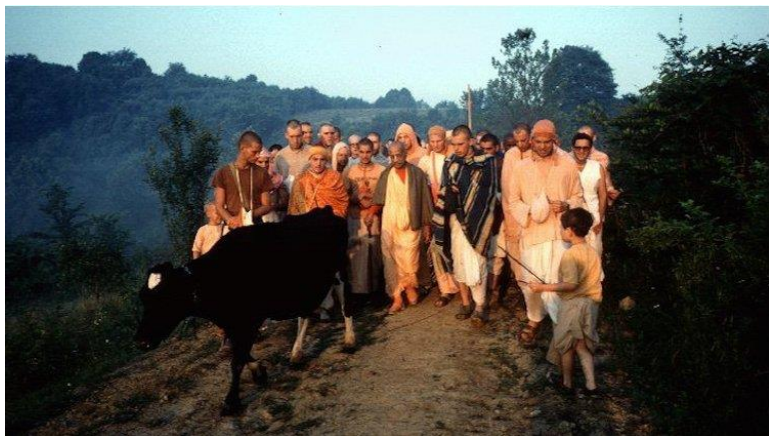
words, they "must be trained up how to control senses. That is the first education."

The Parents' Bizarre Ideas about their Children's Future

A major re-education drive for ISKCON parents is urgently needed. New-convert parents have not experienced *gurukula* life and they also lack theoretical knowledge of its importance. That requires training, because it's the parents that choose the schooling for their children, and parents need to be educated in appreciating and supporting *gurukula*. Another problem is that a lot of parents are almost totally disconnected from Srila Prabhupada's vision of occupational stability and respectability. They generally still daydream of "security" in urban, industrial and technological landscapes. They often doubt that *gurukula* can provide appropriate



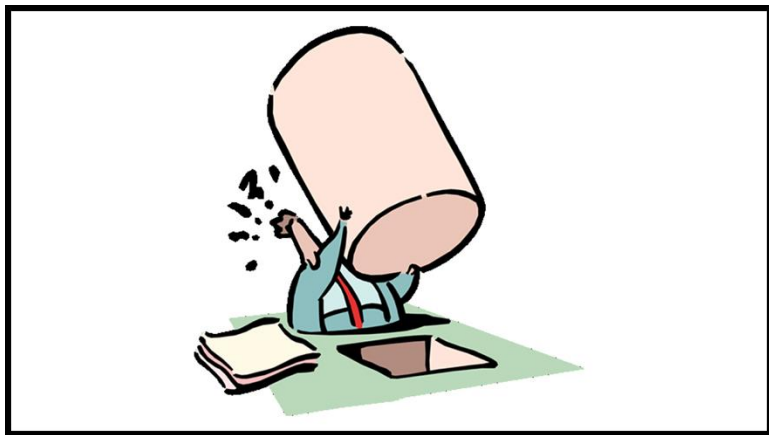
preparation for their children's adult lives. How many parents, for instance, wish their children to become self-sufficient



farmers? Not many, I suspect. Nevertheless, Srila Prabhupada indicated - and recommended - agriculture as a perfectly respectable and desirable career: "Agriculture is the noblest profession. It makes society happy, wealthy, healthy, honest, and spiritually advanced for a better life after death." (*Light of the Bhagavata*) He also says: "Agriculture is the noblest profession. Give him some land, he cuts the wood, makes cottages. The land is clear, now till it, keep cows and grow food grains . . . Simple thing. And then live comfortably, eat comfortably, chant Hare Kṛṣṇa." (Conversation, New Vrindavana, 22 June 1976) *Gurukula* and *Varṇāśrama* College can certainly provide enough training to become a successful farmer (and successful in many other careers), but the glitch is the diffused lack of faith in traditional, holistic occupations. Generally ISKCON parents don't like the idea of their child become a farmer - or a cook, or a pujari, or a *gurukula* teacher, or a self-employed carpenter, etc. -

even if those occupations fit the child's nature and would make that person happy for life. Instead, many parents dream of a dependent, *sudra* future for their children: "In this age, ninety-nine percent people are engaged as *sudra*, working for others. No independence. Otherwise *brahmana*, *ksatriya*, *vaisya*, they are independent. They are nobody's servant. But at the present moment, **education means how to become expert servant.**" (Room Conversation, Atlanta, 1st March 1975) And Srila Prabhupada is not using "servant" in the devotional sense. Why this obsession that our ISKCON children should become "engaged as *sudra*, working for others"? One of the best ways to kill *varṇāśrama* is to train all children as *sudras*; as engineers, computer programmers, etc. Dear ISKCON parents: first of all, *you need to understand the nature of your children*. Before starting to plan for their careers you need to understand *who they are*. Don't plot their future based on artificial, contaminated, materialistic and uncultured notions. Srila Prabhupada writes in the Tenth Canto: "Nanda Mahārāja was trying to take advantage of the opportunity afforded by Garga Muni's presence, for Garga Muni was a great authority in this knowledge of astrology, by which one





can see the unseen events of past, present and future. It is the duty of a father to understand the astrological position of his children and do what is needed for their happiness." (SB 10.8.5, purport) You shouldn't try to hammer round pegs into square holes. You shouldn't force your children into paths diverging from their natural inclinations. You shouldn't choose for them an occupation, such engineer or doctor, based on the wishes of mundane relatives and other idiots. We need to understand the psychology of children and guide them accordingly. Nanda Maharaja asked Garga Muni, a great astrologer; if you don't know any reliable astrologer, you can use other personality analysis tools - Myers-Briggs, Enneagram, Human Design, etc. - but don't speculate, trying to impose on your children an occupation incompatible with their *guna* and karma. That would be violence, and both you and your children would later suffer for that. A sure way to mess up the life of your

children (and the whole *varṇāśrama*) is to force them into careers contrary to their temperament.

Gurukula and *Varṇāśrama* College - Not Only for ISKCON Children

For ISKCON's children, Srila Prabhupada's plan and intention is clear:

Satsvarūpa: Should our children who are at *gurukula*, when they grow up, should they go to that *Varṇāśrama* College, or... ?

Prabhupāda: Yes, yes. They should go.

Hṛdayānanda: We'll start it right away.

Prabhupāda: *Varṇāśrama* college means for grown-up students. College means for grown-up students.

Hṛdayānanda: Is there a minimum age for beginning such a college?

Prabhupāda: Yes. Ten to twelve years.

Hṛdayānanda: They can start at ten to twelve?

Prabhupāda: Yes. From five to ten years, *gurukula*. And after ten years, they should go to the *Varṇāśrama* College.

Viṣṇujana: New Vrindaban would be an ideal place in America for such a school.

Prabhupāda: Yes. Organize that.

Viṣṇujana: Yes.

Prabhupāda: Yes. I shall go.

(Morning Walk, Vrindavana, 14 March 1974)

Srila Prabhupada's vision about the role and potential of *gurukula* and *Varṇāśrama* College wasn't limited to educating ISKCON's children. He saw Krishna conscious education as a major contribution our movement should offer society at large. Srila Prabhupada's wanted to educate *all* children. He wrote to the GBC who was in charge of the *gurukula*: "I am especially pleased that your *gurukula* project is going forward nicely. **I consider that this is one of our most important projects**, because people in general are only suffering due to poor fund of knowledge. So if we have facility to give them the right knowledge of how to





make an end to suffering condition of life, then we shall be performing the highest type of welfare work. So you can try on this point to convince rich businessmen, educators, politicians, etc. to help us push forward this *gurukula* system for guiding their young children on the right path to becoming sober, upright citizens. You can inform them that if they give me proper facilities that I can save all the young people of your country from the worst danger. People are always willing to give anything for educational purpose. They think that if their children get the right knowledge then they will become very successful in life, and that is their concern, so they sacrifice everything for good educational cause. Now their children are all becoming hippies, and they do not want so much technology and knowledge which gives them no real satisfaction, so they are losing all interest in education and only they want to enjoy life, that's all. But if such children are given practical guidance on the transcendental platform, above the bodily and mental conception of life, then they will develop into perfect citizens—moral, honest, hard-working, law-abiding, clean, faithful to home and country, like that. That is the unmatched success of our Krishna Consciousness schooling system, so you introduce it nicely, so that your

country's leaders will see something very nice and come to our assistance." (Letter to Satsvarupa, 17 Dec 1971) The danger of "children becoming hippies" may be lower today that it was then; but the opportunities for degradation have only increased and made more easily available (think of the Internet, for instance). Srila Prabhupada's vision for a healthy, God-conscious education is even more actual and urgent today.

To educate children within the "Krishna Consciousness schooling system" was Srila Prabhupada's plan even before he left India for the West. The response, though, was disappointing: "Before going to the foreign countries, I had a very bad experience. I asked so many men to give students, Vedic students. 'Swāmījī . . . We have to earn money.'" (*Gurukula* Inspection, Vrindavana, 26 June 1977) Throughout the years Srila Prabhupada was in the lookout for opportunities to establish *gurukula* and for attracting outside students to it, as shown in this conversation in Juhu Beach, Bombay:

Prabhupāda: Why not construct a big building for *gurukula* here? The students will be trained up to come here and sporting, having nice bath and chant Hare Kṛṣṇa and build up their character. And in Bombay you will get many children, because there are so many rich men, they are not so much concerned to make their children technologist. If they get good education and character, they will give . . . If our *gurukula* children comes here they can have very good sporting . . . Remain healthy.



Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa: Twice a day.

Prabhupāda: Oh, yes. Twice a day can come, take bath and enjoy sporting life and then chant Hare Kṛṣṇa, take good *prasādam*. That's all. Why they should waste their time in technology to become a coolie?

(Morning Walk, Bombay, 14 April 1976)

And his vision wasn't limited to India. The following exchange takes place in Hawaii:

Siddha-svarūpa: In the Western world right now, or in a, in a couple of years, but right now it's beginning, the people are more and more and more going to be searching for a place where they can send their children to school.

Prabhupāda: We should have ideal institution, *Varṇāśrama* College. People will be very much happy to send their children. So you have got a group of men who

likes you, who follows you; could train up the teachers and open a *Varṇāśrama* College anywhere, either in India or here, and make an ideal school. They will see how nice it is.

Siddha-svarūpa: Would it be one... an institution that more for people who are living outside, public, to come and go, take class?

Prabhupāda: That way we could. But they come, they take their meals here.

Siddha-svarūpa: Take their meals here, just like at school.

Prabhupāda: Or make it public school, resident students.

Siddha-svarūpa: Yeah. Both.

Prabhupāda: So they will be trained up right, just like you are training in Dallas: rise early in the morning and attend *maṅgala-ārati*, then in class, take nice *prasādam*.

(Conversation, Honolulu, 15 June 1975)

Of the many choices involved in raising children, one of the most consequential is where to send them to school.



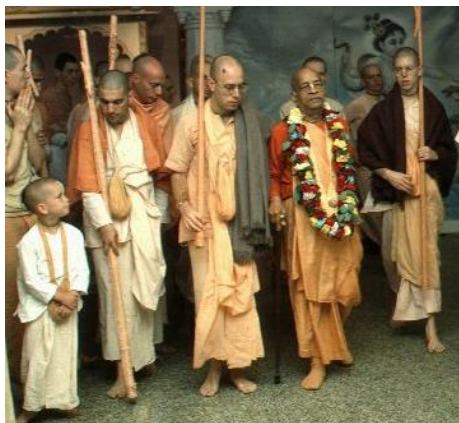
Considering how much time they will spend there, how many friends they will make, how many ideas they will be exposed to, what kind of subjects they

will learn, and it's hard to calculate the influence that schooling has on children during those very impressionable years. Srila Prabhupada was confident that, if ISKCON could provide solid, clean educational opportunities, respectable people would send their children to become learned (*vidvān*) and devoted (*bhaktimān*). Srila Prabhupada personally instructed devotees how to approach the parents: "So now our next business is to bring students, *brahmacārī*. So easy process is to approach . . . gentleman. In their family there are many children—one, two, three, like that. So approach them and plead them that 'Children from your family are expected to be very respectable boys, character and devotee, educated. From your family, people expect like that. According to Cāṇakya Paṇḍita's instruction, he says, *ko 'rthaḥ putreṇa jātena yo na vidvān na bhaktimān*: What



is the use of begetting children like cats and dogs? The children must be *vidvān*, that is, learned, and *bhaktimān*, devotee. This is ideal . . . we are going to teach your son to become *vidvān* and *bhaktimān*. So don't you like to bring your son?' You have to tell them like that. And present it rightly . . . 'For the good of the society you can send your son to become *vidvān*, *bhaktimān*. Then, after some time, you can engage your son in any way.'" (Conversation, Vrindavana, 24 June 1977)

In India, Christian schools, also known as *convent schools*, have generally built a very good reputation and attracted students from different backgrounds, including many Hindu families, due also to being English medium. Srila Prabhupada himself attended the Scottish Church College in Calcutta, and later sent his children to Christian institutes: "They are sending their children where education is given by medium English. High-class men, they send their children to learn through medium of English. There is Calcutta, St. Xavier's College, near our temple . . . All Indian students, all very rich man's son. I sent my sons to English medium, St. Mary's High School and St. Teresa's school. Learned English very nicely." (Conversation, Bhubaneswar, 29 Jan 1977) Srila Prabhupada wanted ISKCON to emulate the model and attract students from "respectable families": "We are making a very gorgeous plan at Mayapur . . . The aim is to make it an international institute for taking perfect spiritual order of life; we shall give titles like bachelor of



divinity, master of divinity, doctor of divinity. Besides that as I have already told you all several times in India, respectable gentlemen want to educate their children through the English medium. If we can organize such an institution such as St. Xavier's college in Calcutta and Bombay and we can give them instruction through the English medium and raise them in a Krishna Conscious culture we shall get unlimited number of students from respectable families of India. Such institution will be very much welcome especially in Bombay and Delhi. So think over this matter how best to organize such an institution as St. Xavier's college." (Letter to Tamal and Gurudas, 23 Aug 1971) Half a century later, what do we have to show? Srila Prabhupada was eager to implement his educational vision. There is true urgency in his words: "The *Varnasrama* College has to be established immediately. Everywhere, wherever we have got our center, a *varṇāśrama* college should be established." (Morning Walk, Vrindavana, 12 March 1974) He was looking for practical ways to realize his strategy, and also considered collaborating with existing realities: "So,

immediately, what I want is in the Kuruksetra university a class should be opened for studying Krishna Consciousness . . . I can immediately take up the task of opening a center there and to open a *varna-asrama* college there affiliated by the



university. In this college we shall train up pure *brahmanas*, (qualified *brahmanas*), *Ksatriyas* and *Vaisyas* . . . So, if we start a *varna-asrama* college in terms of *Bhagavad-gita* instructions and approved by *Srimad-bhagavatam*, why the university will not give degree to a qualified person as approved *brahmana* . . . you can let me know what is the position of the Birla temple at Kuruksetra . . . My idea is that if this temple can be used for our movement, then we do not need to construct a separate temple. If it is not possible to utilize this temple, then we can construct our own temple and for constructing temple and *Varṇāśrama College*, we shall require a big plot of land—at least 10-15 acres or more." (Letter to Prabhakar, 31 May 1975) We need to understand that Srila Prabhupada had big plans for education. He envisioned Krishna conscious education for everyone: "Let the small children from all good families in your country come to

our *gurukula* school and take education from us. They may be certain their children will get the real knowledge which will create the best citizens of brahminical type, clean, honest, law-abiding, healthy, industrious, all good qualities they will have." (Letter to Mohanananda, 11 Dec 1972) In the following exchange, he is inspecting the Vrindavana *gurukula* and giving directions:

Tamāla Kṛṣṇa: Five hundred? Is that your program, Prabhupāda, five hundred boys?

Prabhupāda: At least.

Tamāla Kṛṣṇa: At least five hundred . . .

Prabhupāda: There must be five hundred students and ten managers. That's all. Then it is good. Is that all right? Mr. Sharma?



Dr. Sharma: Yes.

Tamāla Kṛṣṇa: Teachers should be so expert that they can deal with many students.

Prabhupāda: Now your business is bring students . . .

Tamāla Kṛṣṇa: That means we have to canvass vigorously to get students.

Prabhupāda: Yes.

Akṣayānanda: We have to preach.

Prabhupāda: That is the problem. Keep place ready, but you have to bring students.

Tamāla Kṛṣṇa: They're not going to come of their own. We have to go out and get them.

Prabhupāda: They will come later on, when they will see: "Yes."

Yaśodānandana: First we have to get the ISKCON students first.

Prabhupāda: ISKCON or FISKCON, bring students. (laughter)

Dr. Sharma: Prabhupāda, these students can come, any number you like.

Prabhupāda: So that I want. I want the number. It doesn't matter ISKCON or FISKCON.

(*Gurukula Inspection, Vrindavana, 26 June 1977*)



Srila Prabhupada at the Dallas gurukula

This was the vision, the plan of the Founder-Acarya. This was in 1977, less than five months before he left this world. He was talking about bringing hundreds of students to *gurukula*, and not just from ISKCON families. Nowadays only a minuscule fraction of ISKCON parents even *consider* sending their children to *gurukula*. I wish to applaud and commend the small percentage of parents that enroll their children in *gurukula*. In some case they have to rearrange their whole existence to do that, for instance by moving to Mayapur. Their determination, faith and tenacity are praiseworthy and exemplary. From my heart, I wish them and their children all the best. These parents are the real avantgarde of *daiva-varṇāśrama*.

The Future of *Gurukula* (and of *Vaṛṇāśrama*)? In Your Hands

I believe that *gurukula* is super-important. It's super-important for the fortunate souls taking birth in ISKCON: "From the *gurukula* we are training small children. There are about more than hundred children in Dallas. They are rising early in the morning, attending *maṅgala āratik*, boys

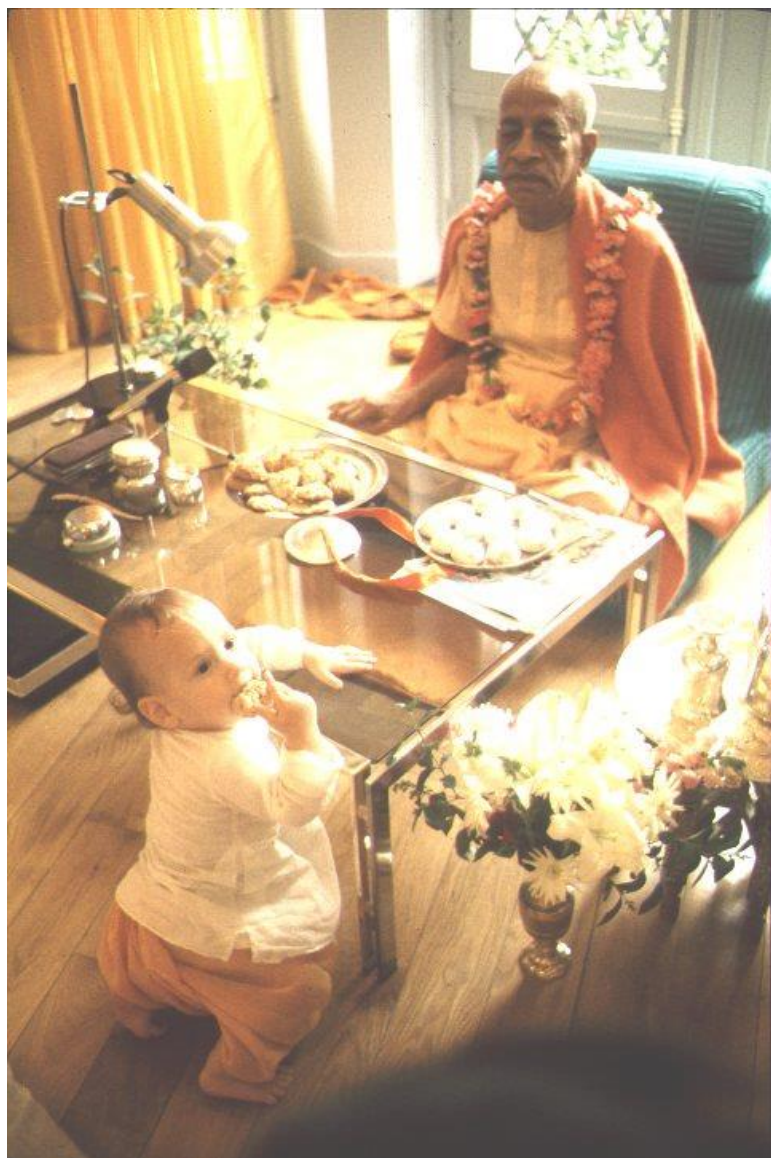


and girls not more than ten years, not more than five, six years. So that is very hopeful. In future they will become nice Vaiṣṇava." (Arrival Lecture, Calcutta, 20 March 1975) The essence and goal of Krishna consciousness is love for Krishna, and *gurukula* is the best chance at that for the fortunate souls born in the movement: "In our Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement, the *guru-kula* plays an extremely important part in our activities because right from childhood the boys at the *guru-kula* are instructed about Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Thus they become steady within the cores of their hearts, and there is very little possibility that they will be conquered by the modes of material nature when they are older." (SB 7.5.56-57, purport) Failing at giving that to the children is a major blemish for parents: "This is the facility of taking birth in



a Vaiṣṇava family. Children, simply by playing with Kṛṣṇa, they become Kṛṣṇa conscious . . . So you are all Vaiṣṇavas. If your children do not become Vaiṣṇava in the future, then it is a great, I mean to say, fault on your part." (Lecture on SB 2.3.15, Los Angeles, 1 June 1972) *Gurukula* is super-important to create qualified *brahmacaris* - that will eventually go on to become qualified *grihasthas*, qualified *vanaprasthas* and qualified *sannyasis*. *Gurukula* is super-important for the future of the mission - to create dynamic, learned, talented, powerful preachers, who deeply imbibed the values and culture of Gaudiya-vaiṣṇavism. Super-important for society at large - to prepare men and women of character, able to create a better tomorrow, for themselves and the world. Super-important for *varṇāśrama*, which, without *gurukula*, is like a tree without roots.

Om Tat Sat



About the Author

Kaunteya das (Dr Carlo Oppecini, PhD, Indovedic Psychology) has been studying, practicing and promoting *daiva-varṇāśrama* for more than forty years.

He serves as co-minister of the ISKCON Congregational Development Ministry (with HH Jayapataka Maharaja, his *diksa-guru*), as trustee and faculty member of the GBC College for Leadership Development; as co-chair of the GBC Organizational Development Committee (with HG Gopal Bhatta Prabhu); as member of the GBC Strategic Planning Team and a member of the GBC Nominations Committee. He is also a teacher with the *Centro Studi Bhaktivedanta*.



In 2004 he received the ISKCON Global Excellency Award for his work in congregational preaching.

He lives in Sridham Mayapur, India, with his wife, Sri Radha Govinda Dasi.

He authored the following books:

[Bhakti-vriksha Manual](#)

[The Book of Icebreakers](#)

[Super Sunday](#)

[Did Srila Prabhupada Want Women Diksa Gurus?](#)

[Varnasrama Illuminations](#) - *How to avoid messing up varnasrama with goofy, unrealistic ideas*

How to Mess Up Varnasrama - By Underestimating Women & Neglecting Gurukula

Varnasrama for the Twenty-first Century - But without the misogyny, the anachronism, the fanaticism, the irrationality, the smārta tendencies and other faults

His seminar "How to Mess Up Your Life with (Misapplied) Varnasrama" is probably the most reviewed presentation in the history of ISKCON.

For more information:

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www.gbc.iskcon.org

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Śrīla Prabhupāda said that the remaining fifty percent of his work was to establish *varṇāśrama*.

There are two sure ways to ruin *varṇāśrama*:
misrepresenting *strī-dharma* and neglecting *gurukula*.

Both are widely practiced today.



EYE of the STORM